

SPORT IN THE GLOBAL SOCIETY CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES



The Olympic Movement and the Sport of Peacemaking

Edited by Ramón Spaaij
and Cindy Burleson

ROUTLEDGE

The Olympic Movement and the Sport of Peacemaking

Edited by

Ramón Spaaij and Cindy Burleson



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The Olympic Movement and the Sport of Peacemaking

Sport and peacemaking have evolved. It is no longer the case that the Olympic Games and war games exist in isolation from each other. Increasingly, policymakers, peacekeepers, athletes, development workers, presidents of nations and others combine forces in an “integrated” approach towards peace. This approach is located not only within the broader, historically evolved Olympic Movement but also in relation to a newly emerged social movement which promotes development and peace through sport. This book critically examines the ways in which this development is being played out at global, national and local levels, particularly in relation to the Olympic Movement and initiatives such as the biennial Olympic Truce Resolution.

The volume constitutes a unique scholarly attempt to provide an in-depth comparative analysis of peacemaking in the context of the Olympic Movement. Through international comparison and empirically grounded case studies, the book provides an important new departure in the study of the social impact of the Olympic Movement and related peacemaking efforts. It discusses these issues from a range of academic disciplines, including history, sociology, political science, economics, geography, philosophy and international relations.

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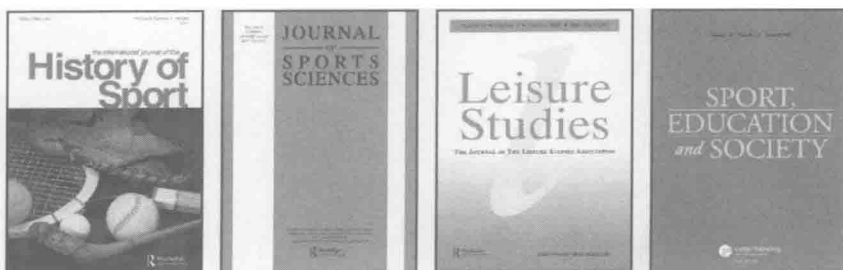
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Olympic rings of peace? The Olympic movement, peacemaking and intercultural understanding

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This article examines the historical and contemporary links between Olympism and peacemaking. It traces the development of thought and praxis in relation to the Olympic movement's aim and capacity to promote peaceful coexistence and intercultural understanding from the ancient Olympic Truce to the revival of the modern Olympic Games by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, to the current relationship between the Olympic movement and the United Nations peace agenda. The article highlights the perceived discrepancy between rhetoric and reality, and between theory and practice, as well as the persistent criticisms that have been levelled at the Olympic movement with regard to its peacemaking achievements. In so doing, it draws together the key issues and debates addressed in this collection of papers.

Introduction: from ancient practice to modern ideal

The attention paid to the association between sport, peacemaking and conflict resolution has increased in recent years. The 'sport for development and peace' (SDP) movement has emerged as a significant element within global civil society, and since the late 1990s this movement has experienced both sudden expansion and increasing differentiation and coordination.¹ The ideas and beliefs embodied within this movement regarding sport's capacity to promote peaceful coexistence have long historical roots. The earliest sign of the discursive connection between sport and peacemaking is probably the *Ekecheiria*, or Olympic Truce, which was at the heart of the ancient Olympic Games. For nearly 12 centuries, from 776 BC to 393 AD, the Olympic Games and the Olympic Truce went hand in hand against the backdrop of an almost perpetual state of war between Greece's warring city-states. The Olympic Truce was a period on either side of the Games during which competitors and other visitors were to be granted safe passage to and from Olympia.² The Truce was reportedly strictly enforced by Olympic officials, who imposed sanctions (i.e. fines) on violators. Although the Truce was occasionally violated,³ it has been argued that truce violations 'were conspicuous by their rarity' and that, overall, the effectiveness and the duration of the ancient Olympic Games and the Truce stand as 'a practical demonstration of endurance in the struggle for peace'.⁴ Indeed, it has been suggested that the intricate relationship between the Olympic Truce and the ancient Olympic Games (i.e. that it was impossible to have one without the other) shows that 'the Games were designed with peace in mind, to broker differences between warring states'.⁵ Some go as far to claim that the Olympic Truce is 'the longest-lived institution of international law in the history of the ancient and modern world'.⁶

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The nature and application of the ancient Olympic Truce, however, is often misinterpreted; in particular, the notion of a complete cessation of hostilities is disputed. The Olympic Truce was never a time when all Greek city-states ceased all wars and military hostilities. In fact, they often continued to wage war against one another throughout the Games.⁷ The Olympic Truce only forbade invasions of Olympia and prohibited anyone from stopping any athlete or spectator on the way to or from the Games, even if required to pass through a hostile state to make the journey.⁸ As Golden puts it:

[T]he truce was quite restricted, an armistice (*ekecheiria*), not a period of peace (*eirene*) throughout the Greek world; only open warfare by or against Elis was forbidden. Other wars could (and did) carry on – all that was intended was that they not disrupt the games.⁹

Thus, the Olympic Truce was not universally applied or observed throughout the Greek world. Furthermore, it was probably not based on the conception of war as morally repugnant, but rather on pragmatic reasons.¹⁰

It is important here to emphasize that the ancient Olympic Games contributed to and were associated with the very difference and conflict they are sometimes believed to address. Sport in ancient Greece provided a forum for the creation and reproduction of a 'discourse of difference', i.e. divisions among groups and the ordering of these groups into hierarchies.¹¹ In protecting the Olympic Games, the ancient Olympic Truce can be seen to have helped preserve and showcase the political power of the ruling classes that controlled the means of organized warfare, as well as the skills and spirit of warfare.¹² The dichotomy of war and peace was constantly present in ancient Olympic history, just as it has been in modern sport.¹³ Indeed, the history of the Olympic Truce corroborates the view that sport is 'an ambivalent phenomenon which, in principle, is open for use in connection with war *and* peace'.¹⁴

What, then, is the significance (if any) of the ancient Olympic Truce to the modern Olympic Games and their ability to contribute to a more peaceful world? Although the ancient Games clearly failed to eradicate war and violent conflict, it could be argued that they did help neutralize at least some of the political discord and contributed to the development of a common consciousness linking all Greek states.¹⁵ As Reid argues, the ancient Games' ability to promote an atmosphere of friendship and solidarity among otherwise diverse, and often warring, peoples may be their most remarkable legacy.¹⁶ In this respect, the ancient practice of Olympic Truce has become a modern ideal. In the present-day context, proponents of the Olympic Truce regard it as one of a range of instruments that can be used to help make peace more likely, notably as 'an example of what might be possible in the field of human conflict, if only there were sufficient opportunity and motivation for a truce pause'.¹⁷

In order to evaluate the ways in which the ancient practice of Olympic Truce has been revived within the modern Olympic movement as a global peacemaking tool, as well as the implications and impacts thereof, this paper examines the key ideas, concepts and practices that are associated with Olympism and peacemaking, which can be defined as the process of constituting peace as a condition of life, maintaining it and recovering it when it fails.¹⁸ The paper highlights the perceived discrepancy between rhetoric and reality, and between theory and practice, as well as the persistent criticisms that have been levelled at the Olympic movement with regard to its peacemaking achievements. In so doing, the overall aim of this paper is to outline the key issues and debates addressed in this collection of essays. First, however, it is necessary to consider how the notion of peace has come to be associated with the modern Olympic Games. To do so, we need to go back to the Olympic philosophy developed by the French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin in the late nineteenth century.

Peacemaking in modern Olympic history: the vision of Pierre de Coubertin

The modern Olympic Games have evolved into a global mega-event with great cultural, political, economic and social significance. More than 11,000 athletes from 204 countries competed in the 2008 Beijing Olympics watched by a global television audience of 4.7 billion viewers, which translates into approximately 70% of the world's population.¹⁹ Given its alleged status as 'the pre-eminent international cultural movement in global society'²⁰ and the 'greatest show on earth',²¹ the Games arguably afford a significant opportunity for international interaction and the development of a global consciousness. The founder of the modern Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin, had taken this mission of 'internationalism' very seriously, based on the belief that organized sport can be an agent of physical, social and cultural change.

Olympism, the philosophy developed by de Coubertin, emphasizes the role of sport in world development, international understanding, peaceful coexistence and social and moral education. It views sport as a means to educate and cultivate the individual, i.e. as a formative and developmental influence contributing to desirable characteristics of individual personality and social life.²² As an educator, de Coubertin recognized the holistic nature of the individual, as expressed in the idea of a perfect harmony between body, mind and spirit as *enrhythmy*. He believed that sport education could effectively contribute to the betterment of society.²³ Being a product of *fin de siècle* liberalism, de Coubertin emphasized values such as democracy, tolerance, solidarity, fairness, respect for others, freedom and excellence.

The issue of peace education through sport occupied a central position in de Coubertin's work. He was aware that education for peace started with the individual.²⁴ Even though in his early writings he saw the participating athletes as 'ambassadors of peace',²⁵ he also pointed out that the basis for mutual respect between human beings is not in the competition of elite athletes, but in the education for athleticism which starts with children. de Coubertin's notion of peace can be said to be one of 'peace education for mutual respect on the basis of strength for which the Olympic Games and elite sports are but a small portion'.²⁶ de Coubertin's plans thus extended beyond the organizing of Olympic Games every 4 years; he wanted mankind to experience sport in the harmonious interplay of physical and intellectual skills through Olympic education.

It has been argued that the originality of de Coubertin's philosophy consists not in reviving the idea of the Olympic Games, but in using this idea to establish an international movement with global pretensions.²⁷ The peace ideal that de Coubertin saw as an important part of Olympism drew a parallel between contemporary Europe and ancient Greece. Where the ancient Olympic Games had supposedly been a celebration of 'Greekness', the modern Olympic Games would be, de Coubertin hoped, a celebration of human progress and international understanding and peace.²⁸ International sports festivals were seen to afford a meeting place where prejudice and ignorance could be overcome, knowledge of other cultures and peoples be broadened and international understanding and global human solidarity be promoted.²⁹ de Coubertin believed that the Olympic Games provided an important contact point across cultures and thereby 'a potent, if indirect factor in securing universal peace' among nations.³⁰ In order to respect each other, de Coubertin argued, people must first know each other. For de Coubertin, mutual understanding was a fundamental value that could underpin the ideal of world peace.³¹ He regarded competing with each other a basis of knowledge and mutual understanding:

[T]he revived Olympic Games must give the youth of all the world a chance of a happy and brotherly encounter, which will gradually efface the people's ignorance of things which