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BIOETHICAL QUESTIONS OF ANIMALS IN SPORT¹

Abstract

Animals are a part of sport industries, from the so-called traditions such as fox hunting and bullfighting, horse and dog racing, to the cruel examples of *hare coursing*, rodeo, and orangutan boxing (Thailand), to cock and dog fights. These are prominent examples of animal exploitation serving our human entertainment. In my presentation, I will try to identify some of the essential questions considering animal use in sports. Some of these questions are: Can we justify animal exploitation in the name of tradition? Can we take into consideration the well-being of sport animals before, during, and after their competitive career? How much could and should the imminent risk of animal stress, injuries, and fatalities prevent us from their exploitation in sports? If animals are ready to obey demands we set upon them, should we abuse them for our entertainment and sport?

Keywords: animals, sports industry, cultural tradition, bioethics, entertainment

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Introduction

When we think about animals in sport, we usually think about activities where people use animals in some competitions such as horse races, dog races, and other similar ones. But first, we need to research the definition of sport as it is. Matija Mato Škerbić finds 127 definitions of sport in the Oxford dictionary.² In the doctoral thesis³ of the same author, we can find a whole discussion about the definition of Sport, in the part called “What is Sport - Definition and (or) Conceptualization”⁴ Škerbić uses the theory from Graham McFee to make the point, and he is successful in doing so – it is possible to understand what is sport without the definition of sport. McFee claims:

“First (discussed in this chapter), general objections to the need (within philosophy) for definitions apply when formalists try to define sport: (a) we can understand what sport is without being able to define it; (b) any definition cannot really add to knowledge (beyond knowledge of the meaning of a term), since one must know how to deploy the ideas independent of the definition.” (McFee, 2004: 16)

This seems very reasonable. Škerbić continues and claims that we need to conceptualize and characterize sport. The main characteristic of sport includes concepts: game, testing, contesting rules, physical, and skills etc. We shall not go further than that in setting up a general frame of what sport is, instead we will focus on animals in sport and try to determine can activities that include animals be considered a sport. Referring to the theory of Jim Parry, Škerbić concludes that “according to this conception, sport is exclusively a human competition. Sport is not an animal competition such as dog racing, although people have trained dogs. Here, therefore, animal competitions should not be confused with sports in which trained animals are used, such as equestrian races and sports, reindeer or horse-drawn sleigh races on the one hand, and fishing and hunting competitions on the other side” (Škerbić, 2019: 31). According to this, we don’t need to discuss animals in sport because the sport is ‘exclusively a human competition,’ but a lot of people don’t agree with this and consider activities with animals as a sport, so we will focus our research on those activities.

2 See more at: <https://varazdinski.net.hr/vijesti/sport/3212625/filozofija-sporta-matija-skerbic-svjetskog-prvenstva-nema-bez-nacionalizma/>

3 Matija Mato Škerbić, *William John Morgan's Ethics of Sport*. Available in Croatian: http://darhiv.ffzg.unizg.hr/id/eprint/11557/1/Skerbic_Matija_Mato.pdf

4 Ibidem, pp. 18-44.

Animals in ‘sport activities’

In different types of literature, in everyday speech and in the media, activities in which animals participate are often called sports. For example, in the magazine *The International Journal of the History of Sport* we can find articles about animals in sport. There is an article “Sport, social relations and animal husbandry: early cock-fighting in North America“, in issue from 1993. In this article that talks about history of cock-fighting in North America, Powell claims: “The early records of sport in colonial North America consist of erratic observations in widely dispersed sources. The available information suggests that horse-racing was the dominant activity. However, by the mid-eighteenth century, a wide variety of sports began to gain popularity or at least to attract greater attention from contemporary writers. One of these ascending sports was cock-fighting.” (Powell, 1993: 361) From this, we can conclude that the first dominant ‘sport’ activity in North America was horse racing and cock-fights. There is a different approach in these two kinds of “animal sports”. In horse racing, the man trains a horse to show its physical strength, its speed. Man’s intention here is not to injure an animal. On the other hand, in cock-fighting the goal is that one animal injures another in the most brutal way possible. In the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, we can find that cock-fighting is a sport that was “popular in ancient times in India, China, Persia, and other Eastern countries and was introduced into Greece in the time of Themistocles (c. 524–460 BC). This sport had spread throughout Asia Minor and Sicily. For a long time, the Romans affected a despisement of this “Greek diversion”, but they ended up adopting it so enthusiastically, that the agricultural writer Columella (1st century AD) complained that its devotees often spent their whole patrimony in betting at the side of the pit.”⁵

Although we can see that by characteristics described in the introduction we can’t call this a sport (neither horse racing nor cock-fights), it is clear that these activities with animals are commonly classified as sports. There is even a name for such activities that contain the term sport – animal blood sport.

“A blood sport is defined as any sport that involves the killing or shedding of the blood of an animal. Such sports have long been a part of human society. Blood sports that are modern-day spectator sports include dog fighting, cock-fighting, and bullfighting.” (Jewell, 2011: 19)

As we said before, cock-fights are an ancient ‘sport’. From ancient times until today, we can find cock-fights in South America, Asia, Europe etc. It is a really

5 More you can see on: <https://www.britannica.com/sports/cockfighting>.

bloody sport, sometimes further intensified by attaching metal daggers to the legs of the roosters. On the objections that the cock-fighting is brutal, deadly, and murderous, the organizers of such activities, which are most often banned today, claim that this is tradition and that not all cocks die in the fights. Not really a good argument, of course.

“One could argue that the existence of such sports is *de facto* evidence that humans enjoy watching violent spectacles, while the prohibition of these sports in many countries suggests that demand for violent spectacle varies over country and culture.” (Jewell, 2011: 19)

Enjoyment of some in watching such violent spectacles is another topic, but for this article, deliberation of active support of violence against animals and among the animals is almost crucial. From the beginning of human history, animal blood sports are present. “The Etruscans enjoyed watching men fight wild animals, especially bulls.” (Mechikoff, 2014: 83) Bullfighting is also one of the oldest ‘blood animal sport’ activities. The oldest depiction of this ‘sport’ in its nonviolent form is found in a painting in Knossos, dating back to 2000 BC. Even today, in Spain, there are 15 schools for matadors that can be attended by children after the age of fourteen.

“Bullfighting, a cross between a baseball game differs from dog and cockfighting in important ways. Foremost, it is a big business practiced openly in major western countries, while dog and cockfighting exist mostly underground.” (Jewell, 2011: 22)

Same as the organizers and fans of cockfights, bullfight lovers claim that their sport is tradition and that not all bulls die in these fights. One more underground blood animal sport today is dogfighting. We can find out more about the cruelty of this in Hanna Gibson’s “Brief Summary of Dog Fighting Laws” (2005):

“Dog fighting, which is appropriately called a blood-sport, is the actual pitting of two dogs against each other in a pit or a ring to fight for the entertainment of the spectators. The dogs, usually pit bulls, literally bite and rip the flesh off of one another while the onlookers cheer, scream, and place bets on which dog will win the match. After the fight, both dogs are critically wounded, often with massive bleeding, ruptured lungs, broken bones, and other life-threatening injuries. Generally, the loser of a match dies or is killed, unless he has any salvage value to his owner.” (Gibson, 2005)⁶

⁶ See more at: <https://www.animallaw.info/intro/dog-fighting>.

Dog fighting, as it seems, is a tradition tracing back to the beginning of history. There were very popular Mastiff fights in ancient Mesopotamia. Today, illegal dog fighting is present everywhere in the world, and it is a brutal criminal activity with a high profit. Unfortunately, dog fights were also one of the types of entertainment for humans in the Roman Empire. Romans were specialists in ‘fighting of animals and with animals’:

“The ancient Romans, who eventually conquered the Greeks in 146 BC, did not have the cultural belief in individual excellence to the same extent that the Greeks did—if at all. Roman sport, if we can call it that, took place in massive arenas (much bigger than anything ever built by the Greeks) that held up to 250,000 fans, who were entertained by watching bloody gladiatorial combats in which hundreds of fighters and animals would be slain in a single day. Another form of mass entertainment took place in the infamous Colosseum, where hapless “enemies of the state” were fed to lions, tigers, bears, and crocodiles or consigned to other horrific deaths in front of 50,000 Romans and others. The vast majority of Romans were bored with the Greek version of sport, even as most Greeks were repulsed by the Romans’ forms of entertainment.” (Mechikoff, 2014: 6)

There is a doubt that fights between people were more appreciated than fights between people and animals.

“There is some disagreement about whether gladiators fought animals as well as other gladiators. There were some who were designated as *Bestiarius* (beast fighter), special gladiators who were sometimes trained in the *Ludus Matutinus* school. The *Bestiarii* were the lowest in status in the gladiator ranks and were often sent *ad bestias* as a form of execution.” (Mechikoff, 2014: 94)

Romans also sacrificed almost all known types of wild (and some domestic) animals for their entertainment.

“A typical agenda of events in the arena began with animal fights in the morning and included elephants, bulls, tigers, lions, panthers, bears, boars, apes, and crocodiles. During the reign of Nero, 400 tigers lashed into bulls and elephants during one day! However, this paled in comparison to the frequent slaughter of men and women, mauled and devoured by lions, tigers, and panthers.” (Mechikoff, 2014: 98)

Different types of activities for exploiting, hurting, and killing animals

From ancient times until today, people invented a lot of different activities in which they exploit, hurt, and kill animals. Most of those kinds of activities are just for pure entertainment. There are few general types of these activities, which some people would call a bloody animal sport.

First are activities in which people train and encourage animals to best other animals, to hurt another animal or even to kill another animal. Most brutal examples are previously mentioned dog fighting, bullfighting, cockfighting etc. There are also a lot of obscure examples of these types of activities. One example is hare coursing. Even in *Encyclopædia Britannica* hare coursing is described under the encyclopedic entry “coursing - sport”. *Britannica* claims:

“Coursing, the pursuit of game by hounds hunting by sight and not by scent. In modern, organized coursing competitions, two greyhounds at a time pursue one hare. The dogs are judged on performance as well as on their success in catching the hare: points are awarded for outracing the other dog and catching up with the hare, for turning it at a right angle, for wrenching (turning it at less than a right angle), for tripping the hare, and for a kill.”⁷

In some countries hare coursing is illegal but in others it is legal. There are two forms of coursing in Ireland - closed coursing and open coursing. Both involve the use of a rabbit as live bait. Every year, thousands of rabbits are subjected to stress, injury, and death.

Throughout history, there have been a lot of bizarre ‘sport activities’ like these. There were lots of baiting activities such as monkey-baiting, bear-baiting, badger-baiting, bull-baiting, lion-baiting, donkey-baiting, duck-baiting, and even rat baiting. All these baiting activities were popular from the 16th to 20th century thanks to the bloodthirst of people. Most of these fights, of course, ended in severe injuries or death of the animals. Some of the ‘fighters’ from these baiting activities were so-called ‘stars’. For example, Jacco Macacco (fighting ape)⁸, a famous fighting monkey. Variety and imagination in such activities were truly unbelievable, which is why I will also mention a very popular ‘animal sport’ in Turkey, camel wrestling, and orangutan boxing⁹ in Bangkok. The most benign

7 See more at: <https://www.britannica.com/sports/coursing>.

8 See more about Jacco Macacco in: William L, Lennox P. (1860) *Pictures of Sporting Life and Character*, vol. 1, New York, Hurst, , pp 162-163.

9 See more at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4306842/Exploitative-orangutan-boxing-Bangkok-criticised.html>

activities of this type are animal races (horse, dog, rabbit, turtle, and snail races). Even these benign activities are morally questionable thanks to the exploitation of animals, their living conditions, and so on.¹⁰

The second type of so-called sport activities with animals is ‘people against animals’. The most known activity like this is hunting. There are lots of theories and discussions about animal hunting but we will not go in that direction. This type also includes some bizarre activities such as octopus-wrestling. “In the 1960s, octopus wrestling became a popular sport – so much so that there was even a world championship held in Puget Sound, Washington, in 1963.” (Brooke-Hitching, 2015: 219) Between the 17th and 19th centuries goose-pulling was popular in the Netherlands, Belgium and England:

“‘Goose riding’ (also known as ‘gander-pulling’ and ‘gooseneck tearing’) was a similar sport that was also popularly played across Europe at about this time. A live goose was strung up by its feet to a pole or length of rope tied between two posts. The competitors rode horses at speed underneath, attempting to wrench the bird’s head free – doing so would win them the body. A gruesome account from a French source suggests the pullers may even have bitten the head off, as the winner was described as needing ‘strong jaws and good teeth.’” (Brooke-Hitching, 2015: 121)

Cock-shying and other poultry-based blood sports, including cock-throwing, were very popular in 17th and 18th century England:

“Another version was cock-throwing, in which a group of youngsters would catch a cockerel, tie it to the ground or bury it up to its neck, and throw sticks and stones at it until it was dead. The game was usually a highlight of Shrove Tuesday celebrations. From this rural version developed a more ‘gentlemanly’ form. The sticks and stones were replaced with ‘coksteles’, specially made weighted sticks. The people of the Basque region of northern Spain also played a game in which a chicken was buried up to its neck, called *oilar jokoa*. Both the bird and the contestants were blindfolded, and, guided by the beat of the *txistulari* (drummer), the players had to locate the creature and remove its head. The game is still played today, most famously in Legazpi in June, but in the modern version it is considered sufficient merely to pat the chicken’s head.” (Brooke-Hitching, 2015: 100)

10 To find out more about this question, please see “Conclusion or bioethical question about animals in ‘activities’ similar to sport of this article.”

There are a lot of similar 'animal blood sports' in which man hurts or kills innocent animals just for the fun of it or to be a king for a day (but a real fool for a lifetime). There is "Drawing the Badger", "Fox-Tossing", "Cat-burning" etc. We must, once again, mention the immense variety and imagination of the people in these 'blood animal sports'

Less brutal, but still in this category, is rodeo. Rodeo appeared in the 1820s and 1830s in the western States and northern Mexico. Cowboys and Vaqueros testified to their work skills against each other. Today we have a lot of rodeo activities in North and South America, Australia, and the Philippines. The purpose of rodeos is to show the superiority of the man over an animal. In various rodeos a man rides bulls, horses, large sheep, etc.

The third type of activities in which animals are used is the ones where there are a man and an animal trained together and are in some kind of competition. The most popular 'sport' of this kind is horse racing, but there are a lot of similar activities such as tortoise racing, pig racing, etc. Hunting with dogs or some other animals (falconry etc.) is also included in this category.

The fourth potential type of people activities with animals similar to a sport are ones which border with such absurd ideas that they seem fictional, something like turkey bowling. The name perfectly describes what this activity is, it is worth mentioning that the turkeys in question are frozen. When you try to find a definition of turkey bowling, the definition you come across starts with: "The Turkey Bowling is a sport..."

Conclusion or a bioethical question about animals in 'activities' similar to sport

As we established at the beginning of this article, if we consider sport to be exclusively human activity, then we can't talk about animals in sport. But we will consider activities similar to sport, activities that people consider a sport and so-called blood animal sports. A lot of organizers and fans of dog fighting, cockfighting, and similar activities try to argue that these brutal activities with animals are tradition. But can we justify the exploitation, brutal hurting, and killing of animals in 'blood animal sport' for the sake of tradition? If we can justify this animal torture with tradition then we can also justify Nepal Child Marriage. In this Nepali tradition, social pressures often encourage child marriage. "Many girls marry immediately after they reach puberty; in some areas girls marry even earlier. The payment of dowry, by a bride's family to a husband's family, remains

widespread, although it is illegal; the expectation that a bride's family will pay a higher dowry in return for a better-educated husband, or to marry off an older girl, creates financial incentives for child marriage.¹¹ It's not rare that 12 or 13-year girls marry much older men, and it is not rare that these poor girls die from hemorrhage after the first night with their new husbands. Also, in some African and Asian countries Female genital mutilation (FGM) is a tradition. "More than 200 million girls and women alive today have been cut in 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia where FGM is concentrated."¹² We can't find any justification for these actions, other than that of moral relativism. The claim that it was justified only because it is tradition is not a valid argument. In a lot of examples, the tradition goes against normal and rational procedures and actions. All 'blood animal sports' are wrong, because all of those activities cause suffering and pain of a living being. Another thing is the prejudice that humans are superior beings in this world, and that other non-human animals need to serve human animals. In other words, human animals are masters of life and death of non-human animals. This anthropocentric point encourages a bad relationship between human and non-human animals. There are no valid arguments to justify pointless violence towards innocent animals in dog-fights, bull-fights, and other blood sport activities.

In much lighter conditions, the third type of activities we described, where we use animals in activities similar to sport, in horse racing, dog racing, etc. we have a lot of open questions. The main question is how people treat these animals. How much of the inevitable risks of stress, injury, and animal mortality should and could prevent us from exploiting them in this kind of activities?

These questions open new, more general, questions. How do we treat our animals? How do we treat our pets? For example, what if we just know that "domestic animals are deprived of hearing, smell, and vision, since they no longer have to search for food themselves and keep away from predators. Their brains are, on average, 20% lighter than those of relatives who have survived at large - e.g. a dog's brain is 30% smaller than a wolf's brain." (Visković, 1996: 27) Is it a positive development trait that a dog has 30% smaller brain than his ancestor? Is that beneficial for dogs? Some will argue that this is beneficial for dogs, but we will never know what dogs think about that.

11 You can see more here: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/09/our-time-sing-and-play/child-marriage-nepal>

12 More about FGMC you can see on: https://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGMC_2016_brochure_final_UNICEF_SPREAD.pdf

Is human-animal behavior beneficial for us or our pets? Maybe for both? How are we to improve the relationship between the human-animal and non-human animal? How should human animals be educated to respect and treat other non-human animals with dignity? Human animals take a lot from non-human animals, even in real human sports. The majority of human sport skills are an imitation of the natural movements of some non-human animals. "A different but related range of sensations is experienced by the cross-country skier. On cross-country skis, the human-animal becomes a creature of wood and plain, kin to the deer, the ruffed grouse, the otter, the snowshoe hare, and other creatures who share the winter landscape." (Dunleavey, 1981: 82)

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BIOETIČKA PITANJA O ŽIVOTINJAMA U SPORTU

Sažetak

Životinje su dio sportske industrije, od tzv. kulturnih tradicija kao što su lov na lisice i borbe bikova, utrke konja i pasa preko izvrnutih primjera kao što su *Hare Coursing* (psi koji love zečeve), rodeo ili boks orangutana (Tajland) pa sve do borbe pijetlova ili pasa. Očito se radi o iskorištavanju životinja radi naše, ljudske zabave. U izlaganju ću pokušati identificirati neka od najvažnijih pitanja vezano uz upotrebu životinja u sportu. Neka od spomenutih pitanja su: Možemo li opravdati iskorištavanje životinja u sportu radi tradicije? Možemo li uopće smatrati sportom sve te manje ili više čudne aktivnosti u kojima ljudi uključuju životinje? Možemo li razmišljati o dobrobit sportskih životinja prije, tijekom i nakon natjecateljske karijere? Je su li životinje u sportu neopravdano 'iskorištene'? Je li uopće opravdano koristiti životinje u sportske svrhe, s obzirom na to da nema apsolutne potrebe da se to čini? Koliko bi nas neizbježni rizici od stresa, ranjavanja i smrtnost životinja trebalo i moglo spriječiti za njihovo iskorištavanje u sportu? Ako je životinja spremna učiniti ono što tražimo od nje, trebamo li je iskorištavati za našu zabavu i sport?

Ključne riječi: životinje, sportska industrija, kulturna tradicija, bioetika, zabava