

## **“Contradictory Values and Rules: The Case of Olympic Sports”**

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This paper examines the concepts of science, rules, and values in women’s sport using a case study of the eligibility requirements for participating in the Olympic Games.<sup>1</sup> Organized, high-performance sport remains a rarely studied intersection of science and values despite the two areas functioning as dominant, but separate, themes in the sport discourse. In this presentation I will argue that a tension between science and values in high-performance sport functions to promote an ethos that condones an exclusionary environment for women athletes and officials. To support this argument I will address the following topics: 1) the growth of sport science, 2) the values of sport, 3) a very short history of attitudes toward women in the Olympic movement, and 4) the continued devaluing of women’s sport.

### **1. The growth of sport science**

Science has played an increasingly large role in sport success since the cold war era. At that time, East Germany and the Soviet bloc countries took steps toward using sport science to facilitate and showcase their achievements, and superiorities, and a victory on the sports fields could be construed as a political victory as well. Several regimes established sport science institutes to determine optimal levels of exercise, nutritional and supplement intakes, and the use of drugs, particularly anabolic steroids, to facilitate success at sport. The most studied example is East Germany’s youth training centres, where over 1500 scientists administered experimental doses of the anabolic steroid Oral Turinabol to over 10,000 young athletes as young as 10 years old, without their consent, as part of state plan 14.25. Unsurprisingly, few, if any, ethicists were

consulted or initiated into the secrets of training high-performance athletes. What sport scientists were faced with, and continue to struggle with today, is how far we should go to create superior athletic performance and use medical technology for the purpose of enhancing athletic performance. A hot topic in doping research today focuses on the possibility of using gene transfer technology for performance enhancing, rather than therapeutic, purposes now that scientists have identified over 70 genes thought to contribute to athletic success. The average kinesiology or sport science department houses researchers committed to making human beings go ‘faster, stronger, and higher’ through the study of exercise and training, sport medicine, sport psychology, physiology, biomechanics, strategy and tactics, nutrition, supplementation, and even rest and recovery -- but without the use of banned performance-enhancing drugs and within the framework of fair play and respect for the game.

Sport scientists, particularly those well versed in pharmacology and genetics, have the knowledge to facilitate performance well beyond that which we see at world championships. For example, Carmelita Jeter runs the 100m race in 10.64 seconds – faster than any other woman in the world today – but it is widely accepted that if her coaches and trainers pumped her full of banned oxygen carrying and power stimulating drugs, so that she would surely fail a doping detection test, she could break the 10 second barrier. Thus, the goal in sport is to push human bodies to their limits, but only using methods and techniques considered fair, ethical, and in line with the rules and values of sport. The result is often a clash between science and values -- often antiquated values from Victorian-era Britain, which valued women as spectators rather than participants.

## 2. Olympic values

The tension between absolute performance and ethics in sport is at its strongest with respect to the Olympic Games. The Olympic movement has a long history and association with values and fair play, stemming back to its founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin's ideas about sportsmanship and developing a strong work ethic through sport. The term 'values' appears frequently in the Olympic Studies literature, where the word connotes the non-performance-related principles the organizers sought to promote through a cultural event focused on sport. Used in a very simplistic sense, the term 'values', in this context, means little more than the positive characteristics, feelings, and attitudes that the organizers hope the participants will gain through participation.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC), uses the term 'Olympism' to represent the non-athletic dimensions and values of the Olympic movement. Several scholars have tried to elucidate the meaning of Olympism and describe the values and virtues assumed to be inherent in the ideal. A review of the Olympic Studies literature helped identify four values that function as common conceptions of the concept of Olympism. These four values include a notion of fairness (which includes fair play, justice, and respect for the rules, traditions, opponents, and one's self), a call for equality and non-discrimination (that respects autonomy, human rights generally, and athletes' rights specifically), a focus on ethical behaviour (including the embodiment of virtues such as honesty, courage, excellence, and honour), and the use of education to promote peace and understanding through sport. Together I will take these four components to define the term 'Olympism' and represent the core values associated with the Olympics. These values are unique to the Olympics and are not associated with other sports

competitions that emphasize athletic achievement only. Moreover, it is these values that retain the high level of sponsorship the Olympics currently attracts, due to the public's perception of an association between the Olympics, values, and positive role models – even if this reputation isn't accurate or deserved.

### **3. A brief history of attitudes toward women in the Olympic movement.**

To understand the struggles women athletes face today, it is helpful to examine the experiences of women athletes throughout the modern Olympic era. At what became known as the 1st IOC Session, held at the Sorbonne in 1894 - 2 years before the first modern Olympics took place in Athens - the IOC members in attendance voted that they would be “responsible for the organisation of the Olympic Games [and have] the right to exclude persons that do not follow the rules.”<sup>2</sup> This lone rule functioned as the original eligibility code, and remained in force until the mid-twentieth century, when, due to the success of the Olympic Games, increasingly large numbers of athletes sought to participate, which created the need for more specific rules to restrict the size of the Games. The IOC sets a limit on the number of athletes that can compete in the Olympics for practical, environmental, and economic reasons. The current limit of 10,500 athletes also functions to ensure the size of the festivals does not exceed the capacities of host city organizing committees to stage the events.

Evidence of Pierre de Coubertin's desire to restrict the Olympic Games to male competitors comes from the minutes of the 19th IOC Session, held in Antwerp in 1920, where Coubertin attempted to pass a motion to bar women from competing. In response to Coubertin's question, “Shall we let women take part in the Games?” the majority of members voted in the affirmative, thereby failing to give Coubertin the support he sought

to end women's participation.<sup>3</sup> Coubertin wanted to restrict the Olympic Games to male athletes because he thought that women should be spectators rather than participants,<sup>4</sup> and that women were neither natural nor attractive athletes – a view that unfortunately still remains in some circles a century later. The Olympic program included women's events because of the persistence of the local organizing committees that fought to add women's events, not at the recommendation of the IOC.<sup>5</sup> The eventual inclusion of women's events on the Olympic program was not to promote equality, but was instead was a strategic action motivated by the desire to prevent Alice Milliat's Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale from continuing to promote the growth of Women's Olympic Games.<sup>6</sup> During the interwar years, women in many countries participating at the Olympics won the vote, the right to hold public office, and the right to freely participate in sports; however, the IOC was slow to respond to these changes and remains an organization with more than 80% male membership in leadership roles.

Steps toward increasing the participation of female athletes and officials at Olympic Games followed after Coubertin's term as president of the IOC ended in 1925. Some scholars argue that a contributing factor in Coubertin's decision to step down was the inclusion of a limited number of women's events in the 1928 Olympics, which is corroborated in a letter Coubertin sent to the male athletes competing in Amsterdam warning them of the dangers involved in allowing women to compete in future Olympic Games.<sup>7</sup> Yet the chilly atmosphere for female participants did not end with Coubertin, and the male bias previously exemplified by Coubertin remained after his retirement.<sup>8</sup>

Substantial modification to the *Olympic Charter* took place in 1980 after Juan Antonio Samaranch took over the IOC presidency and sought to increase revenues by

eliminating many out-dated rules. In the flurry of changes Samaranch implemented, the IOC opted to delegate to the sports federations the decision of whether or not women could compete in the Olympic events falling under each federation's control. Prior to this change, Article 29 of the *Olympic Charter* stipulated the events in which women were 'permitted' to participate. The IOC's decision to bestow upon the federations the authority to determine women's participation presented the federations with not only more decision-making responsibility but also rid itself of the burden of eliminating sex inequality in the Olympic Games. The IOC promotes inclusiveness and tolerance in the *Olympic Charter* while at the same time enabling a male bias to continue.

#### **4. The continued devaluing of women's sport**

While most Olympic rules are acceptable and do not contradict an athlete's pursuit of the Olympic values, problematic rules in force at the Olympic Games that mandate the differential and inequitable treatment of men and women, and exclude intersex athletes, remain. Other problematic rules involve paternalistic requirements toward adult athletes that limit their options in participating, and rules that require athletes to wear uniforms that may fail to respect their freedom, beliefs, and values if they wish to compete; however, these themes are beyond the scope of this discussion.

Focusing on rules related to enforced differences among men's and women's participation, I want to illustrate a few rules contained in the *Olympic Charter* that contribute to maintaining the Olympic Games as an arena that perpetuates sex inequality.

A starting point in examining the current status of women in the Olympic Movement involves taking a simple, quantitative approach and considering the number of events in which women participate, the nature or duration of those events, the

opportunities available to women, and the language used by the IOC and the International Federations to refer to men and women. While the program of events contested at the Olympic Games is much less unbalanced than it was in previous decades, and many casual fans believe gender justice has been achieved, equality of opportunity is not present. Movements promoting women's equality and equity in sports precipitated the move from an Olympic program in 1896, which offered 10 sports where 245 men competed for 50 gold medals, to current participation levels. Of the 302 events included on the 2008 Olympic program in Beijing, 165 were for men, 127 were for women, and only 10 were mixed events open to women and men.<sup>9</sup> From a quantitative perspective, the IOC has taken steps toward closing the gap between the number of men's and women's events contested; however, considerable modifications are still necessary to achieve an equitable program of events.

A content analysis of the rulebooks and policy documents from the International Sport Federations produced concrete examples of how individual federations interpret the eligibility rules outlined by the IOC in ways that can normalize and condone an exclusionary environment for women athletes and officials. The continued absence of women from not only specific events but entire Olympic disciplines, such as ski jumping and Nordic combined, is troubling. Women's boxing has not yet been included on an Olympic program, although it appeared as a demonstration sport in 1904, and the IOC has indicated three women's weight categories will be added for the 2012 Games in London. Should the proposed addition occur, the women's boxing discipline will be much smaller than the men's, which is scheduled to offer 10 weight categories in London. Other incongruities can be found in athletics, flatwater canoe-kayak, rowing,

freestyle wrestling, and shooting, among others, which include women's and men's events, but offer additional men's events without including an equitable option for female competitors. However, an Olympic program that offers an identical program of women's and men's events does not ensure equal numbers of men and women will participate; nor does it ensure that women will be able to compete in events of their choice. For example, the hockey tournaments include 276 men and 160 women ice hockey players; and the luge federation administers luge events for 40 men, 30 women, and 20 doubles that almost exclusively consist of pairs of two men, although women are officially able to compete in the "2-man luge" event.<sup>10</sup> In addition, several Olympic disciplines offer both men's events and women's events but include different durations and distances. The skating federation incorporates subtle differences in the men's and women's speed skating and short track speed skating events that result in the women's events covering shorter distances compared to the men's events. The two longest women's events cover 3,000 m and 5,000 m whereas the two longest men's races cover 5,000 m and 10,000 m.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, all of the women's biathlon events are 2.5 to 5 km shorter than the men's events, and the distance between the start and finish lines of the luge run must be 200m longer for men's events than women's.<sup>12</sup> A program of events that includes women's events that are shorter in duration and distance than the men's events implies value judgments about women's skill and fitness.<sup>13</sup> Sport influences some people's assumptions about women's value as human beings, and the organization of sports can create and amplify gender differences.<sup>14</sup> Offering shorter events for women perpetuates the assumption that women are weaker and therefore inferior human beings.<sup>15</sup>

Gender stereotypes that disvalue women can be a factor in maintaining sex inequality and inequity. Including a women's program that fails to offer the longest and most grueling events within a discipline perpetuates the stereotype that women are too delicate to compete against men and are not the ideal athletes sport scientists create in their labs. An Olympic program that includes single-sex events and competitions that prevent women from demonstrating levels of fitness, skill, and mastery equal to men's levels violates the *Olympic Charter's* statement that discrimination based on sex is intolerable in the Olympic movement. The IOC's argument that women's participation levels at the elite level are too low to warrant including the missing women's disciplines on the Olympic program is troubling for several reasons. These problems include indifference to inequity, the condoning of hegemonic dynamics, and a failure to put the values and ideals of the Olympic Games into practice.

In addition to sex-specific rules, several rulebooks contain gender-exclusive language, invoking expressions and phrases that unnecessarily differentiate between athletes. In the early years of the IOC, the use of gender-exclusive language and false generics was not only accepted, but was the norm in official and academic writing. Very few policy documents at the beginning of the twentieth century addressed women as autonomous individuals or applied directly to women, which enabled language reflecting the masculine gender exclusively to flourish uncontested in the *Olympic Charter*.<sup>16</sup> Until the 1980s the *Charter* included the statement, "No discrimination is allowed against any country or person on grounds of race, religion or political affiliation," without prohibiting discrimination based on sex or gender. Currently, an asterisk in the introduction of the

*Olympic Charter* acknowledges the use of the masculine gender throughout the rules and by-laws contained therein, noting:

the masculine gender used in relation to any physical person... shall, unless there is a specific provision to the contrary, be understood as including the feminine gender.<sup>17</sup>

Similar statements appear in the rulebooks of many International Federations, although a few, notably the federations for volleyball and luge, have updated their documents to eliminate unnecessarily gendered language. As many authors have argued, systematic exclusion of one gender from formal statements and policies perpetuates the linguistic and cultural privileging of men over women.<sup>18</sup> Problems also arise when rulebooks use predominantly gender-neutral language but revert to masculine generics to refer to positions of power and prestige. For example, the track and field federation refers to medical professionals as “he” in the same clause that references athletes neutrally in stipulating that the “Medical Delegate shall also have the authority to arrange for the determination of the gender of an athlete should he judge that to be desirable.”<sup>19</sup> I would love to discuss the implication of the IAAF’s intersex and transgender policies, but the issue falls beyond the scope of this presentation.

Gender-exclusive language in sport is troubling because it reproduces, and continues to normalize, the faulty assumption that if a person is a president, medical director, referee, or holds a similar position of authority, that person must be a man. Furthermore, it remains common to hear reference to “basketball players” and “lady basketball players” when speaking of male and female athletes,<sup>20</sup> and the skating federation still bestows upon the top male skater the title “World Speed Skating Champion” while referring to the top female skater as the “Lady World Speed Skating

Champion.”<sup>21</sup> Language of this nature contains and upholds the assumption that male achievement in sport is the norm.<sup>22</sup> Linguistic reform can help reduce gender inequality in sport by eliminating outdated and unjust rules that unnecessarily differentiate men’s and women’s athletic experiences. One would not be remiss in accusing the high-performance sport world of being one of the last bastions of white male privilege.

The rules in the *Olympic Charter* and rulebooks of the IFs that stipulate separate and diverse requirements for women’s and men’s events, but do not do so comparably or equitably, are at odds with the Olympic values of equality, non-discrimination, and tolerance that respect athletes’ rights and autonomy. The IOC’s failure to implement its own statement that gender discrimination is not tolerated in the Olympic movement is intolerable. In abandoning the amateur rules that preserved the spirit and intention of Coubertin’s vision, the IOC demonstrated that rules are open to interpretation and revision.<sup>23</sup> Modifying outdated rules to eradicate sex and gender inequality from sport would help create an atmosphere of inclusion that respects and values all athletes. In its *Charter*, the IOC grants itself the final “authority of last resort on any question concerning the Olympic Games,”<sup>24</sup> and is thus complicit in tolerating inequality at the Olympic Games by failing to require that sports federations include fair opportunities for all athletes. A program of events that offers more than 40 events for men in which a comparable women’s event is not contested is not acceptable. Furthermore, claiming to prohibit gender discrimination in a document that uses masculine language exclusively is unconvincing. Continuing to support the ‘bigger, faster, stronger’ view, where strength and speed are admired, and sport scientists work to optimize the human body, sustains the tension between science and values, which translates into an exclusionary environment

for women athletes and officials. This view endorses the celebration of machine-like bodies that mimic the stereotypical ideal male athlete, and excludes women unless they opt to conform to these unrealistic expectations.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> This paper stems from the fourth chapter of my doctoral dissertation. See Teetzel, “A Philosophical Analysis of Olympic Eligibility, Values, and Auxiliary Rules.”
- <sup>2</sup> “Minutes, 1<sup>st</sup> IOC Session, Paris – 1894,” 3.
- <sup>3</sup> “Minutes, 19th IOC Session, Antwerp – 1920,” 97.
- <sup>4</sup> Guttmann, *The Olympics*, 823.
- <sup>5</sup> Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, 210. See also Wamsley and Pfister, “Olympic Men and Women,” 121.
- <sup>6</sup> Kidd, “The Women’s Olympic Games,” 1; Wamsley, “Laying Olympism to Rest,” 235.
- <sup>7</sup> Lennartz, *Langlauf durch die olympische*, 443.
- <sup>8</sup> Chase, “A Policy Analysis of Gender Inequality,” 35.
- <sup>9</sup> Chapelet and Kübler-Mabbott, *The International Olympic Committee and the Olympic System*, 63-64.
- <sup>10</sup> See IAAF, *Competition Rules 2008*; IIHF, *Official Rule Book 2006-2010*; and FIL, *International Luge Regulations Artificial Track*.
- <sup>11</sup> ISU, *Special Regulations & Technical Rules – Speed Skating and Short Track Speed Skating*, 14, 76.
- <sup>12</sup> FIL, *International Luge Regulations Artificial Track*, 42.
- <sup>13</sup> Postow, “Women and Masculine Sports,” 51-58. See also McDongagh and Pappano, *Playing with the Boys*, 12.
- <sup>14</sup> McDongagh and Pappano, *Playing with the Boys*, x.
- <sup>15</sup> McDongagh and Pappano, *Playing with the Boys*, 7.
- <sup>16</sup> See Hall, *Sport and Gender*, 2.
- <sup>17</sup> IOC, *Olympic Charter 2007*, 9.
- <sup>18</sup> Kramarae and Treichler, “Words on a Feminist Dictionary,” 150.
- <sup>19</sup> See Rule 113 in IAAF, *Competition Rules 2008*, 81, 83-88.
- <sup>20</sup> See Schulz, “The Semantic Derogation of Woman,” 134-147. See also Kramarae and Treichler, “Words on a Feminist Dictionary,” 150.
- <sup>21</sup> ISU, *Constitution and General Regulations*, 112.
- <sup>22</sup> Spender, “Extracts from Man Made Language,” 106.
- <sup>23</sup> Beamish and Ritchie, “From Chivalrous ‘Brothers-in-Arms’,” 367.
- <sup>24</sup> IOC, *Olympic Charter 2007*, 19.