

SPORT AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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The Role of Sport in Peace-building

The contribution sport can make towards peace-building efforts has generally been considered at the grassroots and nation state levels.

At the grassroots or community level, sport can be seen to provide a useful way of creating an environment in which people can come together to: work towards the same goal, show respect for others and share space and equipment. All these aspects are crucial to peace-building processes and are exemplified in findings from a Peace Players International programme.

A study on the role of sport in fostering social integration among different ethnic groups in South African schools showed that several factors contributed to the use of sport being successful in bringing about exchange and building relationships between different groups, including sport's non-verbal means of communication; sport as a means to engage in collective experience and establish direct physical contact; and sport's ability to transcend class divisions.

The Open Fun Football Schools



The Open Fun Football schools were initiated in Bosnia-Herzegovina, using grassroots football as a means to provide a site for interaction and to build relationships between young people and coaches.

Since then, the initiative has expanded to being a reconciliation tool to encourage understanding and tolerance in FYR of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Moldova, Georgia and various other countries in the Balkans, the Caucasus and in the Middle East. The Open Fun Football Schools implemented in Eastern Europe and the Middle East organized street events for the wider community, which has sometimes acted as the first significant post-war contact between communities that were formerly close but are now deeply hostile to one another.

Sport and National Identity

The United Nations Report on the International Year of Sport and Physical Education 2005 highlights the benefits that sport can bring in building national identity, especially at the level of elite sport.

Sport can provide a positive image of the nation to the international community. Studies on specific cases have shown that sport, especially football, can positively contribute to strengthening national pride and forming a cohesive national identity. For example, a study on the case of football in Liberia shows that football is considered 'a "neutral" pursuit – a common cultural property unspoiled by war'. During the civil conflict, football tournaments were considered the only occasions that produced a sense of national unity. On the other hand, sport can produce nationalist expressions that are detrimental to peace. For example, the 1956 Olympic water polo match between Hungary and the Soviet Union that took place after the Soviet invasion of Budapest led to violent clashes between the athletes. In addition, many scholars associate the importing of modern sport into former colonies as an

explicit strategy of imperialism and conquest. In this sense, it is necessary to consider both the potential dangers and benefits of sport in forming national identity.

Changing Perspectives on Global Sport, International Relations and World Politics

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Any lingering doubt about the extant relationship between sport, foreign policy and international relations should be removed by news that London Olympics security measures will cost approximately £1 billion (around \$1.5 billion). Some might argue that the Olympics are atypical, more media spectacle than sporting event. That, however, would overlook a long history of international relations/politics being attendant on the Games. Even the ancient Olympics had clear city state political dimensions, while the international relations aspect has been ever-present in the modern era. In resurrecting the modern Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin had an overtly politicized “European agenda”, seeing sport as an alternative international interaction mechanism that might release tensions extant in other planes.

The “keep sport separated from politics” refrain, emanating from Victorian England’s “amateur” ethos and taken up by de Coubertin, has bedeviled the study of sport in international relations (and much else) until very recently. The irony is that sport has always represented a rich vein of study for these issues in both the applied and theoretical dimensions. At present, for example, sport contributes significantly to issues such as globalization, the actions and activities of NGOs, international negotiation and reconciliation, nation state development, power relations, aid and development, transnational organizations and alignment, to name just some.

“Causative” examples are rare to the point of being non-existent, of course. The most cited case is the so-called 1969 “football war” between Honduras and El Salvador when a World Cup football qualifier sparked a four day conflict and approximately 3,000 deaths. In truth, football was catalyst rather than cause, the latter rooted in cross-border migration and land ownership problems. The 1932-33 English cricket tour of Australia was an earlier example. English on-field tactics caused enough discontent to produce serious Canberra-Whitehall political relationship issues. Again, though, the incident was based in financial and sovereignty policy issues, the sport was simply catalytic.

The best examples involve the German Democratic Republic, the USSR, China and, more recently, India. Sport was central to the GDR’s international showcasing of national progress and achievement. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, before the Wall fell, the GDR was a leading Olympics medal winner. To that end, it built an elaborate system of local sports and training centers, and what became the world’s first systematic sports doping regime. That regime led directly to a global tracking and policing system, supported by world governments, in the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). Like other multilateral agencies, WADA has its own sectional and regional dogfights, demonstrated by the struggle to install Australian ex-politician John Fahey as boss.

China and India took this aspect of sport to another dimension. The 2000 Olympic Games being awarded to China was interpreted widely as recognition of its “new” global position. Chinese authorities emphasized that view, which is why the spectacular architecture and successful events management were so important. Inadvertently, the unswerving commitment raised several human rights issues internationally, principally as people were forcibly relocated to allow for Olympic construction. India was far less successful. It calculated that a successful 2010 Commonwealth Games would position “New India” to host an Olympics that would signify the country’s “arrival” as a great power. Unfortunately, graft scandals and venue construction dramas combined with poor events management to produce nightmare rather than dream. The spotlight picked out India’s broader corruption, governance and reliability issues rather than India “shining”.

Nelson Mandela confirmed the importance of this in his support for the “new” approach to multiracial sport, especially through his public advocacy for South Africa’s new “rainbow” rugby team that hosted and won the 1995 Rugby World Cup, allocated by the International Rugby Board as a means of re-integrating this major playing power into the world system. (The moment was captured in the Clint Eastwood-directed film *Invictus*, starring Morgan Freeman as Mandela). This process was replicated later in cricket, and through South Africa’s hosting the 2010 football World Cup.

That highlights the role of major international sporting organizations that, over recent years, have considered themselves as important beyond sport itself. An excellent example is the International Olympic Committee’s interaction with the United Nations through the environmental movement. In 1992, the IOC attended the Rio Earth Summit, and from there worked towards achieving observer status in the General Assembly. Many athletes have become UN Goodwill Ambassadors, such as Sachin Tendulkar (cricket), Didier Drogba (football), and Nicol David (squash). Many critics see this as beyond the capabilities of those sporting organizations and their leaders, but the development indicates just how integral sport has become to the international political system. While the IOC now pushes a “green” agenda for its Games venues, it is arguable just how much real impact that has, with London a highly contentious case. Similarly, the IOC-UN approach to sport, peace and reconciliation through sport has created a lot of offshoots, initiating projects such as a youth football program in the tougher suburbs of Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, but the results and impact are debatable.

Paradoxically, the IOC is also criticized for not taking a political stand elsewhere. The most recent debate has concerned whether or not Saudi Arabia should be barred from London because of its treatment of female athletes. Just prior to the Games the Saudi leadership announced it would permit women to compete so long as they dressed moderately, were accompanied by a male guardian, and did not mix with other men. By exerting some pressure, the IOC headed into a contentious area of relations with Islam, but was seen to respond to pressure from within and without concerning gender development in a financially important member state.

The role of sport as an international political agency is now widespread. In Europe, the 1995 Bosman case declared that it illegal under European law to restrict EU citizens from playing where they wanted inside the EU. That opened up labour migration generally. The 2003 Kolpak case extended the principle, declaring that citizens of countries having agreements with the EU had the same playing rights as EU citizens themselves. In 2007, the EU adopted its White Paper

on Sport, with the specific purpose of “sharing our values” with the world. Then, Indo-Pakistani relations are constantly measured by whether or not they are playing cricket against each other, the periodic thaws usually initiated by a game or a series. Pakistan now plays its “home” games abroad, mainly in the United Arab Emirates, ever since 2009 when the visiting Sri Lankan team bus was attacked in Lahore by men armed with grenades and rocket launchers. In the lead up to the Euro12 football championships, the British Government announced it would send no Ministers to attend matches in the Ukraine because of on-going concerns about that country’s human rights record (an echo of the anti-apartheid movement). In the same tournament, the Greece –Germany match was widely interpreted as representing the evolving complexity between the two amidst the Euro zone currency and financial crisis.

Sport, then, is inevitably a major factor in all aspects of contemporary international politics and relations. On the one hand, governments now have to think more creatively and incisively about what consequences might emerge from sports developments. On the other, major sports leaders have to know about a great deal more than just the games they oversee.

Politics and sports

Politics and sports or sports diplomacy describes the use of sport as a means to influence diplomatic, social, and political relations. Sports diplomacy may transcend cultural differences and bring people together.

The use of sports and politics has had both positive and negative implications over history. Sports competitions or activities have had the intention to bring about change in certain cases. Nationalistic fervor is sometimes linked to victories or losses on sports fields.

While the Olympics is often the biggest political example of using sports for diplomatic means, cricket and association football, as well as other sports in the global arena, have also been used in this regard. In the case of Apartheid, sport was used to isolate South Africa and bring about a major overhaul in the country's social structure. While ethnicity and race can cause division, sports can also help blend differences.^[2]

Additionally, numerous athletes have sought political office, some of them unsuccessfully, on either the national level or the sub-national level.

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