

SPORT, MEDIA, AND SOCIETY: MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF ETHICAL ISSUES – BETWEEN IDEALIZATION AND NORMALIZATION OF DEVIATIONS

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Abstract: Sport occupies a prominent position in contemporary society, transcending its primary framework and emerging as a significant cultural and communicative phenomenon. Although it is often promoted as a realm of fair play, character building, and universal values, numerous negative phenomena – such as corruption, doping, match-fixing, pervasive commercialization, and various forms of discrimination – reveal the complexity of its ethical dimension. This article explores how the media represent ethical issues in sport, analyzing whether media narratives contribute to raising public awareness and fostering critical reflection on these deviations, or, conversely, to their normalization and spectacularization. In doing so, the study also draws attention to the broader spectrum of issues that currently shape the field of contemporary sport. Using qualitative content analysis of Serbian daily newspapers, the research focuses on several paradigmatic cases in order to identify dominant discursive patterns through which ethical dilemmas are presented to the public. Particular attention is given to narratives related to fair play, on-field violence, athletes' conduct beyond sports events, and the accountability of sports institutions. The aim of this paper is to highlight key challenges in contemporary sport and the various contradictions inherent in the media representation of its ethical aspects, as well as the broader implications these narratives may have for the relationship between sport, media, and societal values.

Keywords: sport ethics, media representation, sport and society, sports media, discursive analysis

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Introduction

Contemporary sport, driven by a relentless pursuit of ever-greater achievements, both in terms of athletic performance and financial profit, has increasingly drifted away from its original principles and values. It is therefore unsurprising that commentators, but also the scientific researchers, frequently assert that modern sport bears diminishing resemblance to what it once represented.

This trend becomes clearer when sport is observed within a broader societal context, as it functions as a revealing mirror of social values. At the same time, this context also caused the fact that the sport nowadays remains a domain in which the boundaries of morality and ethics are continuously tested, which is shaping contemporary society in general (Guttmann, 2004; Cashmore et al., 2022). Long ago, sports competitions “evolved into a dominant form of entertainment and a routine aspect of everyday life, as well as one of the most profitable global industries” (Пенезић, 2021: 42). Moreover, ongoing trends of “globalization and the monetization of all socially relevant activities contribute to the commodification of every popular resource, reinforcing public demand for sports content” (ibid: 39).

Communication and the media play a central role in shaping the relationship between sport and society, particularly by transforming sport into a form of symbolic capital, as described by Bourdieu long ago (1979). This capital, depending on interests and circumstances, is often converted and instrumentalized in ways that further distance sport from its foundational values. In such environment, the space for ethical reflection becomes increasingly constrained, especially under the pressures of commercialization and spectacularization, processes that Debord (1967) described in his analysis of contemporary society.

Modern sports spectacle is unimaginable without media: the media not only follow sports events and heroes but frequently construct and idealize them – normalize various forms of deviant behavior in and around sport. For these reasons, analyzing how media represent sports events and actors is crucial for understanding processes of moral legitimization or relativization in contemporary sport. In Serbia, media discourse often displays a pronounced ambivalence, oscillating between idealization and the normalization of deviations, which forms the foundation of this research.

The question of ethical issues in sport is, therefore, very important to be considered within this framework. It includes rule violations during play, organizational and game-related fraud, the use of prohibited substances (doping and steroids), gender and racial equality, as well as discrimination and stereotyping. Commercialization of sport is also particularly ethically problematic, as it raises questions about the nature of play and encourages the use of prohibited methods.

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Based on these considerations, the central research question of this paper is: *How do Serbian media represent ethical dilemmas in sport – do they emphasize responsibility and moral values, or do they contribute to their relativization and the normalization of deviant behaviors?*

The aim of the article is to highlight the role of the media in shaping societal understandings of sport and athletes as moral role models.

Particular attention is given to the representation of ethical issues in Serbian media, through the analysis of two paradigmatic cases, in order to demonstrate how media can simultaneously idealize and justify, or minimize deviant patterns of behavior.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research focusing on the analysis of specific media content, with particular emphasis on discourse and narrative in media reporting of selected sports cases. This method enables a deeper understanding of how language, tone, and text structure shape social and moral meanings of sports events and actors (Fairclough, 1995; Krippendorff, 2019; van Dijk, 2009).

Therefore, theoretical frameworks proposed by Entman (1993) and Richardson (2007) guided the identification of discursive strategies and narrative frames in media texts. The analysis covers online editions of daily newspapers in Serbia, specifically Novosti, Blic, Kurir, Danas, and Informer. More concretely, the media coverage of two representative cases in 2025 were examined:

1. Doping and suspension of judo national team athlete Milica Nikolić (announcement: June 3; media coverage: July 10–13, 2025);
2. Violence against a referee by the director of RK Vojvodina Darko Jevtić (announcement: September 24, 2025; media coverage: September 16–24, 2025).

These cases were selected because they represent different types of ethical deviations in sport (individual and institutional), while reflecting prevalent problems in contemporary sports (doping, violence), allowing for a meaningful comparative insight into media patterns of moral representation. The analysis involved identifying discursive and narrative frameworks, with particular attention to tone and modality, i.e., whether texts express condemnation, justification, glorification, or emotional identification with the athletes.

Criteria for analysis included:

- Headline and lexical choices: linguistic tone, connotations, and emotional charge;

- Visual elements within articles: photographs, symbols, layout, and graphic framing;
- Story framing: the way events are contextualized and morally interpreted, fostering specific narratives.

From this, three analytical categories were formed:

- Type of representation: idealization of the athlete vs. depiction of deviation;
- Recognizable discursive strategies: emotionalization, spectacularization, moralization, relativization;
- Visual elements: use of photographs, colors, symbols, and headlines in shaping moral meaning.

Each text was analyzed along the following dimensions:

- Tone and moral framing: condemnation / justification / neutrality;
- Type of discourse: sensationalist / institutional / protective / emotional;
- Role of actors: personalization (focus on the individual) vs. systemic critique;
- Visual and linguistic codes: metaphors of war, struggle, honor, betrayal, etc;
- Media leniency: attempts to humanize or to criticize deviations.

To ensure interpretive reliability, the analysis relied on source triangulation and a comparative approach across newspapers (their online editions) with different editorial policies and ideological orientations. For both cases, texts from the same set of media outlets were analyzed to enhance representativeness and facilitate a comparative assessment of reporting practices. The aim of this methodological procedure is to map how domestic media construct moral narratives about sports actors and to examine the extent to which media reporting contributes to the idealization or relativization of deviant behaviors in sports.

Research questions guiding the study are:

3. How do media in Serbia present sports deviations – through condemnation, relativization, or justification?
4. Does reporting predominantly reflect a narrative of moral responsibility or solidarity with athletes?
5. To what extent do external, non-media factors (social, political, institutional) influence media narratives and shape interpretations of sports events?

Literature Review

Sport, Ethics, and Society

Sport represents not only need to express the body but also an organized skill in that expression. The dynamism within the body seeks to be shaped through movement into various forms. These forms are an expression of human spirit and emotion. Therefore, play is a union of spirituality and the body. Spirituality gives meaning to play, and the body realizes it. Unlike play, which is a human creative need, sport is a structured reduction of that need. When play is organized and reduced to strict rules, it becomes sport. Ancient Greek philosophers emphasized the importance of training both body and spirit for the development of the individual. The origins of organized sport are found in the Olympic Games, where not only physical skill and play were showcased but also intellectual capacities. In the earliest Olympic Games, athletic and gymnastic competitions were given equal importance alongside spiritual contests such as oratory.

From ancient times to the present day, sport has held a significant and essential place in the lives of people across the globe. No one remains indifferent to sport - whether participants, competitors, spectators, or critics. Even Pythagoras noted that some attend the Olympic Games to compete, others to support the competitors, and yet others to observe both the athletes and the supporters - the latter being philosophers. Since the first organized sports competitions, sport has developed into a wide range of disciplines. History has shown that new sports emerge and evolve over time. Due to its profound influence on both individual and societal life, sport has gained significant importance, becoming a human activity that mobilizes diverse resources, from material to value-based. Its impact in contemporary society extends beyond the economy and modern technologies to education and moral values.

Therefore, sport involves various professions such as doctors, psychologists, economists, lawyers, historians, and sociologists, as well as sciences - both natural and applied, and social and humanistic. It also engages artists, writers, and journalists. Sociologists study the impact of sport on social groups, leisure time, values among students, discrimination, pathological behavior, violence, and other phenomena. Psychologists examine its effects on individual success and failure, personality development, behavior in competitions, mass emotional responses, marketing experts, and everyone involved in sporting life. Legal professionals address sports contracts, sanctions for anti-social and criminal behavior in competitions, and other legal matters related to sport.

The significance, role, and mass appeal of sport have also become subjects of philosophical and ethical inquiry. Platon, in The Republic, highlighted the importance of physical training in the education of philosophers. He noted that humans were given „two arts, music and gymnastics... primarily to care for their dual nature: vital and philoso-

phical" (Platon, 1976: 96). The philosophy of sport was formally established in the second half of the 20th century in the United States, thanks to Warren Fraleigh, a professor at the State University of Brockport, New York. He founded the Philosophy of Sport Society in 1972, which became an international association in 1999. The discipline of sport philosophy has since developed in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., and Japan. Philosophical literature on sport in Europe emerged in Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia (McNamme, 2007: 1). For philosophers, the question of sport involves conceptual, cognitive, and moral dimensions. This is why sport ethics is now studied at universities as a distinct branch of ethics.

Sport in contemporary societies also raises numerous moral problems and dilemmas. Ethical concerns stemming from sporting activities have broader implications for both individual and societal ethics. The use of performance-enhancing substances is not solely a concern for athletes, coaches, managers, or sports organizations; it extends to society at large. Questions of fairness in sport intersect with broader societal issues of justice. Another ethical problem arises when rules are broken in play, and referees fail to observe or act on the violation. In such cases, the ethicality of the transgressor's victory is called into question. Cheating in sport thus presents clear ethical dilemmas. To address instances that referees may miss, technological tools like video assistant referees allow for review and fair adjudication. Before such technologies, many ethical questions arose due to unseen or intentional rule violations.

Concrete examples demonstrate significant manipulation and corruption within sport, affecting even amateur activities. Professional sport involves substantial material investment and potential profit. In contemporary society, sport has become a major economic activity. Competing interests intersect, and conflicts of interest often enable manipulation and abuse. Therefore, it is crucial to ethically assess potential risks and illegalities in sport. Ethics plays a central role in evaluating and prescribing rules to prevent immoral behavior in and around sport.

Upholding ethical principles and rules among participants requires the cultivation of integrity. Psychologically, integrity represents the set of personal qualities that make an individual whole. Ethical integrity consists of character traits forming a harmony between chosen values, attitudes, abilities, interests, and habits (Čupić, 2010: 203). Moral integrity encompasses specific character traits, namely honesty, consistency, predictability, and responsibility (Čupić, 2010: 203).

In sport, integrity is demonstrated through fair conduct and safety during competitions and related activities. It is determined by adherence to norms and values that define correct or incorrect behavior for all actors in sport (Robertson & Constandt, 2021). Four types of integrity in sport can be identified: inherent (related to the corporate community, manifested through core values: fairness, justice, and excellence in com-

petition); personal (responsibility of athletes, coaches, referees, managers, administrators, and board members); organizational (demonstrated commitment to values); and procedural (proper rules, athlete autonomy, and high-quality officiating) (Gardiner, Parry & Robinson, 2017). Sport integrity extends beyond the sporting arena to all who influence sport (Cleret, McNamee & Page, 2015: 1-2).

Research in the world's most developed countries shows that integrity in sport is compromised, particularly by corruption. Despite distrust in fair play or deviations within sport, respondents in studies noted that „the positive social outcomes of sport engagement were still referenced as the reason behind the lack of change in participants' interest and propensity to participate, spectate and volunteer in sport, despite their reported lack of trust and discontent with sport's inability to manage its integrity” (Manoli, Bandura & Downward, 2020: 215).

This underscores the enduring significance of sport for individual and societal life. Sport influences not only competitive outcomes but also individual identities, values, lifestyles, and everyday practices, making it a central social phenomenon (Penezić, Bajić & Selenić, 2023). For such reasons, sport has traditionally been regarded as a moral arena where values of fair play, discipline, and self-control are cultivated. Professionalization and commercialization, however, have significantly altered these dimensions, creating a range of ethical dilemmas – between performance and fairness, achievement and integrity (McNamee, 2018).

Despite its social significance, sport has not been sufficiently researched or analyzed from a sociological perspective, particularly in terms of critical media analysis. Guy Debord introduced (1969) the concept of the “spectacle” as a dominant form of social communication, arguing that it is not merely a collection of images but a social relationship mediated by images. From that point of view, reality is replaced by its representation in contemporary society, leading to alienation and passivity, while media and consumer culture actively shape perceptions of reality and limit critical reflection. Pierre Bourdieu (1979) further emphasizes such perspective, helping us to understand that sport functions, both as an institution and as a practice, also providing valuable insight into social structures, cultural values, and symbolic struggles, considering the fact that the sport is a field where social hierarchies, prestige competition, and cultural reproduction are manifested, reflecting broader societal norms and values.

For such reason, David Rowe (2014) highlights the emergence of a powerful “media-sport cultural complex” in this, contemporary context, where sport is transformed into a spectacle for mass consumption. Namely, media generate, reproduce, and circulate representations of sport that become arenas of struggle over ideological, cultural, and social values, shaping narratives about identity, gender, race, and class. This approach

facilitates understanding of how media discourse actively participates in constructing moral meaning and interpreting ethical deviations in sport.

This framework provides a basis for analyzing media narratives in which sport, ethics, and society intersect. It is particularly useful for examining how deviant behaviors in sport, such as doping or violence, are represented in the media, how moral spectacles are created, and how media, consciously or unconsciously, shape boundaries of acceptable behavior and public perception of sport actors.

Ethics and Deviations in Sport

Ethics, as the study of morality, deals with the rules of moral behavior and the judgment of specific actions, that is, „making a judgment about what is good and what is bad or evil” (Čupić, 2010: 27). The question arises: why is ethics important for sport? Precisely because it allows us to distinguish between right and wrong behavior of participants in sporting competitions, those who cheer for them, those who organize events, and those who influence the development of sport externally. Without ethical insight into sport, situations could occur that endanger all participants and the very essence of the game.

Ethics requires all participants in sport „to transcend our own viewpoints in order to adopt the position of an impartial observer who assumes a universal perspective” (Singer, 2000: 320). For the application of ethical principles and norms, it is necessary for every individual to feel and accept themselves as a citizen of the world. This, according to the Stoic philosophers, builds dignity in each person. Kant added to this Stoic perspective that a moral person possesses dignity (Kant, 1981: 82). Human behavior according to moral principles and norms is realized through moral conduct. For individuals to behave morally, Kant argues that they must cultivate their own autonomy, which is „the foundation of the dignity of human nature” (Kant, 1981: 89). Kant maintains that a person physically senses „that in their own self they respect the moral person”, which leads to „elevation and the highest self-respect as a sense of inner worth... by which they are raised above all price... and possess inalienable dignity that inspires self-respect” (Kant, 1993: 236).

Dignity and moral integrity are incorruptible, allowing individuals to make decisions according to their conscience. Incorruptible individuals cannot be bribed, which is one of the major problems in contemporary societies. Bribery, often employed by authoritarian regimes, deprives people of dignity and morality. This is precisely the mechanism sometimes used in and around sport. Any form of bribery constitutes an entry into illegality. Those who manipulate through bribery and illegal acts do so with athletes, fans, as well as managers, administrators, and sports governing bodies. These malicious practices occur at both local and global levels. Therefore, it is necessary to estab-

blish and enforce ethical codes as the first line of preventive guidance. To ensure ethical codes are respected and applied, lawmakers should codify them into laws with strict sanctions. In this way, ethical codes would not remain mere recommendations or moral warnings but would become legally enforceable measures against immoral conduct in and around sport. Prevention and punishment protect individuals from engaging in unethical behavior and actions.

By following ethical codes, which guide individuals toward moral behavior, various forms of deviations in sport and around sport can be prevented. Deviations in sport are both internal and external. Internal deviations are related to the use of prohibited substances that enable athletes to achieve success or results dishonestly. These include doping, i.e., the use of banned performance-enhancing substances, as well as prohibited physical aggression during competitions. Cheating by athletes is also dangerous. Such cheating may involve illegal maneuvers in the game or participation in deliberately rigged results. In match-fixing, participants often include athletes, coaches, referees, team managers, and administrators, as well as external stakeholders such as betting companies and organized fan groups. Behind organized fan groups are usually economic interests of criminals, criminal networks, and the mafia. They are prone to inciting violence to conceal their illicit activities. Given the enormous amounts of money involved, many actors in and around sport consciously contribute to the spread of deviations. One criminal activity associated with sport is drug trafficking. Organized criminal fan groups distribute drugs, particularly targeting young fans. The financial gains from drug sales are substantial due to the large fan base. Moreover, the commercialization of sport facilitates various forms of illegality and corruption, such as player transfers, investments in sports facilities, service contracts, and the purchase of sports equipment.

Everything that occurs in sport reflects the conditions of societies and states. If society and the state are in turmoil due to abuses by powerful interest groups colluding with authorities, or authorities corrupted by selfish greed, this environment inevitably impacts sport. For these reasons, the role of ethical principles and norms is crucial in fostering internal morality in sport through well-designed educational policies, i.e., the moral education of athletes and other participants (coaches, managers, administrators, referees). Individual moral responsibility is also important for all involved in sport, as well as those around it (fans, managers, investors, service providers, and authorities). Responsibility raises the level of moral culture among individuals, social groups, institutions, authorities, and society as a whole. Morally responsible individuals are both ethically mature and psychologically healthy. The Latin saying, "Mens sana in corpore sano", should serve as a credo for play, sport, and all who participate in its community.

Framing at the Core of the Sport–Media Relationship

The power of the media in social life has been evident since their inception, becoming particularly pronounced during the 19th century. With the development of modern technologies, primarily electronic media, the influence of the media in societal life has grown immensely, reaching a global scale. The flow of information across the planet now occurs at unprecedented speed and reach.

In contemporary societies, information has become essential for maintaining and advancing life. Accurate information guides people in making better and more informed decisions, while also alerting them to potential dangers - both natural and human-induced. Information significantly impacts life and death in modern society. The importance, relevance, and value of information are reflected in its codification within human rights frameworks. In the so-called "fourth generation" of human rights, information is prioritized. This category of rights reflects the civilizational development of human needs and interests. Normed within the United Nations framework, it encompasses the right to truthful information, the right of women to make reproductive choices, and the right to a clean and healthy environment (environmental rights).

A key challenge regarding media lies in its use. Experience shows that media can be easily misused, and contemporary societies demonstrate frequent abuses. Therefore, it is crucial to regulate and legally govern their use. The clearer and more precise the laws on information and media, the more limited the potential for misuse. Media should focus only on information that is significant and relevant for public life. Information concerning private life undermines the media's mission and creates confusion in citizens' understanding of contemporary societies. Selection of information is equally important, as indiscriminate reporting can overload public space. Faced with an overwhelming volume of information, individuals may become disoriented, unable to distinguish essential from trivial, primary from secondary, or valuable from worthless information. As Bourdieu (1991: 83) noted, „We live in a universe with ever more information but ever less meaning”.

To prevent misinformation and media manipulation, the role of media professionals is critical. This is where media and morality intersect. Professionalism among media workers is fundamentally grounded in their moral conduct. The moral culture of media professionals is essential for providing citizens with truthful information. When media professionals act with integrity, the information disseminated to the public is not only accurate but also carefully curated. This ensures that citizens are not overwhelmed or lost in the sheer volume of information, avoiding what Bal (1997: 13) described as „too much information kills information”. Proper criteria for selecting information are based on professional standards. Selecting information based on ideological or political criteria is dangerous, as ideological selection allows only information favorable to a specific

agenda to be published. Information serving ideology or politics becomes propaganda. The infusion of ideology „distorts reality within the media space, creating confusion and problems that often destabilize society and the state” (Čupić & Joković, 2016: 13).

Professional media conduct requires talent, knowledge, skills, conscience, and experience. These characteristics reflect their moral health and demonstrate that they are ethical individuals. Ethical individuals are people of integrity, which extends to the media organizations in which they work. Media organizations with integrity become credible, trustworthy, and reliable to citizens. Trust is difficult to gain and easy to lose. Conscious media professionals ensure that public trust is maintained. Through their mission, media also promote moral behavior among citizens. By adhering to professional standards, both media organizations and their staff uphold ethical conduct and maintain moral integrity. Professional media standards include: „truth, accuracy, honesty (objectivity), impartiality, appropriate treatment of information sources, respect for the individuals who are the subject of information, elimination of any form of discrimination, and accountability” (Čupić, 2010: 14). The consistent application of these standards demonstrates moral conduct within both media and public spheres.

Our analysis largely relies on the framework provided by established framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993), which enables the identification of how media frame events, assign meaning through word choice, tone, and moral evaluation. Framing theory is closely related to agenda-setting theory, as both highlight how media draw public attention to specific topics, thereby shaping the public agenda.

Within this analytical perspective, media are also perceived as significant producers of moral boundaries, determining acceptable transgressions or generating moral panics that accompany such actions, simultaneously amplifying scandals while occasionally relativizing deviations.

Media and Sport: Representation and the Normalization of Deviance

Jürgen Habermas, a seminal theorist of the public sphere, who observes the path of transformed media structures in the era of digitalization and democratic crisis, argues in his more recent work that new forms of communication undermine established conceptions of the political public sphere as such (2012, 2022).

This implies a new structural transformation of the public sphere, with serious consequences for contemporary society itself. From that perspective, we should be also aware that the media, both as organizations and as individual actors, constitute “an essential part of the social system, creating patterns of relationships that generate an ‘intersubjective’ understanding of values, norms, and culture” (Mlađenović & Penezić, 2025: 94). They “do not merely transmit meaning; rather, they exist in relation to multiple individual and multi-individual systems” (*ibid*). Therefore, we should under-

line the contemporary fact that “media-mediated communication, although primarily determined by the socio-material conditions of its production, reciprocally reshapes social dynamics and democratic mechanisms, particularly through digital platforms” (Penezić & Kauzlaric, 2024, p. 88).

This sort of suggestions today need also to be contextualized within the relationship between sport and the media, since this provides the most appropriate framework for observing and interpreting the complexity of this connection in contemporary society. Namely, the “position and functions of sport and journalism, and consequently their mutual relationship, are framed by modern processes of globalization, which constitute a continuous historical trajectory of profound systemic change into a new system that becomes simultaneously interdependent, though in a different manner” (Пенеziћ, Бајић & Селенић, 2024: 237). Therefore, it must not be forgotten that “the popularity and broad societal significance of sporting events likewise offer significant opportunities for theoretically examining the challenges that accompany journalism and the media” (ibid: 236).

In the same manner, we have to pay attention to the local landscape, and consider the fact that the Serbian media system is characterized by strong tabloidization and the politicization, along with the frequent instrumentalization of athletic success for the purposes of collective identity. This context represents an ideal field for examining the ethical ambivalence present in the representation of sport. Accordingly, our analytical framework encompasses the following concepts:

Moral Panic: Introduced by Cohen (1972), who describes moral panic as structured societal reactions to perceived deviance, demonstrating that public concern and fear are not random overreactions but socially organized processes.

Normalization of Deviance: Vaughan (1996) describes the process through which individuals or groups gradually accept deviant actions as normal (“human”) facilitated by media narratives and public perception.

Media Effects on Deviance: Hall et al. (1978) highlight that media can simultaneously idealize individuals while normalizing deviant behaviors.

Celebrity Persona Construction: Turner (2014) emphasizes how media production and television create and circulate manufactured celebrity images, shaping unprecedented public engagement with these personas.

Understanding contemporary power relations between sports institutions, sponsors, and media is, on the other hand, essential, as market and audience pressures significantly shape the portrayal of athletes and sporting events. Both Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993) emphasize that media frames shape perceptions of reality, defining what is considered moral or deviant. In the sports context, media frequently depict

athletes as heroes or as ordinary individuals whose mistakes are forgivable, even when their behavior substantially deviates from ethical norms.

Research Results: Case studies

Case A: The Suspension of Judo National Team Athlete Milica Nikolić

1. *SCANDAL IN THE WORLD OF SPORTS! Serbian national team member suspended for doping; Novosti, 10 July 2025*³.
2. *Ugh, what a scandal: A well-known Serbian athlete failed a doping test! Immediately expelled from the sport! Kurir, 10 July 2025*⁴.
3. *Scandal in Serbian sports! Olympian and national team member suspended for doping; Blic, 10 July 2025*⁵.
4. *Shock – Serbian national team member suspended for doping; Informer, 10–13 July 2025*⁶.
5. *Serbian Olympic athlete explains how a banned substance ended up in her body: Because of identical packaging, she mistakenly took her mother's medication, Danas, 13 July 2025*⁷.

³ More details: Novosti (10 July 2025). Skandal u svetu sporta: Reprezentativka Srbije suspendovana zbog dopinga. Novosti online. <https://www.novosti.rs/c/sport/ostali-sportovi/1507829/skandal-svetu-sporta-reprezentativka-srbije-suspendovana-zbog-dopinga>. Accessed 15 July 2025. An introductory article about this case, that opens the topic and contains the basic facts about the suspension, including references to the Anti-Doping Agency. Useful baseline for comparing sensationalist vs. neutral reporting.

⁴ More details: Kurir (10 July 2025). UH, KAKAV SKANDAL: Poznata srpska sportiskinja pala na doping testu! Momentalno izbačena iz sporta! Kurir Online. <https://www.kurir.rs/sport/ostali-sportovi/9720200/milica-nikolic-pala-na-doping-testu>. Accessed 15 July 2025. A tabloid account that serves well for analyzing sensationalist tone and language.

⁵ More details: Blic-Sportal (10 July 2025). Skandal srpskog sporta! Olimpijka i reprezentativka suspendovana zbog dopinga. Blic Online (Sportal). <https://sportal.blic.rs/prica/skandal-srpskog-sporta-milica-nikolic-suspendovana-zbog-dopinga-2025071009340863300>. Accessed 15 July 2025. A suitable article for comparing the tone between a mainstream daily newspaper and a tabloid.

⁶ More details: Informer (10 July 2025). Šok - Srpska reprezentativka suspendovana zbog dopinga. Informer Online. <https://informer.rs/sport/ostali-sportovi/1033349/milica-nikolic-dzudo-suspenzija>. Accessed 15 July 2025. A sensationalist framing is used, making it useful for analyzing the “scandal” narrative in tabloid press. Excellent for studying scandal construction and tabloid rhetoric.

⁷ More details: Danas (13 July 2025). Srpska olimpijka objasnila kako se u njenom telu našla zbranjena supstanca: Zbog istih kutija greškom popila majčin lek. Danas Online. <https://www.danas.rs/sport/milica-nikolic-doping/>. Accessed 15 July 2025. This article presents the athlete’s

This case serves as an example of media coverage of doping in sport and the discourse of ethical weakness. Namely, in most of the texts discussed, as well as in others not explicitly analyzed here, doping is presented as a “scandal” and a “disgrace”, while at the same time a narrative of victimhood – of the athlete as a casualty of the system and of an accidental mistake – is also constructed. Consequently, to this day a more objective consideration of the causes of this case has been significantly hindered: on one hand, the systemic nature of this long-standing problem in contemporary sport is underscored, while on the other, it is partially set aside by pointing to exceptions and instances in which individuals supposedly become victims of the shortcomings of this sphere of sport competition as well as of their own ignorance or carelessness.

Such imbalance in reporting – and therefore its influence on the creation of confusion regarding potential interpretations of this case (and the broader issue it may illustrate) – is evident in the discrepancy between interpretative approaches in domestic media. Tabloid-oriented outlets, such as Kurir and Informer, consistent with the dominant pattern of their editorial practices and modes of information processing, employ sensationalist headlines and a moralizing tone, yet without any deeper contextual understanding. Danas, by contrast, shifts the focus toward the athlete’s personal story, illustrating a humanizing frame and a tendency toward normalization. However, it likewise lacks deeper insights into the complexities that accompany such cases.

Across the entire body of media reporting on this case, including the articles examined here, there is largely an absence of a comprehensive and integrated approach to reporting on and analyzing this case (and the phenomenon more generally) within the context of contemporary sport, including the domestic setting.

Thus, it appears justified to conclude that the media function in this regard is reflected in maintaining the image of a “morally pure sport”, while periodically justifying errors as occurring “outside the system”. This likely contributes to the easier public acceptance of such cases and consequently to their normalization, thereby increasing the likelihood of the recurrence of similar situations.

Case B: Handball Club Vojvodina Director Strangled the Referee

1. *A SCANDAL UNLIKE ANY IN SERBIAN SPORT! The Vojvodina director strangled the referee, the arbiter reveals horrific details;* Novosti, 24 September 2025⁸.

statement and adopts a more analytical tone, useful for observing strategies of humanization, but also relativization.

⁸ More details: Novosti (24 September 2025). SKANDAL KAKAV SRPSKI SPORT NE PAMTI! Direktor Vojvodine davio sudiju, arbitar izneo jezive detalje. Novosti Online. <https://www.novosti.rs/c/sport/ostali-sportovi/1529763/skandal-kakav-srpski-sport-pamti-direktor-vojvodine-davio-sudiju-arbitar-izneo-jezive-detalje>. Accessed 26 September 2025. Article that serves as a good example of

2. *Serious scandal – Vojvodina's director strangled the referee?! The official revealed horrifying details: He pushed me into an empty room...;* Kurir, 24 September 2025⁹.
3. *The head of Vojvodina attacked the referee: A scandal shakes Serbian handball,* Blic, 24 September 2025¹⁰.
4. *Accusations by RK Partizan against RK Vojvodina's director Darko Jevtić: "He must be stopped",* Danas, 16 September 2025¹¹.
5. *Director of Vojvodina strangle the referee and issue horrific threats? A major scandal shakes Serbian sport,* Informer, 24 September 2025¹².

This second case is an example of media coverage of violence in sport and the media spectacle framing. It reveals even more clearly the mechanisms through which domestic media transform violence into a form of sporting spectacle. Despite differences in editorial concepts across various outlets, all the analyzed sources – though to differing degrees – contribute to the spectacularization of the event, as such dramatization increases the visibility and attractiveness of their content. Consequently, the media representation itself hinders an objective understanding of the incident, as well as an examination of the structural causes of violence in domestic sport and in contemporary sport more broadly.

a strong headline and sensationalist framing of a case. Good example of sensational framing in a mainstream outlet.

⁹ More details: Kurir (24 September 2025). TEŽAK SKANDAL - DIREKTOR VOJVODINE DAVIO SUDIJU?! Arbitar izneo jezive detalje: Ugurao me je u praznu prostoriju.... <https://www.kurir.rs/sport/ostali-sportovi/9783574/direktor-vojvodine-darko-jevtic-davio-sudiju-ivana-mosorinskog-u-toku-utakmice>. Accessed 26 September 2025. A tabloid, strongly emotional account, useful for analyzing dramatization and the construction of a specific narrative.

¹⁰ More details: Blic-Sportal (24 September 2025). Prvi čovek Vojvodine napao sudiju: Skandal potresa srpski sport!. Blic Online (Sportal). <https://sportal.blic.rs/prica/skandal-u-srpskom-rukometu-prvi-covek-rk-vojvodina-napao-sudiju-mosorinskog-2025092409470936702>. Accessed 26 September 2025. Article that offers a quick overview of the event and reactions (useful for comparing tabloid and more serious tones).

¹¹ More details: Danas (16 September 2025). Optužbe RK Partizana na račun direktora RK Vojvodina Darka Jevtića: Treba mu stati na put. Danas Online. <https://www.danas.rs/sport/optuzbe-rk-partizana-na-racun-direktora-rk-vojvodina-darka-jevticia-treba-mu-stati-na-klub/>. Accessed 26 September 2025. Article published before the event, but it is important for examining the broader context, as it provides an additional perspective on the case, indicating the genesis of the problem.

¹² More details: Informer-Sportinjo (24 September 2025). Direktor Vojvodine davio sudiju i jezivo mu pretio? Težak skandal potresa srpski sport. Informer Online (Sportinjo). <https://sportinjo.informer.rs/ostali-sportovi/rukomet/2365/darko-jevtic-ivan-mosorinski-sudija-vojvodina/vest>. Accessed 24 September 2025. An additional tabloid source with details of the complaint and reactions, useful for analyzing the common accusation – denial – escalation process.

The articles exhibit typical patterns of sensationalist framing: an emphasis on “horror”, “unprecedented scandal”, and moral panic, which serves to personalize and moralize the incident while simultaneously neglecting the broader context – namely, institutional patterns of tolerated violence, long-standing conflicts within sporting structures, and the lack of sanctions within sports organizations.

Novosti and Kurir generate a heightened emotional charge, while Blic adopts a more informational approach, though still adhering to a similar logic of dramatization. Today, although employing a somewhat more analytical tone, uncritically reproduces the narrative of the official statement issued by RK Partizan, thus participating in the perpetuation of a one-sided interpretation of the event.

The combined effect of these media approaches is the construction of an image of chaos and moral collapse, wherein violence is presented as an individual “emotional outburst”, rather than as a symptom of a systemic problem. Through the psychologization of the actors (“lost control”) and the dramatization of the incident, violence becomes implicitly normalized and situated within a frame of expected – and almost legitimate – reaction under conditions of sporting tension.

Such a discursive approach also influences audience reception, positioning the public as spectators of a spectacle, which in turn contributes to greater tolerance and further reproduction of deviant behavioral patterns.

Discussion: Comparative Analysis of the Cases and its Notion

Table 1: Analysis of Media Coverage of the Doping Case Involving Judoka Milica Nikolić

Headline; Media Outlet	Media type	Content summary	Dominant narrative	Linguistic characteristics
<i>SCANDAL IN THE WORLD OF SPORTS! Serbian national team member suspended for doping; Novosti</i>	Mainstream daily	Introductory report focusing on the basic facts about the suspension; mentions the Anti-Doping Agency.	Neutral-informative framing of a disciplinary case.	Balanced vocabulary, informative tone, standard journalistic structure.
<i>Ugh, what a scandal: A well-known Serbian athlete failed a doping test! Immediately expelled from the sport!; Kurir</i>	Tabloid	Simplified, dramatized presentation of the athlete's failed test.	Scandal-centered, personalized, dramatizing narrative.	Emotive wording, bold expressions, sensational verbs and adjectives.
<i>Scandal in Serbian sports! Olympian and national team member suspended for doping; Blic</i>	Mainstream daily with tabloid elements	Covers the suspension with a somewhat dramatic but still more controlled tone.	Semi-sensational framing balancing information and drama.	Combination of standard news language and mild sensationalist cues.
<i>Shock – Serbian national team member suspended for doping; Informer</i>	Tabloid	Strong sensationalist framing emphasizing "shock" and scandal.	Outright sensationalism; shock-value narrative.	Hyperbolic language, emotionally charged headlines, dramatic framing.
<i>Serbian Olympic athlete explains how a banned substance ended up in her body: Because of identical packaging, she mistakenly took her mother's medication, Danas</i>	Analytic daily	Presents the athlete's explanation and offers a rational, contextualized account.	Humanizing and mitigating narrative focusing on explanation.	More formal register, contextual detail, empathetic framing.

Source: Authors' processing

Table 2: Analysis of Media Coverage of the Violence Incident at the Handball Match Involving the Handball Club Vojvodina

Headline; Media Outlet	Media type	Content summary	Dominant narrative	Linguistic characteristics
<i>A SCANDAL UNLIKE ANY IN SERBIAN SPORT! The Vojvodina director strangled the referee, the arbiter reveals horrific details; Novosti</i>	Mainstream daily	Strong headline and heavily framed report emphasizing the severity of the incident.	Sensationalist, scandal-oriented.	Dramatic adjectives, emotionally charged phrasing, high-impact headline.
<i>Vojvodina's director strangled the referee during the match; Kurir</i>	Tabloid	Highly emotional narrative focusing on shock and outrage.	Shock-driven scandal narrative.	Hyperbolic, emotive, exaggerated expressions.
<i>The head of Vojvodina attacked the referee: A scandal shakes Serbian handball; Blic</i>	Mainstream daily (hybrid, semi-tabloid)	Short overview of the event with included reactions; mixes fact-based tone and mild sensationalism.	Semi-sensational but informative.	Combination of news reporting and moderate dramatization.
<i>Accusations by RK Partizan against RK Vojvodina's director Darko Jevtić: 'He must be stopped'; Danas</i>	Analytical daily	Provides contextual background preceding the incident; sheds light on earlier conflicts.	Contextual, analytical.	Formal, structured, focused on broader issues rather than drama.
<i>Director of Vojvodina strangle the referee and issue horrific threats? A major scandal shakes Serbian sport; Informer</i>	Tabloid	Sensationalist article emphasizing threats, accusations, and escalation.	Escalation-driven, sensationalist.	Emotionally charged, direct quotes, and a chronological narrative to identify actors, emphasize conflict, and create a scandalous tone.

Source: Authors' processing

These two cases – the doping of national team athlete Milica Nikolić and the violence at the handball match involving RK Vojvodina – illustrate different forms of scandals in Serbian sport and how the media shape public perception of these events.

Before moving on to the concrete comparative analysis, it is important to note that tone, narrative, and the framing vary significantly across the selected media, ranging from moral condemnation and dramatization to institutional and humanizing approaches.

Table 3: Comparison of the Analyses of the Two Selected Cases

Element	Case A (Doping)	Case B (Violence)
<i>Dominant Frame</i>	moral weakness and victim of circumstances	moral panic and spectacle
<i>Reporting Tone</i>	empathetic and somewhat justifying	sensationalist, moralizing
<i>Presence of "Forgiveness" Tone</i>	pronounced (female figure, emotional story)	limited (male actor, wild outburst)
<i>Social Message</i>	deviation as a common exception, due to ignorance and unclear rules	violence as a frequent trait of sporting temperament, and a product of overall chaos

Source: Authors' processing

Both of the examined cases demonstrate markedly similar patterns of media representation, despite belonging to different categories of ethical deviance in sport.

In both cases, Serbian daily media predominantly do not function as a critical corrective to the sports system, nor as reliable interpreters of the ethical context of the events. Instead, they operate primarily as producers of moral spectacle, aiming to provoke sensationalism among readers and thereby attract the attention of the broadest possible audience.

Media mediation of ethical issues in sport reveals a double standard: deviant acts are condemned, yet simultaneously justified through emotionalized narrative. Such discourse contributes to the normalization of unethical practices, creating the illusion of "isolated incidents" rather than deeply rooted structural problems.

This dual logic – condemnation for the sake of sensationalism and justification for the sake of humanization – results in doping being portrayed as an individual oversight, while physical violence is framed as an emotional reaction. In neither case is a clear picture articulated regarding the systemic causes of these deviations, whether they relate to the management of sports organizations, structural pressures, a lack of accountability, or the long-term neglect of ethical standards.

Through a combination of censure and empathy, this unbalanced approach maintains an idealized image of sport, while ethical deviations become part of its dramaturgy rather than

a systemic problem. In doing so, consciously or not, the fact is overlooked that the role of the media is not merely informational, but also culturally normative and even educational, as the media undeniably participate in shaping the boundaries of acceptable behavior in sport and in society.

Whereas in the doping case the emphasis falls on moral condemnation ("scandal" or "disgrace") combined with a narrative of accidental error, ignorance, or the athlete's sacrifice, in the case of violence the dominant mode is dramatization ("horrific", "unprecedented", "chaos"), expanded through emotional psychologization of the perpetrator ("lost control", "swept away by emotion"). In both cases, media discourse oscillates between harsh condemnation and simultaneous relativization, thereby transforming ethical deviations into dramaturgical elements rather than subjects of professional, institutional, or societal analysis.

Although they naturalize different forms of deviance, both cases illustrate a similar media mechanism: problems are personalized, dramatized, and emotionalized, which leads to the displacement of systemic responsibility to the background and rational analysis, while individual actors become the suitable narrative carriers of the story. In this sense, both examples demonstrate that the media in the domestic context do not articulate the ethical dilemmas of sport as a societal issue but instead transform them into content with high affective charge, tailored to the logic of readership and market performance.

Thus, both cases confirm the central hypothesis of the study: the media in Serbia, instead of contributing to a critical understanding of ethical challenges in sport, participate in their spectacularization and normalization, producing a specific discourse in which sport remains idealized, while deviations are represented as inevitable – and at times even understandable – elements of its everyday reality.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the two cases demonstrates how media framing and tone shape public perception of sports scandals. Our analysis shows that Serbian media frames ethical deviations in sport primarily through the logic of spectacularization, confirming that sport, as a deeply mediatized field, is shaped by media formats and story-telling conventions rather than by its own normative frameworks. Instead of contextualizing doping and on-field violence as systemic problems, the media construct them as moral spectacles: emotionally charged, personalized, and dramatized narratives designed to provoke public reaction rather than encourage critical reflection.

The presence or absence of forgiveness, as well as gendered representations, further influences how audiences interpret these events. These cases highlight the powerful

role of the media in constructing ethical, social, and emotional dimensions of sports incidents, with significant implications for public opinion and the governance of sport.

Serbian media within the analyzed cases (context) exhibit an ambiguous representation of ethical issues in sport: while they idealize heroes, deviations are often aestheticized. Rather than serving as a corrective to behavior, most of the media become distributors of moral narratives oscillating between glorification and relativization. Such discourse not only alters the perception of athletes but also affects societal understanding of ethics and responsibility. Namely, this study illustrates that the media in Serbia shows a tendency to protect national sporting symbols and to relativize ethical deviations. Sport ethics, therefore, in the domestic media space (and widely, probably), intertwine with national emotions, but also with market interests, and tabloid sensationalism.

This approach reflects a form of mediated moral panics, where moments of condemnation are followed by rapid relativization through humanizing or psychologizing elements. Such oscillation blurs ethical boundaries and contributes to the normalization of deviance: doping becomes an unfortunate mistake, while physical violence appears as a momentary emotional excess. By individualizing responsibility and suppressing structural factors (governance failures, institutional pressures, lack of accountability, etc.) the media prevent the articulation of sport ethics as a broader societal concern.

Ultimately, the findings of this study confirm that media discourse operates between the idealization of sport as a moral domain and the routine incorporation of its deviations into a dramaturgy of everyday news. In a mediated environment where affective intensity outweighs analytical depth, the media relinquish their cultural-normative role, thereby reinforcing the very conditions under which unethical practices persist. A more context-sensitive and critically grounded media approach is therefore essential for strengthening public understanding of ethical issues and for supporting the integrity of contemporary sport.

Our findings indicate that by prioritizing sensationalism over explanation, Serbian media weaken both sport ethics and media ethics. Instead of fostering accountability and fair play, the press presents doping and violence as isolated or emotionally driven incidents, thereby normalizing deviance. In doing so, the media not only fail to provide a critical ethical lens but also influence how unacceptable practices become tolerated within the broader culture of sport. Greater scholarly attention is, therefore, needed regarding ethical journalism in sport and its societal function.

At the same time, we should be aware of the fact that external factors, such as politics, economics, and culture, also play a significant role in shaping sporting events and the athletes activities, and, consequently, the way these events and actors are covered in the media and interpreted within public. For such reasons, media narratives are rarely

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neutral; they often reflect broader societal interests, national priorities, and commercial pressures, which influence how the public perceives sports and ethical conduct.

For example, another, very popular case, that maybe illustrate this context in best manner, included probably the biggest Serbian sport athlete of all time – Novak Đoković, who largely enjoyed the unreserved support of all domestic media, regardless of their conceptual and other differences. All of his sporting achievements were celebrated and rightly praised across the media landscape, and, almost without exception, so were his off-court activities. In such a climate, the media often neglected situations in which they could have been more analytical, or even critical, of certain developments – such as his positions during the COVID-19 pandemic – which are frequently cited as an example of this.

In 2025, however, a significant shift occurred after Novak Đoković, on several occasions, expressed support – both verbally and through gestures on the court – for student and civic protests in Serbia. Following this, almost overnight, he went from being an undisputed sports idol praised uniformly by all media actors to becoming the target of unfounded criticism in a considerable number of outlets close to the current regime (mostly tabloid-oriented ones). Some even attempted to call into question his indisputable athletic accomplishments, and at one point, in one such outlet, he was even labeled a “failed tennis player.”

Recognizing external influences is, therefore, important for any similar analysis, as it allows a more nuanced understanding of how media framing, sensationalism, and moral narratives are constructed and disseminated. Considering these contextual factors helps to critically assess the intersection of sport, media, and society.

Author Contributions

Milica Joković Pantelić: Conceptualization, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Slobodan Penezić: Conceptualization, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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