

Article

# “Omerta” in Organized Sport: Bullying and Harassment as Determinants of Threats of Social Sustainability at the Individual Level

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**Abstract:** The interpretation of the evolutionary theory prevailing in sport, based on the approach that the strongest survive, varies with the rules inherent in the criminal world, forbidding to “take out” negative information about interrelationships, in this case, outside the team or group. Such traditionally established culture puts pressure on athletes to suffer from bullying and follow the “silence law”. In the long run, this turns into a precondition for unsafe environment for athletes, which, due to negative consequences for the individual, can be identified as threats to social sustainability at the individual level. Such a situation is also indirectly approved by the heads and coaches of organizations. The latter, who lack competencies to resolve conflict situations, are left to solve arising problems on their own and do not receive any support from the management of organizations. Therefore, the aim of this research is to reveal the factors determining the specificity, emergence, and development of bullying and harassment in sport as threats to social sustainability at the individual level. The research was conducted using a semi-structured interview method with eight coaches representing team, individual, and duel sport branches. Inductive content analysis served as the basis for the data analysis. Research results disclosed factors determining the specificity of emergence of bullying and harassment in sport and hindering the entrenchment of social sustainability in sport at the individual level. The results revealed the euphemisms distinguished by coaches, which, in sport, have a positive connotation, such as “combativeness” and “sports anger” instead of the term “aggression”. It was identified that coaches named aggressors as “harder players”, “confident players”, “active persons”, “players-torpedoes”, “emotional players”, and “competitive players”. Sports competition is justified in various forms. The emergence of bullying and harassment is grounded on “mastery differences”, it is stated that abusive actions are experienced by “physically weak” players, while physical actions used by athletes are called “mischief”; verbal actions are “raillery”. In addition, inadequate preparation of Lithuanian coaches to respond to bullying and harassment in their trained teams or groups on time and appropriately was identified. It turned out that sports organizations are not particularly interested in organizing trainings for prevention of destructive interrelations and intervention. Such kind of in-service training is left to the coach’s initiative.

**Keywords:** sport; social sustainability; athletes; coaches; violence; bullying; harassment; omerta

## 1. Introduction

Since the 19th century, sport in the European society has been associated with victories, healthy lifestyle, success, and opportunities to be an active member of the society or even enter the public elite. It is most often noted that sport contributes to the development of good social skills, promotes positive values such as equality, cooperation, and respect [1], and helps to create social identity [2].

This widespread phenomenon of the society also provides common space for all to participate and “has the power to make ‘society’ more equal, socially cohesive and peaceful” [3] (p. 1109), which can be directly related to the social component of sustainability in sport. However, attention is drawn to the fact that seeking the highest sports results and trying to ensure a show for spectators, athletes are often treated as things, which, in the opinion of Szathmari [4], can be equated with “a money making tool” (p. 38). Due to every athlete’s unguaranteed welfare, this becomes a great challenge creating social sustainability in sport.

While such view of materializing a person is predominating, the shadow side of sport is rarely analyzed. Unfavorable social conditions, determined by destructive interrelationships, turn into a precondition for those participating in sport to experience emotional and physical violence. According to estimates of McPherson et al. [5], sufferers from such harm may constitute as much as up to half of all population of children engaged in sport. These negative effects as consequences are also mentioned in a number of other studies analyzing such interpersonal relationship problems as antisocial behavior of sports participants [6], aggressiveness against others [7], bullying, harassment, or abuse [8–10]. It is also emphasized that such behavior can manifest itself both between athletes, regardless of their age, sex, sport branch, or mastery, and in their relationships with coaches, parents, or spectators of sports events [11–14]. However, it is obvious that the risk of negative relationships and resulting problems related to athletes’ physical, social, and psychological health or wellbeing may increase alongside with the athlete’s growing mastery [15] and this may be determined by maintaining the hierarchical structure in the team unit [16] and by the attitudes and behaviors of the sports organization and its employees, usually coaches [9].

Several studies show that athletes experience emotional and physical violence not only from their peers but also from coaches [14,17]. Even in the context of early childhood education, coaches strive for victories so strongly that they harass players by hitting, yelling out loud, and kicking them, even in front of other players. This behavior of coaches, associated with their perceived burden and experienced stress on team performance, is most often triggered by the established working/cultural environment in sport [18]. This is also confirmed by the coaches’ imparted thoughts that they themselves have repeatedly experienced such behavior from their coaches in the past [19] and by athletes’ approach that such negative behavior is simply an obligatory part of the coach’s job [20]. Such emotionally abusive training practice is often supported by athletes’ parents too. This means that in the hope that the child’s athletic career will be as successful as possible, parents are socialized into the culture of sport and can become silent bystanders to their children’s experiences of various types of negative relationships [21]. However, there still remains a problem of non-reporting, or the way of reporting, about intolerable behavior in sport. The research findings of Peltola and Kivijärvi [14] point out that boys report about coaches’ emotional, physical, and sexual violence more often than girls. The reports about coaches’ violence against children of immigrant families are also more frequent.

The examples given can be related to the prevailing interpretation of the evolutionary theory in sport, which shares similarities with the rules inherent in the criminal world, leaving negative information about interrelationships, in this case, within the team or group. Such a medium, which is determined by the prevalent traditionally established culture of sport, allows unpunishable opportunities for manifestation of bullying and harassment among athletes. Here, athletes are pressed to suffer bullying and follow the “silence law”, which is indirectly supported by the management and coaches of organizations. The latter, lacking competencies to resolve conflict situations, are left to solve emerging problems on their own and do not receive support from the management of organizations.

The problem of bullying and harassment in sport can be also conceived by relatively low prevalence of bullying and harassment disclosed by quite few studies, especially when compared to prevalence in the school context [8,11], as well as by studies that deny opinion that participation in sports activities can help to prevent bullying and harassment [22]. The opinion that sports is dominated by bullying and harassment, which are quite difficult to identify, is confirmed by a number of conducted qualitative studies [23] stating that antisocial behavior manifesting itself as aggression or

violence in sport is often planned and performs an instrumental function. In addition to that, bullying and harassment are difficult to identify because athletes are additionally traumatized by the escalated topic of violence experienced in sport [24]. For these reasons, athletes often avoid speaking about existing bullying and harassment in sport.

However, most of the research, the main purpose of which is to explain the phenomenon of bullying and harassment both in general terms and by separately analyzing the conditions and causes of its emergence, its manifestation, consequences, or management decisions, is constructed by choosing athletes themselves as a target group [5,13,25,26]. Often, this is related to the approach that the benefit of publicity for athletes is greater than the pain they experience as a result of violence [24]. Only a small share of the research tries to explain the phenomenon based on the opinion of coaches as the most important persons in the formation of interpersonal relationships in sport [27,28]. At the same time, it should be mentioned that this phenomenon is constantly changing [29], which becomes a challenge creating a complete picture of bullying and harassment in sport as a way of expressing negative interpersonal relationships.

Such established culture of interpersonal relationships in sport, determined by both harmful coaching behavior for athletic success or prevailing behavioral traditions and athletes' participation in various roles in the manifestation of bullying and harassment, clearly demonstrates that the promotion of safe sport is becoming an urgent goal. Only a thorough analysis of various forms of violence and negative interrelationships would enable the facilitation of an intervention.

In this context, several studies evaluating cooperation of members of the sports organization and the development of coaches' knowledge and competencies should be mentioned. One of the identified measures, enabling coaches to respond to bullying and harassment in their trained teams or groups in a timely and appropriate manner, which could become essential seeking to maintain and improve the quality of training and the ongoing process of professionalization, is compulsory formal and informal training of sports coaches [30,31]. This is also confirmed by studies that disclose that the positive influence on athletes' intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivation is made by coaches' social and personality processes that determine coaching behaviors [32]. Wilson [33] also draws attention to the fact that the solution of problems related to bullying could be efficiently facilitated by all the staff of the sports organization, and cooperation should take place between the staff of the organization, athletes' families, and friends. Whereas in children's and youth sports, this should be done thoughtfully, relating it to the protection of children's rights, about which coaches, unfortunately, lack knowledge [34].

Imparted ideas confirm that bullying and harassment in sport are a serious problem manifesting itself at the micro and macro levels, while the approach of the systematic attitude to prevention of bullying and harassment in sport must remain prevalent. However, at the same time, there is still a lack of knowledge about the phenomenon of bullying and harassment in sport that prevents effectively developing and applying preventive and intervention programs. To this end, it is sought to conduct as many and diverse studies as possible in this context.

The research problem is raised by the questions: What are coaches' approaches while analyzing the situation of persons experiencing bullying and harassment in sport? How is athletes' behavior, that would not contradict the established moral norms, formed in their trained teams or groups?

The research aim: To reveal the factors determining the specificity, emergence, and development of bullying and harassment in sport as threats to social sustainability at the individual level. To achieve this goal, the following research tasks are raised:

- (1) Disclose coaches' approaches to the situation of persons experiencing bullying and harassment in the sport from the position of interpersonal/social relationships;
- (2) Analyze athletes' intolerable behavior, which contradicts established moral norms;
- (3) Discuss latent aspects of bullying and harassment in sports.

## 2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative research strategy has been chosen to analyze the phenomenon of bullying and harassment in sport. This is a strategy that is suitable for a deep explanation of the analyzed phenomena, when information is obtained from a small purposive sample which has experience related to the topics of bullying and harassment in sport; provides a possibility for representatives of different groups who are related to the topics of bullying and harassment in sports to participate in the research process, creating preconditions for collecting unique information; helps to identify links between connections of variables, which are intricate to grope and represent the environment and factors of persons who have experienced bullying and harassment, promoting the emergence and development of the phenomena.

In this study, data collection was performed using a semi-structured interview. Such a type of interview was chosen due to its easiness, immediacy, and flexibility, i.e., due to the created conditions to change the order of the questions asked, their wording, to ask additional questions by purposefully orientating informants towards the investigated phenomenon, and consistently deepening the researcher's perception of the research object.

Interview questions were formed having analyzed scientific research related to bullying and/or harassment in a general sense and research on these phenomena in the field of sport. The logic of the questions themselves was determined by the results of quantitative research with athletes [35]. This study revealed the prevalence of aggression and its manifestation by bullying and harassment among young people involved in organized sport, identified distribution of roles, and revealed the frequency of preventive and interventional measures applied in sport. That is, it was revealed that 22.3% of athletes acknowledged the fact that they were mocked at and harassed by the members of their team/group. As many as 39.8% of athletes confirmed that they had observed bullying in their team/group, while 13.4% identified themselves as bullies. The study also identified statistically significant differences between men and women, performing analysis by employing cross-sectional profile: Men, compared to women, behave antisocially more often with both team members and competitors; they are more aggressive, using physical and indirect aggression more often than women. However, only a quarter of respondents tell their coaches about the negative phenomena taking place in sport. A similar number of respondents indicate that they are informed how to identify bullying and harassment and how to report them. A semi-structured interview guide was structured to elicit open-ended responses pertaining to: (1) Interpersonal relationships—relationships between the athletes of one team, group; relationships between the athletes of one team, group, and the coach; and relationships between “weaker” and “stronger” athletes; (2) aggression in sport—necessity/inevitability of aggression; (3) ethical behavior norms—intolerable/antisocial/disgraceful behavior in sport; moral norms: Noble and safe sport; written and “unwritten” rules; (4) coaches' attention/awareness and the position of the leader of the organization (management) in cases of bullying-harassment—the coach's applied preventive and intervention measures, their efficiency in solving bullying and harassment issues, and actions performed at the organizational level to prevent phenomena.

**The Research Sample.** The method of drawing up the research sample is criterion sampling. In this case, the research sample selects all cases that meet some criterion and helps to ensure the quality of the research data [36]. Participants were sports coaches working in amateur sports organizations and training adolescents and young people of different age groups (10–29 years old).

The sampling criteria for coaches were as follows: Representing all free groups of sports—team, dual, and individual sports; popularity of sports in Lithuania according to the data of the Lithuanian Department of Statistics 2018 [37]; representation of different generations; gender differences.

The study was attended by eight coaches: Five men and three women. The age of the investigated persons ranges from 23 to 65, and the coaches had between 4 and 30 years of work experience as full-time coaches (Table 1).

**Table 1.** The characteristics of research participants—coaches.

Coach Code Characteristics	1I	2I	3I	4I	5I	6I	7I	8I
Sex	Women	Men	Men	Men	Men	Men	Women	Women
Age	51	27	37	23	46	28	65	44
Sports	Team sports/ Basketball	Team sports/ Basketball	Dual sports/ Wrestling	Team sports/ Soccer	Team sports/ Basketball	Dual sports/ Boxing	Individual sports/ Swimming	Team sports/ Handball

All coaches received a Code (e.g., Coach 1—1I) in the transcribed texts to ensure their anonymity, and this code is referred to in the Results section. Two coaches from all coaches who participated in the survey train three (5I) and four (6I) teams, while other coaches simultaneously train 1–2 teams or groups. With regard to trained athletes, coaches worked only with girls or young women (1I), only with boys and young men (2I, 4I, 5I, 8I), or trained mixed groups (3I, 6I).

In addition, such coaches were selected whose trained athletes were interviewed in the quantitative study previously conducted by the authors (N = 382).

**Organization and Process of Research.** Data were collected in January 2019. The interviews were conducted in the Lithuanian language. All interviews took place upon prior agreement about the time of the interview, meeting each informant directly in an environment/place acceptable to the informant. The average duration of one interview was from 39:14 minutes to 1:27:90 minutes. However, this article presents only a part of the study, without specifying the length of the interviews of this concrete part of the study. Before each interview, informants were assured of their privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. The principles of usefulness and fairness of the research were emphasized to the informants; the participants of the research were also introduced to the research aim, protection of the collected data, and the use of future results. Research participants had to give their verbal consent that they did not object to recording of the interview using a dictaphone. The interviewer would provide pre-formulated questions, supplemented by new questions arising during the course of listening to the informant. Informants were also asked to share a copy of the Code of Ethics that is approved in their organizations. At the end of the interviews, informants were asked to revise the answers during the transcription of the text, if such a need emerged.

**Research Data Processing.** Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim by one of the authors. The total transcribed text of the interview contains 41,346 words, i.e., 236,226 characters. The article presents only that part of the research results which relates exclusively to interpersonal/social relationships between athletes and their behavior that contradicts the established moral norms, using aggression and anger, bullying, and harassment actions. The transcribed interview text of this part of the study contains 23,317 words i.e., 132,243 characters.

Inductive content analysis situated within social constructivism epistemological position served as the basis for the data analysis [38]. This method of data analysis has been chosen because of its usefulness for identifying core consistencies and meanings from a large quantity of qualitative data [36]. The process of qualitative content analysis took place in the following sequence: (1) Selection of notional units of the analysis, (2) immersion into research data, (3) open coding, (4) categorizing, (5) abstraction, and (6) preparation of the research report [39].

In the initial stage of data analysis, two authors independently read all original transcripts and divided the text into smaller meaning units: The constellation of worlds or statements that relate to the same central meaning [40]. Then, an “open coding process” was performed, i.e., each identified meaning unit was labelled with a code that is understandable considering the context. Based on the study design, codes were generated inductively. In the next step, subcategories and categories were distinguished, i.e., groups of content that shares a commonality were distinguished. Here, at varying levels of abstraction, subcategories were both sorted and abstracted into category or some categories were broken down into subcategories [40]. Presenting informants’ original quotes and translating

them into the English language, due to linguistic differences, caused slang accents that are typical of the Lithuanian language to possibly disappear. It should also be noted that informants will be further referred to as males, not seeking to discriminate female coaches but seeking conciseness of the language.

**Ethics of Qualitative Research.** Flawless, transparent, and ethical behavior is obligatory in any research seeking to provide accurate research results to the public, so that both researchers and practitioners do not mislead the stakeholders. The assurance of the informant and/or respondent regarding their security allows to disclose the latent details of analyzed phenomena; therefore, only the guarantee of the ethical research approach ensures good quality research results. Resnik [41] states that the existence of ethical standards helps to seek the essential aims raised in scientific research: Cognitive, honesty, and mistake avoidance. The author notes that these standards propagate the values necessary for joint work, such as *trust, accountability, mutual respect, impartiality*, because implementation of the scientific research usually requires close cooperation and coordination between the abundance of different people and institutions [41]. Resnik [41] also emphasizes that the standards of research ethics help to ensure scientists' accountability to the public. This qualitative study was conducted on the basis of the following approaches:

- After introducing the persons involved in the study to the content of the study and upon their verbal consent, they were informed that the interview would be recorded in the dictaphone and after transcribing the text, the electronic medium would be destroyed;
- The participants' resolve to participate in the study was made on free will, i.e., based on the principles of goodwill and volunteering;
- Provided information about the aim, tasks, and the future use of the research results was accurate;
- Research participants were not misled about the aim, tasks, course of the research, forms, and possibilities of presenting the results;
- Research participants were not forced to answer questions degrading their dignity;
- While conducting the study, the laws protecting human rights were observed (legal acts protecting human rights, which are valid in the Republic of Lithuania: The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania, the Law on Legal Protection of Personal Data of the Republic of Lithuania, the Labor Code, and other legal acts), conventions (European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, etc.);
- No psychological and/or physical pain was caused to research participants during the interviews;
- A verbal guarantee of privacy was ensured to research participants;
- A verbal guarantee of confidentiality was ensured to research participants;
- A verbal guarantee of anonymity was ensured to research participants;
- Research participants were treated with respect and honesty.

The qualitative study was conducted observing the following basic principles of research ethics with regard to the study itself and informants: With regard to the study, usefulness and fairness; with regard to the informant, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity.

**Usefulness of the study.** After providing exhaustive information about the aims of the study and the use of future results, research participants voluntarily agreed to give interviews. Research participants understood the importance and need of the study in order to identify the manifestation of negative interpersonal relationships, preventing the spread of bullying in sport. Based on scientifically grounded evidence, the projected model for management of bullying in sport is relevant to every coach who seeks to ensure healthy interrelationships between athletes without losing the athlete(s) of their trained team.

**Fairness of the study.** The selection of research participants was based on the criteria of fairness, i.e., the informants who participated in the qualitative study were selected according to predefined criteria, not relating them to a concrete person. It was sought that the study should be attended by coaches of various sport branches, training persons of different age groups and sex, with different work

experience, etc. This study was not based on the selection criteria of benefit, credulity, compromise, or other criteria violating fairness.

**Informants' privacy.** Privacy is the control over the extent, timing, and circumstances of sharing oneself (physically, behaviorally, or intellectually) with others. Privacy relates to the method for collecting data; in other words, the study's location, tools, and planned interactions affect your ability to maintain your participant's privacy. Research participants were assured of their privacy, with the right not to answer questions that might possibly violate their privacy, i.e., informants were protected from answering questions that were unacceptable to them, respecting their resolve.

**Informants' confidentiality.** According to Kaiser [42], for qualitative researchers, maintaining respondent confidentiality while presenting rich, detailed accounts of social life presents unique challenges and these challenges are not adequately addressed in the literature on research ethics and research methods. It was emphasized to research participants that the data obtained during the interviews will be stored only in the written form, i.e., only transcribed text will remain, destroying the electronic medium of the interview recording. It was also noted that the transcribed text would be stored in a completely depersonalized form and its full text version would not be published anywhere. Regarding informants' anonymity, anonymity of the information provided by research participants, despite its openness and personalism, does not allow the disclosing of informants' identity [43]; therefore, researchers seeking to obtain reliable information must first ensure informants' anonymity. "The case for seeking to preserve the anonymity of people whose lives are the subject of community studies is well-known and easily understood: Sociologists do not have an automatic entitlement to reveal things to a wider public that the people themselves may regard as private" [44] (pp. 4–5). According to Walford [45], the fact that researchers should give anonymity to research sites and to the individuals involved in research is usually taken as an ethical norm. The author states that "such a norm is embodied internationally in most of the ethical guidelines and codes of practice of the various educational, sociological and psychological research associations and societies" (p. 83). In his article, Walford [45] denies this assumption based on the fact that usually it is impossible to ensure anonymity and it is often undesirable to try to do this. However, in the case of this study, research participants' anonymity was fully guaranteed, noting that all information about them and their trained athletes will be presented in a fully depersonalized form.

Thus, based on the above review, this study respects the principles of usefulness and fairness of the study, ensuring informants' privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, in order to protect research participants, without mentioning their names, workplaces, names of trained teams, etc., i.e., no information that would allow to identify the persons involved in the study or to disclose their identity is provided.

### 3. Results

Factors that determine the specificity, appearance and development of bullying and harassment in sport are described by 49 subcategories that fit into 9 categories: Interpersonal relationships (I); perception of athletes' "strength" and "weakness" (II); moral norms (III); attitude to aggression (IV); ambivalence of the perception of aggression (V); bullying and harassment (VI); causes triggering bullying and harassment (VII); signs and ways of obtaining information (VIII); informing about bullying and harassment (IX).

In category I, discussing interpersonal relationships between athletes and between athletes and the coach, the informants' position with regard to interpersonal relationships between the members of their trained teams unfolds. This can be seen in such distinguished subcategories as "importance of authority", "coach's responsibility", "demonstrative positiveness negating problems", "older players vs, newcomers", and "competing" (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Interpersonal relationships between athletes and between athletes and the coach.

I Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Interpersonal relationships	Importance of authority	5I: The coach is an authority, a teacher for children. In my opinion, the coach is an example and forms relationships between athletes and the coach [...]. 2I: [...] if the coach is much older, you will automatically address him "You" and there appears a bigger distance. 4I: [...] if they came to that coach and do sports, they anyway feel some authority, actually the coach is more important to them than some comments said by parents on football and the like.
	Coach's responsibility	6I: Very much depends on the coach's contribution too. How he presents all that process and how he controls it. 4I: [...] everything very much depends on how children themselves will feel in a team: if they are friendly, they will let others come. 5I: Formation of relationships depends on the team coach.
	Demonstrative positiveness negating problems	1I: Just younger players respect the older ones, the older ones give lessons to the younger ones, but there is that very nice compatibility between young and older. 5I: [...] colleagues evaluated relationships such, different compared to others', let's say, maybe, let's say, slightly not as usually are, a bit specific, but that doesn't mean that they were bad.
	Older players vs. newcomers	4I: There are such cases that they train together, after some three-four years several more children come, but they are not part of that medium, other children simply don't let them come in.
	Competing	1I: It is quite different when you work with a national team. There is competition for the place there, so there, fight takes place using a little different methods.

When analyzing informants' answers, it is important not only to ground on direct answers but also to take into account what the informant attempts to conceal, where they avoid direct answers, and how the informant maneuvers trying to avoid a direct response. For example, despite abundant talk, even after giving additional questions, informant 3I tried to speak "off topic" as if he had not understood the question. Informant 1I emphasizes that there are no major conflicts but accentuates age differences: From the younger—respect, the older ones dominate giving advice. Emphasizing good climate of relationships in the trained team, as an alternative, gives an example of other teams: "fight takes place using little different methods". The informant presents the situation in his team as if it were an ideal case, repeating key words "friendliness", "support". The fact that an informant notices negative aspects of relationships in other teams does not allow to assume that he does not envisage problematic relationships in his own team. The expression "you have to drag him after yourself" (discords with "friendly help") may indicate that negative cases occur, and the expression holds a negative connotation. One can give a rhetorical question whether team members are really satisfied if they "have to drag" another team member? The attempt to understate conflicts also comes to prominence; for example, informant 6I, speaking about conflicts, summarizes: "[...] well, maybe, like as between friends, there are always friendly pinchings". Although the informants admit that competition exists, there are older players' "clans", which avoid allowing newcomers to enter, training culture in different teams which makes it difficult to adapt.

The informants' answers show that the relationships between the coach and the athlete are based on authority (influence is made by the coach's status, age, and official posture of the coach with regard to trained persons), which explains the influence on the athletes' interrelationships. In other words, a certain position of power used by the coach becomes the source of regulating relationships. However, basically, that is the end of controlling relationships when the coach is absent. The coach in the team is perceived as "the ultimate and the only institution", which is responsible for both sports results and



mutual relationships between athletes. For example, informant 8I, who indirectly associates athletes' relationships with personal behavior, states that these relationships demonstrate a certain obligatory pattern of behavior: "This is the order that is in the gym because I am responsible for it 100 percent." It should be noted that the teams trained by informants belong to sports schools or clubs: They are a part of the organizational system, but the organization delegates all responsibility to the coach, holding itself aloof.

In order to highlight the approaches related to the way of perceiving "weakness" and "strength" in sport and interpersonal relationships between athletes and athletes and coaches, such subcategories as "privileged approach to leaders", "bullying against the weaker", "behavior discriminating social features", "justification of aggression", "behavior discriminating physical characteristics", and "Coach's opt-out" were distinguished and combined into the category perception of athletes' "strength" and "weakness" (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Interpersonal/social relationships: Roles of "weaker" and "stronger" athletes.

II Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Perception of athletes' "strength" and "weakness"	Privileged approach to leaders	2I: [...] sometimes good leaders, good players and at the same time the most famous people, as I say in the locker room, maybe turn those poorer, weaker players. [...] This is how it is best most often: if in informal settings, the leader but not the best player in that sport branch, then there is order in the team. When the best player and the leader in informal settings, everything falls on one person's shoulders. This system is faultier.
	Bullying against the weaker	3I: [...] stronger ones often use . . . or some humiliation or something else [...] after fights, children athletes' tendency to bullying is seen. 5I: [...] in children's sports or youth sports exclusion of the weaker ones exists. 4I: [...] some guys feel that they are stronger than others and just sometimes say some bad words and the like.
	Behavior discriminating social features	8I: There are such, there are weaker children ... And physically ... I think that now economic matters can be felt. [...] If you are socially disadvantaged, you don't have to pay anything, but when you go to some tournament or somewhere and then such things come out. And among the children this can be felt very strongly.
	Justification of aggression	4I: [...] it is clear when certain children are doing their best, other children are also doing their best but sometimes they don't succeed, maybe they feel some, well, slight anger too, well, I am trying, doing here, and you came now and messed everything up for us. Maybe that is also psychologically normal, because some anger anyway appears: you are trying, doing. And it just happens to him this way—it's natural.
	Behavior discriminating physical characteristics	5I: [...] many coaches do in the selection, in basketball sport branch, line up these athletes and say "you're small, you're small, goodbye". 6I: Well, let's say in camps. [...] This can be seen where there are rooms, there, let's say, some who are superior such, who are of higher mastery, where they are physically, psychologically stronger, and others such, who just came—calm, obedient.
	Coach's opt-out	7I: I had one such and I have one such guy who is now thirteen years old, so he, certainly, has poor eyesight and I have one such guy who is more of a leader ... So when he has to swim alone in the swimming track, when he would swim up to that . . . the edge of the pool, then that older one occupies a bigger place for himself and doesn't want to move over so that the little one could swim up and touch the wall, well, I don't know why, but that smaller one said that one swimmer doesn't want to let me to the wall. [...] Then, I say, you try somehow to bypass him. Then he goes to another track, that little one doesn't swim.

The informants' responses in this category highlight a certain conceptual convergence, when "strength" in sport, which has positive connotation, is also transferred to a level of interrelationships where "strength" is perceived as a trait suitable for the athlete. For example, although 1I avoids a straightforward answer to the question about the relationships between "weaker" and "stronger" athletes, which is conditionally related to the previously answered question about "dragging" of the weaker one, however, additional questions highlight competition between different ages, competing with who is "stronger". Denying negative relationships, the informant twice repeats "[...] this is not the case with us ..." as if he wants to convince us of what he is saying. However, he states that younger players' competition is related to "proving" that they are worthy of playing on the court longer. Discrimination and stereotypes inspiring it are related to aggression, although informants do not identify that as aggression. In the relationships of younger athletes, discriminatory behavior is based on the comparison of the social status, where the "poorer" status is associated with "weakness" and the role of the victim. At the coach's level, a "weaker" athlete is associated with physical characteristics based on traditionally established approaches. This way, aggression manifests itself in a hidden form. On the one hand, it comes to prominence that coaches observe the ongoing relationships as if from aside, opting-out, and on the other hand, they try to peculiarly "mitigate" or justify them, stating that in force-demanding sports "[...] children are a bit more acute" (3I), relating aggressiveness to mastery or expressing dissatisfaction with team members' performance. This way, the goal—the results of the team—turns into a justifiable condition for negative behavior and the use of force in interpersonal relationships.

The category moral norms (III) reveals the coaches' attitude to the prevailing norm, realizing what clean or disgraceful sport is. This is also reflected in the distinguished subcategories: "Justification of aggression", "understatement of bullying, harassment", "destruction with regard to one's own or competitors' team", "transfer of aggression from private life to sport", and "disregard, non-acceptance" (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Moral norms: Noble and safe sport.

III Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Moral norms	Justification of aggression	1I: [...] for example, having missed one or another throw, you just get angry purely with yourself because of your troubles. Players are angry with themselves. Is like an example, throw the ball there or kick, just because of nerves, anger, being angry with themselves, maybe a situation. 5I: [...] I think that this happens in the team due to, because of some kind of competition in the team sport branch. [...] I think that, again, those who have leadership qualities and want to win that authority in the team, usually want to behave, that this takes place anyway, that someone wants to gain authority among his teammates.
	Understatement of bullying, harassment	3I: Physically, no, there are no such. Everyone gives vent in a place intended for that, but such ... sneers maybe. You can't say that those are such, bullying, but it's such mockery, is probably prevailing. 4I: Not intentionally want to harm, there are cases, but so, sometimes, just it is when some four or five agree: "and now we will put pressure on him" and make some situations harder for him; for example, make a stronger pass, although there is a simple exercise and the like, could be really.

Table 4. Cont.

III Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Moral norms	Destruction with regard to one's own or competitors' team	2I: The coach has one or two players whose work can bring that destruction with regard to the team. As an example, to provoke the best defender, make him nervous if he is hot tempered. Every coach calls such players his own way, there is such an expression torpedoes, such street jargon. Everyone has them. It's a matter of taste how you call. 4I: There are cases when push each other and the like, but here we, coaches have this, like an unwritten rule, how to strike the competitor, it's low level.
	Transfer of aggression from private life to sport	2I: [...] out of some five, three always behave aggressively. As to my team, there is a paradox. Namely that person who plays that role on the court, is good, calm, quiet outside the court, works as a police officer. Such is the paradox that you will not hear a bad word or aggression outside the court, but on the court, he is namely that main who will provoke the competitor. And we really put him in the role of the torpedo.
	Disregard, non-acceptance	5I: Now, with modern youth, just disregard of another, especially if a new athlete comes and is to be integrated into the team of boys who attended earlier. [...] This is one of those methods when they intentionally or unintentionally, but let's say, not to communicate, to communicate less, such maybe a little ... hmm ... especially in the locker room ...

The informants' responses (Table 4) highlight contradictory (dual) assessment of aggressive actions with regard to morality: Morality or immorality is associated with what aggressive actions are directed to. Aggressiveness, as well as prohibited actions, is perceived as a norm during the match, associated as a necessary action in order to defeat, predicting the aggressors' roles in the team. In addition, it is noticed that there is an attempt to justify aggressive verbal and non-verbal actions, and bullying; understanding their negative treatment, euphemistic forms are sought. For example, 1I emphasizes that anger is expressed individually, not against team members, although this affects others too. The informant repeats several times and claims that it is not the case that one player does something intolerable with regard to others. Signs of defense can be noticed, such as aggression being called "emotionalism", the causes are related to positive circumstances ("I demand from myself very much"), attempts are made to belittle reactions ("After that, gives remarks [...] just, as being angry"), the causes are sought outside ("on the court, judges provoke", "competitors' actions can give rise to it"), and attempts are made to justify ("they want to play well"). That is, talk about the relationships inside is obviously avoided, and aggression is understated. According to informant 2I, conflicts between team members manifest themselves as verbal and physical violence ("[...] there are swears addressed to other players, negative emotions. Sometimes there is physical contact in the locker room during the break"). Physical violence manifests itself "in the locker room" (2I). This shows that verbal violence is considered more "tolerable" than physical, which takes place in a closed space. On the other hand, a degree of tolerance that differs in the team and beyond it, comes to prominence. This shows the existence of the culture that tolerates physical violence among athletes. Team members are encouraged to use the competitors' psychological traits in order to destabilize them (2I: "[...] to provoke the best defender, make him nervous if he is hot tempered"). That is, some team members are encouraged and gain experience seeking to provoke other persons. The question arises whether the encouraged aggression against competitors does not tell on relationships between team members who are considered "guilty" (as a behavioral model) and whether is it possible to separate provocative tactics used in the game from interpersonal relationships outside the game. All the more, teams lack the simplest ethical rules. 2I illustrates his team's situation by presenting the police officer's example (2I: "[...] is good, calm, quiet outside the court, works as a police officer"). The example shows that the

behavioral norms of statutory officers play the role of controlling violence (2I: “Such is the paradox that you will not hear a bad word or aggression outside the court, but on the court, he is namely that main who will provoke the competitor”). That is, the person distinguishes the rules that control the type of behavior and makes use of unwritten sports rules that tolerate aggressive behavior.

Although 3I states that bullying is of a psychological type (“Physically, no, there are no such. Everyone gives vent in a place intended for that”), explaining that in combat sport “vent is given” physically. However, attempts are made to understate the importance of verbal bullying (“[...] they are not very malevolent, but they, you can say, like sneers, mockery [...] You can’t say that those are such bullying, but it’s such mockery, probably mainly prevailing”), when sneering is not treated as bullying. That is, the informant either does not know what bullying is or seeks to understate it by looking for descriptions with less negative connotations.

Based on answer of informant 4I, harm is considered to be intolerable, but children disregard prohibitions. Harm occurs through refined, hard-to-identify actions, complicating workouts. The informant’s justification is felt (“unintentionally”), this is considered as a “natural” thing, relating it to age, which is to be considered as an alarm.

It came to prominence that children who did sports for a longer time formed closed groups that do not accept newcomers (5I “The group formed over some years, then—it’s not to communicate”). Bullying and harassment, which manifest themselves as disregard, physical contact (pushing, throwing snowballs), hiding clothes, and non-communication is named as naughtiness related to sports competition (“[...] as they say, in the form of games or mischief, but actually, this happens with some sort of deliberate thing [...] I think that in the team this occurs because of, such like, competition in the team sport branch”). Bullying and harassment take place in the locker room and other settings where team leaders do not see (“[...] they very well understand the coach’s control during the very workout process, that it will be difficult to do this in the presence of the coach and the like, so they try to look for such spaces while coming, before, waiting for the workout”). Aggressive and repetitive behavior is associated with the athletes’ aspiration to dominate: “[...] the character traits are such that he wants to be a leader, dominate and the like. So most often from such cases of these athletes, let’s say, are noticed”.

Analyzing responses of informant 6I, one can envisage the influence of age on how personal status within a group is perceived, that is, older (and at the same time, physically stronger) athletes feel more privileged than younger (weaker): “[...] Who will sleep there, as it happens, let’s say, in the camp, simple beds or they bring that so-called fold up bed. So, anyway, such as the ones 16 years old, 14–16, they don’t want to sleep on that fold up bed, because, well, they feel then maybe already lower than the other who sleeps in that normal bed. So then such like shouting matches occur.” Other individual causes of conflicts belong to the closed group, such as status-giving mastery and psychological qualities when the “weaker”, unable to defend himself, becomes a victim: “Most often because of personal traits. Because, as I said, I say there, one is high-performance athlete, another doesn’t have this at all. [...] Sometimes, it is a lack of communication skills. The child is quieter there, can respond with several words there, gets excited quickly, blushes and is unable to behave adequately in certain situations because he hasn’t been in them often. That’s why this so-called bullying begins. Well, you know, *lopas, duchas*.” It should be noted that the jargon of the street and prison is used, denoting the low social status of the victim, that is, “loser”, “pawn”. Conflicts in the domestic settings move to workouts, although the informant is trying to understate them, calling “a friendly pinch”; therefore, the question arises whether the informant adequately understands what bullying is: “Something doesn’t happen in this workout process or throwing a heavy ball, who will throw further or, there, playing basketball, they don’t hit the basket or still something, so, it’s clear, that one, who sneer each other constantly: go on the fold up bed and sleep—says—if you don’t hit. Well, but these are, as I say, friendly such things, pinchings. [...] They sneer at each other, but this isn’t malevolent, just in a friendly way.” However, conflicts are more common among young people of the same age group (“[...] in his age group, it is clear, he is already, already. Or a 17-year-old to 20-year-old or more, he will be afraid to do this. But between them, they for sure. Sometimes they are very acute.”). However, verbal attacks are

more frequent (“So well, verbal, you know, are most common. Physical, it is very rare. So, I say, well, I remember several cases that something was. And, and verbally, you can see every time everywhere”).

There are impermissible actions against competitors and members of one’s group, ways of impact, and consequences such as malevolent mockeries, disregard which has a negative impact on the victim, and physical harm: “Both in the ring while boxing and in the workout can’t stand nervousness and do impermissible actions. Maybe feel some kind of frustration that they are losing the fight. [...] Already like to malevolently mock at each other. And, and really, there are cases, I see, some children are disregarded. There are cases that a calmer child, so he can be greatly affected by that travel to the match. [...] I have heard that, where from, two young men were boxing, and I wouldn’t say that they, in the age groups of juniors, so 14–16 years. So, one who lost the fight, after the fight came to the winner and knocked out his teeth. This is one of those ruder cases I’ve ever heard. And more . . . of course, last year or two years ago there was a competition in Palanga, Kaunas and Vilnius athletes had a fight with the Palanga athletes. Besides, senior age athletes feel more privileged than younger ones, relationships with competitors can be influenced by such a peculiarity as a different city of residence, different teams.”

Responses of 8I show that the athlete’s personal opinion is considered intolerable and a stereotypical age argument is used, which was named by the informants in other responses, noting that this criterion was important for establishing the rank of young athletes in their interrelationships. This answer shows that the stereotypical attitude can be promoted by the coach himself: “[...] this season, I noticed that the sixteen-year-olds are seventeen-year-olds, every of them has their very strong opinion. And in the competitions they allow themselves to say that the coach this way and not that way. And this was four competitions in succession, until we built that whole pyramid that “it can’t be so, it won’t be this way, because I have been in handball for thirty years, not you; you are just learning [...] Yes, I am also learning from you”.

The category attitude to aggression (IV) reveals how aggressiveness in sport can be understood and how it manifests itself in athletes’ behavior. This is highlighted in the distinguished subcategories “looking for the guilty (causes)”, “aggressor’s role in the team”, “verbal aggression”, and “anger grown into aggression” (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Attitude to aggression in athletes’ behavior.

IV Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Attitude to aggression	Looking for the guilty (causes)	1I: You understand that those people in life are quite different. On the court, they seem to give themselves and as if they give their heart. And when something fails or someone else intervenes, either a competitor or a judge, they just are disturbed a little. 5I: [...] the desire such to show off, maybe, let’s say, if I am such more quiet, it will be not good already.
	Aggressor’s role in the team	2I: Here, according to the specificity of sport, if you aren’t, as an example, a good player, you don’t have talents, if you want to be competitive, get time on the court, you have to bring some benefit to the team; therefore, very often players understand their limitations and choose this role. That role is in football and in ice hockey too, everywhere those torpedoes play such role.
	Verbal aggression	3I: No, as I mentioned, that aggression maybe, I wouldn’t be able to name that that is aggression, but those jokes are often, maybe, offending to a smaller or weaker athlete, sometimes they even cry or complain or even you can see ...
	Anger grown into aggression	4I: These maybe more single cases, but there are cases when anger grows into aggression. He may not want to give in or he thinks he was right, although actually he was wrong. 5I: The so-called accumulated energy, energy surplus, as, let’s say, hyperactivity, all such, which occurs in certain, some forms of aggression.

On the one hand, informants treat the very concept of aggression as negative, but it comes to prominence that aggressive verbal and non-verbal actions tend to be justified by looking for “the guilty” outside or by explaining personal traits (subcategory “looking for the guilty (causes)”). On the other hand, it can be stated that aggressiveness involving non-sporting actions is perceived instrumentally and is promoted. This is demonstrated by the informants’ answers. For example, informant 1I is trying to justify aggressive behavior (“And when something fails or someone else intervenes, whether a competitor or a judge, they just are disturbed a little. But I don’t relate this to aggression, really”), while on the other hand, it turns out that aggressive behavior in sport is considered as a norm (“those people in personal life are quite different”). However, emotions on the court are tolerated—they are showed more demonstratively (subcategory “anger grown into aggression”). In other circumstances, outbursts of emotions possibly may not be particularly acceptable. The reason for this is that aggressive actions are justified by the athlete’s role, which is beneficial to the team (subcategory “aggressor’s role in the team”). This role is promoted and rewarded when the person does not have other outstanding sports abilities (I2: “[...] the only way to get minutes to play is that role”). Three roles are distinguished: The judge’s, the coach’s, and the player-aggressor’s (I2: “[...] the limits of actions are set by judges, and the coach’s job is to press judges, that player’s job is to press the competitors’ player”). The coach and the player form a coalition, where the coach’s support for violent actions acts as a stimulus, while the regulating function is left for the judge (I2: “This is the judge’s job. He can give a technical or professional foul and that’s all”). In other words, aggressiveness and violent actions are stimulated by the coach, treating them as a natural play element and as an unwritten but well-known rule. In addition, informant 3I introduces the approach that verbal bullying is not aggression or violence, although its damaging effect is perceived (“I wouldn’t be able to name that that is aggression, but those jokes are often, maybe, offending to a smaller or weaker athlete, sometimes they even cry or complain or even you can see”) (subcategory “verbal aggression”). Informant 5I does not treat non-verbal bullying (pushing, throwing sneakers to the wastebin, hidden clothes, disregard) as aggression (“[...] well, maybe I wouldn’t relate to aggression [...] maybe a desire such to show off”). In other words, the informant does not know what aggression is and what forms of its manifestation are, or seeks, in a certain sense, to understate the importance of aggression to justify it. This way, the possibilities for manifestation of aggressive behavior are expanded. On the other hand, it would be meaningful to expand coaches’ education and professional development (for prevention). Analyzing responses of informant 5I, it also became clear that coaches are watching cyberbullying, where the behavior of team members similar to the one during workouts and competitions is repeated: Non-communication (“[...] I won’t write, I won’t accept [...]”, disregard (“[...] I won’t accept you into the group, to my friends [...]”) and verbal abuse (“[...] I get information that there are swears too and the like. [...]”). At the same time, it becomes clear that the space in which harassment takes place has expanded: “As there is a saying “the theater begins in the locker room”. I think it always used to be this way, but in nowadays situation, it has expanded: Not only in the locker room, not only in direct relationships but also using technical possibilities, all of it takes place much more intensively”. It also comes to prominence that there is informal culture supporting negative behavior, which is disclosed by the statements of informant 6I: “There are certain rules which old-timers know, that if a new person comes to that collective, he doesn’t know, it’s quite complicated to understand for the first time. Most often, I myself, before going to the match, seat and explain how, these unwritten rules, how all should behave during the match so that later those incidents are avoided”). However, he is the only among the informants who relates bullying to aggression (“They usually experience aggression when they are bullied”) but treat aggression in boxing as a shortcoming, which “[...] switches the mind off”.

The category ambivalence of aggression perception (V) discloses how aggression with negative connotation is differentiated from the so-called “sports anger” with positive connotation, and discloses itself in such subcategories as “aggression as response”, “aggression vs. sports anger”, “control of aggression”, “promotion, transfer of aggression”, “coach’s abilities”, and “self-control” (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Perception of aggression in sport vs. anger.

V Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Ambivalence of aggression perception	Aggression as response	1I: I think there shouldn't be any aggression. Of course, aggression can be provoked by the competitor. You won't stand and watch when you are hit, punched, right. Either you back or hit him back.
	Aggression vs. sports anger	2I: There is little difference between aggression and sports anger. Aggression is an emotional state where you don't control yourself, while sports anger is a very centralized behavior. When you have sports anger, you very well know what you are doing, how you are doing, you follow instructions, destruction strategically.
		3I: Sports anger, especially in wrestling, it must be present. And I think in other sport branches too, especially in duel sport branches, athletes must be, they . . . sports anger must be, but aggression to another person, really must not be and after the fight or getting ready, during the workout, must not be.
	Control of aggression	4I: Aggression maybe from that big sport anger, from that big desire grows into aggression, but I think it's a very rare case, because both a clever child and a clever adult, not necessarily in football, everywhere, in any contact sport, I think must feel when there is aggression and when there is sports anger, because there should be a limit.
	Promotion, transfer of aggression	5I: [...] on the court, you must be positively aggressive. [...] My, as an example, usually is: "On the court, show what you are doing here now, so, demonstrate this on the court against the competitor. Why didn't you do anything against him and behaved in such a way that nothing, and the like, and here, you are already using against a weaker, younger child, and the like."
	Coach's abilities	5I: Summing up from the psychological side, we, coaches are psychologists . . . You, coach, must be a very good psychologist and act not using some . . . say, "aggression against aggression". But you have to work using psychological methods.
Self-control	5I: There is the simplest thing—self-control. So, to control these outbursts of aggression in difficult situations, both on the court during the match, when it is difficult for you psychologically and you explode there, push another, start a fight or the like, or outside the court, he has to know that.	

Informants' responses also highlight a double (contradictory) system of values, differentiating aggressiveness from what is called "sports anger". The latter is perceived as synonymous with aggression, but it is given a positive emotional connotation. It turns out that coaches encourage aggressive behavior with regard to competitors but leave the control of promoted emotional expressions to chance; that is, to the athlete himself. For example, answers of 1I reveal a dual system of values. First, it is stated that aggression "cannot be tolerable", but it is justified by situational actions: "Either you back or hit him back". This confirms that there have been physical aggression cases among team members ("Girls really had a fight, they fought so that they pulled each other by hair"), but the focus is again diverted from the team.

Based on the responses of 2I, aggression (perceiving violent actions behind it) is perceived as a tactical instrument discussed by the team and used to influence the competitor (I2: "When you have sports anger, you very well know what you are doing, how you are doing, you follow instructions, destruction strategically."). Such actions are evaluated morally positively. Informant 3I calls aggression (negative connotation) in the match "sports anger", which is given positive connotation ("[...] sports anger must be, but aggression to another person, really must not be"). The responses of 4I again record an obscure boundary between "sports anger" and aggression. It is maintained that the athlete himself should feel the limit. Disobedience to the rules and open demonstration, activated by stereotypes,

are treated as intolerable actions (“either win, or die on the court”). Similarly, aggression and sports anger are treated as synonyms by 5I (“[...] sports aggression or sports anger [...]”), the tendency to treat aggression positively comes to prominence too (“must be positively aggressive”). Aggressiveness is perceived instrumentally: “[...] If we speak about aggression in the interpersonal relationships between young people, but the coach’s task is to control it, to introduce to that so-called positive aggression and to direct to it during the match. ... aggression, positive sports aggression or sports anger, if we can raise it, in the coach’s work must be moved to the sports court during the match against the opponent, to the very team, all together, unanimously to direct”. In other words, aggressiveness is basically perceived as a useful feature of sporting activity, which must be controlled by a “coach” and directed to a “good purpose”, although the informant admitted above that he had no possibilities to control athletes’ behavior outside the “limits of the court”. On the other hand, the informant is convinced that the athlete must “[...] control himself from inside”. The athlete’s ability to “manage” aggression is identified based on records of crimes in law enforcement (“If during eighteen years, none of your trained persons was involved in certain outbursts, incidents, where the law enforcement was interested in or other things, then you think that the athletes have learned to control that aggression”). Informant 6I distinguishes between sports anger and aggression but is the only one who recognizes that the boundary between these things is unclear (“Here I even don’t know where to draw that line”) and realizes that this is related to impermissible actions (“[...] I don’t know in which place they pass each other because in the beginning that kind of sports anger was seen, that nothing can be done, so tried to do their best, somewhat, to put maximal efforts and later, when nothing comes out again, then these impermissible actions started [...]”). Similarly, informant 8I treats aggression as intolerable: “I say if you are angry and something is bad for you, then you direct all the power to the sport itself, I mean, for example, when with us, in handball, throw to the gate so strongly that the gate is torn, if you are very angry for something or somebody you, but God forbid, not to the friend, not to the opponent, after all, because, because the consequence is traumas.”(Table 6).

The category bullying and harassment (VI) discloses coaches’ attitude to bullying and harassment and the ability to recognize them. In addition to the fact that bullying and harassment in the informants’ approaches are “pushed” to the conditionally called “shady” zone, where negative and positive behavioral assessments are leveled, a specific tradition based on bullying culture, which is also supported by coaches who accept it as a usual thing, come to prominence. This is reflected in the following subcategories: “The ability to recognize”, “relating to age”, “denial of bullying (justification)”, “link with the image”, “culture of bullying”, and “Rituals” (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Bullying and harassment as the athlete’s intolerable/antisocial/disgraceful behavior.

VI Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Bullying and harassment	The ability to recognize	1I: Well, bullying, I imagine, is, well, that another person is bullied. They tease by some actions, discuss when others can hear or comment something, well, like negative appearance, some relationships, like humiliating. Harassment. Well, they harass probably because of something. You are doing wrong, something isn’t favoured or constantly there are some remarks. 8I: [...] that concept of bullying, it is so broad and it is not hundred percent clear to me. Because, for example, I had one child, who simply named everything he disliked as bullying. If he throws to the gate and misses, and there, another, well, let’s say, there, sneers, doesn’t bully.
	Relating to age	2I: In the first-fourth grade, I trained: bullying exists. Later that bullying from a certain age, it disappears somewhere or there is little reaction to it. [...] There is sarcastic sneering, bullying in the company of friends up to fourteen, fifteen years is very vital among children, adolescents, but in length of time, move to the second place and in general, I think senior age children or coaches think about them.



Table 7. Cont.

VI Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Bullying and harassment	Denial of bullying (justification)	4I: I'm saying such a big wish or the like, maybe they didn't want to lose, but that aggression maybe ... it isn't so that it turns into bullying, maybe more just that moment, that wish and don't want to lose, the child or adult, there are cases when they push each other, shout at each other and the like, but if the team's climate is good, then those jokes never grow into such big bullying.
	Link with the image	5I: This is incompatible with the image of a real athlete, winner, because, as I mentioned, a true athlete must be a personality, an example to others should be.
	Culture of bullying	6I: For example, Kaunas athletes, there are such, who like boxing with some Pasvalys athletes, also with Klaipėda athletes, with these, Panevėžys athletes. Even if they lose, anyway, everybody knows there, Klaipėda athletes—terns, these, Panevėžys people—chebureki [cheap Turkish fried meat-filled turnovers—author's comment], they call each other like this, Pasvalys athletes—villagers.
	Rituals	4I: [...] there is a tradition, an unwritten rule, where all coaches know it, and, and some are trying this, tolerate, others don't, going to the match for the first time, you get "tapkių". "Tapkės" [slippers—author's comment] is the ordination to that already competing squad; those who are in the team longer they can slap like on the naked bottom, quite strongly with a boxing shoe, three times or one. But this is a tradition. This is in England, Russia and Lithuania, Latvia."

Bullying exists between people of different ages, but informant 1I (like 2I) believes that over the years, athletes come to terms with it and tolerate more. Bullying acquires collective character that exists as a tradition of athletes from different cities to humiliate competitors (example 6I) or as rituals of bringing into the team (4I), which are understood as a tolerable tradition. What is considered "usual" aggravates recognition of bullying and harassment and moral judgment, as shown in the answer of informant 4I: "[...] but that aggression, maybe . . . it isn't so that it turns into bullying, maybe just that moment, that wish and the child doesn't want to lose" <...> "And I don't know whether that child who feels aggression, whether he has a wish to bully. Just doesn't associate it with bullying". Moreover, that in the behavior of the very informant, you can envisage signs of verbal violence: "[...] if the child spits on the wall, right, and I say why you spit here like some camel or like a Polish or something else, I say, I call to order, well, him, because of bad behavior, I say, this is bullying, right? If he takes offense, that is already bullying". On the other hand, the answer of the latter informant shows that the solution to the problem of bullying is entrusted to the team itself: "If there are, how shall I put it, "eagles", so, if the team is able to get under it, I think this will never harm, because, I say, very much depends on the climate of the team inside"). That is, the coach holds himself aloof and supports the chaotic power position determined by the bullying culture.

Discussion of concrete bullying cases highlighted several trends joined into the category causes triggering bullying and harassment (VII) (Table 8).

**Table 8.** Bullying and harassment in trained teams and groups: Causes.

VII Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Causes triggering bullying and harassment	Mastery differences	1I: I had such cases, when there is very big difference in mastery. And when the player is weaker and she can't do and you still have to integrate her into the team. And most often those others there are already angry with her. 3I: I also have athletes of higher mastery, so their bullying level is very low. But with those athletes of lower levels, more bullying cases manifest themselves. 5I: Anyway, unwillingness to acknowledge some defeat triggers, let's say, certain aggressions.
	Internal competition	5I: [...] in search of leadership, the wish perhaps, someone doesn't admit that it is him ... that is, let's say, as a weaker job or unwillingness to admit that maybe I didn't do something while seeking that goal to be better or seeking those goals in healthy team competition or leadership sharing, which leader in the team. [...] Because the team cannot have two leaders.
	Physical difference	1I: [...] just say that you're physically weaker. You can't do that and you hinder us and we can't win because of you. 2I: For sure not everybody will be bullying all the time. One, two appear who bully in the collective. More famous, stronger. 3I: [...] is related to a certain age, and if only among the guys, this could be related, as I say, the stronger one is usually bullying the weaker.
	Social differences	2I: Child bullying is usually of low level of intelligence. It is enough to come with worse sneakers, it is just enough to do something during the match.
	Influence of the family	2I: Children's bullying is very primitive, but it comes from the family. Just the way parents behave during the match, children are of different levels, the way parents upbringing children, I would say, a reflection. 3I: Maybe it is still possible to relate to parenting or his understanding about workouts.
	Sex aspect	3I: In my case, maybe it manifests itself less among young women compared with young men. [...] the biggest reason is that boys' harassment to girls.
	Aggressiveness	4I: [...] if they could, they would "bite each others' heads". Just all of them gathered think they are better than others. [...] Sports anger between them is greater than playing together against another competitor. 5I: There are cases between them that they offend each other using certain words or even, let's say, to stop fights [...], would grow into grapple, where you had to intervene quickly and stop that outburst of aggression.

First, bullying and harassment are perceived as a difficult-to-manage phenomenon, which can be little influenced by the coach (subcategory "mastery differences"). Informants constantly emphasize external causes, avoiding the topic of team leadership. Secondly, as in previous answers, attempts are made to understate the importance of bullying by justifying the desire for victory, age, sex, and the like. In other words, the perception that the situation is uncontrolled can promote various defensive reactions. For example, informant 1I relates pressure and accusations ("others are already angry with her", "we lose because of you") to the lack of mastery of the person experiencing it, as if it should justify in some way. However, the informant relates that to the perception of the lack of mastery ("And then, that player, after that, inside, there, she feels as if uncomfortable for what she has not done or is not doing, withdraws and then usually drops that sport"). It is significant that actual reasons of withdrawal or leaving the team are not found out; only a stereotypical attitude is defined, which should confirm the ideal status of the relationships in the team, although it shows the coach's opt-out: "Explains and make peace immediately". This is also demonstrated by the phrases used to describe

conflicts “[...] my girls are just playing ... they will not jump higher than they are able to”. On the other hand, bringing of clothing repeated by informant 8I may be a feature of the tradition, but questions clarifying this were not given. Responses to the bullying text suggest that the content of bullying is related to the personal life of the victim (“These are some giggles [...] really not from the world of handball, from personal life”).

Informants also accentuate external social, demographic, or parental influence causes of spread of bullying (subcategories “influence of the family”, “social differences”, “sex aspect”, “physical difference”, “internal competition”, and “aggressiveness”). According to informant 2I, the family both hinders training and become an example of negative behavior: “[...] When I train children, I would always emphasize to parents that it was the coach’s job to explain what to do. Parents can’t shout on their child: “Run, get open” or something else. The child’s eyes look up at the grandstand and not at the coach—this is one moment; often parents, especially men work as coaches from grandstands. And another moment—what you are exactly shouting at the competitors’ children and what you namely say about the judges of the match. If even eight-year-old children chant “judge a cock”, so what we can talk about. How can the child not bully others? This is the problem in all Lithuania.” Another reason is social inequality. Based on the response of informant 2I, bullying against children is related to clothing that shows property-social status: “It is enough to come with worse sneakers, it is enough to do something during the match”. It is also emphasized that in the younger age, bullying is different from that which is more refined in the older age. Informant 3I associates bullying among adolescents with age and sex. Age and sex are presented together as certain stereotypes that traditionally understate the importance of the fact of aggression (“[...] simply those reasons, like everywhere, boys might like some girl and they are trying to express themselves, joke or something else”). In this case, we see that, first, it is sought to present the relationships between “boys and girls” as “usual” and “not worth paying attention to”, and secondly, the fact of harassment is understated, presenting this as an innocent and “natural” phenomenon: “they are trying to express themselves, joke or something else”. Bullying is related to age and assessment of athletes’ level: “those who are lower level athletes, bullying cases [...] manifest more”. On the other hand, informant 4I associates the absence of bullying with the absence of complaints, but it becomes evident from the answer that he notices bullying, although the informant is not inclined to relate verbal aggression to bullying, calling it “sports anger”.

Informant 5I confirms physical and verbal violence, but when explaining the causes, two aspects are distinguished: The endeavor to dominate (the informant calls it leadership) and to compensate for personal failure by directing anger to other persons (“[...] in search of leadership, a wish, maybe, while someone is not acknowledging that, anyway, he ...that defeat ... that I felt weaker on the court ... try to prove playing one against one, that he is better or some kind of test indicators, match indicators, during workouts it is aimed to find out while playing one against one, who is better. Anyway, unwillingness to acknowledge some defeat triggers, let’s say, certain aggressions that “I won’t play in that team”, “he said something there” but, most probably, this is, let’s say, as your weaker job or unwillingness to admit that maybe I didn’t do something while seeking that goal to be better or seeking those goals in the healthy team competition or leadership sharing, which is the leader in the team ... Because there cannot be two leaders in the team”. The answer highlights that, on the one hand, from the informant’s point of view, there is strong competition for the privileges given to the leader: “[...] he is a leader, I will help him a lot, I will give him some help, for that leader, we together as a couple, assisting each other, we will reach together and it will be better for the whole team ... So, that personal misunderstanding triggers then aggression and there are cases when we move to impermissible norms; causing a fight where you have to stop and there have been such cases in the locker rooms.” The informant’s replies show that, in the absence of a clear scheme of becoming a “leader” (competition), team members’ relationships can become counter-productive (“So, that personal misunderstanding then leads to aggression and there are such instances when we progress to impermissible norms ... causing a fight where you have to stop and there have been such cases in the locker room”). The answer of informant

6I repeats that the biggest risk of bullying is in the locker room and other places where the coach is not present. Usually, news about the incident is late.

The category signs and ways of getting information (VIII) reveals how and in what ways coaches monitor and record bullying and harassment. The informants' responses show that informants identify signs of bullying and harassment based on subjectively perceived features of changes in the athlete's behavior. On the other hand, it is noticed that the coaches' behavior is delayed and they react when conflicts reach critical stages, outburst as distinct verbal and non-verbal violence. In addition, coaches' verbal and non-verbal violence used in order to "teach" the offenders of the team come to prominence (subcategories "avoidance of the aggressor", "hiding", "aggressors' behavior", and "coach's violence") (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Coaches' attentiveness/inattentiveness in cases of bullying and harassment.

VIII Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Signs and ways of getting information	Avoidance of the aggressor	<p>1I: [...] players became angry on somebody, said something there and, you see, bowed down the head. I don't want to play, I don't want to be with her in a couple, in a team. Maybe you can assign me to another group of five.</p> <p>2I: Sometimes children's emotions show that they don't want to be in one team, sometimes they give some remarks. And as to the senior ones, those things can be noticed very quickly, one or two weeks is enough and you see who doesn't get along, who is weaker in the team, who is stronger and so on.</p> <p>4I: [...] for example, when we do an exercise, never stands in a couple or a group of four, will never stand in that group these two children (conflicting) or at least one will avoid the other, you will never see them talking, then, in the locker rooms, they will also never sit next to each other, will keep the distance and maybe one will cast his eyes down more, while the other will be in the main position wishing only to insult and to say something and the like ...</p> <p>5I: [...] suddenly becomes sluggish, for some reason doesn't want to go, hides the reason. Then I start finding out why. If I find out as a coach that the reason is not that, that bullying or something like that . . . otherwise, maybe got interested in another sport branch, everything is okay with him but changed, whether friends attend another sport branch, is that really so, we find out that the athlete not because of that...</p>
	Hiding	<p>2I: Of course, children hide that because they go to the same schools or in the locker room . . . they hide that bullying. It is often the case that the child leaves workouts and doesn't tell even to the mother why he left.</p> <p>4I: Both those who abuse and those who are abused try, don't want the truth to come to the surface because that feels bad, how to say, because he is abused, another feels bad . . . that he is hard, if they'll say, but if it comes to the surface, so to say, will have problems.</p>
	Aggressors' behavior	<p>1I: [...] confident players, those already aggressors, how to put it, well, they are much better and they, well, want to be leaders.</p> <p>3I: No, they don't try to hide ... Of course, when the coach is present, that bullying is such ... They are under control. They have to "let off steam" but if there is more freedom during the workout, then, of course, an active person who likes to do that, he will seer at another person.</p>
	Coach's violence	<p>6I: In Poland, somewhere, in the first stop we got out and they all went to do sports for all those things. [...] You, I say, are like some gipsies, only wait to push each other, deceive. You have to support each other and not stab a knife in the back, there; I am playing in the same gym and I still will do something bad to him.</p> <p>7I: I am very sorry that I had to refuse that athlete, but I did this for the sake of others, for my sake. I don't like being humiliated ... students ... Everybody stands up, squares their shoulders, and he mutters to me ... I sort out that quickly.</p>

Based on answers of informant 1I, the victim's avoidance to be close to the aggressor comes to prominence while the answers of informant 2I show hiding of bullying ("in the locker room"). Victims tend to hide bullying both from coaches and parents ("doesn't tell even to the mother why he left"). Consequences are withdrawal, retreat from sport, or unwillingness to play in the same team. Bullying is recognized from remarks ("lievas"—understand as poor—author's comment), avoidance to play together ("doesn't want to be in one team"), and reticence ("don't say, um and aah, I can't find a concrete reason, so then you need to figure out and for sure something happened in the past"). In other words, consequences are noticed already after long-lasting bullying, which is explained by the fact that "small children still don't know how to show these emotions expressively and withdraw" as well as by the size of the group ("[...] if there are 25–30 on the court at the same time, it is also a job for the coach to manage them"). Analyzing responses of informant 4I, it can be assumed that the victim conceals information due to the experienced feeling of shame; the aggressor, due to avoidance of punishment. That is, both sides are interested in hiding (4I: "[...] we raise such things in our meetings, discuss what to do with those children and make such more common decision jointly, not only by the coach but the organization itself and we try to avoid such things"), but does not specify what decisions are made, how they are implemented, and what results are achieved. However, the reactions to bullying are delayed. Informant I5 notices that "The wish to attend disappears, parents give a signal that he somehow doesn't want to go to the workouts, doesn't show up in the workout once, second time, looks for some reasons—as if healthy, isn't ill [...] avoidance, unwillingness, goes to the workout being apathetic, looks for reasons not to go, I'll go somewhere else. Such a word "I don't want". Acquisition of information is aggravated by the fear of violence and trust in the coach (I6: "Will not complain because there'll be even more bullying from them, most likely. [...] Goes, as I say, usually with other teams, so, yes, they'll not complain. They'll not complain."). The answer of informant 8I indicates that the problem of bullying is not actualized and not discussed among coaches; therefore, it may be that for this reason bullying cases may remain unnoticed. In addition, there is a sex factor, because a female coach cannot go to the boys' locker room, where incidents can happen: "I think there have been such cases that you here repercussions, let's say from the watcher, who there, that. Because a man, he can go to the locker room and hear or the very child comes, who says to you."

It is significant that informants respond to visible bullying and harassment. For example, informant 3I relates manifestation of bullying during workouts only to athletes' busyness during the workout. In other words, the higher the intensity of the workout, the greater the physical load, the less opportunities of communicating with other athletes. Answers of 6I and 7I demonstrate that violence is not avoided even towards the very athletes. If 7I removed the athlete in order to teach the athlete who did not show appropriate respect for the coach's authority, 6I sought to teach using physical punishment: "So, when that bullying started about his all, that he was from a lower social layer, I was even disgusted and ... Well, he loves fishing, that child. So, with what you fish, on the branch, right, you hook the line. What is it, now. And the trousers, how, there, the same trousers there. From clothing, from that worldview. They haven't seen much. Others, well, they haven't been in Palanga, at the sea, they go to the village somewhere where there is a pond and that's all they've seen related to water body or river there. To fish, well, such. Well, people of lower social layer cannot afford that. But a child of the parent who occupied a very high position and who lives a really very wealthy life went, so then, in Poland, somewhere, in the first stop, we got out and started doing sports for all those things".

The category informing about bullying and harassment (IX) reveals coaches' opinion how informing about bullying and harassment coheres with the stereotypical label of a "telltale" (Table 10). Stereotypical approaches related to the label of the "telltale" promote the sending of signals that contradict each other, where it is as if it is encouraged to inform about bullying and harassment while at the same time, the negative attitude related to informing people, predominating in the culture, is supported. Favoritism serves this purpose when amiability relationships between the coach and the selected athlete are created, requiring sharing information about the situation in the team, forming a secret coach–favorite coalition.

Table 10. The telltale's label.

VIII Category	Subcategory	Interview Statements Substantiating the Distinguished Category and Subcategories
Informing about bullying and harassment	Tradition entrenching hiding	2I: Because the coach comes to the locker room, speaks and goes out, all that takes place in the locker room must remain in the locker room. So, it is clear to that very player that upon leaving you can't "babble out" what they are talking about in the locker room. 4I: It used to be so at all times, I think, it's like a norm, nothing changes. [ . . . ] when you ask him why he kept silent and the like, he says, I don't want to be a telltale because then I'll be written off fully.
	Favoritism/trustees	1I: [...] nobody knows that he comes and speaks with me. Our status is as if we both were coaches. She's a senior player. And we as if often speak before the workout, during the workout, after the workout. 2I: If there is a matter, that message is brought by the captain. The captain of the team can bring that message of what's going on in the locker room, what the problems are and so on. If the captain says nothing, it means no one has the right to take these things out.
	Contradicting message	3I: I tell everyone that it is bad to complain but it is normal to say if you feel something is unpleasant.
	Prevention of the "telltale's" label	5I: In the philosophy of senior teams, there is, say, there is a team captain. I use the method among children that the captain of the team (Americans have such system) is in a certain match, or for one week, then changes.
	Justification of bullying	4I: [...] in the locker rooms—push each other, go to the shower—that one isn't allowed, hide his things... well, maybe this to some degree shows, but when adolescence comes, it's normal to do this to each other ... Sometimes it is even hard to say, sometimes such pranks are normal in their age.

Responses of 1I show that the victims conceal information (subcategory "tradition entrenching hiding"). The coach gets information from the player who has a certain "status", who he trusts. This limits possibilities to get adequate information and allows manipulation, as there is no system enabling them to actually receive complaints from the victims. The coach's "right hand" informs about the situation in the team, which may threaten with unequal relationships in the team. Being aware of such privileged member, team members may be afraid of her and put up with many things (subcategory "favoritism/trustees"). Thus, the response of informant 1I provides a confirmation that there is a different status of the senior player in the team. Victims conceal feeling ashamed, but this may be influenced by a certain philosophy of "struggle for existence", which is demonstrated by the coach: "a little bit, a lack of, of character, ambition. Well, to rebuff to such stronger ones, to show a little, to fight: I can, I'm not that weak." Responses of 2I indicate that there is a subculture that prevents them from talking openly about things happening in the team (subcategory "prevention of the "telltale's" label"). This reminds us of the "omerta"—"the code of silence" valid among criminals. This happens with the coach's approval ("Because the coach comes to the locker room, speaks and goes out, all that takes place in the locker room, must remain in the locker room. So, it is clear to that very player that upon leaving you can't "babble out" what they are talking about in the locker room", "There is an unwritten rule that what happens in the locker room between players must remain between players"). The decision that can be revealed is made by the coach ("[...] the coach comes to the locker room, speaks and leaves, so all that takes place in the locker room must also stay in the locker room") and the captain of the team ("If the captain says nothing, it means no one has the right to take these things out"). That is, teams have a vertical structure, which is based on the authority and position and the internal, unwritten code of ethics, which protects the structure that tends to hide the dynamics of internal relationships from outside. Therefore, even the coach himself, judging from certain external behavioral aspects, can predict the existence of problems in interrelations. This way, the rule of "silence" and the

delegation of authorization to the team captain create three subsystems in which actions take place: Of individual interests; of the plane of personal and coach's relationships; of the plain of personal and team members' interests. Informant 2I also indirectly confirms that, in a sense, he is removed from the internal dynamics of interpersonal relationships among team members, but all the negative consequences of what is happening manifest themselves during the match.

It is not clear from the response of 3I what the informant calls "snitching" but states that "I tell everyone that it is bad to complain". That is, the approach is expressed that information on inappropriate relationships is unacceptable or unacceptable. However, communication about relationships is considered a "norm" in case the younger person is harmed. In other words, it can be assumed that the informant tends to defend a weaker position, but the message sent remains contradictory and can be widely interpreted (subcategory "contradicting message"). It is significant that the answers of informant 4I show that informing about bullying and harassment is related to the label of the "telltale", due to which the status (respect) in the group is lost ("I don't want to be a telltale, because then I'll be written off fully"). In other words, bullying is endured more than the loss of status ("he doesn't want to go down to such a low level, because how you'll look into eyes after that, if you are a telltale"). However, it remains unclear how the coach solves this problem. It can be assumed that there is no system to ensure the availability of information about unethical relationships; this is also hindered by a specific culture supporting violence, into which nobody interferes. This may also be influenced by the coach's attitude, justifying certain actions by the "age" ("[...] sometimes these pranks are normal in their age, but if that is repeated with one child, so then maybe you should think"). According to the model used by 5I, all who become captains become "telltals" too, this way sublimating the stereotypical approach, but this model does not ensure the receipt of permanent information directly from victims.

The word "telltale" to informant 6I has a negative connotation, which is supported by the socio-cultural environment. The informant's response shows that he is interested in receiving information about bullying and harassment, but by his actions he promotes the existence of the stereotype of the "telltale". At the same time, it remains unclear which actions are considered by him as worthy communicating to the coach: "It's very easy to earn. Very easy, and I say, well, that's the telltale. I don't like the telltale myself. Most often, as there is, especially those smaller ones. There, those smaller children, and the most important thing for them is to snitch. Coach, he stepped on my foot, though it was necessary to run there one after another. Well, there are cases, step there. That's bad for me. I'm saying, listen, you go to your dad and ask if he likes such people who snitch on others. I say, let your dad explain. Well, dad, I think, will really explain there. [...] Doesn't give away friends. And still that all, such, that idealistic thinking, not giving away the friend: torture me stronger, I'll suffer, I'll not moan. Still, at that age, they still don't realize that it's a disservice to a friend too."

#### 4. Discussion

The obtained research results, based on the opinion of the interviewed coaches, enabled us to distinguish nine factors indicating the emergence and development of bullying and harassment in sport settings and highlighted the specificity of this phenomenon in the cultural context of Lithuania.

The analysis of the transcribed text also highlighted several trends. These are the officially declared approach and the "shadow" trend that is not publicly promoted but came to prominence in coaches' assessments. In this case, the choice of the qualitative research approach served the purpose of seeking to interpret the complex phenomena of bullying and harassment in sport and to develop and revise understanding rather than purely verify earlier conclusions of theories [46]. The results of the research also revealed the influence of tradition, expressed by stiff phrases and subconscious assessments of phenomena. The latter trend reflects the culture that is traditionally formed in sport and that is also observed while assessing various negative aspects of social relationships in sport, manifesting themselves at different levels both in the relationships between athletes [47] and analyzing

coaching behaviors [48]. All of it influences the attitude to bullying and harassment as well as some ambivalence of their assessment and the ability to recognize/acknowledge in-depth reasons.

These trends become particularly distinct upon combining the sub-categories and formation of the matrix of the nine vectors, where each vector is characterized by four trends that came to prominence as a result of the study (Figure 1).

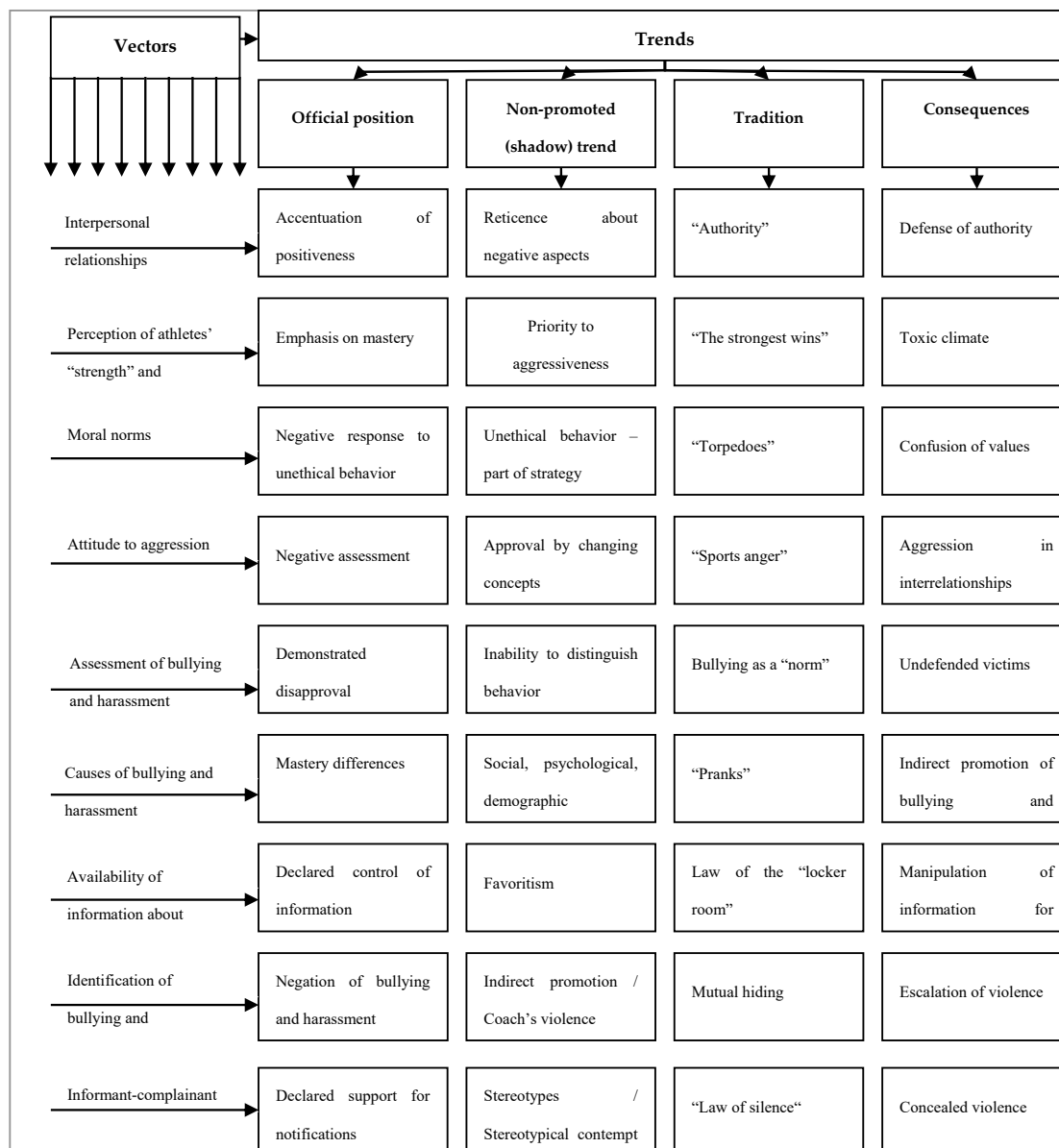


Figure 1. Matrix of nine vectors.

On the one hand, the demonstrative endeavor of depicting the relationships between athletes and between athletes and the coach in a positive light, avoidance of direct and open responses, and negative aspects of relationships that were disclosed only after giving additional questions can be related to the traditionally formed conception of the coach-authority, which links the disclosure of existence of negative phenomena to understating of personal authority. After all, the coaches do not shy away from describing themselves as caring for athletes and see themselves in the role of a parent [19]. Such a trend shows that the coach, on the one hand, is able to recognize the negative aspects of relationships, and on the other hand, lacks competence to solve them and, under the pressure of public opinion, moves



to a kind of defense, which manifests itself as denial and accusations to external subjects: Athletes, fans, parents, etc.

Assessment of relationships between stronger and weaker athletes demonstrates the dual-level content, which is revealed through relating mastery to behavioral ethics and the endeavor of stronger athletes (or athletes demonstrating higher mastery) to gain greater privileges as well as dominance in the relationships with “weaker” athletes. This can be related to the perception of one’s importance for the team/group, concessions made by coaches in order to preserve leaders, and to the traditional (stereotypical) approach, supported by coaches, that the strongest win. This is also evidenced by studies demonstrating that the athlete’s increasing mastery gives the coach a reason not to notice or justify athletes’ aggressive behavior [49]. This approach indirectly moves to the level of athletes’ interpersonal relationships and shows signs of discrimination, because, according to the social norm theory, athletes’ behavior is determined by the team’s social norms, and those who do not comply with these social norms are often socially excluded [50]. This assessment is related to the third and fourth vectors, which disclose moral norms and the attitude towards aggression. In the latter context, the boundaries between permissible and impermissible behavior are obscured and are difficult to identify to the informants themselves. In principle, they are based on the rules of the competition, which they try to bypass. Aggressive behavior is interpreted by the euphemistic concept “sports anger”, this way replacing it with the stereotypical approach with a positive connotation, expressing the athlete’s positive trait. In other words, aggressive behavior becomes an attribute of the sports fight, which enables to reach even higher results [51]. At the same time, the support and promotion of the roles of the team’s “torpedoes” (provocateurs, teasers of opponents) and the like express the established and almost unmasked tradition, which is supported by an orientation towards results and efforts to bypass rules limiting non-sporting behavior. In other words, teasing and provocation using aggressive behavior forms are considered to be a “normal” constituent of sport and happens all the time [52]; while “venting” of aggression is considered a kind of therapeutic measure against off-court violence. In such a case, a peculiar “guerrilla” behavioral strategy can be observed, supporting the cult of aggressiveness, and making the boundaries of moral norms “blurred” without any guarantees that promoted aggressiveness will not transfer to interpersonal relationships. Although it is believed that athletes will subjectively distinguish where aggression can be applied “legally”, research states opposite trends. Aggressive behavior acts in sports performance repeat, and other athletes observing them over time also start behaving aggressively [53]. Such legalization of aggression and the lability of assessing morality of behavior hinders the formation of clear rules of ethical/unethical behavior and promotes “broad” interpretations of morality itself, which may vary depending on goals and situations. This is especially relevant in the younger athletes’ age, when moral norms are still undergoing formation and approaches demonstrated in the team can affect relationships in adults’ sports. To explain how athletes or their group learn and negotiate their own norms, practices, and rituals, the sociocultural perspective can be used. Young athletes will learn established patterns of interacting and the characteristics that are highly valued in sport. Hence, in the groups or sports teams where aggression, dominance, and negative forms of interaction are normalized, bullying and harassment will become more common and frequent [54].

The above-mentioned lability of moral assessment is also characteristic to trajectories of bullying assessment. In this case, the treatment of unacceptability of bullying and harassment as a conception that is perceived negatively by the society is to be separated from what the informants really treat as bullying and harassment. The informants’ responses show that there is no clear understanding what athletes’ actions should be treated as bullying and harassment. However, in the context of sport, this is not new. Scientists, analyzing bullying behavior in sport and presenting anti-bullying policies, impart their concern about the definition of the phenomenon, and the consequent difficulties in recognizing, managing, and assessing the prevalence of the phenomenon [55]. In addition, discussing the negative aspects of relationships, it is sought to “mitigate” them and treat them as a natural phenomenon of the age period, which is experienced in every generation.

In the context of bullying and harassment, the traditional approach prevails, trying to negate the problem or at least “reduce” its significance and consequences, treat psychological and physical violence as a “game”. It is officially announced that the fight takes place at the level of sports mastery, treating bullying as “friendly raillery”, but poorly controlled social and demographic implications, encompassing not only interrelationships between the team members but also the attitude towards the competitors from another administrative territory, come to prominence. Informants do not have a clear strategy how to deal with this phenomenon.

The informants’ responses, which announce availability of information about bullying and harassment, highlight the position that underpins the approach that the coach is not responsible for what is going on outside the court, this way suggestively transmitting the approach that management of this information is sufficient and that the coach has sufficient personal skills for that. At the same time, it is understood that among athletes, there is a common established tradition to “sort out relationships” outside the court, which can be summarized as the “rule of the locker room”. Although basic openness to any information is demonstrated, subjective aspects of relationships, which are determined by the priorities given by coaches to “trustworthy” persons or favorites, also operate. This way, the coach is not only unable to obtain objective and comprehensive information, but also becomes dependent on the subjective intentions of the “favorites” and on their personal approaches with regard to conflicting persons or manipulations.

On the one hand, the identification of bullying and harassment in sports teams/groups is related to poor knowledge of the phenomenon. Therefore, even when information about certain relationships reaches them, they may not be adequately assessed. However, based on sociocultural theories, such a situation can be explained by the change of the phenomenon itself in various cultural contexts [54], although according to scientists, the still unpurified conception of bullying and harassment, which is the one that causes difficulties in recognizing this phenomenon [56], in the sports context as well [57], is a greater challenge. On the other hand, team punishments that resemble the army’s traditions, when the whole team/group is responsible for one offender, can only promote general hostility towards the victim. The conflict is also exacerbated by punishments to both participants of the conflict, based on the approach that there cannot be one perpetrator, but basically this demonstrates an opt-out of the team/group leader, leaving the conflicts to be solved as well as concealed by the very perpetrators. Hiding is associated with a specific “code of honor”, which resembles the “omerta” rule of the criminal world and is closely related to the telltale’s label, well-established in the sociocultural tradition. Although the declared official position as if promotes reporting about negative phenomena, the traditional approaches equal informing to “snitching”, which has a negative connotation. In addition, it comes to prominence that informants associate “snitching” with weakness or a malevolent negative action.

The defense of authority means not only seeking to limit permeation of any information worsening the coach’s reputation to the publicity, but also that while following subjectively established rules, ethical norms, and defending subjectively perceived “authority”; i.e., satisfying personal interests, the athlete can be dealt with, as shown in informants’ answers. The highlighted trend of consequences, in general, shows the consequences of the long-standing traditional approach to the organization of team activities and the management of interrelationships. It comes to prominence that a certain *modus operandi* (way of acting) is used in training, which is not only incapable to adequately respond to the rising challenges of bullying and harassment but also serves to support destructive culture, which is shielded from the public eye. This kind of situation in sport is prevailing and manifests itself year after year. As Stirling [19] revealed in 2013, coaches themselves stated that they had repeatedly experienced offending behavior from their coaches in the past, while most of the athletes still today treated such behavior of the coach as an obligatory part of their work [14]. Thus, reticence and hiding of the negative information are beneficial for both aggressors and coaches worrying about their authority.

All the negative relationships discussed indicate that everyone who is involved in sport, regardless of age, gender, or mastery, may be exposed to unsafe environment at one point or another, which is

contrary to his right to be engaged “in ‘safe sport’: An athletic environment that is respectful, equitable and free from all forms of non-accidental violence to athletes” [9] (p. 2). Whereas such an environment in which negative social interactions will manifest themselves is likely to have a negative impact on the athletes’ physical, social, and psychological health and negatively affect their wellbeing [58].

Although these things are often not directly related to sustainability, moving towards social sustainability, particular attention must be paid to human wellbeing and responding to human needs [59]. One of them is safety, the conception of which is among the ontological foundations of social sustainability framework [60], while the created possibility to act in safe environment contributes to assurance of physical well-being. Meanwhile, social equality with others, ability to trust others, and freedom to choose social relationships will determine the athlete’s emotional and social wellbeing.

It is natural that this requires huge changes. However, so far various communities, including the sports community, are inherently conservative and usually do not change until they are forced to [59].

It is likely that those studies that state the negative side of sport, which results from poisonous social relationships, as well as those that reveal links between quality of interpersonal relationships in sport, the right to safety in sport, and physical, social, and emotional well-being of the participants of the sports context—athletes, coaches, administrators, etc.—will more markedly force stakeholders to pay attention to the importance of social sustainability in sport.

## 5. Conclusions

The main factor promoting bullying and supporting it is the culture of training based on the conservative tradition, which is grounded on the authoritarian leadership style and hinders acknowledgement of existing problems of interrelationships (at the vertical and horizontal level of relationships: Athlete–athlete and athlete–coach), on avoidance to weaken authority, on organizational reticence that prevents the inclusion of external entities into problem solving (hiding of problems), on stereotypical attitudes about the role of aggression in sport, and on lability of ethical norms of interpersonal relationships. Coaches use euphemisms in their speech speaking about aggression, which in sport have a positive connotation, such as “combativeness”; the term “aggression” is replaced with the term “sports anger”. It was found that coaches called aggressors a “harder player”, “confident player”, “active person”, “players-torpedoes”, “emotional players”, and “competitive player”. Sports competition is justified in various forms. The emergence of bullying and harassment are justified by “mastery differences”, and it is stated that “physically weak” players experience insulting actions while athletes’ physical actions are called “pranks”; verbal actions are considered “joking”. These approaches are characteristic to coaches of different ages, education, and experience, which shows the predominance of tradition; in other words, the peculiar culture of understanding leadership and relationships, transferred from generation to generation, and the risks it poses. This tradition is characterized by masked advocacy of aggression (seeking results), transferring to the athletes (between team members and competitors), and its support and promotion grounded on supporting the stereotype “the strongest survive”. These approaches are related to the success of the team (performance), pushing the role of quality of the team’s and coaches’ interpersonal relationships, which is underestimated by coaches for quality of interpersonal relationships, to second place. While training athletes, anger is promoted, but its consequences are not perceived; the difference between healthy relationships and bullying and harassment, which are sought to be justified, is not perceived. On the other hand, there are socio-cultural societal attitudes that manifest themselves in the athletes’ interrelationships as relationships between the stronger and the weaker, stereotypically perceived as concepts “dignity” vs. “snitching”, which hinders provision of information about the experienced violence and turns into “omerta” principle supported by the organization, which serves to preserve the reputation of the coach and the organization and which is used by violators. This enables the formation of the media that is favorable for manifestation of unethical interrelationships, directly (when coaches condemn “telltales”) and indirectly (not promoting openness) mediated by the organization.

It was found that the causes of epidemiology of bullying and harassment in sports teams vary with the norms customary in the society and are supported by stereotypical approaches in sport relating to competitiveness, but coaches lack competencies to manage them. Therefore, in further research it would be meaningful to analyze sports coaches' training programs, as coaches' inadequate preparation to respond to bullying and harassment in their trained teams and groups on time and appropriately has been identified. All the more so that sports organizations are not particularly interested in organizing trainings to ensure prevention of destructive interrelations and intervention into them.

**Limitations and further research:** This study does not claim to be a comprehensive assessment of the situation and is limited to one country's cultural and social environment. Therefore, it should be expanded in the future, taking into account the results of this study, and identified risks. The results of the research promote additional assessment of such aspects as anti-bullying programs developed at the national level and their effectiveness and detailing of coaches' training programs. Because all coaches who participated in the study have higher education in sports pedagogy, in the future, it is meaningful to evaluate not only the quality of the provided education in the area of formation of interpersonal relations, but also to elaborate on the factors hindering the efficient application of this knowledge in sports organizations.

**The value of the research:** The study newly views the problem of bullying and harassment, assessing coaches' attitude towards tolerance of aggression and the quality of interrelationships in sport; discloses specific trends of bullying and harassment and emerging risks inherent in sports schools and organized adults' sports; highlights prevailing stereotypes related to aggression in sport and the dangers they pose; and shows the directions of preventive programs at educational institutions training sports managers and their improvement. Our research was limited to analyzing one country's situation, where sport, and especially basketball, is considered to be the "second religion of the country", but the results demonstrated how coaches' efforts to preserve their own reputation and the reputation of the sport branch can be detrimental to athletes' interrelationships. The established training tradition is based on universal reticence and tends to hide the actual situation and the coaches' inability to cope with the challenges, which continue as bullying, harassment grounded on perverse tradition, and which are indirectly promoted by the coaches themselves by their decisions.

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