

# SPORT AND POLITICS: THE (GROSS) ANATOMY OF THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

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*'We can all rejoice about this German victory',  
President Heuss told a cheering crowd of 80,000,  
'but nobody should believe that good kicking is  
good politics.'*<sup>1</sup>

The subject which has come to be identified under the heading 'Sport and Politics' is a vast and complicated one. In trying to gain a better understanding of the subject there may be many useful approaches, but perhaps it is best to start with a familiar slogan 'Keep politics out of sport', which is the battle-cry for one side of a common dispute. Probably the most notorious utterance of this was by Avery Brundage who said, on the occasion of the 1956 Olympics, when six nations withdrew from the games in protest over the Hungarian invasion and the Suez crisis:

By their decisions these countries show that they are unaware of one of our most important principles, namely that sport is completely free of politics.

Natan, representing the other half of the dispute, accused Brundage of thereby showing (yet again) his "colossal ignorance of the interrelationship between sport and politics", supporting this accusation by arguing, with the help of a long list of examples, that sport has become everywhere "a propaganda weapon in world affairs", "a sop thrown to the warmonger in man".<sup>3</sup> I find this dispute rather barren, because the two opposing arguments, as well as being inadequate in themselves, do not seem to meet. If, as McIntosh correctly reminds us, Brundage's utterance is not a statement of fact but "a clumsily worded and misleading statement of principle",<sup>4</sup> then the statement, by Natan, that his small selection of examples gives us proof that those who believe that sport has nothing to do with politics are deceived, is largely irrelevant to Brundage's claim. The most that the examples can show is that the ideal has frequently not been upheld. Sometimes this factual claim is

strengthened by arguing that even in the ancient Olympics, sport was not free of politics, and that of course the Olympic ideology has a political objective for sport anyway, in seeking to foster international understanding and goodwill. These statements, assuming they are true, may give rise to stronger doubts about the practicality of the ideal, but they leave untouched its worth.

To meet Brundage's principle head-on it is necessary to show either that it is not a worthwhile ideal, or that it cannot, in some sense, be achieved; either because we do not know how to keep sport free of politics, or because we are too weak to keep sport free of politics, or because it is logically impossible to keep sport free of politics since the concepts are logically connected. If the principle involves a contradiction (like the wish both for ever-increasing wages and for a stable economy) then there is little point in wondering how it might be achieved. However in the other two cases, of weakness or ignorance, it then becomes a matter of judgment about the worth of the ideal in relation to the strength of the opposing forces.

In order to decide whether, and in what sense, then, sport and politics are inseparable, it is necessary to examine the mechanisms by which they are connected, and this is the main focus in this paper. But there remains the matter of the worth of the ideal. The ineptness of the realists attacking the ideal has been matched by that of the idealists in explaining why sport should be free of politics. Usually it is claimed that the intrusion of politics interferes with the pursuit of their own political ideal, international peace and goodwill. This equates sport with Olympism and allows the Orwellian response that sport creates not international peace and goodwill, but chauvinistic aggression.<sup>5</sup> Obviously this changes the nature of the dispute from one about the desirability of protecting sport from the interference of politics, to one of the likelihood of different outcomes. It remains to be said clearly how politics may interfere with sport (as distinct from Olympism), and this also is a task in this paper.

Obviously it would be, in some measure, a counter to the claim that politics interferes with sport, to argue that sport benefits from its political associations. Regardless of the truth of such a claim, the mixing of sport and politics might well be an

ideal espoused by the world media agencies because it is certainly in their interests to generate public interest in sport by fostering its political significance. How many people would be interested in the highest levels of track and field athletics or swimming if the athletes were not identifiable as representatives of nation states? Nationalistic identification is the simplest mechanism to swell the ranks of the spectators.

Even the athletes might believe that sport benefitted from its association with politics. Thereby the extent of their fame and the amount of their financial support from governments are increased. The extent to which sport benefits from the association with politics has not been discussed much in the literature and it is not examined in this paper, although it would need to be included in a full discussion of sport and politics.

What has been said so far should be enough to show that the relationship between sport and politics is in need of some clarification, and to justify spending some time on the following basic questions:

1. In what ways does politics interfere with sport?
2. In what sense is the ideal 'keep politics out of sport' (or keep sport out of politics) unrealistic?
3. What is the nature of the mechanisms by which they are related?
4. Is sport worthwhile? (in its ideal form) (or in its polluted, decayed form: even 'war without weapons' might be a good thing even if it is no longer sport).

Only questions 1, 2 and 3 are discussed in what follows but it will become clear that much might depend on the kind of answer given to question 4.

In order to describe the possible forms of interference of politics in sport it is first necessary to describe sport clearly. In this paper 'sport' is taken, in Keating's sense, as athletics.<sup>6</sup> Athletics is physical activity in which the pursuit of excellence, and the agonistic principle are the guiding rules. The activity is competitive and success is dependent on effort within a set of abilities specified by the rules, which also are designed to create

equality of opportunity. As Keating has emphasized, the athletic endeavour demands sacrifice, dedication and training. Winning is taken as a sign of excellence provided that certain conditions are fulfilled: the competitors must be worthy, the rules must be obeyed and the victory must not be due to chance. The basic purpose of the athlete is to do his best - achieve his potential, which of course he develops in training. The way he approaches this personal limit is by trying to be the best among people with a similar purpose. Striving to win among like minded people is a mechanism which is the most likely means to bring the athlete near to his limit.

Santayana argued that athletics "unites vitality with disinterestedness"<sup>7</sup> and I have argued elsewhere<sup>8</sup> that disinterestedness is a desirable, if not necessary, basic condition for the continued pursuit of excellence, because of the strong possibility of failure when the athlete is seeking his limits. Any fear of failure means a certain reticence about committing oneself to the necessary effort. The athlete must dare, and he is less inclined to dare if he is aware of important consequences which depend on the outcome.

Disinterestedness, under its other name of amateurism, is central also to the philosophy of Olympism which usually surrounds the notion of athletics outlined above. It is important though to distinguish between athletics and Olympism; the latter provides an educational and political context for the former. Athletics however could exist in other ideological contexts which provided a different basis for ascribing value to the pursuit of excellence.

There is another component of pursuit of excellence that certainly characterized ancient Greek athletics, and which may be an essential element: fame arising from the recognition of the excellence. According to Morford and Clark an important feature of the agonistic society was the acclaim for the heroic deeds, from one's colleagues.<sup>9</sup> Later as athletics replaced agonistic battle as the main expression of the agonistic spirit, the recognition was more widely based, in the general populace of spectators, rather than in the elite warrior caste. In modern terms the athlete has both the recognition of fellow athletes, and the acclaim of the spectators. While the former may be an unavoidable

component of the athletic endeavour, the latter is by no means necessary, however much it may function as a source of motivation.

In the modern world, athletics, in the sense described, is conducted at its highest levels for the most part in an international context under the Olympic philosophy. This means that it is usually representative athletics; and the representation is of nation-states. Of course not all sport at the highest levels is organized in this way (e.g., professional golf and tennis) but most is, and certainly the sport which is most intertwined with politics is of this kind. This has no justification in the theory of the athletic endeavour itself; it is rather a consequence of the Olympic objective of promoting competitive sport in each of its member states.

Judging from the published discussions of the interrelationship of sport and politics, there is a vast range of different kinds of relationship. Some of these are listed in Table 1. Not all of them can be said to constitute an interference with sport, nor do all involve international representative athletics, which is the focus of the rest of this paper. Some of the commonly cited examples seem to have little to do with sport in any significant way at all (e.g., 'the Munich massacre').

Politics can be said to interfere with athletics when non-athletic factors arising from the exercise of power between groups adversely affects the pursuit of excellence. Usually this interference is the result of governments using some part of the athletic system for non-athletic objectives of their own. It seems that there are two central ways in which the political use of athletics significantly interferes with the athletic endeavour: winning as a sign of excellence is compromised, and there is a loss of disinterestedness. In addition, the use of athletics for other political purposes may be detrimental to the pursuit of the Olympic political objective of international goodwill and understanding, or indeed to any other value which gives athletics its importance. This kind of interference, which is not discussed further in this paper may affect the athletic endeavour indirectly, by undermining its importance, but it does not impinge directly on the structure of the athletic system. For example if, as Orwell argues, representative athletics fosters 'orgies of hatred' rather

TABLE I: POLITICS AND SPORT - some relationships described in the literature

Type of Relationship <sup>10</sup>	Alleged Examples
Tool for diplomatic recognition	G.D.R. diplomats in track-suits 1960s <sup>11</sup> Ping-pong diplomacy (China-U.S.A.) <sup>12</sup>
Vehicle of ideology and propaganda	1936 Olympics <sup>13</sup> U.S.A. in early Olympics <sup>14</sup> U.S.S.R. <sup>15</sup> South Africa <sup>16</sup>
Focus for publicity	Staging Olympics
Source of prestige	Olympic victories by Kenyans, Ethiopians Uruguay winning World Cup <sup>17</sup> GANEFU - Indonesia <sup>18</sup>
Release of aggressive tendencies (safety valve)	U.S.S.R. - U.S.A. Track meets <sup>19</sup>
Development of mutual understanding	U.S.S.R. - U.S.A. Track meets, <sup>20</sup> Aust. - Eng. Cricket, Transnational administrative links <sup>21</sup>
Means of protest	Boycott: Moscow Olympics South Africa U.S.S.R. withdrawal from track meet 1966 Demonstrations: Black Power Salutes, Mexico Olympics
Development of conflict, aggression	Honduras -El Salvador soccer war 1969 <sup>22</sup> 'Body-line series' Eng. - Aust. cricket Underarm bowling Aust. - N.Z.
Political Education	Growth of Sports metaphor <sup>23</sup> G.R.R. <sup>24</sup>
Development of national consciousness, morale	Sport in African countries <sup>25</sup> S.E. Asia <sup>26</sup> Cuba <sup>27</sup>
Unification	Asian Games <sup>28</sup>
Social Control	Athletics in U.S.A. <sup>29</sup> Sport for all <sup>30</sup>
Government funding for sport	Various countries <sup>31</sup>
Politicians as fans, athletes	President Nixon: No. 1 Fan <sup>32</sup>
Tool for gaining favour	Indonesia excluding Israel and Taiwan <sup>33</sup> from 4th Asian Games

than 'goodwill between nations'<sup>34</sup> this may be counted as contrary to what is perhaps regarded as the primary justification for athletics. Alternatively if, like Goodhart and Chataway one believes that "in describing international sport as war minus the shooting", Orwell was, indeed, advancing its ultimate justification<sup>35</sup> then the intrusion of politics is not a detrimental one, providing, as it does, a safety valve.

Another example of this kind of dispute in the area of the value of athletics, as distinct from athletics itself, is found in the socialist criticism of athletics as dehumanizing, alienating work<sup>36</sup> against which Lenk has argued.<sup>37</sup> Petrie summarizes this dispute when he says:

Attempts to magnify the attachment of politically important instrumental value to sport denigrates athletic effort and reduces the phenomenological significance of Self substantiation through physical excellence.

What counts as political interference, or any other kind of interference, here, depends on the justificatory ideological framework, and discussion of the range of possibilities is outside the scope of this paper. Attention in this paper is restricted to the cases of interference with internal structure of the athletic endeavour as distinct from its value. Two cases of this kind of interference are identified here.

A common form of political interference in sport is the boycott, which results in some worthy competitors being excluded for non-athletic reasons. As a result of this, the validity of winning as a sign of excellence is reduced, with a resulting loss in the athletic prestige for the victor. While of course the political significance of the victory may escape this blemish, this exclusion of worthy competitors severely undermines the value of the contest for the members of athletic fraternity with their necessary desire to seek out the best opponents to assist in their quest for their personal limits.

A second common form of political interference in sport arises from the widespread tendency to attach a symbolic value to victory in the contest. Victory is made politically significant, as an indication of national superiority and prestige. Conversely

defeat is a symbol of national inferiority and a cause for shame. To attribute non-athletic significance to victory in this way is to increase the psychological pressure on athletes and coaches and officials to break the rules, both quantitative and qualitative.<sup>39</sup> Because, usually only victory has any significance politically, the pressure to win is increased, without a corresponding increase in the pressure to abide by the rules (as distinct from a pressure not to be discovered cheating), and the pressure to avoid defeat is increased. This latter pressure has the tendency to reduce the willingness of the athlete to dare, as he must if he wishes to approach his limits. All in all the athletic endeavour becomes distorted, and the nature of the activity changes.

Having described then in what senses politics may be said to interfere with sport, we are now in a position to consider the sense in which the ideal 'keep politics out of sport' is unrealistic. This can be done by examining the nature of the mechanisms by means of which these interferences occur. From an understanding of the mechanisms, a judgment about the possibility of separating sport and politics, can be made. On the basis of the discussion so far, consideration is given here only to the mechanisms involved in those relationships of sport and politics which have been identified as constituting interference in the athletic endeavour itself. It will not be possible, in this paper, to do more than identify and comment briefly on the following factors which make interference possible: the competitive structure, the representative structure, the identification of athlete and state, and the 'ideological innocence' of sport.

Probably the most basic fact about athletics which makes political interference possible is that it is a contest with, usually, a winner. In general the winner is unambiguously identified and acclaimed. The winner provides thereby a clear and already prestigious vehicle for any extra-athletic significance which might be added by those who wish to use sport for ulterior motives.

A second feature of athletics which makes political interference possible is the fact that in many of the highest level competitions athletes represent nation states. This feature does not of course arise from the nature of the athletic endeavour

itself, but from the Olympic system under which most competition is conducted. It was part of de Coubertin's vision that athletes would be representatives of their nations, being the best which has been produced from the national system of competitive sport in their countries. As Espy argues, "given the organizational structure of the Games, politics is not really an intrusion but is very much a part of the Games and of sport itself? The growth of nation states and the politics of their relationships provided the basis for the growth of international sport. Espy argues that therefore "the only way to divorce politics from international sport is to alter the organizational structure of sport".<sup>40</sup> Shaw & Shaw distinguished between an international and transnational organization of sports, the latter being a system for providing competition at the highest levels, but not based on nation states.<sup>41</sup>

Because the athletes represent states, inferences are made, from the performances of the athletes, about their states. Examples of such uses abound in the literature. Kanin argues that "the United States was the first country to advertise itself through its victories in the modern political sport system".<sup>42</sup> At the Olympic Games in 1900, the Amateur Athletic Union hoped to demonstrate to the Europeans the advantages of the American training system, and also of the American way of life. It was with pride that the strapping republican youths who took time away from their useful occupations in order to compete, but who worked at rigorous training programmes, defeated the aristocratic gentlemen-of-leisure athletes of Europe. "Such superiority of human resources demonstrated that America was the society of the future".<sup>43</sup>

Later the U.S.S.R. followed the lead of the U.S.A. and began quite explicitly to use sport as a vehicle for the spread of propaganda. Victories are taken as a sign of national vitality and prestige. Riordan quotes from a Soviet sports book which states as the first of three political tasks for Soviet sports organisations:

to ensure top performance by Soviet athletes abroad as a means of widely publicising our attainments in building communism and in promoting physical culture and sport and to gain a prominent position internationally in the major sports.<sup>44</sup>

While "for the spectator it is a short perceptual step from the comparison of athletes to that of the cultures they represent" (18:2)<sup>45</sup> it is by no means clear that the step is a legitimate one. As in any case of inferring characteristics of a population from the characteristics of a sample, the validity of the inference depends on the sense in which the sample represents the population, which in turn depends on how the sample was selected. It seems clear that athletes from a system of talent identification, sports schools, special training and a full-time commitment to athletics, are representatives of a very different kind to those from a system, such as that envisaged by de Coubertin, where the best athletes emerge naturally from a broadly-based pyramid of mass participation. With the extreme specialization of modern athletics, it seems that all that can be inferred from victories is that the represented nation gives some priority to the elite performer. "To seriously believe that running, jumping and kicking a ball are tests of national virtue" is quite unjustified.<sup>46</sup>

In the political uses of sport the representative basis of the organization works to enhance, legitimately or not, the process of identifying with the athlete. The process of identification described by Heinila,<sup>47</sup> makes the spectator rather than the athlete the chief actor in international athletics.<sup>48</sup> The combination of the feelings of nationalism, based on the representative structure, and the natural production of a winner in the contest, give rise to the nationalistic identification with supreme athletes. There may be many bases for identification with athletes but it is clear that identification on the basis of nationality is one of the most obvious and simple. It can provide an interest for spectators, even in the absence of any real appreciation of the activity itself. As Goodhart and Chataway say:

They are drawn to it not so much by the mere spectacle, by the ritual, or by an appreciation of the skills involved, but because they identify themselves with their representatives.<sup>49</sup>

Little seems to be known about the conditions which make it likely for spectators to identify with the athletes. Heinila says that they identify with an athlete or team in which they believe they have something in common, and obviously state representation provides a ready vehicle. In addition it is easier to identify with

a team than an individual athlete.<sup>50</sup> Obviously government funding may provide the basis for some sense of identification because the spectators' taxes support the athlete. What Heinila calls 'the totalization and industrialization of sport' may increase the numbers of citizens who feel that they have some connection with the athlete, "because they contribute to the emergence of the bureaucratic organizations with hierarchical structures and enlarging staff of production experts like coaches, sport scientists, physicians, test-, recruitment-, and public relations-specialists, managers etc".<sup>51</sup>

It would be interesting to compare the sources of identification among different groups of spectators, such as retired athletes, scholars of the activity, and spectators ignorant of the activity. For the time being however it is clear that nationality provides the chief source of identification, and thereby contributes to many of the political uses of sport.

The fourth and final factor which allows political interference with sport is what Bouet has called 'the ideological innocence of sport',<sup>52</sup> or what Edwards has called sport's 'liquid quality'.<sup>53</sup> Several other writers have referred, in different ways, to the fact that a sporting victory may be given whatever meaning anyone, or any state, chooses (ideological appropriation):

the effectiveness of sport as a foreign policy tool derives from its essential neutrality<sup>54</sup> and sport is safe because it is peripheral to the international political system<sup>55</sup> and it is superficially apolitical and readily understandable.<sup>56</sup>

The fact that a sporting victory, or loss, indeed even the holding of a contest, can be interpreted in whatever way anyone chooses, makes it a particularly useful tool in the international diplomacy where, it seems much more importance is attached to the short and long term effects of what is said, rather than to its truth. So if one nation claims that its victory indicates a superior way of life, it is much better to resist challenging the truth of that inference, because if it is accepted, unchallenged, then in the future the defeated nation, when it has a victory, will be able to make the same claim, without having it challenged. If the impact of the claim at the time of one's own victory is

likely to be more significant than the impact of the opposition's claim at the time of their victory, strategically it seems better to let them have their say.<sup>57</sup> Since it is likely that in the joy of victory a nation is likely to be able to ignore the frailty of the link between national virtue and athletic success, whereas at the time of the opponent's victory privately it is known that their sporting victory really indicates nothing significant, this seems not an unreasonable strategy, made possible because of the fact that basically the athletic victory needs to be interpreted.

The fact that sport is basically outside the international political system makes it a valuable means of testing the political climate between two countries. The consequences of the rejection of a proposed contest are much less serious than the consequences of the rejection of a formal diplomatic initiative. An athletic rejection can be easily explained away.

These then seem to be the elements of athletics which make political interference (and other relationships of politics) with athletics possible. While it seems that the separation of sport and politics is by no means logically impossible, one could not be very confident of any significant change in practice. Because of the superficial analysis here of the relationship it is premature to draw any firm conclusions about the main factors inhibiting the separation of sport and politics. However it seems likely that there are three main obstacles. The first is financial cost. The huge cost of staging international athletics contests and the materialism of athletes make almost inevitable that there will need to be vested interests, including those of governments. It is much easier for governments to devote money to something of national significance. The second obstacle is the international organization of sport, based on nation states, rather than a transnational organization. The third obstacle is the media, in whose interests it is that there be as many spectators as possible. While nationalism remains the simplest way of promoting interest and conflict, there is little hope for any significant change.

NOTES:

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15. J. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society* (London: Cambridge University Press 1977).
  16. R.E. Lapchick, 'Apartheid Sport: South Africa's Use of Sport on its Foreign Policy' in Lowe, Kanin and Strenk, *op.cit.*, pp.369-385.
  17. Goodhart and Chataway, *op.cit.*
  18. S. Sie, 'Sport and Politics: The Case of the Asian Games and the Ganefo' in Lowe, Kanin, Strenk, *op.cit.*, pp.279-296, and S. Sie, 'The Problem of Sport and Nation Building in South East Asia' in Lowe, Kannin and Strenk, *op.cit.*, pp.551-561.
  19. Goodhart and Chataway, *op.cit.* and D.B. Kanin, 'Superpower Sport in Cold War and Detente' in Lowe, Kanin and Strenk, *op.cit.*
  20. Kanin, *op.cit.*
  21. Goodhart and Chataway, *op.cit.*
  22. R. Espy, *The Politics of the Olympic Games* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
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31. J. Thirer , 'Politics and Protest and the Olympic Games , in  
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33. Sie, *op.cit.*
34. Orwell, *op.cit.*, p.41.
35. Goodhart and Chataway, *op.cit.*, p.158.
36. See Hoch *op.cit.*, Balbus *op.cit.* and J. Brohm, *Sport - A Prison of  
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54. Espy, *op.cit.*, p.4.
55. Lowe, Kanin and Strenk, *op.cit.*, p.V.
56. Riordan, *op.cit.*, p.348.
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