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# Success and Failure of Countries at the Olympic Games

Danyel Reiche

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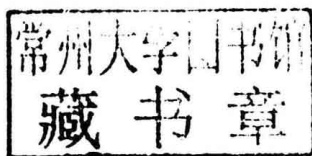
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# Success and Failure of Countries at the Olympic Games

The Olympic Games is undoubtedly the greatest sporting event in the world, with over 200 countries competing for success. This important new study of the Olympics investigates why some countries are more successful than others. Which factors determine their failure or success? What is the relationship between these factors? And how can these factors be manipulated to influence a country's performance in sport? This book addresses these questions and discusses the theoretical concepts that explain why national sporting success has become a policy priority around the globe.

Danyel Reiche reassesses our understanding of success in sport and challenges the conventional explanations that population size and economic strength are the main determinants for a country's Olympic achievements. He presents a theory of countries' success and failure, based on detailed investigations of the relationships between a wide variety of factors that influence a country's position in the Olympic medals table, including geography, ideology, policies such as focusing on medal-promising sports, home advantage, and the promotion of women.

This book fills a long-standing gap in literature on the Olympics and will provide valuable insights for all students, scholars, policy makers, and journalists interested in the Olympic Games and the wider relationship between sport, politics, and nationalism.

**Danyel Reiche** is an Associate Professor for Comparative Politics at the American University of Beirut and a Visiting Scholar at the Harvard University Institute for Quantitative Social Science (IQSS). He has also worked as a visiting Assistant Professor at the School of Foreign Services, Georgetown University, USA, and as a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. He is the author of numerous peer-reviewed articles, most recently in *European Sports Management Quarterly*, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, *Journal of Energy Policy*, *Sport in Society*, *Soccer & Society*, and *Third World Quarterly*.

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Two students made important contributions to this work: Alexander Brown, Graduate Assistant in the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at the American University of Beirut, not only proofread my text but also supported me with my research, particularly by collecting data for the tables. Thomas Chekaiban, an undergraduate student majoring in business with a minor in political science who attended with great enthusiasm my "Politics of Sport" and "Politics of Emerging Countries" classes, helped me with the figures in this book and the PowerPoint presentations for talks I gave on topics related to this work.

We have exceptional students at the American University of Beirut, and I benefitted from our discussions in the "Politics of Sport" classes that I teach. Furthermore, it is always helpful to present research results at conferences and get the input from colleagues; particularly, I would like to highlight the feedback I got from the discussions after my following lectures: "Success and Failure of Countries at the 2014 Winter Olympics" at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sports (NASSS) 2014 Conference in November 2014 in Portland; "Motives to Participate in the Olympics" at the Sport & EU Conference 2014 at



the German Sport University Cologne in June 2014; “Soccer at the Olympics: Interests, Issues, and Significance” at the conference “Soccer as the Beautiful Game: Football’s Artistry, Identity and Politics” at Hofstra University in April 2014; and my two talks on Qatar, “Qatar’s Motives for Hosting Mega Sport Events and Funding Elite Sports” at the SPLISS (Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success) Conference in Antwerp, Belgium, in November 2013 and “Qatar and the FIFA World Cup 2022: An Attempt to Gain Soft Power” in the Ash Institute Democracy Seminar Series at Harvard University in October 2014.

Although I completed my degree work on energy and environmental policy issues, my current position as Associate Professor of Comparative Politics at the American University of Beirut has given me the academic freedom to shift my research interests towards sport. A life-changing moment was when just before my appointment at AUB in Lebanon, I wrote a non-academic book in German language on my life as fan of the soccer team Hannover 96. The book was quite successful (it received considerable media coverage after it was presented at a press conference with the club president and a player legend, and the book quickly sold out) but I considered it a once in a lifetime event. After becoming a professor, I decided to gradually integrate my personal sport interest into my professional life by teaching “Politics of Sport” classes and starting to learn about the academic sports world. I published papers in leading journals in the field such as *European Sports Management Quarterly*, *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, *Sport in Society*, and *Soccer & Society* and presented my work, among others, at the above-mentioned conferences.

My first academic book on sport is not the end of my journey in the academic world of sports, but an important first milestone. I am grateful to the luxury of my professional life to work on something I truly enjoy, and I am full of energy and ideas for future contributions.



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# 1 Introduction

One of the first opinions I received from a friend in response to the idea of my book was that the Olympic Games are generally negative because of the notion that "Olympic athletes all ruin their health." Although this opinion might stem from a general bias against sport, I had to admit it might still be a valid question worth studying. However, such normative discussion is not the center of focus for this book. Rather than discussing whether elite sport is good or bad, I seek to analyze why winning medals at the Olympic Games has become a priority around the world. As a political science professor, I find it interesting to analyze this phenomenon because Olympic success has become an area of increased government involvement in many countries, with considerable resources from state budgets being channeled into policies that promote national success at the greatest international sporting event.

This book seeks to answer the following questions: how "Olympic success" is defined differently around the globe, why countries are aiming for success at the Games and its Winter and Summer editions, and which policy instruments are countries utilizing to achieve their sporting goals.

During the last decade I have worked as a professor in Lebanon and the United States, however my childhood in Germany played an important role for my interest in the topic of this book. After telling my father about plans to write a book on success and failure of countries at the Olympics, he was adamant that I discuss the role of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The GDR, better known internationally as East Germany, was a sporting power despite its short period of existence. "We" in West Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), had to acknowledge that our East German "brothers and sisters" outperformed us at the Olympic Games. Although there were severe travel restrictions from the West to the East (and even more restrictions vice versa), it remained possible to access East German TV in the northern German city of Hanover where I grew up. I can still remember East German commentators enthusiastically celebrating the successes of their athletes.

Despite being on paper dissolved in 1990, the GDR still ranks historically as a leading sporting power, ranked in the top 10 of the all-time Olympic medal rankings. This is a remarkable feat considering that the country participated in only six Winter and five Summer Olympics over a period of 20 years, from 1968 until



## 2 Introduction

1988. While the GDR outperformed West Germany at the Olympic Games, it could not win against the “class enemy” (“Klassenfeind”) beyond the sports field. The GDR only existed from 1949 until 1990, when the Berlin Wall fell, and the GDR’s success as a major sporting power could not prevent its political downfall.

While the GDR was more successful overall than the FRG at the Olympics, it was unable to compete with West Germany in soccer, the sport most popular in both German countries. The GDR did have success by beating the FRG at the 1974 World Cup in the group stage. However, West Germany would later go on to win the world championship at the tournament, and the GDR’s early win would become a marginalia in soccer history. Despite competition between East and West, when West German soccer clubs such as Bayern Munich had to play in European competitions in the GDR, many East Germans came to the stadium to cheer for the West German players. While this was in part a form of protest against the dictatorship in their country and a demonstration of their desire for German reunification, it also proved that sporting success is not that always easy to define: There are not only medal rankings, there are also the hearts and minds of the people, and for them a victory in a popular sport such as soccer often means much more than several medals in niche sports.

One scholar at Harvard University’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science (IQSS) suggested in a discussion with me that there might be a simple answer to explain the success or failure of countries, simply by measuring the different number of a country’s athletes in a particular sport. There might be cases that do prove this assumption. For example, Germany has the largest soccer association in the world (the German Football Association, DFB), and the men’s team won the soccer world championship in Brazil in 2014. The German women’s team is successful as well; winning two out of seven World Cups that took place from 1991 until 2015. However, when looking at the men’s World Cups, there are also examples of small countries that have few athletes, but also have tremendous success: Costa Rica, a country with a population of less than five million people, made it to the quarter-finals in Brazil in 2014.

Still, there could be another simple explanation that the population size matters at the Olympics. In the recent history of the Olympic Games, China and the United States have been the most successful countries. Thus are more populated countries more successful at the Games than less populated countries? However, there are numerous exceptions such as the GDR with its 16 million people, which was more successful than more populated countries (such as West Germany). Cuba, for example, is still outperforming other far more populated Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. China, the largest populated country in the world, has recently become an Olympic superpower, but why does India, a country with also more than one billion people, fail at the Games? Uruguay, a country with less than four million people, has won the men’s soccer World Cup and Olympics each twice, as well as a record 15 wins at the prestigious South American Championship, the Copa America. Uruguay has achieved all of this success despite being surrounded by large soccer powerhouses such as Brazil and Argentina.