

Evaluation of the Sportsmanship-Aggression Continuum in Youth Football

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Abstract

Given the importance of sport in modern society, it is essential that appropriate instruments are available for the assessment of both fair play and unfair play in the sport of football, particularly in the context of youth football. This research study presents the findings from the implementation of a protocol intended to assess fair play during football matches across three seasons. The study included 64 teams, 1192 players, 64 coaches and 292 referees all of whom were involved in the *First Cadet* category of the Football Federation of Álava (FFA). The measurement instrument employed was the *Record of Football Match Evaluations (RFME)* developed by Gimeno, Sáenz, Ariño and Aznar (2007). The results revealed that there was a high level of fair play at this level of play which extended to referees, coaches and players across the seasons of interest; there was a greater frequency of fair play attitudes relative to unfair play attitudes; home teams that were victorious were judged to have the most favorable fair play attitudes; and there was a negative correlation between perceived fair play and the number of cards shown by referees. The instrument 1) allowed for the effective utilization of a tool to assess fair play in youth football; 2) was effective for use over the course of the season; and 3) provided knowledge about the social agents who initiate inappropriate and unsportsmanlike acts during football matches for of school age youth, which enables consideration of appropriate counter measures.

Keywords: football, evaluation, sportsmanship, violence, teenagers

The sport of football can be a valuable tool in the development of young people if it takes place within a supportive social environment that contributes to the realization of this goal. However, inappropriate actions and behaviors can occasionally complicate the learning and developmental processes. Consequently, it is necessary to gain an improved understanding of the types of sportsmanlike and unsportsmanlike behaviors that occur during game play from all individuals involved, including players, coaches, officials and spectators and to develop the capacity to measure the type and sources of these behaviors.

The conceptualization of sportsmanship must be considered with respect for the established norms of each sport (Gómez-Mármol & Sánchez-Pato, 2014) and rests in avoiding taking unfair advantage of one's opponent, the referees and social conventions (Comité Internacional de Fair Play, 2012; Vallerand et al., 1996). Similarly, it involves appreciation for the success and effort put forth by one's opponent both during and after sport participation (Hechenberger, 2004). The contrasting behavioral dimension reflects a lack of fair play or sportsmanlike behavior that also includes the distinction between physical aggression and non-physical aggression (Gimeno et al., 2007). The first type of aggression is reflected by illegal acts and hostile and aggressive

behaviors of a physical nature that are inflicted on others. Behaviors that conform to non-physical aggression do not necessarily involve illegal behavior or hostile and physically aggressive behaviors. In order to avoid constant reference to the entire range of behaviors, the term *sportsmanship* (or *fair play*) is used to make reference to both dimensions of the construct in which a continuum of more and less favorable behaviors is considered.

As has been noted in recent studies (e.g., Sáenz et al., 2015), quality instruments do not currently exist that allow us to assess the prevalence of sportsmanlike behaviors by the individuals involved in the context of youth football and instruments also do not exist to assess these behaviors over the course of time, such as an entire season. The majority of instruments that assess sportsmanship behaviors can be used, however, across sport modalities and contexts (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009). Some of these instruments were designed to evaluate sportsmanship behaviors (e.g., Vallerand, 1997) whereas others are intended to assess unsportsmanlike behaviors (Bredemeier, 1985) or to assess both sets of behaviors through the same instrument (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009).

In youth football, unsportsmanlike behaviors have typically been assessed and quantified by the frequency of

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sanctions by referees (yellow cards and red cards) but there is no corresponding means of quantifying sportsmanship behaviors (González-Oya & Dosil, 2004). It is possible to examine the referees' actions to yield a descriptive summary of sanctioned behaviors in relation to the rules of football. However, though these records allow us to identify transgressions of the rules they do not extend to the evaluation of the prevalence of other forms of sportsmanship behaviors that occur over the course of the match (e.g., verbal aggressions among parents or spectators in the stands). In the same sense, the work of the referees during the game does not permit the evaluation of sportsmanlike behaviors that are positive, such as applause or encouragement provided by parents or spectators in the stands toward the referee, or those actions by referees that contribute to fair play. As such, it is not possible to rely solely on officiating decisions to make assessments of the prevalence of sportsmanship behaviors over the course of a particular match. According to Sáenz et al. (2015), there have been few instruments that have been developed that allow for a long term assessment of the prevalence of sportsmanship behavior, particularly in youth football. The *Instrument for the Observation of Fair Play in Football (IOFPF- Instrumento de Observación del Fair-Play en Fútbol* in its Spanish version), was developed by Borrás and colleagues (Borrás, Palou, Ponseti & Cruz, 2003) and constitutes a useful instrument for this purpose. The *IOFPF* was developed through observational methodology and records sportsmanship behaviors in the order in which they occur over the course of a match and in relation to the behaviors of both the home team and the visiting team. The *IOFPF* is also used to record the events that occur during the match (e.g., awarding of yellow or red cards, goals). Previous findings obtained through the use of the *IOFPF* show that a greater number of sportsmanlike, relative to unsportsmanlike, behaviors occur in the youth football context. These results coincide with the findings obtained in other studies (Cruz, 1999) that have found a greater proportional number of sportsmanlike actions. Nevertheless, this instrument (*IOFPF*) does not extend to the examination of sportsmanlike behavior in the stands nor does it permit the evaluations of coaches and referees over the course of the season. It also does not enable research knowledge about the types of sportsmanlike and unsportsmanlike behaviors engaged in by each of the principal social agents involved in youth football (players, coaches, parents/spectators) as these behaviors take place over the course of the season which complicates our understanding relative to the nature of sportsmanship in this context.

Following a review of the measures utilized to examine the prevalence of sportsmanlike behaviors in youth football (Sáenz et al., 2015), as well as consideration of officiating evaluation tools, a new instrument titled the *Record of Football Match Evaluations (RFME)* as developed by Gimeno and colleagues (2007) and Sáenz (2010) was employed. The underlying logic for the utilization of the *RFME* was that: 1) the instrument permits the assessment of all matches

over the course of the season; 2) it assesses the construct of sportsmanship; and 3) it includes coaches and officials in the evaluation of each game in league play. This means of assessing youth football competition is unprecedented and facilitates a higher quality assessment of the sportsmanship phenomenon.

In addition to the previous information, the principal objectives of the study have been to: 1) understand the prevalence of sportsmanship in youth football at the *First Cadet (Primera Cadete)* level across three seasons; 2) to identify the attitudes and behaviors that occur at this level of play through the inclusion and assistance of coaches and referees as evaluators; 3) to determine the influence of the game's result on the evaluations of the coaches with regard to fair play, and in reference to the actions of other social agents involved in this context; 4) to examine the nature of the relationship between the values provided on the *RFME* ranking scale (ranging from "0" to "10") and the actual incidence of cards shown by the officials in the matches.

In relation to the preceding foundation for the study, the hypotheses of the present investigation were as follows: 1) there will be a greater prevalence of fair play behaviors, relative to non-fair play behaviors, as recorded through the *RFME* over the course of the season; 2) there will be a greater number of nonviolent acts of aggression displayed by coaches, players and spectators, as recorded through the *RFME*, than there will be of violent acts of aggression; 3) sportsmanship levels of coaches and team members that lose a match will tend to be lower than sportsmanship levels of coaches and team members of teams who win or draw the game; 4) there will be a negative, but not necessarily significant, relationship between the global evaluation of the fair play level in the game as provided by the *RFME* and the number of cards shown by the referees during the game.

Method

Participants

692 games at the *First Cadet* level of play were evaluated over the course of three seasons in the Federación Alavesa de Fútbol (F.A.F.) Participants in the study included 16 coaches, 73 officials and 298 football players, ages 14 and 15 years who participated in this level of play and volunteered to participate in the study.

Instruments

To assess fair play and sportsmanship, the *RFME* (Gimeno et al., 2007; Sáenz, 2010) was employed. The structure of the instrument (see Table 1) is as follows: The first part of the instrument is intended to evaluate sportsmanship in a given match in a global sense and uses an 11-point subjective ranking scale with endpoints of "0" (games or behaviors that are very violent or aggressive) to "10" (reflecting the highest possible levels of sportsmanlike behaviors and fair

play). This evaluation is related to the game as a whole, including the behavior of the coaches and participating teams as well as the actions of the referees and parents/spectators. The second part of the instrument includes a list of specific attitudes and behaviors related to sportsmanship that can be assessed by the evaluators. The third part of the scale provides a list of unsportsmanlike attitudes and behaviors

that are similarly documented when they occur. The fourth section includes a written summary of the sanctions/cards that were shown over the course of the game. The fifth, and final, part of the instrument includes descriptions of relevant attitudes and behaviors that were not otherwise recorded.

Table 1
Structure of the Record of Football Match Evaluations (RFME)

First part of the RFME	Subjective global ranking scale from 0 to 10 points
Second part of the RFME	List of attitudes and behaviors related to sportsmanship and fair play
Third part of the RFME	List of attitudes and behaviors related to a lack of sportsmanship/fair play
Fourth part of the RFME	Referee sanctions (this section is completed only by the referees)
Fifth part of the RFME	Inclusion of additional attitudes and behaviors not identified on the RFME

The items on the first part of the *RFME* have demonstrated adequate discriminant capacity and a high level of internal consistency: Cronbach *alpha* values = 0.87, 0.80 and 0.76, respectively (Gimeno, et al., 2007; Sáenz, 2010). Even though the Cronbach *alpha* values for each of the subscales were high, additional item-total subscale correlations were included to complement the reliability analysis, and each of the correlational values on the instrument's measure exceeded 0.25 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1995), which was the criteria included in this study. In addition, content validity was supported through assessments of face validity as provided by those individuals (coaches and officials) who are most heavily involved in assessing fair play, aggressive behaviors and violence in youth football (Sáenz, 2010).

Procedure

Every football game at this level of play was evaluated over the course of three seasons. Each competitive season was separated into home and away games with each team playing every other team once at home and once as the visiting team. Data were collected from 692 of the 720 matches that were played. In the circumstances where game data was not recorded, it was due to the use of new referees who had been incorporated into the officiating team during the season. There were nine officials who constituted this "new pool" of officials and these individuals had not been previously informed as to the purpose of the study. Each match was evaluated by three individuals (the coaches of each team and the referee) and a total of 2,076 data points were recorded.

Before the start of each competitive season, a meeting was held with the coaches of all of the clubs as well as with the entire officiating crew at the *First Cadet* level of play. At this time, all individuals were informed about the protocol of the study and the process of evaluation for each of the games that they would be involved in. The referees had been assigned to officiate one of the eight games to be played each weekend at the category of play of interest. Prior to each game, the referee delivered the evaluation form in

separate envelopes to the coaches of each team. After the completion of the match, the coaches and referee submitted their evaluations in a closed envelope to the Alaves Officiating Committee. Subsequently, the referee delivered the envelopes to the Officiating Committee for analysis.

Data analysis

Descriptive data analysis was conducted on the data obtained from the variables assessed in the first part of the *RFME*. This analysis included a calculation of variable means as well as standard deviation values as indicators of central tendency and variability, respectively, and operating under the assumption that the values between "0" and "10" represented equidistant data points. The central tendency assessments (mean and median values) were obtained in relation to the assessment of the three evaluators (two coaches and the referee) although the individual coaches and the referee did not evaluate their own actions in the match. The items evaluated included questions with stems: "I would evaluate this game as..."; "I would evaluate the coach of the home club in this match as..."; "I would evaluate the players of the home club as..."; "I would evaluate the coach of the visiting club as..."; "I would evaluate the players of the visiting club as..."; and "The actions of the referee contributed to ..." with each item scored in relation to level of fair play. For the purposes of comparing the obtained results in each of the rounds of play, the Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test was used to determine whether the data conformed to the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance.

A subsequent analysis was conducted to examine the frequency distribution of the second and third subscales on the *RFME* that relate to sportsmanship attitudes and conduct. An a priori criteria was established for this purpose in which at least two of the three evaluators had to be consistent in their evaluation. The Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric test was also used to determine whether the outcome of the match was related to the favorability of the evaluations. Pearson's *r* correlation coefficient was calculated in order to assess the magnitude of the correlation between the evalua-

tion of the match by the coaches and the number of cards shown by the referee during the match.

Results

The primary purpose of the study was to identify the prevalence of sportsmanship at the *First Cadet* level of play. The overall mean global assessment of fair play as assessed through the first item (“*I would evaluate this match as...*”) reflected a mean value of 7.54 ($SD = 1.46$) across the 692 matches that had been evaluated by coaches and officials. The pattern of evaluations revealed a tendency toward improvement in fair play in the second round of play relative to the first round, although this difference was not statistically significant. The corresponding values for fair play were (\bar{x} first round = 7.42, $SD = 1.45$; second round = 7.57, $SD = 1.51$; \bar{x} third round = 7.54, $SD = 1.58$; \bar{x} fourth round = 7.56, $SD = 1.36$; \bar{x} fifth round = 7.56, $SD = 1.45$; \bar{x} sixth round = 7.6, $SD = 1.54$). The mean evaluation obtained across each of the rounds of play could be considered “notable” in terms of the favorability of the assessment. The Kruskal-Wallis test did not reveal significant differences in game evaluations across rounds of play ($X^2 = 1.427$, $p > .05$). A frequency analysis was also conducted relative to fair play behavior during the matches. This analysis reflects the frequency and percentage of each of the actions of interest from the second part of the *RFME* on the individual and combined data across matches. Sportsmanlike actions were more frequent than unsportsmanlike actions on the whole. Specifically, group level sportsmanship actions were the most frequent (77%). The specific sportsmanlike action that appeared with the greatest frequency was the post-match greeting of the players from both teams at the end of the match (18%).

The second objective of the study was to identify the types of unsportsmanlike actions that take place in this level of play. Unsportsmanlike attitudes and actions that appeared with the greatest frequency (when all rounds of play are considered) were also related to the attitudes and behaviors of the players. The most common form of unsportsmanlike acts involved verbal aggression on the field of play (23%), followed by complaints by coaches to the officials (20%) and verbal aggression by spectating parents toward the referee (13%).

For the purpose of better understanding the results provided by referees and coaches relative to the game, and in correspondence with the third objective of the study, Table 2 provides the global evaluations of each of the evaluating participants in relation to the result of the match: home team victory, draw or victory by the visiting team.

Table 2

Sportsmanship perceptions of coaches and referees in relation to match outcome

	Games	\bar{X}	SD	Range
Home team victory	979	7.70	1.80	0-10
Draw	205	7.55	1.74	0-10
Visiting team victory	538	7.23	1.77	0-10
Total	1722	7.54	1.80	0-10

As can be noted, matches won by the home club tended to receive more favorable evaluations of fair play by coaches and officials whereas matches won by the visiting club received lower fair play assessments. The Kruskal-Wallis test demonstrated significant differences in the evaluations of the judges according to the match results of win, lose or draw ($X^2 = 31.97$, $p < .05$). Multiple post-hoc comparisons revealed statistically significant differences in the evaluations of the three judges when the home team won or lost (0.89, $p < .05$). However, no significant differences were found in matches that ended in a draw.

The fourth objective of the study was to intend to better understand the relationship between the sportsmanship perceptions of coaches and referees with the frequency of cards shown during the match. Descriptive statistics were as follows: (\bar{x} match evaluation = 7.54; $SD = 1.46$; \bar{x} total yellow cards = 1.65; $SD = 2.19$; \bar{x} total red cards = 1.83; $SD = 2.47$; \bar{x} total yellow and red cards = 3.48; $D = 1.46$). Further analysis among the sets of variables revealed that a significant negative relationship existed between overall evaluations and the number of yellow cards shown ($r = -0.16$, $p < .01$), the number of red cards shown ($r = -0.15$, $p < .01$) and the total of yellow and red cards shown ($r = -0.13$, $p < .01$). These results make clear that more favorable overall evaluations of the matches by coaches and referees were associated with fewer sanctions from the referees during the matches and provide additional support for the validity of the instrument.

Discussion

This study provides a new understanding of the contributors to the phenomenon of sportsmanship during competitive play in youth football. Strengths of the study included the fact that the data collection took place over the course of three full seasons and the pure amount of data that was provided by the youth and adult participants in this environment to allow for a fuller evaluation of the quality of sportsmanship in the *First Cadet* level of play. The two primary objectives to the study were to understand the prevalence of sportsmanship and fair play in this environment and to identify the types of attitudes and behaviors relevant to this interest area. The findings indicated that the fair play and sportsmanship attitudes were more common than were behaviors and actions that were unsportsmanlike in nature. The first hypothesis, that the prevalence

of sportsmanlike behaviors would exceed the frequency of unsportsmanlike behaviors, was supported.

The most frequent inappropriate behaviors were found to be verbal aggressions, which is consistent with other investigations at this level of play (Gairín, Muñoz, Castro & Díaz-Vicario, 2014).

The second hypothesis which was that there would be a greater number of nonviolent as opposed to violent forms of aggression committed by coaches, players and spectators was also supported. Nonetheless, the low incidence of unsportsmanlike behaviors and actions cannot cover up the large negative impact that these behaviors may have in the development of young players and such actions can affect the overall quality of the youth football experience. The use of criteria in which at least two of the three evaluators needed to agree on the labeling of a particular behavior through the *RFME* contributes to the quality of the assessment of youth football competitions.

The third objective proposed in the investigation was to examine the potential influence of the game result on the evaluations of fair play. The findings revealed that although the average evaluation of the matches in terms of sportsmanship reached the level of “*notable*”, that the match received higher evaluation in circumstances in which the home team was victorious. Meanwhile, the postgame evaluations of fair play were less favorable in circumstances in which the visiting team won the match. As such, the result of the match may influence the evaluators at the moment in which they complete their assessment. This finding can be explained by the tendency for there to be expectations that the home team is better than the visiting club and should win the match. The third hypothesis that sportsmanship evaluations would be more favorable in circumstances where the home team secured a victory, as opposed to gaining a draw or experiencing a defeat, was thus supported.

With regard to the fourth objective of the study, which was to examine the relationship between the subjective rankings of fair play during games as provided by the evaluators (from “0” to “10” on the *RFME*) with the number of cards shown by officials during games, the findings indicated that more favorable overall fair play scores were associated with fewer cards shown by the officials. Various studies that have used an objective assessment to evaluate referee actions (González-Oya & Dosil, 2004; Olmedilla et al., 2001) have shown that anti-fair play actions of coaches are associated with a greater number of cards being shown by the officials. A greater number of cards shown to coaches has also been associated with a greater amount of unsportsmanlike actions on behalf of coaches (Lozano et al., 2001). The fourth hypothesis was thus supported given that the relationship between the overall evaluation of the match in terms of fair play and the number of cards shown by the referees was related but not statistically significant.

The use of data relative to the number of sanctions given by referees provides a descriptive account of referee actions but only in relation to the rules of the sport (González-Oya & Dosil, 2004).

However, there is not a means for quantifying fair play actions on the pitch directly through the actions of the referees since the referees are responsible for sanctioning only violations of the rules and officiating actions do not take into account the fair play and non-fair play activities that take place off of the field. As a consequence, it is helpful if both the officials’ actions on the field and the *RFME* are considered simultaneously in the evaluation of fair play during a match because the combination of the two knowledge sources allows for a broader sense for the actions that occur on and off the field of play. In the same sense, the use of the *RFME* over the course of the season may have a favorable influence on reducing the behaviors and attitudes associated with unsportsmanlike acts. In this regard, the *RFME* can be used as a tool for preventive purposes (primary prevention) given that the knowledge acquired can be considered to be a signal to responsible parties that the a negative evaluation of their behavior is possible in the event of inappropriate attitudes and antisocial behaviors.

Through the rigorous evaluation of youth football contexts it is possible to use the knowledge from research gained to strengthen the training and preparation of coaches (Buceta, Mondoni, Avakumovi & Killik, 2000; Gimeno, 2006), referees (Catteeuw, Werner, Bilis & Wagemans, 2009) and parental spectators (Gimeno, 2003; Gimeno, 2006; Teques & Serpa, 2009). The primary purpose of these programs ought to be to improve communication and conflict resolution skills as well as the transmission of positive values. As such, it is necessary to implement anti-violence campaigns through the youth football clubs at this level of competition for the purpose of promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviors. In addition, strategies for secondary prevention (Cecchini, Montero & Peña, 2003; Gimeno et al., 2007) and tertiary prevention (Jiménez & Durán, 2004) can also be considered in these ongoing efforts.

Although promising findings have been obtained in the effort to evaluate and identify fair play, this study also has a few limitations. It would be appropriate for future investigators to utilize other samples to determine the adequacy of the *RFME* at different levels of play as well as in differing sociocultural contexts. In addition, there need to be individuals assigned to monitor the attitudes and behaviors that are of interest in this area, and that have been examined through the *RFME*, in order to maintain appropriate follow-up in achieving the goals of fair play at the youth football level. In this regard, it would be appropriate for sporting federations to assign an individual responsible for coordinating the evaluation and the practice of fair play during matches. An individual with a degree in Psychology or Physical Education who is trained in appropriate pedagogical principles would be suitable for carrying out appropriate instruction and oversight at this age and level of play. In closing, this line of research can contribute to the enrichment of the methodologies, research designs, results and interpretations of future investigations.

Evaluación del continuo deportividad-violencia en el fútbol base

Resumen

Dada la trascendencia que tiene en nuestra sociedad el deporte, en especial el fútbol desde edades muy tempranas, se hace necesario que los gestores de las competiciones dispongan de herramientas que permitan evaluar los comportamientos de deportividad y no deportividad que se observan en contextos deportivos de fútbol. En la presente investigación, se presenta la implementación de un protocolo de evaluación continua de la deportividad en los partidos de fútbol, durante tres temporadas deportivas. Participaron 64 equipos; 1192 futbolistas, 64 entrenadores y 292 árbitros, de la categoría primera cadete de la Federación Alavesa de Fútbol (F.A.F.). El instrumento de recogida de información utilizado fue el "Registro de Evaluación de Partidos de Fútbol" (RFME) (Gimeno, Sáenz, Ariño y Aznar, 2007). Los resultados reflejan: puntuaciones positivas, en relación a la deportividad de árbitros, entrenadores y jugadores en cada una de las temporadas evaluadas; una mayor frecuencia de actitudes y conductas deportivas en comparación con las no-deportivas; una mayor percepción de deportividad en aquellos partidos en los que el equipo local es el ganador; y una correlación negativa entre la percepción de deportividad de un partido y el número de tarjetas mostradas por los árbitros. Como conclusión, se puede afirmar que el instrumento que se presenta permite: 1. Utilizar una herramienta de evaluación específica de la deportividad para la disciplina del fútbol en edad escolar; 2. Evaluar la deportividad a lo largo de toda la temporada; 3. Identificar los agentes que presentan comportamientos inadecuados durante la práctica deportiva de los jóvenes deportistas, pudiendo proponer las mejores medidas de intervención.

Palabras clave: fútbol, evaluación, deportividad, violencia, adolescentes

Avaliação do contínuo desportivismo-violência no futebol base

Resumo

Devido à transcendência que o desporto tem na nossa sociedade, especialmente o futebol a partir de idades muito precoces, torna-se necessário que os gestores das competições disponham de ferramentas que permitam avaliar os comportamentos de desportivismo e não desportivismo que se observam nos contextos desportivos do futebol. Na presente investigação apresenta-se a implementação de um protocolo de avaliação permanente do desportivismo nos jogos de futebol, durante três épocas desportivas. Participaram 64 equipas; 1192 futebolistas, 64 treinadores e 292 árbitros, da categoria primeira cadete da Federação Alavesa de Futebol (F.A.F.). O instrumento de recolha de informação utilizado foi o "Registro de Avaliação de Jogos de Futebol" (RFME) (Gimeno, Sáenz, Ariño e Aznar, 2007). Os resultados refletem pontuações positivas no que respeita ao desportivismo dos árbitros, treinadores e jogadores em cada uma das épocas avaliadas; uma maior frequência de atitudes e comportamentos desportivos em comparação com os não desportivos; uma maior percepção de desportivismo naqueles jogos em que a equipa local é a vencedora; e uma correlação negativa entre a percepção de desportivismo de um jogo e o número de cartões mostrados pelos árbitros. Como conclusão, pode afirmar-se que o instrumento que se apresenta permite: 1. Utilizar uma ferramenta de avaliação específica do desportivismo para a disciplina do futebol na idade escolar; 2. Avaliar o desportivismo ao longo de toda a época; 3. Identificar os agentes que apresentam comportamentos inadecuados durante a prática desportiva dos jovens desportistas, podendo propor as melhores medidas de intervenção.

Palavras-chave: futebol, avaliação, desportivismo, violência, adolescentes

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