

OCELOVÝ MUŽ: PŘÍPADOVÁ STUDIE ROVNÝCH PŘÍLEŽITOSTÍ VE SPORTU

STEEL MAN: A CASE STUDY ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN SPORT

E. Hurych

Department of physical education and social sciences, Faculty of Sport Studies of Masaryk University

Abstract

This study examines the ethical problem of fair opportunity in sport, using the Czech endurance-strength competition *Steel Man* (in Czech *Ocelový muž*) as a case study. The event, founded in 1999 by Karel Vydra, combines five disciplines – pull-ups, sit-ups, bench press repetitions, a 5 km run, and a 40 km cycling time trial. It involved 40–70 participants per year, including men, women, and juniors. In 2017, the organisers introduced a new scoring system with recalculations based on age, sex, and body weight to achieve greater fairness. Archival records, scoring tables, and official results from 1999 to 2019 were examined through a conceptual-ethical analysis. The findings indicate that frequent mid-season rule changes and unclear coefficients produced inconsistent results, participant dissatisfaction, and declining attendance, culminating in the end of the national cup format after 2018. This paper provides a conceptual and ethical analysis of this case, demonstrating how the pursuit of fairness became self-defeating and outlining guidelines for sustainable fairness in similar competitions. The study concludes with recommendations for sustainable procedural fairness grounded in transparent, stable rules complemented by empirically validated compensatory mechanisms.

Keywords: equality in sports ethics; equality of opportunities; deontology; consequentialism; case study; Steel Man

Souhrn

Tato studie se zabývá etickým problémem spravedlivých příležitostí ve sportu na příkladu české celorepublikové vytrvalostně-silové soutěže *Steel Man* (česky *Ocelový muž*). Soutěž, založená v roce 1999 Karlem Vydrrou, kombinuje pět disciplín – shyby, sedy-lehy, bench press na počet opakování, běh na 5 km a cyklistickou časovku na 40 km. Každoročně se jí účastnilo 40–70 závodníků včetně mužů, žen a juniorů. V roce 2017 zavedli organizátoři nový bodovací systém s přepočty podle věku, pohlaví a tělesné hmotnosti s cílem dosáhnout větší spravedlnosti. Archivní záznamy, bodovací tabulky a oficiální výsledky z let 1999–2019 byly zkoumány v rámci koncepčně-etické analýzy. Zjištění ukazují, že časté změny pravidel během sezóny a nejasné koeficienty vedly k nekonzistentním výsledkům, nespokojenosti účastníků a poklesu účasti, což vyústilo v ukončení pohárového formátu soutěže od roku 2018. Tento článek nabízí konceptuální a etickou analýzu daného případu a ukazuje, jak se snaha o spravedlnost stala sebezníčující, zároveň však načrtává vodítka pro udržitelnou spravedlnost v obdobných soutěžích. Studie se uzavírá doporučeními pro udržitelnou procedurální spravedlnost založenou na transparentních a stabilních pravidlech, doplněných empiricky ověřenými kompenzačními mechanismy.

Klíčová slova: rovnost příležitostí v etice sportu; deontologie; konsekvencialismus; případová studie; Ocelový muž

Introduction

Fairness and equality of opportunity belong among the foundational normative principles of sport. In its ideal form, sporting competition presupposes that outcomes depend primarily on relevant athle-

tic qualities—such as effort, skill, endurance, and perseverance—rather than on arbitrary or morally irrelevant factors. In practice, however, sport is unavoidably confronted with human diversity. Differences in age, sex, body composition, or physical predispositions raise persistent questions about how equality of opportunity should be understood, operationalised, and justified (Hämäläinen, 2012; Loland & McNamee, 2000).

One influential response to these challenges has been the increasing use of compensatory mechanisms and recalculation models. Age grading, weight coefficients, or category-based adjustments aim to produce fairer comparative outcomes by correcting for systematic inequalities. While such mechanisms are well established in some sports, they also introduce new ethical tensions, particularly in amateur and grassroots contexts, where transparency, stability of rules, and shared understanding among participants play a crucial role in sustaining legitimacy and trust.

This paper examines these tensions through a qualitative ethical case study of the Czech endurance-strength competition *Steel Man* (*Ocelový muž*). Founded in 1999 as a local all-round endurance challenge, the competition evolved into a national cup series before undergoing a radical reform of its scoring system in 2017. The reform introduced complex recalculations based on age, sex, and body weight with the explicit aim of increasing fairness and inclusivity. Paradoxically, these changes contributed to rule instability, participant confusion, and a rapid decline of the competition.

The central aim of this study is not merely to document the historical trajectory of the Steel Man competition, but to analyze the ethical logic underlying the reform and its consequences. Using deontological and consequentialist frameworks, the paper argues that the pursuit of outcome-based fairness, when insufficiently constrained by principles of rule stability and transparency, can undermine the very conditions that make fair competition possible. In this sense, the Steel Man case contributes to broader debates on the limits of mathematical compensation, the algorithmization of fairness, and the moral foundations of amateur sport.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptually oriented case study design (Priya, 2021; Yin, 2018). The case study approach is particularly suitable for examining normative and ethical questions embedded in specific institutional and historical contexts, where the aim is not statistical generalization but analytical insight.

Our analysis is based on a factual comparison of the two scoring systems and follows a conceptual-ethical framework (Loland, 2007, 2024; Mindrescu et al., 2024) applied in sports. The factual component concerning the enumeration of particular rule changes is intentionally reduced. Although this article does not present an empirical output, it rests on exact and verifiable historical data. A separate qualitative study exploring competitors' opinions and attitudes toward the scoring system would undoubtedly be valuable but would require a different research design.

The main method of this study, therefore, is the analysis of selected elements of the conservative and innovative models through two ethical approaches – deontological and consequentialist. The focus is directed toward the value foundations of specific processes and the perspectives through which the issue of equal opportunities can be viewed. This includes the search for a balanced model that respects theoretical premises, remains ethically sound, and at least minimally meets criteria of practical applicability.

Data Sources and Selection

The analysis draws on multiple types of material related to the Steel Man competition (ocelovymuz.cz, 2025) between 1999 and 2019. These include:

- archived versions of competition rules and scoring systems from different years,
- official results databases and publicly available rankings,
- internal organizational documents and scoring tables,
- media reports, interviews, and online archival materials published on the competition's official website.

The selection of sources was guided by their relevance to changes in rule design, scoring logic, and category structure. Priority was given to official and publicly accessible documents that directly informed participant understanding of the competition rules.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured around two complementary ethical frameworks: deontological and consequentialist reasoning. Rather than applying formal qualitative coding procedures, the study employs theoretically informed analytical criteria, derived from core principles of sports ethics.

Deontological Interpretation: Stability and Procedural Justice

Deontology, rooted in Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*, is understood as the doctrine of duty. From a deontological standpoint, the ethical legitimacy of a sport competition depends on the stability, universality, and transparency of its rules (Kant & Denis, 2017). The moral worth of an act lies not in its consequences but in adherence to duty and fairness (Freeman, 2007). Synthesising key deontological perspectives, five central principles emerge:

1. Predictability – enables moral responsibility and autonomy of action. Kant insists that an act must follow a principle that could serve as a universal law. If the rules of play or competition are changeable or unpredictable, rational and autonomous action becomes impossible (Kant & Denis, 2017).
2. Transparency – ensures legitimacy and trust. Following John Rawls's "veil of ignorance," rules must be acceptable to all, regardless of their position. Transparency guarantees equal access to information and fair consent (Freeman, 2007).
3. Comprehensibility – allows rational understanding and consensus. Habermas views moral norms as valid only if they are the result of rational discourse in understandable language (McCarthy, 1988).
4. Equality of Conditions – secures respect for every participant as an end, not a means. For Kant, this is respect for human dignity; for Rawls, it translates into the principle of fair opportunity—competition is just only if everyone has a comparable chance to succeed.
5. Consistency (Internal Coherence) – maintains the stability and moral binding force of the system. Principles such as equality and transparency must be applied continuously and coherently; otherwise, rules lose their moral authority (Rawling, 2023).

Consequentialist Interpretation: Outcomes, Utility, and Inclusion

Consequentialism assesses moral correctness based on outcomes – whether an action or rule produces greater good, justice, or satisfaction for all concerned. Four main principles apply here:

1. Utilitarian Principle – maximises overall good. Following Bentham, the moral value of a decision depends on its total positive and negative impacts (Eggleston et al., 2010; Müller-Schneider, 2022).
2. Egalitarian Principle – promotes equality of outcomes and reduces unjust disparities (Bradley & Fleurbaey, 2021; Zwolinski & Ferguson, 2022).
3. Communitarian Principle – strengthens cohesion and mutual trust (Häyry, 2021; MacIntosh & Burton, 2025; McNamee et al., 2021). Sport is a moral community, and its rules must enhance solidarity and respect.
4. Pragmatic Principle – demands empirical verification and accountability. Ethical reforms are hypotheses about outcomes; if their effects are untested, moral responsibility for consequences is lacking (Tweedy & Vanlandewijck, 2011).

Historical comparison between the pre-reform period (1999–2016) and the reform period (2017) serves as the main analytical strategy.

Author Positionality and Reflexivity

The author participated in the Steel Man competition between 2008 and 2021. This involvement provided direct experiential insight into the practical functioning of the rules but also entails a risk of interpretive bias. To mitigate this risk, the analysis relies primarily on archived rule documents, official results, and publicly available data rather than on personal recollection. Interpretative claims

are grounded in documented changes to rules and their observable consequences, allowing readers to assess the plausibility of the ethical interpretation independently.

Historical Background

The Steel Man competition began in 1999 in the town of Žebrák as a local strength-endurance challenge. By 2003, it had developed into a national cup with several host cities. Throughout its history, it remained a pentathlon comprising five disciplines: pull-ups (or static hold), sit-ups, bench press repetitions, a 5 km run, and a 40 km cycling time trial. All subsequent information is based on the results service and archive available at www.ocelovymuz.cz.

From 2001 to 2016, the rules were relatively stable. The bench press load was slightly adjusted over time – one main load and (from 2010 also for women), an auxiliary load intended for endurance athletes and awarded fewer points. The following table summarises the weights used and illustrates the contrast in 2017.

Tabulka 1./ Table 1.

Hmotnost činky pro bench press v různých obdobích (zátěž v kg)./ Bench press load across competition periods (in kilograms).

Category/ Period	Men	Men (auxiliary load)	Women	Women (auxiliary load)
1999–2009	65	50	25	–
2010–2013	65	50	32.5	25
2014–2016	70	50	35	25
2017	20–40–60–80	–	20–40	–
2018–2025	65	–	30	–

Age categories provided a clear framework, and overall rankings within each category were unambiguous. Between 1999 and 2016, minor rule adjustments also affected the execution of certain disciplines (pull-ups, bench press, sit-ups). These refinements primarily specified technique. Women competed in the same disciplines as men, though their scoring differed. Until 2009, points were assigned by a simple coefficient (1 pull-up = 5 points, 1 bench press = 3 points, 1 sit-up = 1 point). From 2010 onwards, scoring tables modelled on the decathlon were introduced, though the overall structure remained stable.

It continued to function as a cup-style series held at multiple venues across the Czech Republic. The organising group led by Martin Svoboda (an organizer of Bartošovice event) was particularly active, introducing several rule innovations. A major contribution was the establishment of a group of referees who ensured uniform judging standards across all events, replacing the earlier system where each organiser appointed their own judge. The competition also benefited from increased promotion on social media, especially from 2016 onward.

A fundamental change occurred in 2017. That year featured four cup events. While the expanded choice of bench-press weights (20–40–60–80 kg) represented one modification, the key change was the introduction of a coefficient system designed to equalise performances across age and gender. Categories were partly abolished, and each discipline was scored in a single unified table.

For bench press, the coefficient incorporated body weight, age, sex, and load; for pull-ups, body weight, sex, and grip type (underhand/overhand); for sit-ups, age and exercise type (classic or CrossFit style); and for endurance events (running and cycling), age-adjusted times were used as final. Individual discipline results were compiled into one table across all participants, though total rankings were still separated by sex.

Further changes were implemented during the season – for instance, the CrossFit sit-up (with a higher coefficient) was introduced only from the second race in Jičín, and not in the opening race in Tišnov.

A key precedent occurred at the third race in Ostrava, when two high-performing male competitors (A and B) exploited a loophole in the bench press rule. The 20 kg barbell, originally intended for juniors and women, was not explicitly restricted. Both athletes performed exactly 1,000 repetitions,

an extreme figure unanticipated by the scoring system. The best athlete using the 80 kg bar in that event completed 21 repetitions, earning 864 points. Yet, due to recalculated coefficients for age and body weight, the two 20 kg performances (A and B) yielded 1,714 and 1,635 points respectively – mathematically outscoring all realistic performances. The organisers had to keep the results which undermined the credibility of the event.

These inconsistencies, combined with frequent rule changes and the Ostrava “loophole incident,” led to a split between founder Karel Vydra’s conservative group and the reformers led by Martin Svoboda. In 2018, Vydra reinstated the original system, while the innovative group withdrew from further organisation.

The competition never recovered its former *cup structure*. Only three independent races were held in 2018 and two in each of the following years (2019–2025). The Steel Man retains its historic tables, legends, and statistics, yet its national-cup era effectively ended in 2017.

External factors such as organiser ageing, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), and changing social preferences also influenced this decline. Still, the events of 2017 remain the pivotal moment. The Steel Man thus serves as a model case for examining how ideals of equality in sport interact with organisational practice and ethical rule-making.

Results

The following two tables present the deontological and consequentialist perspectives on the Steel Man competition by comparing the competition systems from 1999–2016 and from 2017. Through the prism of five deontological principles and four consequentialist aspects, the functioning of both systems and their impacts on participants are briefly evaluated.

Tabulka 2./ Table 2.

Deontologický pohled na oba systémy./ Deontological view of both systems.

Principle	Original System (1999–2016)	Reformed System (from 2017)
Predictability	Rules were long-term and stable; competitors could plan within a clear framework.	Frequent changes and unclear coefficients reduced trust and predictability.
Transparency	Simple rules and publicly available tables; easy to verify.	Compensatory formulas were not fully published or explained.
Comprehensibility	Clear structure; required no expert knowledge.	Complex formulas caused confusion even among experienced athletes.
Equality of Conditions	All competed under identical measurable criteria.	Coefficients aimed to equalise differences but created new disparities.
Consistency	Disciplines formed a coherent whole (strength–endurance–resilience).	Diverse calculation principles disrupted systemic coherence.

The 2017 reform, though motivated by fairness, can be interpreted as violating the implicit *categorical imperative of sporting fairness*: to treat all competitors under the same rule at the same time.

The “loophole incident” in Ostrava demonstrated the fragility of procedural ethics. Generally, it appears when rules lack clarity (Škerbić, 2021). Participants who exploited the system acted in accordance with its letter but violated its spirit (Reid, 2023) – a moral failure despite formal compliance (Imbrišević, 2024).

Tabulka 3./ Table 3.

Konsekvencialistický pohled na oba systémy./ Consequentialist view of both systems.

Aspect	Original System (1999–2016)	Reformed System (from 2017)
Utilitarian (overall good)	The competition fostered joy, respect, and a sense of belonging.	Confusion and dissatisfaction reduced participation and benefit.
Egalitarian (distribution of good)	Simple performance metrics perceived as fair despite natural differences.	Compensations introduced new inequalities and unclear advantages.
Communitarian (trust and cohesion)	Stable tradition and respect reinforced community bonds.	Reform divided the community, raising disputes about fairness.
Pragmatic (empirical verification)	Rules tested by long-term experience.	Reform introduced without pilot testing or evaluation of outcomes.

Discussion

The Steel Man case illustrates a broader ethical tension inherent in contemporary sport governance: the conflict between rule-based fairness and outcome-oriented compensation. While compensatory mechanisms aim to correct systematic inequalities, they simultaneously risk undermining the normative foundations of competition if they become opaque, unstable, or excessively complex.

Comparable mechanisms can be found across a wide range of sports. Age grading in running, the Sinclair coefficient in weightlifting, classification systems in Paralympic sport, or scaling rules in CrossFit all attempt to reconcile diversity of participants with meaningful comparison of performance. These systems demonstrate that mathematical compensation is not inherently incompatible with fairness. However, their legitimacy depends on long-term stability, transparency, empirical validation, and broad acceptance by participants.

Philosophically, the 2017 reform was motivated more by consequentialist than deontological reasoning. Consequentialism evaluates moral correctness through outcomes – whether welfare, justice, and inclusion are maximised (Singer, 2011). In theory, adjusting results by age, sex, or body weight might have improved fairness by recognising diversity. In practice, the reform produced the opposite: confusion, declining motivation, and reduced participation – an overall utilitarian failure. Mechanisms of fairness that diminish transparency and trust yield negative utility even when intended to promote equality.

Thus, consequentialist and deontological analyses converge: ethical intentions are insufficient if institutional arrangements lead to harmful consequences.

This case therefore raises a meta-theoretical question central to sports ethics:

Can fairness in sport be meaningfully reduced to algorithmic correction without losing the ethos of competition? The Steel Man experience suggests that fairness is not solely a technical problem but a shared moral practice sustained by stable rules, mutual trust, and participant consent. Mathematical models may support fairness, but they cannot replace the normative role of rules as publicly intelligible commitments.

Contemporary sport ethics (Loland, 2006; Torres & López Frías, 2023) indicates that sustainable fairness must integrate both perspectives – rule-based and outcome-based. Three practical principles follow:

1. Transparent core rules – simple, unchanging principles throughout the season (deontological).
2. Empirically tested compensations – coefficients used only when statistically validated and clearly communicated (Tweedy & Vanlandewijck, 2011).
3. Participatory governance – involving both organisers and competitors in rule revisions to ensure legitimacy and shared understanding (Hardman & Jones, 2011).

As emphasised by leading sport ethicists (Loland, 2007; Morgan, 2025; Simon et al., 2018), sustainable sport ethics must unite normative stability (deontology) with practical outcome evaluation

(consequentialism). The Steel Man exemplifies how the pursuit of result equality can threaten the very fairness of play.

An ethically sustainable model should therefore preserve five deontological principles (stability, transparency, clarity, equality, consistency) while integrating four consequentialist ones (utility, equality of outcomes, community trust, empirical verification). The Steel Man case thus illustrates the paradox of fairness: the attempt to perfect equality of outcomes can destroy the fairness of the game itself.

Tabulka 4./ Table 4.

Minimální etická kritéria pro kompenzační systémy v amatérském sportu./ Minimum Ethical Criteria for Compensatory Systems in Amateur Sport.

Criterion	Ethical rationale	Practical implication
Rule stability	From a deontological perspective, fairness presupposes predictability and temporal consistency of rules. Frequent changes undermine moral legitimacy.	Compensation formulas should remain unchanged within and preferably across seasons; revisions must be announced well in advance.
Transparency	Fairness requires that participants can understand how results are calculated and on what normative assumptions the system rests.	All formulas and coefficients must be publicly available and explained in accessible language.
Comprehensibility	Rules that cannot be reasonably understood fail to meet the conditions of informed consent.	Avoid excessively complex or opaque algorithms; provide worked examples.
Resistance to exploitation	Ethical rule design must anticipate strategic behavior and prevent systematic loopholes.	Pilot testing and stress-testing of scoring systems before implementation.
Empirical validation	Consequentialist justification depends on demonstrable effects, not intentions.	Use historical data to simulate outcomes and assess distortions prior to adoption.
Equality of formal conditions	All participants must be subject to the same procedural framework, even when outcomes are adjusted.	No ad hoc exceptions or retroactive corrections during the season.
Participatory legitimacy	Fairness in sport is a shared normative practice, not merely a technical solution.	Involve athletes and organizers in consultation before introducing reforms.

Conclusion

The ethical analysis of the Steel Man competition shows how easily fairness may be lost when the pursuit of outcome equality outweighs rule integrity. From a deontological perspective, the original system (1999–2016) maintained moral legitimacy through stability, transparency, clarity, equality of conditions, and consistency. These principles ensured predictability and mutual trust – the cornerstones of moral autonomy and respect among participants.

The 2017 reform, though motivated by inclusion, undermined these normative foundations. Frequent changes, opaque coefficients, and inconsistent application eroded both moral clarity and perceived fairness. From a consequentialist viewpoint, the reform failed to achieve its ethical aim: instead of increasing fairness, it reduced collective good, produced new inequalities, and fractured community cohesion.

Sustainable sport ethics requires balancing normative stability with practical evaluation of consequences. Rules must remain universal and transparent yet flexible enough to reflect empirical insight and contextual change.

This case study contributes to sport ethics by illustrating the limits of algorithmic approaches to fairness in amateur sport. Mathematical compensation may support inclusivity, but it cannot substitute for the ethical role of rules as publicly intelligible commitments that structure fair competition. As summarized in Table 4, compensatory systems must meet minimal ethical criteria – stability, transparency, comprehensibility, resistance to exploitation, empirical validation, and participatory legitimacy – if they are to enhance rather than erode fairness.

More broadly, the Steel Man case highlights that fairness in sport is not merely a technical problem to be solved by increasingly sophisticated models. It is a shared moral practice sustained by trust, mutual recognition, and the willingness of participants to accept common rules as binding. Sustainable sport governance therefore requires a careful balance between deontological principles of rule integrity and consequentialist evaluation of outcomes. Without this balance, well-intentioned reforms risk undermining the very ethos of competition they seek to protect.

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doc. PaedDr. Emanuel Hurych, Ph.D.
Fakulta sportovních studií Masarykovy univerzity
Katedra tělesné výchovy a společenských věd
Kamenice 1
620 00 Brno
hurych@fsps.muni.cz