

Tennis cheats may be predicted by their moral standards

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When top athletes cheat it makes headline news. Retaliating badly to a foul, faking an injury, or deliberately harming an opponent can all result in a loss of credibility and respect. In some cases, it can lead to a loss of sponsorship and even long-term disqualification.

So why do some athletes engage in immoral sporting conduct, when there is so much to lose?

Previous research has discussed how the motivation for playing sport in the first place, as well as overall sporting morals and values, can lead to [cheating behavior](#). [A new study, published in the open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology*](#), examines these personal characteristics and links them to direct observations of cheating during tennis matches.

"We find that tennis players who use sport to boost their egos, and view success as their ability to outperform others by winning at all costs, tend to condone cheating and other dubious methods of gaining an advantage during match play. However, those players who strive to be the best they can be, and interpret success through their own personal improvement, tend to respect sporting rules and social conventions," says [Fabio Lucidi](#), Professor of Psychometrics at Sapienza University of Rome, Italy and lead author of the study. "[Our most important discovery is that these attitudes can have a direct influence on whether a player cheats during a tennis match.](#)"

Lucidi and his colleagues surveyed hundreds players participating in the

2012 LemonBowl in Rome—one of the most important international tennis tournaments for young competitive players. They asked questions that could be used to measure a player's sporting values, ultimate sporting goals (self-improvement or increased status), and attitudes towards cheating and dubious match play. Rather than ask the players directly whether they cheated or acted immorally during a match, a number of independent observers were used to record this behavior.

"We used trained observers to assess cheating and dubious behavior during competitive matches. By doing this, we could rule out any bias from answers given by the players themselves. Cheating behavior is generally viewed as socially and culturally undesirable and their answers would be likely to reflect this," says Lucidi.

The answers given by the players revealed a connection between certain moral values and the acceptance of cheating behavior. These characteristics were then directly linked to the observation of cheating behavior during match play. While previous research has discussed the possible link between cheating and moral attitudes, this is the first study to have linked them directly.

"Parents often encourage sporting activities for their children, assuming that it will help them develop a correct sense of morality. While this assumption might hold true in some cases, our study suggests that playing sport may actually elicit behavior that is ethically or morally inappropriate" says Lucidi.

He continues, "Indirectly, our study highlights ways that parents or coaches can promote good sporting behavior in children. For instance, coaches should promote values of personal success and achievement, rather than those of ego and status, in order to decrease the risk of antisocial or ethically inappropriate behavior in sport."

It is hoped that this research will act as a basis for future studies clarifying the psychology of cheating in sport. "More direct observations of cheating across different sporting disciplines and professional levels are needed. It would be interesting to see how sporting values, moral standards and views on cheating develop over an athlete's sporting career," concludes Lucidi.

More information: Fabio Lucidi et al, Moral Attitudes Predict Cheating and Gamesmanship Behaviors Among Competitive Tennis Players, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00571](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00571)

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