

What violence is necessary for sports?

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

(Leland Stanford Junior University, Stanford / USA)

Just before this year's Pan American Games started in the Mexican city of Guadalajara, shocking news about violence was spreading, 'shocking news' above all because of some terrifying detail it contained: "the city is again engulfed by organized crime, this time with messages of intimidation towards officials that arrived in the city for the event. Those messages were left in ice boxes that contained pig's heads inside, the first message was found in the periphery of the hotel housing the Federal Police, who arrived to maintain order in the sporting event, while the second was found in the corner of the streets Lopez Cotilla and Emerson."¹ Later, as the report conveyed, representatives of a Forensic Institute found out that the supposed "pig's heads" did indeed consist of human remains.

When I was reading that text, I realized how I had not been able yet to forget the images of cold-blooded brutality as they had come up during the investigations about the former Flamengo goalkeeper Bruno, and it became clear to me that the Guadalajara incident was bound to provoke, once again, those traditional discussions about a secret – or should one say: about a certain or about a hypothetical? – relation between sports and violence. Does the potential and, in some cases, the inevitable violence inherent to at least some athletic events always and necessarily trigger acts of violence that cannot be contained by their different rule systems? The answer that one is supposed to give, with all due signs of regret, is a 'yes of course': yes, sports do necessarily produce violence – although we all somehow know that things are much more complicated. A better answer to the old question first of all requires a definition of 'violence.' In what follows I will therefore call 'violence' every act that tries to occupy or to block spaces with bodies, against the resistance of other bodies.

¹<http://noticiasus.terra.com/road-to-2012/noticias/0,,OI5382811-EI17467,00+Violence+continues+in+Guadalajara+days+before+PanAms.html> [23.12.2011]

The gory scenery of Guadalajara hints to a sequence of two levels of violence in this sense. One concerns those “human remains” that may well have been the result of murder, and the other one regards the placing of two “ice boxes” in a space where they do not belong. But what is the specific connection, if there is any, between such traces of violence and sports? It is definitely not plausible to assume that any potential violence inherent to a sport could have launched these criminal acts. Rather, we may say and we should understand that big athletic events quite literally attract (organized) crime. For such events make humans vulnerable in multiple – perhaps even in unique – ways. They attract many athletes and much larger numbers of spectators who do not know the local spaces well enough to protect themselves against criminal threats; they gather huge numbers of persons in the narrow spaces of stadiums where they cannot escape from violence (they thus become the ideal target for a bomb dropped from an airplane or for the attacks of a gunman); finally, important sports events receive intense media attention, which means that any violence in this context is likely to become visible world-wide. In an age like ours, where the terror techniques of organized crime have long outgrown the traditional violence monopoly of the State, no sports event can ever be completely safe against crimes such as those of Guadalajara – which, after all, were only a ‘warning’. This is a relatively new, preoccupying situation that the Brazilian government needs to take into account in anticipation of the upcoming Soccer World Cup and of the Rio de Janeiro Olympics.

Beside violence from the outside that sports so frequently attracts, we are all familiar with very different, more intrinsic dangers of physical force in athletic events. Whoever has been exposed, as a live spectator, to the fundamentally innocent dynamic of what we call ‘the wave’ (‘la ola’) knows how difficult it is to resist the collective energy that it unfolds. Oftentimes the sheer enthusiasm for the play of one’s own team triggers similar movements whose violence will soon exceed the control of any individual in the crowd and even the control of those present to guarantee a certain degree of order. It was such a fatal dynamic which, only a few years ago, cost the life of many people during a game at Vasco da Gama’s old ‘Sao Januario’ stadium. But would we really want this source of violence and danger to be completely eliminated? Would we like to watch a soccer game the same way we see a film in a movie theater? Clearly, the possibility of becoming part of a larger, collective body belongs to the appeal of going to sports events – so much so that it may well be the most underestimated dimension of going to a stadium.

The real question is, then, whether this potential of dangerous – and maybe inevitable – spectator violence mirrors the violence that unfolds among the performing athletes. I believe – against all politically correct suspicions and suggestions that are asking for the flawless repression of any kind of violence in sports – that this is not the case. Soccer, at least according to its rules (rules that will of course occasionally be broken), is an almost violence-free game, and yet it has long been famous for excessive violence and aggression among its spectators. There are many other athletic events – Rugby, for example, American Football, Ice Hockey and, most directly, boxing – where the display of violence is much more open and essential, without their crowds being particularly notorious for violence. If a direct relationship ever existed between the degree of violence inherent to certain sports and the violence emerging among its spectators, then soccer stadiums would have to be peacefully bucolic places – and boxing arenas the living inferno.

As this is absolutely not the case, I think the international Sports Federations should be less concerned than they actually are with the repression of violence. For, however provocative and unusual such a statement may be, the existing athletic violence both among athletes and occasionally among spectators is an inevitable part of the distinctive aesthetics of sports – and there may even be a (seldomly mentioned but) systematic relationship between aesthetics at large and violence. Sports administrators and the media covering sports should rather focus on other, much more serious, although less frequently mentioned problems. On the obvious racism by which soccer has been haunted, internationally, for many years now; on homophobia; or on the habitual exploitation of the most talented young players – did anybody ever ask indeed whether Lionel Messi was really happy to swallow all those growth hormones that the FC Barcelona so generously provided for him?