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THE IMPORTANCE OF SPORT IN SOCIETY



Introduction

“Winning in a sporting event is not a matter of life or death – it is much more important than that”. This sporting cliché sums up an attitude towards sport that is increasingly common around the world. The object of this article is to examine how sport has become such a major factor in everyday life.

Just over a century ago the American philosopher William James called for the creation of a “moral equivalent of war”: the search for something – other than war – that would enhance a person’s self-discipline, hardiness and self-sacrifice. I think that sport now performs that role. This claim is examined in the context of politics, religion and racism.

It may seem odd for such a “serious” journal as this one to give attention to sport. Sport is often seen as a trivial aspect of life by academics. George Gmelch, professor of anthropology at the University of San Francisco, has recently recalled how fellow academics have expressed surprise at his choice of research: “The elitist view, that sport is of the body and not the mind, and therefore not intellectual or refined enough to merit such attention, still holds in some quarters... Perhaps they forget how pervasive sport has become in Western Societies – sports coverage in North American newspapers surpasses that of the economy, politics or any other single topic – or that sport occupies a major portion of our television programming (with seven US cable channels dedicated to sports), or that many Americans are now more devoted to their sports than their religion”.

Gmelch was a baseball player in his younger days. I have no sporting interests at all and have not played sport (and even that was under duress) since leaving school almost half a century ago. But it is necessary to recognize, for good or ill, that sport is a major factor in modern life.



Sport as the “Moral Equivalent of War”

In 1906 William James, in his essay The Moral Equivalent of War, explores the problem of how to sustain political unity and civic virtue in the absence of war or a credible threat . The standard solution for that problem was the creation of a militia both to defend the country and to create a national sense of unity, not least among unruly young men. But a century ago, the

traditional US militia system had broken down and James felt that Americans needed a way of life that was so exciting that they would no longer turn to violence out of emptiness and boredom.

James recommended a new form of national service for males, for example, to tame the environment. Some progress has been made on his ideas, such as the Roosevelt New Deal Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s and later Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). But the American libertarian spirit rebels against enforced national service (and even the so-called War on Terror is unlikely to result in military conscription being reintroduced).

Therefore how are we today to civilize young males without the discipline of sergeant majors? I suggest that sport meets James' ideals – and it is voluntary. Sport involves young – and not so young – people and gives a sense of national unity. Sporting activities are the only major sphere – outside war – where acts of aggression are encouraged. They are a good way to channel youthful high spirits and energy into constructive causes.

✓ Politics

In 2006 the then United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan wondered about “if only world politics could be as well organized as the World Cup Games” . Both activities were universal: the UN had then 191 members, while football's governing body FIFA had 207. Soccer had a degree of openness and transparency missing from international politics. Citizens loved talking about soccer, while he had great difficulty getting much media attention for issues like foreign aid. National governments were making migration difficult – but soccer teams had players drawn from the best across the world. Similarly “local” soccer teams have international supporters that transcend national borders (I think it likely that Manchester United has even more supporters overseas than in the UK) .

Soccer is simply the tip of the global sporting iceberg. The Olympics are now the biggest peacetime event in modern history. UK-based Simon Anholt, who advises governments on their national “brand” international awareness, sees the Olympics as one of the best ways for a country to get international attention . The Modern Olympics are therefore a highly political activity. They were partly designed that way – countries would compete on the sporting field rather than the battlefield. Young men would train to be athletes rather than warriors.

The International Olympics Committee likes to think that the Games are above politics. Indeed in 1915 the IOC moved from war-torn Paris to Lausanne, in neutral Switzerland, to show that it was not associated with politics. The IOC does not produce the medal tally based on the medals won by countries (that is an unofficial list done by the media). The IOC thinks of competitors as individuals in their own right and not as representative of countries.

But all this “above politics” talk is just wishful thinking. Indeed, it is partly because the Olympic Games are marketed as being “above politics” that makes them so attractive to politicians. The Games are a showcase of a country’s ability. Communist countries used the Games as a way of showing the “superiority” of the communist way of life (and put a great deal of funding and training into preparing athletes). China used the 2008 Games to show that it is getting ready to become the world’s number one country, thereby replacing the US in sport as well as economics.

The Games are also riddled with politics in a variety of other ways. A major recurring political issue is participation. Many Olympics have been hindered by some countries staying away or being kept away. In 1920 Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary and Turkey were all banned from taking part because they were on the losing side in World War I. Japan, West Germany and East Germany did not attend the 1948 London Games. Meanwhile, Japan used the 1964 Games in Tokyo as a way of showing the progress it had made in recovering from the war.

The Soviet Union did not participate until the 1952 Games. Communist East Germany took part for the first time in 1968. Taiwan withdrew from the 1952 Games because mainland China was allowed to participate (Taiwan claimed, then with US backing, to represent all of China). China resigned from the Olympic Movement entirely in 1958 as part of its withdrawal from international politics. It did not rejoin until 1971, when the US had improved relations with it and it was again active in international politics.

In 1960 South Africa was banned from the Olympics because of its racist apartheid policy. It did not rejoin the movement until 1991, when apartheid had gone and it had its first African president (Nelson Mandela). The 1972 Munich Games had few African participants because the African countries objected to the presence of the team from the illegal Smith regime from Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). 20 countries withdrew from the 1976 Montreal Games because of New Zealand’s rugby contacts with South Africa. In December 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and so in January 1980 US President Jimmy Carter called on the IOC to move the mid-1980 Olympics out of Moscow. The IOC refused and the US (and about 60 allies) boycotted the Games.

The 1984 Games were held in Los Angeles, California. The Soviet Union and its 13 communist allies boycotted them. They said that did not want to help President Reagan in his re-election campaign, especially as the Games were taking place in his home state (which could also be a crucial state in the election result). This was also a revenge for the US boycott in 1980. The 1988 Games were held at Seoul, South Korea. North Korea and some communist allies (such as Cuba) boycotted them. But by this time the Soviet Union and China were both on friendly terms with the US and so they did not boycott the Games. In the 2000 Sydney Games, East Timor/ Timor Leste participated as one of its first major international acts as a new country (even before it had joined the UN). It was a way of showing that it had arrived on the international scene.

Another linkage between the Olympics and politics is that the Olympics are now just so big that they crowd out usual political activities. Few countries would try to have an election campaign during the Games. The voters would be far more interested in the Games than in the games of the politicians. But this also means that politicians try to capitalize on the “feel good” factor for their own election campaigns after the event. In 2004, President Bush, who was up for re-election in November, ran advertisements in the US showing that as a result of his military campaign in Afghanistan, Afghan women were competing in the Olympics – for the first time in their country’s history (previous Islamic governments had banned women from doing so). Similarly Bush also boasted that the Iraq team – flown to the 2004 Athens Games by the Royal Australian Air Force – could compete without the threat of torture if it did badly (Saddam Hussein’s son, Uday, used to have Iraqi sportsmen tortured for not winning).

A linkage that has not been fully examined by academics is the way that government leaders are able to meet privately out of the media spotlight at these events. These are not formal “summit conferences”, with all the usual diplomatic arrangements. Instead, the politicians can informally discuss matters of mutual concern and improve ties between their countries. Little research has been done into this particular value of the Olympics.

✓ Religion

Former US priest, now best-selling author Thomas Moore, regards sport as a form of “calling”. “Play and recreation”, he writes “are as important to the soul as to the body, and many games have more mysteries baked into them than most people realize.... Sports are highly symbolic and usually ritualistic... It is a short step from the sports stadium to the church or temple, insofar as sports involve ritual and contemplation – we watch games with intense absorption”.

The Olympics are “religious” in that - like all the world’s religions try to do - they bring people together across national, ethnic or racial lines. They are a global glorification of the diversity and energy of humankind.

The creation of the Modern Games was influenced by religion. Pierre Fredey, Baron de Coubertin (1863-1937) refused a military career and looked to sport as a way of bringing countries together. He was inspired by the best-selling English novel Tom Brown’s Schooldays by Thomas Hughes. Hughes had attended Rugby School in England in the days of Dr Thomas Arnold. Arnold was headmaster 1828-1842 and transformed the school into one of the greatest private schools in England. His ambition was to create Christian gentleman, who were well read in Greek and Latin, and were fit, athletic young men who believed in fair play and team play. The Victorian private schools followed the trinity of Godliness, good learning and good games. To what extent all that was actually achieved is a matter of debate. But these were the people who helped run one third of the globe in the British Empire in the late 19th Century.

In 1875, de Coubertain, an impressionable French 12 year old, read Tom Brown's Schooldays and he was inspired. Arnold became for him a kind of spiritual father figure. Eventually, when he created the Modern Games, de Coubertain was seeking an elegant, non-commercial activity for gentlemen. They would glorify and inspire humankind. In 1892 he publicly proposed the revival of the Olympic games with the double objective of sports competition and the peaceful bringing together of all countries.

In a broader sense, the Games have become a secular religion: a religion with universal appeal which incorporates all the basic values of other religions, a modern, exciting, virile dynamic religion, attractive to the youth . The Games contain a passion, grandeur and an excitement that are often missing from many present religious activities. People yearn for these qualities and often cannot get them in religious institutions and so they are finding them in the Olympics and other sporting events. The Games are also “religious” in their format. There are the highly organized opening and closing ceremonies, oaths, colourful processions, rites and songs. These inspiring events could almost be formal religious events.

Religion (in whatever form) is a very intense and high priority activity for its adherents. Given the attention that the Games now receive, they could claim to be “religious” in terms of the enthusiasm and dedication they attract from participants and spectators around the world. Few formal religious activities could claim such a response.

✓ Racism

One of the major changes made in sport in the last few decades has been the determined effort to end racism. Sport is now seen as a way of uniting people rather than dividing them.

In the US, Afro-Americans traditionally had only two ways out of their poverty: entertainment and sport. Meanwhile the people most likely to be running these industries have been whites. Audiences were usually white because they had the money to buy the tickets. Tensions were inevitable.

American boxing is a good example of both the tensions and the changes. A turning point took place in Sydney a century ago. On December 26 1908 Jack Johnson (the “Galveston Giant”) became the first Afro-American to ever win a heavyweight championship fight – by defeating Canadian Tommy Burns on a technical knock out. He remained the Heavyweight Champion of the World until 1915. The Sydney clash was a turning point in boxing history because it ended the myth of “white superiority” in boxing. The 20,000 spectators were outraged.

The search for “The Great White Hope” then took place – the white boxer who could reassert white dominance in the sport. The “fight of the century” took place on July 4 1910 in a

purpose built ring at Reno, Nevada at which a former heavyweight champion James Jeffries came out of retirement to fight Johnson. The promoters encouraged racist taunts from the 22,000 crowd and the ringside band played “All coons look alike to me”. But Johnson beat him in the 15th round.

Race riots flared across the US that evening. Afro-Americans also organized parades and parties to celebrate the reaffirmation of the Afro-American dominance in the sport. Meanwhile, some American cinemas banned the showing of the news movie of the defeat. Johnson became the most famous Afro-American in the US – and an inspiration to black people worldwide. White men were not necessarily going to always dominate boxing.

There had been earlier Afro-American boxers but none had got far. They did not get much opportunity for training and promoters were reluctant to take them on as clients. The violence following the 1910 match was also a warning to Afro-Americans that they risked their lives if they were to take up boxing and ever beat a white man. They had enough problems and so they did not want to risk their health by breaking into a white-dominated sport.

Johnson was eventually beaten in 1915 in the 26th round of a match against newcomer Jess Willard a cowboy who had started his boxing career late. But the white return to dominance was only temporary and heavyweight boxing is now dominated by Afro-Americans. Johnson after his 1915 defeat led an unsettled life, including involvement in petty crime. He died in a car crash in 1946, aged 68. At the time of his death, racism was still widespread in all facets of American life, not least sport. Gradually, as racism was reduced, Johnson’s legacy became recognized. Eight years after his death, he was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1954 and the movie of the 1910 Johnson-Jeffries fight is now included as an “historically significant” item on the US National Film Registry. It is now recognized that Jack Johnson’s initiative in forging a boxing career inspired other Afro-Americans that they too could do well in the sport. He has earned in death far greater white respect than he ever got in his lifetime.

After World War II the US began to do more to end racism in sport. The war itself had been fought against the racist regimes in Germany and Japan and so Americans were obliged to confront their own evil past. The Afro-American athlete Jesse Owens caused an upset at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games by winning four gold medals – and eroding Hitler’s idea of white supremacy. Hitler did not congratulate him. “But, then, I never did get to shake the hand of President Franklin Roosevelt, either”, Owens said. 1936 was an election year in the US and Roosevelt was running for re-election. He could not afford to offend conservative voters by being seen with Owens. Owens – by then one of the world’s most famous black sports people - did not get invited to the White House.

Additionally sports administrators in the US and elsewhere were recognizing that black people had talent. A black person who did well in sport had to be exceptional because they had had to overcome more obstacles than the average white sportsman. Given the same training

opportunities they too could be good sportspeople. Sports administrators were missing out on a valuable resource. Therefore the opportunities gradually opened up to them.

Meanwhile, the 1970s and 1980s were particularly bad times for racism in the British crowds. Black soccer players were showered with bananas and peanuts not only by racist supporters wanting to intimidate the other side – but even against the black players representing their own club . Fascist groups targeted the sporting matches for disruption because they knew that their activities were being televised into millions of British homes. Tough penalties and quick police reduced the offences.

In December 1997 the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair acknowledged the work done to reduce racism on the British sporting field but he said there were still issues with the British spectators: “Just about every team in the country has a black player but there are still too few black and Asian faces in the crowd. We may have done much to eliminate racism on the terraces but we have to ask whether they still do not come to matches because they feel the atmosphere is too intimidating. It is something to be worked on” .

To conclude, sport has, then, become a major factor in the lives of many people. However, it is evident from the sex and drugs scandals associated with the private lives of many sporting personalities that they have not yet recognized that they have a new role in life: they are role models, not least for impressionable young people. This is the next challenge for sports administrators.

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NOTES

1. George Gmelch “An Anthropologist on the Team: Studying Baseball as s Former Player”, Anthropology Today (London), October 2008, p 10
2. William James The Moral Equivalent of War, 1906 (<http://www.constitution.org/wj/meow.htm>, accessed October 3 2004) and William James The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, London: Collins, 1975 (1901), p 356
3. Kofi Annan “If Only World Politics Could be as Well Organized as the World Cup Games”, The Guardian (London) June 12 2006, reprinted in <http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=views06/0612-32-htm> (accessed June 21 2006)
4. Also, see: Franklin Foer How Soccer Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization, New York: HarperCollins, 2004

5. Simon Anholt Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions, London: Palgrave, 2007, pp 108-110
6. Thomas Moore A Life at Work: The Joy of Discovering What You Were Born to Do, London: Piatkus, 2008, pp 106-7
7. Another area of possible research is the role of sport in the temperance movement. Ironically sport is now more associated with alcohol-fuelled violence but there is another history: that of sporting personalities who supported the traditional temperance movement, see: Robert Evans "Raymond Preston (1861-1950), Evangelist in New South Wales", Church Heritage: Historical Journal of the Uniting Church in Australia (Sydney), September 2008, p 215
8. "Fact Sheet 6: Racism and Football", Centre for the Sociology of Sport, University of Leicester (<http://www.le.ac.uk/so/css/resources/factsheets/fs6.html> accessed August 1 2008)
9. Tony Blair "Speech at the Launch of the Anti-Racism in Sport Campaign", December 2 1997 (<http://www.number10.gov.uk/output/Page1086.asp> accessed August 1 2008)