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## Research Article

### INFRINGEMENTS OF THE LAWS OF THE GAME AND YOUTH SOCCER CATEGORIES: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

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#### ABSTRACT

This work shows a descriptive study on infringements, defined as actions penalized by referees, and the different competition categories in youth soccer. It analyzes the frequency of sanctions imposed by the Competition Committee of the Soccer Federation of Murcia (Spain) on players and coaches in the different categories of 11-a-side soccer (under-12, under-14, under-16, and under-18). We test the hypothesis that there are significant differences in the frequency of sanctions imposed on players and coaches in the different categories of competition.

**Key work:** sanctions, soccer, youth players, coaches.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the mediating factors between children's games and socialization is the recognition of the rules of the game. In the world of sport, this fact occupies a prevailing place as a mean to foster healthy and ethically correct norms of socialization. From the point of view of fair play development in youth sport, concepts such as sportsmanship, moral values, and respect for the rules of the game are basic (Sherindan, 2007).

The importance of socialization as one of the processes of psychological development of the child through sport comes through the agents of socialization (parents, coaches, and athletic competition organizers) and the different socialization situations of youth sport (athletic context). Following Cruz, Boixadós, Torregrosa and Mimbreno (1996), we can observe that three positions about the role of sport in the processes of socialization exist: (a) that which considers that, in general terms, sport in and of itself is good for the socialization of the child (Brackenridge et al., 2005; Bredemeier, Weiss, Shields and Shewchuck, 1986; Jones, Armour and Potrac, 2003); (b) that which considers that many of the programs of sport initiation turn out to be a negative environment for the process of youth socialization (García Ferrando, 1990; Gutiérrez, 1995; Ogilvie and Tutko, 1971), since they copy the models of professional sport; and (c) a neutral position, shared by the majority of sport psychologists, that considers that athletic participation will determine the socialization processes depending on various factors: parents, organizers, coaches, friends, means of communication, etc.

These processes of socialization have a great importance in the formation and the development of a child's personality and character (Horn, 1985; Lines, 2007), in affective and emotional development (Brustad, 1988, 1993; Scanlan and Lewthwaite, 1986), where the influence of parental models and peers in the selection of social and athletic activities is very important (Wankel and Kreisel, 1985; Weiss and Bailey, 1981, 1985). The study of the transmission of moral values through sport (Arnold, 1999; Bredemeier, 1994; Bredemeier and Shields, 1996; Gutiérrez, 1998; Lee, Whitehead and Balchin, 2000; Cruz, et al., 1996) has also played an important role perhaps due to the recent preoccupation with the possible loss of positive social values and the increase in poor sportsmanship in the school athletic environment, as noted by Palou, Borrás, Ponseti, García-Mas and Cruz (2003). Along these lines of research, some authors have focused their interest on the behaviors of fair play and anti-fair play of the agents implicated in youth sport and its influence on children's socialization (Cruz, Boixadós, Valiente and Torregrosa, 2001; Cruz, Boixadós, Capdevila, Mimbreno, Torregrosa and Valiente, 1999; Gimeno, 2003; Palou et al., 2003; Sherindan, 2007).

In Spain, one of the most controversial sports with respect to the inherent processes of socialization is soccer, which finds itself very obstructed by external factors: media, social pressure, introduction and social repercussion, excessive professionalism, etc. In this context, the healthy and ethically correct norms of socialization sometimes have difficulty in establishing themselves. In the scientific literature, there are few references to specific studies about the role of sanctions in soccer with respect to the regulation of behavior and of establishing ethical and sportsmanlike behaviour.

In studies by Lefebvre and Passer (1974) of professional and semiprofessional soccer teams in the first Belgian division, it was observed that a greater number of aggressive acts sanctioned with yellow cards were produced in those players that were competing "away from their home field", that are "famous", or "losers", supporting the necessity of modifying the competitive structure of soccer, basing it on adequate reinforcements and contingencies and strengthening

cooperation in order to minimize the aggressiveness in the game. Also interesting is a study by [Avanzini and Pfister \(1994\)](#), in the context of professional soccer during the celebration of the World Cups of 1986 and 1990, which studied the efficacy of the sanctions to control aggressive behavior. Other studies of interest are those of [Rainey \(1994\)](#), in which a wide range of aggressions (light and serious) toward the referees by coaches and players of different sports are showed, as well as their consequences of competitive sanctions, and the study of [Olmedilla, Lozano and Andreu \(2001\)](#), in which a psychological intervention directed toward the elimination of or decrease in the sanctions of a semiprofessional soccer team was demonstrated.

In soccer, a very important part of the application of the rules of the game comes from the interpretation that the referees have of these rules. This can provoke great controversy among players, fans, and professionals, not helping the correct disposition of the young players in regards to respecting the rules and sportsmanlike play. Another peculiarity of soccer with respect to the rules of the game is the slowness for their change or modification.

The competent organization in the establishment and modification of the rules in the game of soccer is the International Football Association Board. Following their criteria, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association ([FIFA, 1999](#)), establishes the 17 Laws of the Game ([Table 1](#)), of which only two provoke some type of disciplinary sanction when they are broken (Law III and Law XII).

*Table 1. Nomenclature of the 17 laws of the game of soccer*

<b>LAWS OF THE GAME</b>			
I.	The field of play	X.	The method of scoring
II.	The ball	XI.	Offside
III.	The number of players	XII.	Fouls and misconduct
IV.	The players' equipment	XIII.	Free kicks
V.	The referee	XIV.	Penalty kick
VI.	The assistant referees	XV.	The throw-in
VII.	The duration of the match	XVI.	The goal kick
VIII.	The start and restart of play	XVII.	The corner kick
IX.	The ball in and out of play		

The type of sanction for the transgression of the first is a warning (yellow card) and for the second can be either a warning (yellow card) or expulsion (red card), depending on the nature of the infraction ([Table 2](#)). From the point of view of intervention and psychological analysis, although all are interesting, we will focus on those actions that are related to clean play or the sanction, due to the non-fulfillment of the laws as well as their transgression from the point of view of fair play. Consequently, the interest is focused on the analysis of all those actions of the players that can involve a sanction (yellow card or red card).

*Table 2. Actions punishable with yellow cards (YC) and red card (RC)*

YC SANCTIONS	RC SANCTIONS
<p><b>Law III: The number of players</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If a substitute enters the field without the authorization of the referee</li> <li>2. If a placer changes position with the goalkeeper without the authorization of the referee (both players)</li> <li>3. Whatever other violation of the Law</li> </ol>	<p><b>Law XII: Fouls and misconduct</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is guilty of serious foul play</li> <li>2. Is guilty of violent conduct</li> <li>3. Spits at an opponent or any other person</li> <li>4. Denies the opposing team a goal or a clear goalscoring opportunity by deliberately handling the ball (not applicable to goalkeepers in his/her own penalty area)</li> <li>5. Denies a clear goalscoring opportunity to an opponent moving toward player's goal by offence punishable by free kick or penalty kick</li> <li>6. Uses offensive, insulting, or abusive language and/or gestures</li> <li>7. Receives a second warning in the same match</li> </ol>
<p><b>Law XII: Fouls and misconduct</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Is guilty of unsportsmanlike behavior</li> <li>2. Shows dissent through words or actions</li> <li>3. Persistently infringes on the Laws of the Game</li> <li>4. Delays the restart of the game</li> <li>5. Does not respect the required distance when play is restarted with a corner kick or a free kick</li> <li>6. Enters or re-enters field without referee's permission</li> <li>7. Deliberately leaves field without referee's permission</li> <li>8. Deliberately moves the ball from the place where the pass should be realized.</li> </ol>	

Some punishable actions with respect to Law XII are determined by specific conduct of the soccer players; therefore, we can talk of “serious foul play”, “violent conduct”, and “unsportsmanlike conduct”, trying to determine the intention and nature of the player's behavior (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Definitions of different illegal conduct in the game of soccer

<b>DEFINITIONS OF BEHAVIOR ACCORDING TO THE LAWS OF THE GAME</b>	
<p><b>Serious foul play</b></p> <p>The action produced when a player commits an offence against the Laws of the Game, punishable with a free direct kick (or with a penalty kick if it occurs within the penalty area), where the player voluntarily uses excessive and unnecessary force to fight for the ball with an opponent (rough behavior)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Light a cigarette during a game</li> <li>2. Without being injured, leave the playing field without the permission of the referee</li> <li>3. Send the ball out-of-bounds to waste time</li> <li>4. Take off jersey</li> <li>5. Make disapproving gestures toward the public or toward the referees</li> </ol>
<p><b>Violent conduct</b></p> <p>The action produced when a player attacks an opponent when the ball is not directly being fought for between the two. It is also considered violent conduct when a player attacks any other person (teammate, referee, fan, etc.)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Hold the ball more time than necessary (the goalkeeper)</li> <li>7. Fake that a foul has occurred</li> <li>8. Not keep the distance determined by the Laws of the Game</li> <li>9. Dance or gesture during a free kick in order to distract the opponent</li> </ol>
<p><b>Dangerous play</b></p> <p>Any voluntary action – toward or on the ball – that due to recklessness or imprudence of the player that practices it brings an implicit risk of danger</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Unsportsmanlike conduct</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Hang from the crossbar of the goal</li> <li>11. Use deliberate tricks to avoid Law 12, while the ball is in play</li> <li>12. Use tricks to disregard Law 12 while executing a free kick</li> <li>13. Any simulation on the field to try to deceive the referee</li> <li>14. Incorrect distraction or interference when executing the throw-in</li> </ol>

If, as we have indicated, knowledge of the laws of the game can represent a mediating factor between children’s games and socialization, the acceptance of the laws and their follow-through can be an aid in the development of fair play behavior. Thus, the dissuasive and corrective effect of the sanctions imposed by the infraction of the laws should provoke a decrease in the number of sanctions as the player goes from younger categories to those of higher age levels. However, different authors (Dunning, Murphy and Williams, 1992; Durán, 1996; Cruz, Barangé, Boixadós, Niñerola, Torregrosa and Valiente, 1999) mention that the specific character of soccer competition, closely associated with professionalism, the spirit of winning as the most important aspect and very subject to social pressure, appears to be able to neutralize the dissuasive effect of the sanction, on the one hand, and obviate the increased knowledge of the laws of the game, on the other, facilitating, in this way, an increase in the transgressions of the laws as players go to categories of higher age level.

This study tries to be a descriptive study focused on the athletic sanctions imposed on the youth soccer players and their coaches. We think that the frequency of the sanctions, the protagonists of these sanctions, and the motives for them being produced can help to understand an important part of this reality. The purpose of this study was to assess the number of sanctions and type of infractions among players and coaches who differ by category of competition (Under-12, Under-14, Under-16, and Under-18). The sanctions imposed by the Competition Committee of the Soccer Federation of the Region of Murcia (SFRM), Spain, were analyzed to examine three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: “The higher the age category, the greater number of transgressions of regulations that will be made by players and coaches and that will be sanctioned by the SFRM.”

Hypothesis 2: “The higher the age category, the greater number of transgressions of regulations that will be made by players and that will be sanctioned by the SFRM.”

Hypothesis 3: “The higher the age category, the greater number of transgressions of regulations that will be made by players and coaches and that will be sanctioned by the SFRM.”

## METHODS

### *Participants*

The study's sample was composed of all sanctions (n=1202) imposed by the Competition Committee of the SFRM during the first one-third of the competitive soccer season. Three-hundred forty soccer teams in Youth categories (Under-12, Under-14, Under-16, and Under-18) were part of the study (Table 4). The teams comprised 6,120 players and 340 coaches (96 of whom held coaching certification).

*Table 4. Data of number of players and coaches per category*

	1 <sup>st</sup> National Div			2 <sup>nd</sup> National Div			1 <sup>st</sup> Regional Div			2 <sup>nd</sup> Regional Div			Total			
	T	P	C	T	P	C	T	P	C	T	P	C	T	P	CC	C
Under-12							16	288	16	33	594	33	49	882	4	49
Under-14							18	324	18	67	1206	67	85	1530	15	85
Under-16							28	504	28	74	1332	74	102	1836	31	102
Under-18	3	54	3	16	288	16	32	576	32	53	954	53	104	1872	46	104
Total	3	54	3	16	288	16	94	1692	94	227	4086	227	340	6120	96	340

**Legend:** *T* is the number of teams, *P* is the number of players, *C* is the number of coaches, and *CC* is the number of coaches having certification.



### Procedure

In order to do a qualitative analysis of the motives of the sanctions, sanctions were divided in four mutually exclusive categories (Table 5), the first of which explains sanctions due to the development of the game (SG), the following two explain sanctions due to anti-fair play behavior (SD and SA), and the last are sanctions due to reasons not explained by the three anterior categories (OS).

*Table 5. Definition of studied sanctions*

SANCTION	EXPLANATION
Movement	Sanctions caused by movements in the development of the game (for example, hand, tackling an opponent to gain possession of the ball, making contact with the opponent before touching the ball, loss of time, playing in a dangerous manner, etc.)
Disrespect	Sanctions caused by conduct of disrespect: disrespectful verbalizations to opponents or officials, unbecoming gestures and movements, insults that are not serious, etc.
Aggression	Sanctions caused by aggressions: all kinds of violent conduct as classified in the Soccer Regulations, by serious verbal aggressions, serious insults or other verbalizations, and physical aggressions (hitting, threatening to hit, etc.) directed at opponents, referees, teammates, public, etc.
Other	Other sanctions not covered in the previous groupings.

Each of the studied behavior was taken literally from the Competition Committee of the SFRM Report, which, together with the behavior, indicates the imposed sanction (yellow or red card). This fact is important given the disparity of criteria that those implicated in the athletic competition have to interpret a determined conduct as punishable or not and what type of sanction corresponds with the behavior. Along these lines are findings in a study by [Teipel, Gerisch, and Busse \(1983\)](#), which showed the differences in evaluation with respect to athletic behavior susceptible to sanction between soccer players, coaches, referees, and external experts. Only the referees showed a rigorous evaluation directly tied to the interpretation of the rules of the game, while the players and the coaches tended to not identify unsportsmanlike situations as punishable, though coaches interpreted more situations as punishable than the players did. Therefore, the classification was exclusive of such behaviors, establishing two categories considered to be unfair play (disrespectful behavior and aggression) and another two of a more neutral character (movement and other).

### Statistical analysis

To test the hypotheses, a Poisson regression analysis was performed ([Long, 1997](#); [Cameron and Trivedi, 1998](#); [Grupo Modest, 2000](#)). The use of this procedure was justified because the response variable is a recount variable, for which the application of a normal regression model would usually produce inefficient, inconsistent, and slanted estimations of the parameters. The Poisson regression model supposes that the probability of the count is determined by a Poisson distribution, whose average is a function of one or more explanatory variables.

A peculiar feature of this model is that the count can depend on a maximum possible total; for example, the number of sanctions can depend on the number of players. To model this dependence, it is common to incorporate a fixed component in the model (called the offset or variable of exposition), in the same measurement scale as the response variable. The resultant effect is to convert the count into a rate, over which the modelled corresponding statistic is applied (Grupo Modest, 2001). The analysis of the data by means of a Poisson regression was carried out with a current version (version 1.8) of the program R (Venables and Smith, 2003).

**RESULTS**

Table 6 lists the number of sanctions imposed on the players and coaches and the classifications by infraction and by age category. For the sanctions imposed on the coaches there are no sanctions for movements in the game, as the coaches do not directly participate in the game and so cannot be penalized with this type of sanction.

*Table 6. Number and type of sanctions imposed on players and coaches by age category*

	Age Category	TYPE				Total
		Movement	Disrespect	Aggression	Other	
Players	Under-12	9	2	6	6	23
	Under-14	48	18	23	18	107
	Under-16	144	56	65	33	298
	Under-18	340	83	109	37	569
	Total	541	159	203	94	997
Coaches	Under-12	-	14	2	3	19
	Under-14	-	28	3	1	32
	Under-16	-	50	6	8	64
	Under-18	-	70	5	15	90
	Total	-	162	16	27	205

Table 7 shows a classification of the sanctions imposed, classified by type of infraction and age category, the total number of players, classified by age category, the total number of coaches by age category and by coaching certification (CC), and the total number of players and coaches per category.

*Table 7. Number and type of sanctions imposed on players and coaches by players' age category*

Age Category	INFRACTION TYPE					Players	COACHES			Players & Coaches
	SM	SD	SA	OS	Total		CC	No CC	Total	
Under-12	9	16	8	9	42	882	4	45	49	931
Under-14	48	46	26	19	139	1530	15	70	85	1615
Under-16	144	106	71	41	362	1836	31	71	102	1938
Under-18	340	153	114	52	659	1872	46	58	104	1976
Total	541	321	219	121	1202	6120	96	244	340	6460

*Note:* SM= Sanctions for movements in game; SD= Sanctions for disrespectful conduct; SA= Sanctions for aggression; OS= Other sanctions; CC= Coaching certification



The first hypothesis (model 1) that was subjected to testing was that the total number of sanctioned transgressions of the regulations (by both players and coaches) by the Competition Committee of the SFRM would increase with an increase in age category (from under-12 to under-14, from under-14 to under-16, and from under-16 to under-18).

Taking the category of the players and coaches as an ordinal variable, a moderate increase in the rate of transgressions with respect to total players and coaches for the youngest categories and rather more pronounced for the older aged categories. Specifically, the rates were 0.04 (under-12), 0.09 (under-14), 0.19 (under-16) and 0.33 (under-18) and the obtained discrepancy with model 1 was  $D(2)=2.04$ ;  $P=0.36$ , which represents an optimal fit between data and model that allows us to accept the proposed model (model 1) as representative of the empirical data and to therefore conclude that as players go up the age-determined categories, the number of total transgressions increases significantly both on the part of players and coaches.

The second hypothesis (model 2) is that the number of transgressions of regulations on the part of players that were sanctioned by the Competition Committee of the SFRM would increase as the players increase in age category (from under-12 to under-14, from under-14 to under-16, and from under-16 to under-18). Taking the category of the players as an ordinal variable, closely related to age, a moderate increase in the rates of transgressions with respect to total players for the youngest categories and rather more pronounced for the older aged categories. Specifically, the rates were 0.03 (under-12), 0.07 (under-14), 0.16 (under-16) and 0.30 (under-18). The obtained discrepancy with model 2 was  $D(2)=4.31$ ;  $P=0.12$ , which also represents an adequate fit and allows us to conclude that as players go up the age-determined categories, the number of total transgressions increases significantly by the players.

The third hypothesis (model 3) is that the number of transgressions of regulations on the part of coaches that were sanctioned by the Competition Committee of the SFRM would increase as they increase in the players' age categories (from under-12 to under-14, from under-14 to under-16, and from under-16 to under-18). The empirical data do not seem to show an increase in the rates of transgressions with respect to the total number of coaches for the youngest categories (under-12 and under-14) but there is a pronounced increase for the older-aged categories (under-16 and under-18). Specifically, the rates were 0.39 (for coaches of under-12 teams), 0.38 (for coaches of under-14 teams), 0.63 (for coaches of under-16 teams), and 0.86 (for coaches of under-18 teams). The obtained discrepancy with model 3 was  $D(2)=1.61$ ;  $P=0.45$ , which allows us to accept model 3 and conclude that as coaches pass to higher-aged categories there is a significant increase in the number of transgressions of the regulations by the coaches.

## DISCUSSION

From the obtained results we can conclude that, as you ascend through the categories, there is a significant increase of transgressions of the regulations, by both the players and the coaches. This same tendency can be observed in the results of other studies ([Torregrosa, Mimbreno, Boixadós and Cruz, 1996](#)) in which fouls due to contact as well as those due to anti-fair play behavior by the players were shown to be significantly greater in professional soccer competitions than in competitions of other age categories. Further, in both cases, more fouls due to contact appear than anti-fair play and pro-fair play fouls.

In agreement with these results, in our study the sanctioned conduct due to the development of the game (similar to contact fouls) make up the largest percentage of sanctioned conduct of the players (54.3%); this type of conduct, in general is not attributable to unsportsmanlike intentions of the players, but rather, as suggested by Cruz et al. (1996), they are produced principally “because soccer is a contact sport in which physical interaction between the players is practically constant” (p.126), being something specific to the nature of the game (intensity in getting position, in regaining control of the ball, and in trying to score a goal); in this sense, the greater competitiveness that the participation in higher age categories implicitly brings, along with the growth of the soccer players, could also explain the increase in this type of sanction.

The percentage of anti-fair play sanctions (SD plus SA) of the players is 36.3% that, in spite of everything, still is very high; if to that we add the sanctions imposed on the coaches, which are mostly due to anti-fair play conduct (86.8%), the situation is not very positive. The results of the present study indicate that the transgression of the rules of play by the players and coaches increases significantly as you ascend age categories and it would be very important to know what type of sanctions they are and if there are differences between the players and coaches in the evolution of this tendency. In another study, a significant increase in the quantity of sanctions due to aggressive behavior in players as well as in coaches as you ascend categories has been found, in line with the results of the study by Schwartz (2002), who points out that the two principal motives of expulsion are serious foul play and violent behavior; however, the same does not happen with the conduct sanctioned due to disrespect, which do increase among coaches although not among players, which can suppose a hindrance in the introduction of pro fair play behavior, since “the behavior of the players in a game is regulated not only by their personal concepts of what is correct or incorrect, but also by the actions of other important people for the players like their coaches” (Cruz et al., 1996). In this sense, we can consider the social context in which frames athletic participation as determinant in the appearance and evolution of pro-fair play and anti-fair play behavior, noting especially the role that social agents play (Boixadós, Valiente, Mimbbrero, Torregrosa and Cruz, 1998; Simons, 2003). Some authors even suggest very innovating proposals (Blake, 2002), such as the utilization of yellow cards directed at spectators as an effective manner of standing up to the unsportsmanlike conduct of them.

At any rate, it appears that the coaches and parents are the closest and most influential models, since, as indicated by Torregrosa et al. (1996), learning through imitation in the first stages of sport initiation appears to be limited to the normative aspects such as kicking the ball out of bounds or the manner of celebrating goals and not to fouls or anti-fair play behaviors. In this sense, it is important to emphasize some experiences of formation directed to parents and coaches of youth athletes (Cruz, Boixadós, Torregrosa and Valiente, 2001; Gimeno, 2003) with very positive results.

Finally, it seems that any action to improve fair play conduct should be directed to early ages since, as we have shown, at older ages (with the passing to higher aged categories), the number of sanctions increases, which is to say, there is a greater frequency of transgressions of the rules. Also, all these actions should contemplate direct interventions (specific courses of formation, inclusion of ethical and formational aspects in the curricular itineraries of coaching certification) directed at coaches (direct agents of socialization for young athletes) since, as we have seen, their anti-fair play conduct (SD and SA) increases as the category of competition increases, possibly due to the increase in responsibility of results or due to the

personal preoccupation for obtaining results in pursuit of ascension to superior professional levels.

In conclusion, given that knowledge of the Laws of the Game, and the corrective effect of the imposed sanctions for their infraction, do not decrease anti-fair play conduct, neither in coaches nor in players, it would be interesting to dedicate a part of the psychological training to help to correct this conduct that continues to the detriment of the sport, the clubs, and the athletes.

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