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5
Sport

It's the year of the Olympic Games. For many fans, this is one of the highlights of the sporting calendar. Even those who do not follow sports may tune into the spectacular opening ceremony.

The modern Olympics supposedly were set up for noble purposes: instead of waging war, nations could engage in peaceful, healthy competition. From the start, though, the games were driven by baser considerations, including nationalism and, later, commercialism.[1]

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1 Useful treatments include Robert K. Barney, Stephen R. Wenn and Scott G. Martyn, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic Commercialism* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2002); Jules Boykoff, *Celebration Capitalism and the Olympic Games* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Jules Boykoff, *Power Games: A Political History of the Olympics* (London: Verso, 2016); Richard Espy, *The Politics of the Olympic Games* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Christopher R. Hill, *Olympic Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); John Hoberman, *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics and the Moral Order* (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1986); Jeffrey Segrave and Donald Chu (eds.), *Olympism* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1981); Alan Tomlinson and Garry Whannel (eds.), *Five-Ring Circus: Money, Power and Politics at the Olympic Games* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

The nationalist bias is apparent in several features. Athletes compete as representatives of their country of citizenship. In individual events, no more than three competitors are allowed from any country. In team sports, such as basketball, each country can have only one team. So the Olympics, rather than being a genuine world championship of the best athletes, are constrained by the artificial barriers of citizenship. Team sports in particular can become surrogates for international rivalries.

In the opening ceremony, watched by billions around the globe, athletes march around the host stadium in national teams. It is a special honour for an athlete to lead the team, carrying the country's flag.

In most media coverage of the Olympics, a country's media concentrate on the progress of their "own" athletes, namely the ones representing their country. Viewers are encouraged to identify with these particular athletes. For example, in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Cathy Freeman, a sprinter in the 400 meters and a prominent Indigenous Australian, was favoured to win. She was chosen that year to light the Olympic flame. When she won the final in her signature event, there was rejoicing throughout the country, with saturation media coverage both encouraging and responding to this popular interest. Many viewers saw Freeman's victory as not just a personal achievement but as representing Indigenous success and, more generally, an achievement for the whole country, especially given these games were in Australia.

Hosting the Olympics is treated as a matter of national prestige, as well as kudos for the city. Government officials use all sorts of persuasive means, including

bribery, to encourage Olympic committee members to support their bids to host the Olympics. Politicians and entrepreneurs in cities and countries where the Olympics are held use the opportunity to sell their preferred image, perhaps as a responsible member of the international community (for example, Beijing) or a desirable tourist destination (for example, Sydney). A winning bid to host the games is widely seen as a diplomatic triumph, despite the huge costs and headaches in getting the venues ready in time.

Behind the scenes at Olympic host cities, governments carry out various forms of civil and social engineering in order to present a positive picture to the world. This includes moving homeless people out of city centres, bulldozing homes, suppressing dissent and creating huge facades.

Meanwhile, among the athletes, every attempt is made to foster a clean image. Competitors, in their quest for Olympic gold, will make all sorts of sacrifices, and for some this includes performing while injured, using banned drugs and using unethical techniques to undermine opponents.

The Olympics are officially presented as a moral paragon, as a unifying enterprise for the world. In practice, Olympics politics represent one of the worst models of compromise and lack of principle. In order to enable participation, nearly every government, no matter how dictatorial and corrupt, is allowed to send a team. Thus oppressive regimes can bask in the reflected glory of having their chosen athletes compete. For some governments, participation is restricted to those considered

acceptable. For decades, numerous governments allowed only men to compete, and persecuted minorities are commonly excluded. Olympic officials seldom intervene in decisions made by national committees. In these ways, the Olympic movement panders to nationalism.

The Olympic Games have often been used as tools in international diplomacy. In 1980, many governments boycotted the games in Moscow as a protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In some places, Australia among them, athletes were placed in a quandary. Should they follow the recommendation of their government and boycott the games, or instead attend anyway in order to achieve what for many is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to participate in the world's most prestigious sporting competition? In 1984, Soviet-bloc governments held a payback boycott of the games in Los Angeles.

The Olympics have also become highly commercial, especially with the rise of television coverage in the 1950s and 1960s, providing huge revenues to the International Olympic Committee and leading to transformation of the games into an ever greater spectacle.

Originally, Olympic athletes were required to be amateurs. This gave an advantage to members of upper classes who had access to facilities and leisure time for training. As the Olympics became more prestigious, some governments and athletic organisations gave support to their athletes in ways that got around the amateur rule. In the Soviet bloc, elite athletes were de facto professionals with sham jobs. In the US, athletic scholarships at universities, combined with soft study options, enabled many athletes to train almost like full-time professionals.

Furthermore, many received covert payments or benefits, so this era was sometimes called "shamateurism." The ending of the amateur requirement meant these forms of hypocrisy were avoided, though at the expense of the original Olympic ideal.

In the Soviet bloc, scientists were involved in designing training for national teams. The East German team was highly successful, producing many world champions, and was also notorious for the widespread use of banned drugs. The quest for Olympic gold was so strong that athletes in many other countries also used drugs.

Drugs are only one way to seek a competitive advantage. In several countries, national training centres undertake research to support elite athletic performance. In the 1976 Montreal Olympics, the Australian team did not obtain a single gold medal, a dismal performance in the eyes of political leaders who saw athletic success as a source of national pride. In response, the government set up the Australian Institute of Sport to undertake research and oversee training of elite athletes. This was modelled on the Eastern European efforts, but without the emphasis on drugs. The AIS has studied training regimens, psychology, special technological aids in training, coaching techniques and other areas. It has been one factor in the later successes of the Australian team, putting it ahead of larger countries on a per-capita basis.

The rhetoric of sport sometimes proclaims that the aim is participation, not winning, but in practice the emphasis is on victory, as in US football coach Vince Lombardi's famous saying "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." The emphasis on winners, and on elite

athletes, is obvious in media coverage. Olympic coverage is on the finals and on medallists, especially gold medallists. In many countries, coverage is selective, with attention given to athletes from the country in question. A local hero might be followed through the heats of an event, but if beaten, coverage switched to other events. Viewers who want to watch the "best in the world" may be frustrated by coverage oriented to national competitors.

Then there are the unofficial medal totals, listing the number of gold, silver and bronze medals obtained by athletes from different countries. In 2012, the countries with the most total medals were the US, China and Russia. However, further down the list, many people in countries such as Algeria and Guatemala were proud that a single competitor from their country received a medal.

Media coverage and medal totals encourage identification with a national team, and with a country. Flags are in abundance, and national anthems played for winners. These processes encourage citizens to identify with the elite athletes from their own country. (Immigrants often have conflicted loyalties.)

When citizens identify with Olympic athletes from their countries, many important differences are obscured. Just because runners or shooters on an Olympic team do well does not mean ordinary citizens from the country are any good at running or shooting. They might be, but many of them might be unable to run more than a short distance and never have used a rifle. Success in the Olympics can make viewers feel like winners, by proxy.

Olympic athletes must be highly dedicated to achieve world-class performance levels. This typically means

spending hours per day for years on end. This sort of commitment is uncommon. Viewers can bask in the illusion that dedication by athletes has some spin-off association with dedication by themselves or others in their societies. This might be true, but often isn't.

The Olympics, like most sports in other contexts, are presented as clean, honest, fair competitions, in which those with superior capabilities are victorious. Sports are widely seen as separate from the messy and corrupt practices found elsewhere in society—they provide an escape into an ideal world. This illusion is sometimes threatened by the behaviour of athletes, for example when they are discovered cheating or when committing crimes in their life outside the sporting arena. These violations of the image of sport as pure are seen as especially objectionable, and constitute one reason why the crusade against drugs in sport is unrelenting: sport must be seen to be fair so the illusion of a pure, separate world can be maintained. Governments like to be associated with the image of sporting success—as long as it's a clean image.

Other sports

National identification is promoted via sports such as cricket and rugby in which there are national teams, so it sometimes can seem like countries are competing against each other when actually only teams representing countries are competing. Commentators say "India defeated England" rather than "The cricket team representing India defeated the cricket team representing England." Many fans identify with national teams.

In individual sports, like golf and tennis, there is some identification based on country of origin. That tennis star Rafael Nadal is from Spain can be a source of pride for Spaniards, but this is minor compared to what happens with the World Cup.[2] Football—called soccer in the US—seems to arouse tremendous passions, and nationalism is an important component of this emotional process. Football is indeed the "world game"—the US baseball finals are misleadingly called the world series—so every national team carries the hopes of many of its citizens.

The World Cup is broadcast internationally, and is the ultimate football competition. Normally, fans will back a local team, but when it's time for the World Cup, these parochial attachments are set aside in a bigger type of parochial partisanship, identification with the national team. Many athletes see their greatest achievement as playing in the World Cup, especially in the finals.

It should be noted that women's football is insignificant in audience ratings compared to the men's game. Many competitive sports remain male dominated in terms of prominence. Patriarchy influences sport in various ways, intersecting with nationalism, commercialism and other factors.[3]

2 David Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football* (London: Viking, 2006).

3 On the politics of football, see Gabriel Kuhn, *Soccer vs. the State: Tackling Football and Radical Politics* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011).

The arbitrariness of sporting attachments

Most sports fans develop strong commitments to particular players or teams. When fans support a local player or team, loyalty is usually based in a sense of community, in which the team is treated as a representative of the locality, city, region or country.

Very few fans can observe games dispassionately, not caring who wins but simply observing a game of skill. Instead, the games involving favoured players or teams receive far more attention. If a sport is not played locally and is not widely established internationally, few fans will have any interest in it. For example, Australian rules football has a limited following in China, India or Russia.

It may seem logical that fans will support the local team, especially when the players are local identities, perhaps even meeting with the fans. However, most fan identification with players is vicarious, through watching their team, not by personally interacting with them.

The arbitrariness of these loyalties is shown when players are brought in from other parts of the country or the world. A US basketball player who joins an Australian team usually has no prior connection with Australia, yet is eagerly adopted by local fans as part of *their* team. Players and coaches are traded and transferred, basically as commodities, but only occasionally does this alienate fans. It seems that the name of the team is enough to inspire loyalty to it.

This is apparent in baseball in the US, where loyalty is most commonly to the team with a city's name, for example the Chicago Cubs or the New York Yankees. When a team moves to another city, as when the Dodgers

moved from Brooklyn to Los Angeles, city-based loyalties usually trump loyalties to the players. In any case, players are regularly traded, so teams are not composed of local athletes but simply of players who have been made part of a team with a local name.

The same applies to international sport. Players are often born and bred in the country they represent, but this not essential. There are plenty of cases in which players change their citizenship in order to join a team in their adopted country. Such players are usually welcomed with open arms as one of *our* athletes. Assignment of loyalties is more about the label than about any deep connection to the country or its institutions.

Alternatives

International sporting competitions, such as the Olympics and the World Cup, seem so natural that it can be hard to imagine any other way of doing things. Therefore it is worth noting some possible alternatives, not because they are likely or even desirable, but to highlight assumptions about sport.

One alternative is simply to abolish all elite international sporting competitions. Instead, emphasis could be placed on mass participation in health-promoting and socially engaging sport and physical activity. Research shows that physical activity is a reliable way of improving happiness—more reliable than watching sporting competitions on television, for example—and there are health

benefits too.[4] So if the aim is to improve gross national happiness, rather than gross national product, then widespread participation in sport is an obvious candidate.

Another option is to set up sporting competitions on a different basis, so national identification is limited. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were a number of "workers' games" run as alternatives to the Olympics. In these games, competitors did not represent countries. The orientation was to achievements by members of the working class, at a time when many elite athletes were from privileged backgrounds.[5]

Yet another option is cooperative games.[6] An example is football with an added rule: when a player scores a goal, this player joins the opposing team. When players switch sides during a game, winning becomes a side issue, because it is not even clear exactly who has won. This sort of rule undercuts the competitive dynamic and orients players to enjoying the game rather than

4 John J. Ratey with Eric Hagerman, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).

5 Boykoff, *Power Games,* pp. 60–65; James Riordan, "The Workers' Olympics," in Alan Tomlinson and Garry Whannel (eds.), *Five-ring Circus: Money, Power and Politics at the Olympic Games* (London: Pluto, 1984), pp. 98–112.

6 Terry Orlick, *Cooperative Games and Sports: Joyful Activities for Everyone,* 2nd edition (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Press, 2006). More generally on the advantages of cooperation, see Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986).

winning. Many different sorts of cooperative games have been devised and played. Few of them would serve as vehicles for accentuating nationalism. Indeed, cooperative games might actually help break down national identification, as players from different countries helped each other in joint endeavours.

Tactics promoting nationalism in sports

There are several routine methods that promote nationalistic thinking and fervour in sport.[7] First is *exposure*: the sports, and athletes identified with countries, need to be publicised. Commonly this happens via the media, for example the worldwide coverage of the Olympics and the World Cup. Note that only some sports are publicised to a great extent. Many sports and athletes languish in obscurity, or have very limited followings. It is interesting that some of the most widely publicised competitions, with global coverage, involve athletes representing countries.

Second is *valuing*: the sports and athletes need to be seen positively. This is almost always the case for sport. Only a few sports, such as boxing, are stigmatised in some circles. Elite athletes as a group are highly esteemed, though some individuals fall from grace, especially those exposed as cheats or who commit serious crimes. By and large, athletes are seen as dedicated and talented, and are lauded for their achievements.

In 2014, 26-year-old Australian cricketer Philip Hughes was killed when hit in the head by the cricket ball while batting. This led to a huge outpouring of grief, aided

7 See chapter 1 for the framework used for this exposition.

by saturation media coverage. For example, some major newspapers devoted six or more pages to the story for day after day. It was the biggest such public grieving spectacle since Princess Diana died in 1997. Hughes had played on the national team and was well known to anyone who followed Australian cricket, though he was not the country's most prominent cricketer. This episode showed a confluence of valuing processes: it involved a sport that many in Australia have seen as the traditional national sport, and one in which the Australian team has often been the world's best, a young player seen as exemplary in dedication to his craft, and a sudden drama and tragedy, ideal for media coverage. It should be noted that some letter-writers were sceptical of giving so much adulation to a sportsperson, and pointed out that other people, who had made greater sacrifices to serve the community, had died without much media coverage. Perhaps a key factor was that Hughes contributed towards a sense of national identity, at least for those who followed cricket.

Nationalistic thinking is promoted using various arguments that give a *positive interpretation* of country-identified sporting competition. There is the trickle-down argument that elite sporting success will be an inspiration for others in the country, the economic argument that tourism and trade will benefit from international recognition, and the status-related argument that international prestige is tied to involvement in and success in international sport.

Another key tactic is *endorsement* of international sport by governments and national sporting bodies. This works in two ways: governments and sporting bodies

endorse participation in international sport, and by competing with others implicitly endorse other teams and governments. This routine endorsement is usually unnoticed, only coming to attention when challenges are made.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, as South Africa's apartheid government faced increasing opposition to its racist policies, it sought international validation through its sporting teams. Opponents of apartheid protested against events involving South African teams. For example, in the early 1970s, there were protests in Australia and New Zealand against matches with the visiting the South African rugby team. The point here is that national teams serve as de facto ambassadors of governments, and as emblems of national pride: endorsement of the team is assumed.

The final tactic is *rewards* for joining in the glorification of athletes representing countries. The athletes themselves receive several types of rewards: the satisfaction of achievement at the highest level (being good enough to be selected for a national team is impressive), the prestige of being a winner at the international level, and occasionally financial returns from endorsements and career opportunities.

Companies can gain by associating themselves with sports. A few are involved with sports equipment, such as running shoes; others attach themselves to teams or prominent athletes through sponsorship deals; yet others benefit when a country hosts an international sporting competition.

Governments can gain by associating themselves with elite sports. In Australia, prime ministers sometimes

attend sporting events, a mutually beneficial media opportunity, and by trying to associate themselves with sporting heroes. When hosting the Olympics, politicians take maximum advantage of the associated international prestige.

Finally, when identification with international sports teams is widespread, there are rewards for ordinary citizens: being an avid supporter of the team enables solidarity with friends and co-workers. If nearly everyone at the office is excited by an international match, then those who are uninterested are safer saying nothing—and supporting an opposing team can sometimes be awkward.

Tactics against alternatives

Alternatives to national identification in elite competitive sport—including abolition of international competitions, workers' games, and cooperative sports—are seldom mentioned. So it might be said that a key tactic against these alternatives is *cover-up,* except that so few people advocate such alternatives that active efforts to suppress information are hardly necessary.

International elite competitive sport has become hegemonic: it seems part of everyday reality. Those who are not interested in sports ignore the issue, and few of those interested in sports spend much time promoting alternatives. Meanwhile, young athletes see participation in a national team as an aspiration.

Then there are tactics to challenge nationalism in sports. This does not mean supporting a foreign team, because this doesn't question the importance of national identification of some kind. Let's consider some more

frontal challenges. One is to denigrate international competitions, for example by exposing corruption, cheating and damaging side-effects. There is certainly plenty of critical material about the Olympics, for example exposés by journalists about the machinations of the International Olympic Committee.[8] Activists in host cities have tried to oppose the repressive and damaging measures used by governments to control the image portrayed about the games, for example moving homeless people out of urban areas and implementing harsh security measures.[9]

Every four years, a fresh crop of critics of the games emerges, especially in the host city. However, only a portion of their activity is directed against Olympics in general, or against the nationalistic dimensions of the games. Furthermore, in between Olympic years, there is little activity critical of the games or their patriotic dimensions. Possible tactics for challengers include exposing shortcomings and abuses (and plenty have been documented), denigrating the Games, explaining what is wrong with them, and mobilising protests.

There is one major obstacle to direct criticisms of any international sport: it is easy for others to say that this is

8 Andrew Jennings, *The New Lords of the Rings: Olympic Corruption and How to Buy Gold Medals* (London: Pocket Books, 1996).

9 Jules Boykoff, *Activism and the Olympics: Dissent at the Games in Vancouver and London* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014); Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics, and Activism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).

criticism of athletes. Elite athletes are sometimes treated as almost sacred: when they are unblemished in their personal and professional lives, they are considered beyond criticism. To question elite sport may be taken to imply, "You've been putting incredible effort into something that's not all that worthwhile."

Rather than mount a campaign against elite international sport, probably a better strategy is to promote alternatives—and there are many who do this. Increasing public participation in sport is a worthy alternative task, with well-documented benefits for health, personal satisfaction and social interaction. It would seem a reasonable step to argue that government expenditure should be redirected away from elite sport towards greater public participation. Cooperative sports—rather than competitive ones—are a complementary alternative, and might be promoted as a way of getting people to think of the disadvantages of competition.

Finally, there is another option: simply paying no attention to elite competitive sport, especially its nationalistic dimensions. Many people are already uninterested, but often they are polite about it. This could be encouraged, so that avid sports-watching is seen as uncool, or simply boring. This is already the case in some circles. Whether this could be the basis for something broader remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Sport can serve as a tool to promote nationalism. To do this effectively, participants need to be representatives of countries, so that engagement in the sport can be inter-

preted as a national enterprise. The sports need to be competitive, allowing individuals and teams representing countries to engage with those from other countries, so there is national honour involved in what would otherwise just be a contest between athletes. Ideally, the competitors are elite performers, without moral blemish, encouraging citizens to identify with the athletes representing their country. By glorifying national sporting heroes, especially winners, identification with one's country is encouraged, while governments bask in reflected prestige.

The role of these various components of international sport can be seen by imagining alternatives. A global fun run, in which participants are identified by some arbitrary characteristic such as birthday or height, would not provide much fodder for nationalism. A cooperative game, with participants joining for a common goal such as keeping a ball aloft, might foster a sense of international cooperation. A competition between non-elite performers—for example a swimming contest involving several presidents and prime ministers—would be more an amusement than a source of national identification, with internal opponents of any given president likely to support others.

Ironically, it is the seeming neutrality and non-political status of sport that makes it such a potent tool for national identification. Because sporting contests seem to be separate from politics and instead as places of moral virtue where the best athletes win, they are attractive to viewers, allowing them to identify with their preferred individuals or teams—and national identification comes as part of the package.

Because elite international competitive sports are so highly entrenched, it is difficult to challenge them. Direct criticism has a role, but perhaps more effective in the long run is promotion of alternatives, including mass participation in physical activity and cooperative sport.