

# ETHICAL SPORTSMANSHIP: COMPETITIVE SPORTS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF *DHARMA*

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**Abstract:** This article explores the interplay between ethical dilemmas and competitiveness in sports within the framework of sportsmanship grounded in *Dharmic* ethics. While competition often drives excellence, it also generates ethical tensions, particularly regarding the true purpose of sport – whether it is to win or to cultivate character and integrity. Drawing from Hindu philosophy, especially the *Bhagavad Gita*, the paper examines the principles of *swadharma* (personal duty), *yuddha dharma* (righteous competition), and *karma yoga* (selfless action) as frameworks for ethical behaviour in athletic contexts. It also considers contrasting perspectives from Christian coaching traditions, which emphasize the role of sport in personal and moral development. By analyzing these diverse ethical standpoints, the author advocates a *dharmic* notion of success – one that prioritizes virtue, fairness and mutual respect over mere victory, fostering a more inclusive, respectful and ethically grounded sporting culture.

**Keywords:** *Bhagavad Gita, Cultivated Environment, Dharma, Ethics, Karma Yoga, Sportsmanship, Swadharma, Yuddha Dharma.*

## 1. Introduction

The nature of competitiveness in sports is a double-edged sword. While it fosters excellence, resilience and innovation, it also raises pressing ethical concerns. Competitive sports, long viewed as a mirror of human ambition, test the limits of physical and mental endurance, offering a stage for both individual and collective

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perseverance. Lorenzo Casini (2021) argues that sports embody the essence of human endeavor, encapsulating not just the pursuit of success but the broader struggle for self-improvement and mastery (160). Yet, does the glorification of competition overshadow the fundamental principles of sportsmanship?

This paper explores the relevance of *Dharma* in shaping ethical sportsmanship by analyzing its philosophical roots and their link to fair play and integrity. It compares *Dharmic* ethics with Western notions, reviews Vedic, Buddhist and Hindu teachings—especially the *Bhagavad Gita*—and evaluates ethical challenges in modern sports, including commercialization and performance pressures. The study proposes practical strategies for integrating *Dharmic* principles into sports ethics policy and training. Ultimately, it argues that a *Dharmic* approach offers a moral alternative to victory-driven competition, redefining sports as a path to self-realization, virtue, and a more inclusive, ethically grounded sporting culture.

## **2. Ethical Tensions and the Meaning of Sportsmanship**

True sportsmanship extends beyond mere victory and defeat; it demands ethical conduct, fairness and respect for opponents. This raises an essential question: Should the ultimate goal of sports be winning at all costs, or should it prioritize character-building and moral integrity? Religious and philosophical traditions offer valuable insights into this debate. The concept of *Dharma* in Indian philosophy, for instance, provides a compelling platform to assess ethical behavior in sports. As Sridevi Seetharam (2013) highlights, while many religions have extensively theorized ethics in competition, Hindu perspectives on sportsmanship remain underexplored despite their deep-rooted philosophical significance (226). C. Upender Rao (2021) presents *Dharma* in the context of Yoga, emphasizing that to “yoke” oneself to wholesome qualities and actions is essential for spiritual progress. He explains that being yoked to unwholesome tendencies leads to attachment and craving, which hinder growth. Therefore, unwholesome actions must be consciously avoided (159–166).

On the other hand, Christian perspectives on competition, as examined by Vinson and Parker (2020), emphasize the role of

faith in shaping coaching philosophies. Their research suggests that Christian coaches often integrate servant leadership, fostering an athlete-centered approach prioritizing personal development over a singular focus on winning (304-310). By emphasizing trust, mentorship and moral accountability, these coaches challenge the prevailing win-at-all-costs mentality, raising a critical debate: Should the purpose of competitive sports be redefined to align more closely with ethical and character-driven leadership models? While competition undoubtedly drives performance and innovation, the ethical frameworks guiding it determine whether it remains a force for personal and collective growth or devolves into a ruthless, winner-takes-all domain. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to recognize the value of competition but to continually question and refine the moral foundations upon which it stands.

On university campuses, integrating sportsmanship is not just an enhancement to education but a vital component of nurturing morally grounded and socially responsible individuals. Lin-Bao Zhang (2018) contends that sports instill essential values such as fairness, teamwork and ethical behavior, promoting holistic student development (530-533). However, it is essential to question whether the institutionalization of sports values leads to a more harmonious educational environment or inadvertently prioritizes competitive achievement over academic and personal growth. On a different front, John T. Ehrbar (2015) critically examines the ethical dilemmas posed by genetic modification in athletics. He navigates the contentious debate surrounding gene doping, distinguishing it from traditional performance-enhancing drugs while highlighting the ethical tensions between technological advancement and the integrity of sports (1-9).

Western sports ethics generally emphasize rule-based fairness and integrity. In contrast, *Dharmic* traditions provide a broader and more spiritually integrated framework. Drawing from Hindu philosophy and the *Bhagavad Gita*, concepts such as *swadharma* (personal duty), *yuddha dharma* (righteous competition) and *karma yoga* (selfless action) offer a vision of sports as a moral and spiritual endeavor rather than a pursuit of victory alone.

According to Charles Willemen (2018), *Dharma* refers to the inherent nature or quality of something that defines its existence and function (1285), suggesting that true sportsmanship lies in fulfilling one's duty with integrity and selflessness. Yet, this raises another critical question: Can *Dharmic* ethics realistically guide modern sports ethics amid commercialization and consumerism, or do they remain too idealistic for today's competitive environment? The convergence of Christian servant leadership, Western ethics and *Dharmic* principles invites a rethinking of the meaning of competition, success and integrity in sports.

### 3. *Dharma*: Religious Perspectives

Prof. P. G. Yogi (2000), in his paper "The Vedic and Buddhist Concept of *Dharma*," explores the meaning of *Dharma* in the Vedic and Buddhist traditions. He emphasizes the difficulty of translating *Dharma* precisely into English, as it encompasses a wide range of meanings rooted in the Sanskrit root *dhṛ* (धृ), which means to uphold, support or nourish (38). In the Vedic context, *Dharma* refers to order, righteousness and duty that sustain both the cosmos and society. In the *Rig Veda*, the term appears at least 56 times, denoting religious rites, moral laws and principles of conduct.

In the Buddhist tradition, *Dharma* has multiple layers of meaning. It commonly refers to the teachings of the Buddha. It also signifies the fundamental elements of existence—mind, matter and forces that constitute reality (39-40). Yogi also examines various authoritative sources of *Dharma* cited in classical Indian texts. The *Gautamadharmasūtra* upholds the *Vedas*, tradition and the practice of those who know the *Vedas* as foundational. *Apastamba* highlights the consensus of Vedic scholars, while the *Manusmṛiti* identifies five sources: the *Veda*, tradition, the conduct of Vedic scholars, the practices of virtuous people and personal satisfaction. Yājñavalkya further includes tradition, the example of the good, personal contentment and reflective desire. Yogi thus presents a comprehensive yet concise overview, emphasizing that *Dharma* is not a singular concept but a dynamic, multifaceted principle central to both spiritual paths and social harmony in Indian thought.

*Dharma*, understood as duty or righteousness, encompasses personal responsibilities shaped by one’s social role, age, and spiritual stage (Hongal & Kshirsagar, 2023, 1-6). It is a fluid, context-dependent concept that challenges moral absolutism, promoting a situational and personal ethical approach. Beyond religious obligation, *Dharma* includes the totality of duties essential for a virtuous life and social harmony. Each being has its own *Dharma*, reflecting a deeply interconnected universe where individual actions influence the whole. This perspective fosters collective responsibility, linking personal virtue with social justice and universal well-being, encouraging compassion, wisdom, and inner harmony as foundations for ethical living.

#### **4. The *Dharmic* Foundations of Competitive Sports**

The integration of *Dharma* into sports ethics offers a transformative experience through which morality, responsibility and fairness in athletic competition can be re-evaluated. Colin G. Pennington (2017) stresses that duty in sports must align with principles like fair play, respect for opponents and rule adherence (36-42). Translating these values into athletic practice depends significantly on coaches, who must foster both skill and ethical awareness in athletes (Cumming, 2003, 50-51). This prompts a vital question: Can sports act as platforms for moral education that nurture honesty, perseverance and discipline? *Dharma* emphasizes interconnectedness and personal accountability, advocating empathy and compassion in competitive settings. It calls into question whether a win that compromises fairness truly honours the spirit of sport. This challenges the conventional, results-oriented understanding of success, encouraging a shift toward valuing character and integrity (Reid, 1998). Such a shift requires reimagining success not solely in terms of victory but as a reflection of ethical conduct throughout competition.

Cultural and philosophical traditions further shape moral behavior in sports. While some cultures emphasize collective duty and hierarchical respect, others stress individual performance. These differing paradigms demand nuanced approaches to sportsmanship that balance competition with ethical

responsibility. Patterson (2019) reinforces this by asserting that genuine sportsmanship is rooted in personal responsibility and ethical conduct (1544-1559). Fair play, a cornerstone of athletic ethics, links closely with *Dharmic* ideals of justice and equality. Yet, the intensity of competition often tests these principles. Athletes face temptations to exploit rules, pushing ethical limits for advantage. *Dharma* offers a corrective, suggesting that how one competes matters as much as the outcome. Thomas and Ermler (2012) highlight the need to address structural power dynamics and ensure that fairness is upheld at all levels (Thomas and Ermler, 2012, 137-150).

Respect for opponents, too, reflects *Dharmic* values of compassion and dignity. Fair play, grounded in mutual respect, demands that athletes honor their opponents' efforts and engage with humility in both victory and defeat (Doolittle and Demas, 2013, 28-33). Sports psychologists further navigate this moral landscape by supporting athletes from diverse belief systems and fostering ethical performance (Sarkar et al., 2014, 580-587). Finally, sports ethics are shaped not only by religious or philosophical traditions but also by secular influences. Recognizing the role of non-religious beliefs in shaping conduct adds depth to ethical discourse in sports. A more inclusive model of sportsmanship can emerge when values like fairness, respect, and accountability are embraced universally—regardless of background. By aligning athletic ethics with *Dharmic* principles, the definition of success expands beyond victory to include moral responsibility, empathy, and integrity. This approach encourages athletes, coaches, and institutions to foster a culture where ethical values are integral to competition, redefining sportsmanship as both a personal and collective pursuit rooted in deeper moral commitments.

## **5. *Bhagavad Gita* and *Dharmic Ethos***

The *Bhagavad Gita* offers profound insights into duty (*dharma*), self-discipline and moral decision-making—values that resonate deeply with the ethical foundations of sports. Set on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the *Gita* presents Arjuna's inner conflict as a metaphor for the struggles individuals face when values, emotions and responsibilities collide. Lord Krishna's counsel to

Arjuna emphasizes that true *dharma* lies in fulfilling one's duty with detachment and integrity, not in the pursuit of victory or personal gain. In sports, this translates into playing not merely to win, but to uphold fairness, honour and commitment to the spirit of the game. Three core teachings from the *Gita* illuminate this *dharmic* foundation for sports ethics:

**a. *Swadharma*: Personal Duty**

The concept of *swadharma* emphasizes fulfilling one's unique role based on one's nature and position. In sports, this may involve understanding one's position in a team, respecting individual limitations and cultivating one's talents without comparison or envy. As Shunmugan and Sukdaven (2024, 1-7) argue, aligning actions with one's intrinsic nature fosters authentic motivation and resilience—traits crucial for sustained athletic development and ethical conduct.

**b. *Yuddha Dharma*: Righteous Competition**

Sports inevitably involve conflict and competition, but *yuddha dharma* reorients this toward ethical engagement. It emphasizes justice, fairness and respect for opponents, rejecting the “win-at-all-costs” mentality. In this view, competition becomes a means of self-growth and noble striving, not domination. Athletes are encouraged to pursue excellence while upholding integrity, creating a space where ambition and morality can coexist meaningfully (Mittal, 2013).

**c. *Karma Yoga*: Selfless Action**

*Karma yoga* encourages acting with full dedication while remaining unattached to outcomes (*nishkama karma*). For athletes, this principle invites a focus on process over result—on disciplined effort rather than medals or accolades. As Natesan et al. (2009, 128-143) note, such detachment fosters mental clarity and emotional balance, allowing athletes to remain composed under pressure and resilient in defeat. This approach not only enhances performance but builds character and inner stability.

The *Gita*'s ethical vision challenges contemporary sports

culture, which often prioritizes results, fame or commercial gain. By grounding sports ethics in *dharma*, the *Gita* calls for a shift from ego-driven ambition to values-driven engagement. As Arun and Sanjay Kumar (2013) observe, true enlightenment in action involves rising above self-interest and serving a higher purpose – an ideal that athletes can embody through teamwork, humility and perseverance. Swami Vivekananda's interpretation of the *Gita* frames struggle itself as sacred when approached with sincerity and ethical intent (Brown, 2014). In sports, this outlook redefines losses and setbacks not as failures but as opportunities for self-refinement and learning. Ultimately, the *Bhagavad Gita* affirms that ethical sportsmanship is not separate from high performance but integral to it. Its teachings show that personal well-being and team success, inner discipline and outward achievement, are not opposites but complementary. In applying *dharmic* principles to sports, we move toward a vision of competition rooted not in ego or entitlement, but in integrity, purpose and the greater good.

## 6. Conclusion

*Dharmic* ethics—rooted in *swadharma* (personal duty), *yuddha dharma* (righteous competition), and *karma yoga* (selfless action)—can reshape modern sports culture by emphasizing moral responsibility, integrity and inner growth over mere victory. Drawing from the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Dharmic* ethics urge athletes to act in harmony with their intrinsic nature. *Swadharma* promotes self-awareness and purpose-driven participation, helping individuals align their efforts with their deeper values rather than external rewards. *Yuddha dharma* reinforces the importance of ethical competition. It does not reject ambition but insists it be guided by fairness, respect for opponents and a sense of justice. *Karma yoga*, the path of action without attachment to outcomes, teaches that the process of striving itself is meaningful. It encourages athletes to cultivate humility in victory and dignity in defeat, helping maintain emotional balance and ethical focus amid pressure. Unlike rigid, rule-based models in some Western traditions, *Dharmic* ethics are dynamic and situational, allowing for a contextual and holistic approach to sportsmanship. By



integrating these principles into training, education and governance, sports institutions can foster ethically conscious athletes and coaches who view competition not merely as performance but as a platform for personal and integral growth. In doing so, *Dharmic* ethics can help redefine success—not as domination, but as the realization of virtue, discipline, and shared human excellence.

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