**Advocacy Plan: The need for a governing body of MMA & importance of self-regulation as an SPP consultant**

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**Advocacy Plan**

Mental health professionals advocate for their clients’ well-being. That is their job--to competently deliver services, and ensure access to resources. As an amateur mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter as well as a future sport and performance consultant (SPC), I understand the need for ethical behavior via ongoing education of virtues. A virtue is defined as a state or disposition of a person. Ethics guide our behaviors. Virtue ethics, thus, rely on the consultant to be morally sound and base one’s behavior upon foundational virtues. In this paper I will advocate for two topics: the mental health of mixed martial arts fighters and using self-regulation to ensure ethical behavior. Both the AASP and the ACA rely on foundational principles or virtues to lead a counselor/consultant in making the most ethical decisions regardless of whether an issue exists. Prevention is the key to minimizing harm to the client, the consultant, and any of the other stakeholders involved in sport and performance consulting. I believe my knowledge and adherence to virtue ethics will determine my success in both areas: MMA fighter and SPC.

**Advocacy Topics**

The first topic I will discuss is the mental health of mixed martial artists. Today, there is an issue with MMA having no official governing body. While there are organizations like the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and state athletic commissions to write the rules of the sport, conduct of the athletes are rarely mentioned. Without a firm set of ethical codes or national governing body (NGL), it not only puts the sport itself at risk of ethical dilemmas, it puts the athletes at the most risk of harm to physical and mental health. There are no unions in MMA either, so advocating and ensuring the well-being of MMA athletes is left to the individual coaches and athletes themselves. Most of these athletes do not have the wherewithal to deal with the many risks of mental disorders and symptoms that come with training and competing in a full-contact combat sport. Some issues, for example, are brain damage and concussions leading to mental instability and mood disorders. “Many athletes experience psychological issues following concussion that might include anxiety, depression, and behavioral changes such as irritability and impulsivity” (Gordon & Caron, 2021). Without a governing body to aid in the mental well-being of its athletes, MMA fighters are left to their own devices regarding professional help and self-care.

Historically, ethics have played a large role in martial arts. According to Nicholas Dixon (2016) violence is at the heart of MMA and the goal is to subdue and inflict physical harm to your opponent. So how can MMA be ethical at all? Given its roots of sport, we can apply the general principles of fair play, sportsmanship, and respect to MMA as well. To be clear, MMA is a sport that requires more dedication and more courage than non-combat sports. Dixon even goes as far as referring to combat sports as “blood sports” (Dixon, 2016).

Many MMA athletes are also at risk of mental health issues due to the physical demands of the sport. The UFC has 12 total weight divisions for the men and women ranging from 115 lbs to 265 lbs with about 10 to 60 pound differences in between. It is commonplace for athletes to compete in the lowest weight division possible to maximize the skill, size, and power they have against their opponents. If a fighter does not make weight, they face consequences of fight cancellation, monetary fine, or suspension. Thus, MMA athletes employ controversial and potentially harmful practices to rapidly lose weight (Hillier et al., 2019). These practices can lead to dehydration, impaired cognitive functioning, kidney failure, and eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. While some athletes refer to dieticians to safely remove the weight over time, a majority of athletes refer to their coaches who rarely have the proper education and competence. Hillier et al. (2019) call for urgent action from MMA organizations to “safeguard the health and well-being of athletes competing in this sport.”

The second topic I want to discuss is self-regulation and the use of virtue ethics to maintain ethical behavior in sport and performance consulting. There are many unique challenges that SPCs face compared to a clinical counselor: “challenging settings, unique interventions, and numerous expectations raise ethical issues related to multiple relationships, confidentiality, and self-regulation” (Aoyagi & Portenga, 2010). Etzel & Watson (2014) advocate for virtue ethics to guide the SPC in minimizing ethical dilemmas that are both inevitable and essential to successful work. The nature of the work requires that a consultant be embedded into the team so in order to reduce the risk of harm to the client, being an ethical person is more important than abiding to ethical standards.

Sport and performance consultants are often the only ones knowledgeable to ethics in their environment, making them responsible for ethical behavior above other stakeholders such as coaches, administration, medical teams, national governing bodies, team owners, etc (Aoyagi & Portenga, 2010). In order to be an ethical person, a practitioner must self-regulate and reflect often to uphold ongoing ethical understandings. These virtues will be discussed in the ethical analysis section later in this paper. Self-regulation requires self-awareness in an ongoing process of ethical knowledge. I am advocating that this is the most important aspect of successful consulting.

Lorraine Besser explains the importance of self-regulation perfectly: “Most importantly, though, self-regulation allows us to harness our cognitive capacities towards virtue; it allows us to take control over our behavior and to bridge gaps between knowing what to do and doing it. It allows us to exercise virtue and to be virtuous.”

**Ethical Analysis**

While there are no current ethical codes for mixed martial arts fighters, there are numerous organizations that provide guides. The International Mixed Martial Arts Federation is “focused on developing MMA as an international sport, from the recreational level to the elite, driving the development of common sets of rules, safety regulations, structure, progression pathways and mutual exchange” (IMMAF, 2021). Unfortunately due to the relatively new existence of MMA as a sport and the lack of unifying governing entities, these ethics are rather moot.

The UFC holds events in many different states domestically and in various countries. The ruleset for every event is thereby determined by that state’s or country’s athletic commission. This implies that athletes must learn the rules and standards of each commission before every fight, which could be as often as every other month and in different places each time, promoting confusion and conflicts of interest.

The AASP (2011) and the ACA (2014) both have standards for reducing harm to a client: AASP’s standard 6 and ACA’s principle of nonmaleficence. Above all, a consultant’s responsibility is to care for the well-being and welfare of their client (ACA A.1.a , 2014, AASP Principle E, 2011). When improving the conditions for MMA athletes worldwide, their welfare and well-being should be considered paramount. The AASP (Standard 24, 2011) also mentions conflicts between ethics and organizational demands by stating that members (SPCs) will do their best to solve any conflicts of the sort by adhering to the ethical code to the best of their abilities. Again, an athlete’s well-being is more important than an organization like UFC’s demands.

In regards to self-regulation, the ACA (2014) has specific virtues that counselors must use to inform their decisions regarding ethical situations. The ones that pertain to self-regulation are nonmaleficence or doing no harm, fidelity or being honest and truthful, and beneficence or promoting the well-being of the client. Virtue ethics rely on principles that envelope all that ethical situations derive from and the responsibility of a counselor or consultant to remain ethical in their environment with all the aspects at play lies solely on their shoulders.

The AASP (2011) recognizes virtue ethics in the form of principles A, B, C, D, and E. They are: competence to fulfill the duty of SPC, integrity to the role of SPC by not falsifying information or deceiving clients, professional and scientific responsibility to safeguard the AASP and the public against unethical conduct, respect for people’s rights and dignity by avoiding discriminatory practices, and concern for others’ welfare to not exploit or mislead others. It is a tall order to remain the most ethical of all organizations and authorities involved in an athlete’s care, but with careful consideration and ongoing education, the bar is not too far to reach.

**Advocacy Plan**

Advocacy for the mental health of mixed martial artists is a missing piece in the success and well-being of these athletes. In 2016 I founded a 501(c)3 nonprofit called #SubmitTheStigma which seeks to normalize mental health in the MMA community. Starting with the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ) discipline in which I earned the rank of black belt in 2017, I began campaigning for athletes to prioritize their mental health as they do their physical health. I have run seminars, social media campaigns, and guest hosted on podcasts and various media platforms to speak about my own issues with mental health as a BJJ athlete. The pressure of competition along with preexisting mental disorders gave rise to my advocating for martial arts athletes to destigmatize mental health and mental illness. I am one person but I have spread the message of mental health advocacy to four continents within the martial arts community.

The UFC is the largest MMA organization in the world but it does not employ an ethical code of conduct for its fighters. In fact, fighters are not employed by the organization, merely contractors, which minimizes the responsibility of the organization to provide for the well-being of their athletes. I advocate for a unionizing organization to protect fighters’ rights and safety no matter the organization they are currently signed to. This organization would ensure proper medical coverage including mental health. Wages would be predetermined and agreed upon by all MMA organizations given that currently fighters do not have any representation beyond their individual coaches, agents, managers, and/or lawyers. This plan would also provide sport and performance consulting to ensure that athletes have the necessary skills and knowledge to handle the physical, mental, and emotional demands of this sport.

My advocacy plan for the self-regulation of consultants in the field of SPP would ground itself in accountability. How can we make these professionals accountable for their actions and accountable for their impact on their clients, the profession, and the public? Consultants should know which ethical codes to refer to if an ethical dilemma or situation arises. Ideally, consultants will have an understanding of virtue ethics, or underlying principles with which to guide their everyday behaviors and actions as the role of consultant. As noted, there are more complications with being an SPC than there are as a clinical counselor. Confidentiality is more at risk given the environments and locations that SPCs must advise their clients within and who else is around when they are consulting. Athletes need to know that they are in good hands not only in terms of competence, but in respect, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and fidelity. Of course these are all qualities expected of a consultant or counselor but without self-regulation and accountability, we can never be sure if they are abided by.

In order to facilitate the self-regulation of SPCs, we must have available resources for each consultant to refer to, especially colleagues. According to the ACA Standard C.2.g (2014), counselors must monitor themselves for potential impairment. If a counselor cannot fulfill their duties due to their own physical, mental, or emotional problems, they must recognize this impairment and seek help. This may require them to suspend or terminate existing client relationships. And perhaps the most important part of this code is to seek out other colleague’s help, and be vigilant to notice and notify any impairments of these colleagues as well. Although I advocate for self-regulation, accountability is necessary within the consulting field. The more eyes and ears the better.

**Summary**

All in all, the ethics of an organization or SPC is dependent upon an overlaying concept of virtue ethics. The need for MMA to protect its athletes’ mental health is not just the job of one organization or one consultant but the responsibility of one unifying entity that is yet to exist. MMA athletes engage in consenting violence so their safety is of utmost importance for the sanctity and longevity of the sport. Self-regulation is the most important factor in the ethics of sport and performance consulting due to its unique circumstances and deviation from typical counseling role expectations and ethics. It is up to the consultant to maintain a level of ethical knowledge and adherence, otherwise ethical dilemmas will not be solved. Between principles of beneficence and responsible consultants, the ethics of both the sport of MMA and sport and performance consulting will be raised to a higher standard.

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