



RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT  
VOLUME 3

# GLOBAL OLYMPICS

HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL  
STUDIES OF THE MODERN GAMES

Edited by  
**KEVIN YOUNG &  
KEVIN B. WAMSLEY**



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SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

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## HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE MODERN GAMES

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# Introduction

## COUBERTIN'S OLYMPIC GAMES: THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

Kevin B. Wamsley and Kevin Young

Judged in terms of global participation, world media coverage, the construction and cost of elaborate facilities, billions of dollars in expenditures, environmental and community disruption, crises, scandals and political intrigue of various sorts, massive popular consumption, and the threat of terrorism, the Olympic Games may well be the most consistently compelling cultural phenomenon of modern times. Against a backdrop of nineteenth century industrialising nation-states engaged in assorted international cultural competitions, followed by twentieth century World Wars, the Cold War, numerous revolutions and, later, the expansive globalising of economies, the Games (both Winter and Summer) undulated through most of the twentieth century every four years, now alternating every two years. For spectators, politicians, patriots, corporations, and opportunists of all sorts, the Olympic Games became a focal point and where political, economic, and cultural interests intersected, where the hopes and accomplishments of modern sport were juxtaposed against the often imperialist, racist, and gendered imperatives of certain nations and international organisations. By the middle of the twentieth century, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was, unequivocally, the most powerful sport organisation in the world, wielding influence on how people in more than 100 countries understood, organised, and played sport at a number of different levels (Wamsley, 2002).

Millions of dollars are spent by cities that bid for the rights to host a Summer or Winter Olympic Games and, quite literally, billions more are spent to host the festival itself. There are more than 200 countries that have National Olympic Committees, and the Olympic emblem of five interlocking rings may be the most recognised symbol in the world, along with other seemingly ubiquitous symbols such as that of the Red Cross, the United Nations, and corporate logos like the 'golden arches' of McDonald's or the

Nike 'swoosh' (Barney, Wenn, & Martyn, 2002). Successful participation at the Games has come to be viewed as so important that national governments have formed domestic and international policies around matters relating to the Olympics, establishing comprehensive sport programmes to improve the performances of teams and competing individuals. In addition to the contemporary significance of bidding for and hosting the Games, Olympic medals are widely coveted by nations and athletes for their symbolic and economic implications; so much so that athletes are willing to risk their reputations, their health, even their lives, to win. Concomitantly, nations have invested millions into performance-enhancement laboratories and child talent identification programmes, many of which, far from being viewed as ethical or humane, have elicited strong criticism for dubious motives and sometimes harmful practices (Hoberman, 1992; Ryan, 1995; Donnelly, 1997).

How did this once innocuous sporting competition attain a status of such magnitude and cultural significance? Many such socially pertinent questions animate the modern Olympic Games. Why do athletes take drugs?; why do corporations invest millions of dollars to become exclusive Olympic sponsors?; why are men and women treated differently in Olympic sport and the spin-off sport cultures it spawns?; why is the IOC plagued by scandal and corruption? The answers to these and similar questions rest in a long and often tawdry history that effectively emerged during the nineteenth century, leading to a popularly supported Olympic Games, where nations sought to position themselves among others economically, politically, and militarily throughout the twentieth, now into the twenty-first, century. Such questions and answers are addressed in depth in this volume.

Popular accounts typically credit the efforts of French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin in the modern 'rebirth' of the Olympics, and also typically invoke links to the religious 'Olympic' festivals of ancient Greece (Young, 1987). Once the Games established some measure of success in the modern era, de Coubertin himself took the bulk of the credit for their (re)introduction, even though he is known to have borrowed ideas from the work of others, capitalised on their organisational and fund-raising efforts, and ridden a growing tide of cultural interest in ancient Greece and in the establishment of a modern festival (Young, 1984). It cannot be denied, however, that de Coubertin tirelessly devoted the latter stages of his life to promoting the Olympic Games, securing their stability, fending off rival sport leaders and sport festivals, and ensuring that 'his' Games would become the most significant sporting competition among the nations of the modern world (Wamsley, 2002).

On a foundation of interest in amateur sport as a character-building and socially valuable exercise for boys and men, de Coubertin brought his observations of nation-state sport programmes and nineteenth century Olympic-like festivals and World's Fairs to bear at a Congress held at the Sorbonne at the University of Paris in 1894 (MacAloon, 1981). The Congress was scheduled to deal with international understandings of amateurism, but de Coubertin manipulated the programme to bring 'his' Olympic Games ideas to the forefront. Most influential on de Coubertin's plans for staging an international sport festival were the Olympic competitions organised by William Penny Brookes in England, juxtaposed against the competitive model and tourist appeal of the already popular World's Fairs and Expositions (Young, 1984). A nostalgic connection to ancient traditions and a profound sense of ownership and local support for the nineteenth century Olympic festivals in Greece contoured de Coubertin's plans, as he convinced European delegates and members of the Greek royal family that a new, internationally-based festival served the interests of all men concerned with sport as a worthy pursuit, both athletically and socially. Since it was popularly perceived as a training ground for instilling gentrified 'manly' values and promoting military preparedness among young men, there were few aristocratic delegates in favour of sport for women at this time. As such, from their modest beginnings and throughout the twentieth century, the Olympic Games remained a critical venue for the establishment and reproduction of gender differences (Wamsley, 2004). While there are undoubtedly more flagrant versions of gendered cultures and settings in the world of sport, and despite recent changes, it is clear that the Olympics have always operated as a site of male privilege. This trend endures, as may be seen today in, for example, the disproportionate number of Olympic events open to men (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004, pp. 226–227).

Due in large part to the political maneuvering, fundraising, and organisational efforts of Crown Prince Constantine of Greece, the first Olympic Games in 1896 were declared an unambiguous success (MacAloon, 1981). Thousands of spectators in a festive and beautified Athens, brandishing a new stadium and a proud sense of tradition, celebrated the first Games with athletes from 13 countries and ushered in a new era for modern sport. Eventually, de Coubertin's Games secured the interests of amateur sport leaders in all participating nations, promoting internationally regulated sport competitions as new symbols of cultural supremacy. Against the early wishes of the Greeks, who were principally responsible for the success of the first Games, de Coubertin, according to his own reckoning, insisted initially that the Games be ambulatory, gracing the great cities of the world every

four years. Barney (1992, p. 93) reports that de Coubertin saw this as "...the original trinity chosen to emphasize the world character of the institution and establish it on a firm footing". De Coubertin confirmed this sentiment in a letter to the *New York Times*, April 30, 1896 (Müller, 2000, p. 363), protesting the inference that the Games might be held permanently in Greece: "Nothing could be further from the truth. The Olympic Games will move about the globe as decided at the international congress held at the Sorbonne two years ago. The 1900 Games will be in Paris. In 1904, the committee will choose between New York, Berlin, and Stockholm".

However, the practical difficulties of organising various aspects of the Olympics, and the marshalling of interest, aid, and support, led to a direct reliance on the existing infrastructures of World's Fairs, where de Coubertin's Games became embedded in Paris in 1900, St. Louis in 1904, and London in 1908. Separate sporting events for men and women, increasing participation numbers, a growing interest by the world media, and a burgeoning nationalism evident in controversies and protests during and following competitions, represented the humble beginnings of de Coubertin's early twentieth century international festival.

At the same time, it was clear from the outset that the Games carried potential to crystallise and confirm broader social and political goals for participating countries. Already powerful sporting nations such as England and the United States used the events to assert their authority over rules and regulations, as well as matters of 'appropriate' social decorum, at a time when Olympic competitions were just beginning to resonate with political, cultural, and military undertones. As such, the early Olympic Games provided significant opportunities for nations to represent themselves outwardly to international audiences, as well as domestically, in myriad state-building exercises and social schemes (Dyreson, 1998; Senn, 1999).

Marking their 10-year anniversary in 1906, the Greeks celebrated a second successful modern Olympic Games, but de Coubertin exerted his authority over the fledgling enterprise and effectively removed any Greek proprietorship of the Games by rendering them 'unofficial' and unrelated to the record books of his 'Olympics' (Lennartz, 1996). Adhering to the by-then established four-year cycle, the nationalist controversies of 1908 in London and the residual organisational difficulties of the World's Fair Games, gave way to a rather successful event in Stockholm in 1912, securing a place for Sweden's Sigfrid Edström in de Coubertin's inner-circle of leading administrators (Wamsley & Schultz, 2000). Four years later, Berlin's place as host city was denied by the conflicts of World War I; yet, the interest in maintaining the Olympic competition cycle after a devastating

War signalled a promising place in twentieth century culture for de Coubertin's festival. The Belgians, in spite of the mass destruction wreaked by the War, offered to host the 1920 Games and utilised them as a focal point for national regeneration and rebuilding, themes which were repeated following World War II. Significant in these 1920 proceedings was Count Henri Baillet-Latour, the future IOC President (Goldstein, 1996). Baillet-Latour was named IOC President to replace the eminent de Coubertin at the IOC Congress in 1925. He faced many challenges during the prewar period, including matters related to women's participation, the Depression era Games of Los Angeles, and the Nazi Olympics of 1936.

The growing symbolic significance of the Games among nations, equating athletic victory with cultural and national progress in the early twentieth century, ensured that the Olympics would remain deeply politicised. In its first overtly post-war act, the IOC declined to send invitations to the so-called 'defeated' nations of World War I. For the allied nations, the post-war popularity of competitive sport for both men and women was evident in its use for projects of community boosterism and national identity construction. For example, real estate tycoons and Hollywood movie moguls had secured the 1932 Games for Los Angeles well in advance of the event, as early as 1923. And, during the 1920s, the IOC struggled to maintain control over the word 'Olympic' and to manage both women's participation and rival sporting events such as the Workers' Olympics.<sup>1</sup>

In 1925, de Coubertin, a consistent opponent of women's participation in the Games, and reluctant to stage a winter sport complement to its summer competition, stepped down as IOC President. Following his retirement, the International Amateur Athletics Federation, headed by Sigfrid Edström, negotiated the inclusion of women into Olympic track and field events, and all but dissolved the Women's Olympics as a rival event (Wamsley & Schultz, 2000).<sup>2</sup> During its 1925 session, the IOC declared the winter sport festival in Chamonix, France, held for 11 days during January 1924, to be the first Winter Olympics. Contrary to the views of some IOC members that a Winter Games might remove some of the lustre of the 'real' (i.e., Summer) Olympics, the new event engaged more people than ever in de Coubertin's project, as well, crucially, as creating new tourism opportunities for the alpine destinations of the world as potential Olympic hosts.

As Communist detractors had observed, the de Coubertin Olympics served the interests of class-structured societies through the doctrine of 'amateurism', thereby providing opportunities for predominantly middle- and upper-class sportsmen to participate in the Games. Further, a distinct gender order had prevailed in the competitions and ceremonies of the

Olympics from the outset, reinforcing the residual notion that sport was most suitably a pursuit for men. However, intense lobbying efforts by advocates of female participation in athletics secured a place for women in new events by 1928 (Wamsley & Schultz, 2000). Male fears of the (perceived) socially disruptive potential of female participation were reinforced by widespread misinterpretations of the women's 800 m event in Amsterdam. After observing several athletes in normal but serious states of fatigue during and after the race, in the meetings that followed, some IOC members threatened to expel women from subsequent Games. Edström had recognised that, in order to manage and control women's participation, they had to be included in the Games. Sport leaders from both the United States and Britain demanded that women remain on the programme. However, this IOC compromise led to a more open channelling of women into so-called 'feminine' sports such as gymnastics and figure skating, where traditional 'womanly' traits such as grace and flexibility could be showcased and celebrated at the Olympic level. It was not until the emergence of the mighty Soviet teams of the 1950s that other nations began to include full contingents of female competitors willing to challenge traditional gender markers (regarding qualities such as physical strength and power) that had prevailed for well over a century (Wamsley, 2002).

The increasing size of the Games inevitably raised concerns about costs, particularly during the 1930s, when many nations reeled from the effects of the Great Depression. How could Los Angeles concern itself with sport, the President of the United States declared, when there were more pressing matters at hand? President Hoover, as head of state, broke the Olympic tradition by refusing to officially open the Games. "It's a crazy thing", he remarked, "and it takes some gall to expect me to be a part of it" (Barney, 1996, p. 156). A simple retort might have been that Olympic leaders had always considered the Games as existing above politics, as more of a peaceful and uplifting human enterprise than a source of conflict or negativity. This sort of thinking permitted organisers, politicians, and sport leaders the leeway to infuse the Games with symbolic meanings that supposedly transcended the everyday political and economic, even military, realities of the world.

At no time was this clearer than during Berlin's preparations for the 1936 Winter and Summer Games. Initially opposed to the Olympics as a capitalist, bourgeois initiative, Chancellor Adolf Hitler eventually embraced the Games as a potent weapon of Nazi propaganda in a fashion chillingly, but brilliantly, demonstrated in Leni Reifenstahl's film, *Olympia* (Mandell, 1971; Kruger, 1998). By this point, the world already identified de Coubertin's

Olympics as an index of modernisation and cultural supremacy; in turn, Hitler positioned the festival as a declaration of German military prowess and a manifestation of Aryan supremacy in particular. Olympic leaders such as the Belgian IOC President Baillet-Latour claimed inherent value in the Berlin Olympics, and refused to move them, while future President, Avery Brundage of the USA, worked tirelessly to ensure the participation of the powerful American team and press entourage, in spite of the well-known atrocities being committed in Germany. In brief, the Berlin Olympics clearly showed that the Games could be manipulated by political forces for political reasons. Despite every sign to the contrary, in a stunning forecast of stereotypes that would come to pervade the contemporary world of sport, and absolving themselves of all responsibility for Hitler's machinations, Olympic leaders stubbornly explained that sport and politics should not and did not mix (Guttmann, 1992).

Similarly, the political potential of the modern Olympics was not lost upon the Cold War leaders of the post-World War II era. Indeed, with the exception of the programme to explore outer space, the Games became the most important global arena for the declaration of cultural supremacy and for the explication of national political statements at this time. Nations allocated unprecedented resources towards elite level sport, as participants, organisers, and spectators identified world record-breaking performances as direct indicators of national – and, implicitly, human – progress. So it was that the Olympic Games heralded the union of science and nationhood in a cultural arena. The Cold War era, fuelling the scientisation of human performance, also ushered in new levels of systematic performance enhancement through drugs and intensive, often-abusive, training techniques. The Cold War athlete trained full-time, pushed him/herself to new extremes, and carried the weight of entire social systems on his/her shoulders, personifying the successes and failures of Capitalism and Communism (Hoberman, 1992). As post-war allies jockeyed for military advantage in satellite countries and for rich, economic resources such as oil and gas reserves, these political tensions played out through a sequence of highly Olympic publicised boycotts.

World events such as the Suez Canal Crisis, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and the lobbying efforts of the 'two Chinas' and 'two Germanies' plagued the presidency of Avery Brundage (1952–1972), the self-proclaimed watchdog of amateurism and guardian of Olympic ideals (Guttmann, 1984). Further, the entry of Black African nations into the Olympic movement and Soviet economic interests in Africa placed increasing pressure on the IOC to deal with the issue of racist Apartheid in South Africa. With the increasing



symbolic significance of the Games, in concert with emerging satellite technology and the prevalence of television as the new mode of communication during the 1960s, the commercial exploitation of athletes and Olympic symbols presented by winter sports gnawed at the recalcitrant and aging Brundage, whose turgid leadership style many felt was outdated and out of touch. A typically insulated and reactive IOC, for example, could not foresee the burgeoning costs of hosting the Games, evident in Tokyo's billion dollar expenditures in 1964 (Barney et al., 2002), as a point of crisis for impoverished nations. Hence, its decision to distance itself from the social uprising and protest against such excessive expenditures in Mexico City in 1968, resulting in a horrific massacre, was hardly surprising (Paz, 1972). Once again, how could an organisation that claimed apolitical status accept responsibility for political problems, or for complicity in, such problems, when it perceived events as being only tangentially related to the Olympic Games?

By the 1960s and 1970s, the Olympic Games had become what de Coubertin had imagined – one of the most magnificent and celebrated cultural events in the world. Yet, only after the massacre of Israeli athletes and officials in Munich in 1972 did organising committees prepare extensively for breaches of security or acts of politically motivated violence occurring at the Games. And, only after the financially disastrous 1976 Montreal Olympics did the IOC seriously consider a modification in funding strategies. The sheer magnitude of these sorts of issues – the massacres of Mexico City and Munich, Apartheid and South Africa, the two Chinas, Montreal and its massive debt, the constant battles over notions of amateurism, and the significant United States-led boycott against Moscow in 1980 – left IOC President Killanin (1972–1980) in poor health. If one concedes that the turbulent terms of Presidents Brundage and Killanin enabled the Olympic Games to barely survive, then one must comparatively assert that the presidency of their Spanish successor, Juan Antonio Samaranch, brought the festival to new heights of commercial growth, including vast riches to the once impoverished IOC, and to new depths of scandal and corruption.

In spite of the athletic compromises forced by the Soviet-led boycott of Los Angeles, the 1984 Summer Games marked a new era in the commercialisation of the Olympics and a significant expansion in the extent to which countries willing to host the Games were willing to go that de Coubertin could never have imagined. The more than US\$200 million profit that organiser Peter Ueberroth accrued remains, in part, responsible, some 20 years later, for the current levels of intensity that cities apply to their elaborate and costly bidding initiatives. Over the coming years, Samaranch's administration transformed the Olympic Games into a multi-billion dollar business, profiting