

The role of anger in sport – and why it makes some people worse

FAITH IN SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

Anger has as many impacts on sports performance as it has in life. Studies show that anger can diminish athletes' attention, cognition and fine motor skills, which can be particularly detrimental in sports like golf and tennis. Other research finds that aggressive hockey players suffer more head injuries than their less-aggressive teammates. Even spectators can cause serious harm if their anger boils over. However, when harnessed effectively, anger is 'unbelievable fuel' that can set top athletes apart.

In a physical game like rugby, you can lose your temper. Most players, once they have lost their temper, have enough self-control to hold back and avoid doing something that would get them sent off, but they have made their point.

There is also an unofficial rule that, if one player loses his temper, everybody else joins in. This goes back to the 1974 British and Irish Lions tour to South Africa, which was nasty even by the standards of the day. Lions captain Willie John McBride introduced the '99' call, which meant 'one in, all in' – if one player looked in danger of doing something silly and getting sent off, the whole team were to join in the scuffle. The referee could not send the whole team off.

'The one thing that makes me lose my temper is a lack of effort'

Shaun Wane, the head coach for the England national rugby league team and former professional rugby league footballer, made a reputation for himself over the years as being one of the toughest coaches in the game, something that made outsiders believe that Wane had a short-temper. However, according to the man himself, that was not so.

Wane did admit that "the one thing that makes me lose my temper is a lack of effort. If I see somebody or a group of people not trying their best or putting in the effort, that's when I have a problem. It's unforgivable."

At the F1 Dutch Grand Prix, on 4th September 2022, seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton apologised for an expletive-laden radio outburst at his Mercedes team as his hopes of a first win of the Formula One season disappeared. "I was just on the edge of breaking point with emotions and my apologies to the team because I don't even remember what I said; I just lost it for a second," Hamilton said later.

On 20th August, at King Abdullah Sports City, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia,



Eric Cantona's infamous kung-fu kick out at a Crystal Palace fan, back in 1995. The notorious volatile Frenchman was given a lengthy ban for the incident

Anthony Joshua vented his spleen in the worst possible way after losing to Oleksandr Usyk in his rematch fight. Joshua could be seen throwing the WBA and Ring Magazine belts out of the ring, before taking the in-ring microphone and going on a passionate rant.

Darker moments in tennis

In sport, losing your temper can be costly. The noble game of tennis has also had its darker moments.

John Patrick McEnroe Jr., who finished his career with 77 singles titles on the ATP Tour and 78 doubles titles, is remembered for his short-temper and angry confrontational on-court behaviour, which frequently landed him in trouble with umpires and tennis authorities. On January 21, 1990, at the Australian Open in Melbourne, he became the first player since 1963 to be disqualified from a Grand Slam tournament for misconduct.

At the 2019 Wimbledon tournament, umpires handed down a record amount of fines in the first week. Russia's Daniil Medvedev was fined \$US5,500 for attacking the grass court with his racket.

Meanwhile, Serena Williams was slapped with a \$US10,000 fine for "unsportsmanlike conduct" after the tennis veteran damaged an outside court at the Wimbledon Championships before the tournament began by throwing a racket during a practice session. Serena was at the peak of her powers and was dominating in women's tennis when she faced Kim Clijsters in the semi-final of the 2009 US Open. The American great was penalised for smashing her racket in frustration and yelling at the chair umpire after being warned for a potential second violation. Clijsters went on to win the game 6-4, 7-5. Williams was fined and handed a

two-year probation.

Yet all of this pales into insignificance when compared to the fine given to Nick Kyrgios in 2019 during an ATP event. A racket-smashing rant saw Kyrgios fined \$US113,000 for audible obscenity, verbal abuse, and unsportsmanlike conduct.

Roger Federer completely lost his cool during the Miami Open semi-final with Novak Djokovic in 2009. Federer, losing to Djokovic and frustrated by the windy conditions, did something even more uncharacteristic than crying: He smashed his racket, drawing unthinkable boos from the crowd.

In May 2022, Canadian tennis player Denis Shapovalov lost his temper during his Italian open match against Lorenzo Sonego, arguing with the chair umpire and hurling abuse at the spectators. The 23 year old later apologised for his tantrum. He was fined \$7,000 (£5,623) after hitting umpire Arnaud Gabas in the eye with a ball during Canada's Davis Cup tie against Great Britain. He was immediately defaulted.

Shapovalov could have been fined up to a maximum of \$12,000 on site by referee Brian Earley but the unintentional nature of the offence and his remorse will have been taken into account.

Kung-Fu kicks and football

On 25th January 1995 at Selhurst Park, a Crystal Palace fan called Matthew Simmons ran down 11 rows of stairs to shout at Manchester United's Eric Cantona after he had been sent off. He was alleged to have told Cantona to "f - off back to France". Eric responded with a Kung-Fu kick at his verbal assailant. The picture of Eric Cantona flinging himself feet-first at a supporter remains one of the most iconic

images of the Premier League era. Various voices called for Cantona to apologise and change his ways. He never did, but neither did the fan.

For Eric, the aftermath was not pretty. Manchester United fined him £20,000 and, as agreed with the FA, banned him for the rest of the season. The FA then increased the ban to eight months (up to and including 30 September 1995) and fined him a further £10,000. He was stripped of his French national team captaincy.

During the trial in May 1996, Matthew Simmons claimed he had shouted "Off! Off! Off! It's an early bath for you, Mr Cantona!" – the Frenchman having been dismissed for challenge on Palace defender Richard Shaw. Cantona's defence denied this version of events, claiming what Simmons had actually shouted, "F-off back to France, you French b*****", before dubbing the Manchester United forward a "French animal" and his mother a "French whore".

Then there was Zinedine Zidane, who head-butted Italian defender Marco Materazzi during the 2006 World Cup final. "Zidane asked me if I wanted his shirt, I said I wanted his sister," Materazzi said.

Know your triggers. In football, players stamp on their opponents' feet, elbow them in the back when there is a compact crowd gathered for a corner, or repeating sayings that are likely to annoy and provoke a response that might get a yellow or even a red card.

However, anger can be a powerful motivating force, making us push on towards our goals in the face of problems and barriers.

'You are worth much more than a bully'

We know that Jesus was – in Greek – a *tekt n*, (Mk. 6, 3) rather

than a carpenter, more accurately a 'craftsman' or 'artisan'. However, the only object he made, as described in the Gospels, was a whip. In John 2:15, we read how 'he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.'

Maybe it is due to my early years under the Nazis that I hate bullies. I cannot stand bullying, as some tough sixth form lads at Cardinal Vaughan School, where I was Head of RE and Chaplain for some 12 years, found out. Whenever I became aware of a touch of bullying, I would approach the bully and offer to shake hands. Thanks to my rowing – and lots of DIY – my grip would tighten until the bully's knees started to buckle. "Don't ever do that again. You are worth much more than a bully."

No violence. No child protection issues... "but your honour, I was just shaking hands." No bones were ever broken.

Though the numbness wore off, the memories, it seemed, endured.

It may sound like an odd thing to say, but angry people have something in common with happy people. Both tend to be more optimistic.

Anger provides self-insight. In 1997, a sample of Americans and Russians were asked about how recent outbursts of anger had affected them.

Fifty five percent claimed that getting really mad had led to a positive outcome. One top of this one-third said that anger provided an insight into their own faults. Anger can motivate self-change.

As many parents know, when used correctly, anger can be a handy tool in keeping children in check and getting points over.