



Olympic and Paralympic Analysis 2024: Mega events, media, and the politics of sport

Early reflections from leading academics

Edited by:
Daniel Jackson, Alina Bernstein, Michael Butterworth, Younghan Cho,
Danielle Sarver Coombs, Michael Devlin, Ana Carolina Vimieiro

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Introduction. Paradox in Paris: Studies in contrast at the 2024 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games

Prof Daniel Jackson

Professor of Media and Communications at Bournemouth University.
Email: jacksond@bournemouth.ac.uk

Dr Alina Bernstein

Senior lecturer at the School of Communication of the Academic College of Management School of media studies and the Steve Tisch School of Film and Television, Tel Aviv University, Israel.
Email: alinabernstein@gmail.com

Dr Michael L. Butterworth

Director of the Center for Sports Communication & Media, Governor Ann W. Richards Chair for the Texas Program in Sports and Media, and Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin.

Prof Younghan Cho

Professor of Korean Studies in the Graduate School of International and Area Studies at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies.

Dr Danielle Sarver Coombs

Associate Professor in the Department of Business and Computing, Ravensbourne University London.
Email: d.combs@rave.co.uk

Dr Michael Devlin

Associate Professor of Advertising at Texas State University.
Email: mbd51@txstate.edu

Dr Ana Carolina Vimieiro

Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at The Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil.
Email: acvimieiro@gmail.com

Ahead of the 2024 Paris Games, many observers worried that the Olympic flame, though not extinguished, had been considerably diminished. Reflecting on the 2020 Tokyo Games, *The Atlantic* wondered “whether the modern Olympics—an international spectacle that has become increasingly synonymous with overspending, corruption, and autocratic regimes—are worth having at all.” Audience and media reactions to the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing had been, at best, lukewarm, and survey data in the United States anticipated the smallest television audience among Americans since Gallup began measuring such data in 2000. Within the host nation, a majority of the French population expressed either “indifference” or “concern” just days before the Opening Ceremony. In short, expectations for 2024 were muted; as veteran Olympic broadcaster Bob Costas stated, the Olympics need “to get their groove back.”

With the closing of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games we can conclude that reports of the Olympics’ demise have been greatly exaggerated. The Opening Ceremony became the most-watched television program in French history. Canadian viewers watched more than 24 million hours across CBC platforms, an all-time record. Streaming of BBC coverage in the United Kingdom was more than double than what it had been for Tokyo in 2021. And, for the Olympics’ largest Broadcast partner, NBC, viewership in the United States was 82% higher than Tokyo and became the “most-streamed Olympics of all time.” By any commercial measure, Paris 2024 was a massive success.

The enthusiasm for the 2024 Games isn’t merely about robust television ratings and streaming numbers. It appears, too, that general enthusiasm for the Olympics was sparked by incredible athletic performances and the spectacular backdrop one of the most photogenic cities in the world. Indeed, the Games were distinctly *Parisian*, something made clear by an Opening Ceremony that leaned heavily into French art, history, and style. Neither an unwelcomed downpour nor critics who lamented the allegedly blasphemous references of the opening spectacle dampened the general public’s enthusiasm. Really, how could the ceremony be seen as anything but triumphant after Celine Dion’s powerful return to performing—while standing on the Eiffel Tower!—and the Olympic cauldron floating as a balloon above the City of Light? The Opening Ceremony was not universally beloved, but it was *interesting*, and it set the stage for a series of record-breaking, head-scratching, and meme-generating performances.

The Olympics and Paralympics were *fun*, but that is only part of the story. That the French public warmed to the Games doesn’t negate its prior skepticism, especially when considering the expense of nearly \$10 billion USD—which, notably, is considerably less than what was spent in Tokyo in 2021—and the choice to direct important resources away from other public needs. Most controversially, Paris spent around \$1.5 billion USD on one project: an effort to clean the River Seine so that it could be used in Olympic competition. E. coli and other contaminants were still present enough to delay the triathlon events and, following the men’s event, at least one swimmer reported an E. coli infection (though it was not clear whether came from the Seine). Concerns regarding the river placed a brighter spotlight on environmental issues in general, with critics noting that, in spite of organizers’ efforts, the Olympics are a “sustainability nightmare.”

The Paris Games also occurred in the context of national elections and political shifts that have given rise to the right wing “New Popular Front” in France. Thus, while athlete activism was much less visible in 2024 than it had been in recent Olympiads, visible protests in Paris came from other groups dissatisfied with the convergence of capital and political interests that all too often seem designed only to reward those who already hold considerable wealth and power. Dissatisfaction with French officials was exacerbated by the government when it upheld a national ban on Muslim women wearing hijab and prohibited the religious expression during the Olympics. Such a ban would appear to violate the International Olympic Committee’s charter, which declares, “The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in this Olympic Charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” Nevertheless, the policy remained.

The political, cultural, and environmental concerns provoked by the Paris Olympics leave us with something of a paradox: the 2024 Games were equal parts athletic spectacle and commercial excess; a demonstration of breaking boundaries and reinforcing historical exclusions; and a source of ephemeral global unity and a reminder of persistent division. In short, the Olympics may indeed have gotten “their groove back,” but at what cost?

Building off our report of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, this report endeavors to answer this question, drawing upon the expertise of an exceptional and international collection of scholars. As editors, we represent multiple nations—Brazil, Israel, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and, although our expertise coalesces around the disciplinary traditions of communication and media studies, our contributors come from a range of academic perspectives, including education, kinesiology, history, political science, and sociology. We hope you will enjoy reading them as much as we have in assembling them.



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Host City and
Mega Events

In transit from Tokyo to Los Angeles via Paris: place, memory, fantasy and the Olympics/Paralympics

When reflecting on the preceding Summer Olympics and Paralympics, I wrote of a spectral, pandemic-plagued event that “happened in a Tokyo that was largely unseen”. Three years later, with the virus omnipresent but tamed by vaccination, the host city of Paris was impossible not to see. This is a salutary reminder of the deep dependence of mega media sport events on projecting a sense of place even when, with conspicuous exceptions, most contests occur in enclosed, standardized sport infrastructure.

There are compelling political economic reasons why this is the case. In previous Olympic bidding cycles – increasingly rare, at least in prominent zones of the liberal-democratic West – the International Olympic Committee (IOC) could effortlessly exploit the seductive illusion of a mutually beneficial relationship between Olympism and host city/country finances. Although few reputable economists entertain the fantasy that investment by hosts results in a budgetary bonanza, the fiction has been maintained and disbelief suspended for contrasting reasons.

For the IOC, with its XL Bully dog-grip on Olympic intellectual property and hosting contracts, persuading a host to bear the risk, wear the cost, and forego global media and sponsorship rights revenue is all upside in terms of profile, influence, and balance sheet. For hosts, the main advantages are accelerated, publicly subsidized infrastructural development and a mostly intangible (and short-lived) boost to civic and national morale and to global image-based positioning. As Atlanta 1996, Athens 2004 and Tokyo 2020/1 painfully discovered, poor planning, execution and/or bad luck expose the vulnerability of the baby-holding Olympic host.

Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo cited prior misfortune as compelling motivation for bidding in June 2015. She referred to Parisian and French creativity, resilience, freedom and democracy following the deadly political violence in the city in January and November of that year, the latter involving major sporting and musical venues. Paris had already mounted failed bids for the 1988, 2008, and 2012 Games.

If hosting the Games was intended to stimulate the tourist trade, this ambition was at odds with plans by Tourism Minister Olivia Gregoire to counter ‘overtourism’ in Paris and other parts of France, including Normandy and Brittany in the north and Bouches-du-Rhône and Pyrénées-Atlantiques in the south.

Staging the Greatest Show on Earth exposed continuing tensions between Paris, which for many observers embodies La France, and the rest of the nation seemingly positioned as its hinterland. It was insisted that this was a Games for the whole country and its dispersed territories. Yet, the majority of events took place in inner Paris and the surrounding Île-de-France area. Most other cities

with an Olympic role, like Bordeaux, Lyon, Nantes, and Saint-Etienne (football) and Villeneuve-d’Ascq (basketball and handball), hosted stadium-based pursuits, severely limiting their opportunities for place brand exposure.

Paris staged not only the Seine and city-focused Opening Ceremony, but freewheeling *en plein air* sports like marathon swimming and running, road cycling, and triathlon. Even relatively static events could take place in globally familiar sites, such as beach volleyball beneath the Eiffel Tower and 3x3 basketball, BMX freestyle, breaking, skateboarding at Place de la Concorde. Revealingly, of “the 11 iconic venues of the Paris 2024” celebrated on its official website, six were in inner Paris, three in its environs (Colombes, Saint Denis and Versailles), one in the Pacific (Teahupoo) and the other in Mediterranean France (Marseilles).

Marseilles, which also hosted football, did get some opportunity to display itself a little more expansively through the sailing competition, but after Paris the strongest sense of place came from another hemisphere altogether via surfing in Tahiti. This visual reminder of the global power and reach of the French Republic would have been routinely labelled ‘sportswashing’ if exercised by an illiberal state beyond the orbit of the West.

This Olympic activity in the Pacific took place in the aftermath of unrest in May and June in the French overseas territory of New Caledonia. The violence stemmed from unhappiness among members of the Indigenous Kanak community over proposed electoral changes seen as reducing their prospect of independence. Then the bitter snap French national elections concluded just 19 days before the Olympic Opening Ceremony, highlighting the country’s persistent difficulty in coming to terms with its imperialist and colonial history. Both internal and external problems will continue to beset the country long after the Paris Olympic flame has been extinguished.

Final confirmation that the city that controls and signifies the country dominated these Games is indicated by the event locations of the Paralympics. Only shooting in Chateauroux, central France occurred outside the Paris conurbation.

The Five Ring Circus summer caravan now moves on from the City of Love, Light and Shadow to the City of Angels, Dreams and Quartz in 2028. The Handover Ceremony in the Stade de France ended with a Mission Impossible flourish as famed screen actor Tom Cruise transported the Olympic flag to the Hollywood sign.

Visual memories of Paris 24, beyond the strictly sporting, are likely to be infused with its much-mythologized, monumental built environment and the romantic river flowing through it. Now Los Angeles’ venues, freeways, canyons, and beaches must compete with homegrown cinematic artifice, an Olympics of the imagination emerging from the dream factories of its dusty film lots.



Prof David Rowe

Emeritus Professor of Cultural Research, Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University, with honorary positions at Bath, Beijing Foreign Studies and London Universities. A publicly engaged sociologist of media and popular culture, David's books include Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity (2004, second edition, McGraw Hill) and Global Media Sport: Flows, Forms and Futures (2011, Bloomsbury).

Email: d.rowe@westernsydney.edu.au

Twitter: [@rowe_david](https://twitter.com/rowe_david)

July in Paris: The last month before the Games



Prof Garry Whannel

Emeritus Professor of Media Cultures at the University of Bedfordshire. For over 40 years, he has written on media, culture, leisure and sport. His recent publications include Understanding the Olympics (with John Horne) 2020.

Every Olympic city will have its own distinctive patterns, but there are also some structural regularities. Typically, cities move through some version of hostility-indifference-criticism-anticipation-excitement. This is never universal – some will remain hostile and critical; others have been anticipating with enthusiasm ever since the Games were awarded.

In my experience, however, the anticipation is ramped up significantly, as the searchlight of world attention starts to swing around to, and focus upon, the host city, in the last month before the start. In part this is spontaneous, in part media construction. Indeed, one could argue that the two phenomena feed each other.

The circus is coming

“If this is the Olympic Games, I wish we could have it every week”: one city gent said to another, during the London 2012 Games, on registering how the tube trains were much less crowded, probably due to the success of the Organising Committee in emphasising the potential danger of over-crowded transport, thus “stampeding the cattle” – encouraging London citizens to holiday out of London or stay at home during the Games. It seems likely that similar attempts may have been made in Paris. In fact, the estimates of incoming tourists, mobilised during bidding, and while attempts to build support in the business community are underway, usually turn out to be overly optimistic. Olympic tourists come, but many other tourists elect to avoid the Olympics by booking earlier or later.

Until the last month, with not much to report: “everything going to plan”, “on time and under budget”, are not strong media news stories, so most stories for the two years before the Olympics tend to be around two themes: “things will not be ready in time”; and “everything will be too expensive and over-budget”.

The big searchlight

However, in the last month a new phenomenon, an instance of vortextuality, comes into play, helping shape and co-ordinate the Olympics, its media representation and public sentiment (I coined the term *vortextuality*, in the 1990s, to denote the growing media tendency for one single story to dominate, temporarily, to the extent that all news coverage is sucked towards the event as if trapped in a vortex). In the case of the Olympics, this media phenomenon is not a simple fabrication or construction, but operates in conjunction with events on the ground, in the host city, during the last month before a Games opens,

I experienced the phenomenon at first hand, in Beijing (2008) London (2012), and, most recently, Paris (2024). Bunting, banners and signs

go up; Olympic merch (licensed and non-licensed) begins appearing everywhere; Olympic volunteers and helpers are deployed; barriers and security infrastructure is erected; the prominence of the imminent Olympics in the media grows exponentially. Less tangibly, the citizens of the city become aware of the ways in which world attention is swinging around to highlight their city. It becomes strikingly clear, that for the next 2-3 weeks, the events in their city are going to attract world attention, and dominate the global media. The sense is exhilarating, inebriating, almost *jouissant*. Normal reality will be put on hold as a whole new daily existence imposes itself. I believe that even those resistant to the appeal of the Games will be affected by this process. It is precisely as if a giant spotlight has suddenly swung round to your own city your own neighbourhood, your ‘burb.

There is clearly a structural regularity about these processes – they are determined partly by the four-year cycle, the changing host cities, and the high profile of the Games in the global media. At the same time though, the particular histories and cultures at play in each individual city bestow a specificity in the way each city experiences the last month before the Games open. The most obvious and prominent variation of Paris grew from the audacious decision to stage the Opening Ceremony, for the first time, not in the main stadium but along a length of the River Seine, enabling the prominent use of major Paris landmarks such as Notre Dame, the Grande Palais and the Eiffel Tower.

This had its negative side – zones alongside the river in central Paris required that residents within the zones had to obtain permits to access their own homes, bus routes were curtailed, metro stations closed, bars and restaurants within the zones experienced a significant drop in trade as the zones were implemented. The temporary seating erected along the route sold for high prices. It became evident that a front row seat at this spectacle had become a new fashion accessory for the super-rich, although in the event, it did rain (with a vengeance) on Paris’s parade. That the spectacle was, nevertheless delivered with panache and brio, is a credit to the resilience of the performers and improvisational skill of the organisers. Nevertheless, it was clear that the best seats were those indoors and dry, with a big screen, and, ideally a ready source of alcoholic sustenance. The Opening Ceremony is a pivot ending the increasingly frenetic pre-Games speculation, and ushering in fifteen days of extensive sporting actuality, the reporting of which rapidly eclipses the speculative and the critical modes of journalism.

The role of legacy in the organization of the 2024 Olympic Games

The Heritage and Sustainability Plan for the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games (HSP OPG 2024), published in September 2021, highlighted the strategic importance given to this aspect. From the candidacy phase, legacy was presented as one of the innovative elements meant to make Paris 2024 the Games of a new era. The goal was clear and explicit: “to organize the Olympic and Paralympic Games with a new model.” More than just an event, it was about initiating a radical change by organizing Games that are “more responsible, more sustainable, more inclusive, and more supportive.” Among the various legacy pathways, the social and environmental aspects were prioritized to distinguish its approach from those of its predecessors.

Olympic trajectory of a concept

In an effort to justify the efforts made for organizing the Olympic Games (OG), Pierre de Coubertin believed they should serve as propaganda for the sporting ideal. Although the term “legacy” was not used, the positive impacts, particularly in education, were considered implicit, with Olympism intended to be “a school of nobility and moral purity as well as physical endurance and energy (...).” The term “legacy” was used for the first time during Melbourne’s 1956 bid. Its use was part of the IOC’s crisis at the time. However, it was during Sydney’s bid in the early 1990s that social legacy became prominent, as a response to the upheavals of the 1992 Barcelona Games (participation of professionals, fewer bids, etc.). For the IOC, it became necessary to highlight the positive effects of the event, and all organizers had to take a position on this.

The magic of the Games

From the opening lines of the HSP OPG 2024, the ambition of the President of the Organizing Committee is for sport to be a solution in areas such as “health, education, social cohesion, inclusion, especially for people with disabilities, and gender equality” (p.4). Citizen engagement, solidarity, and ecological transformation are among the expected outcomes. The reader is captivated by the power of the Games to change people’s lives. The document leaves no doubt that the legacy is meant to justify holding a costly and demanding event. The Games will notably aim to “Inspire the French people, especially children and teenagers, to engage in physical and sporting activities; Develop physical and sporting activity everywhere (...); Promote the values of sport, Olympism, and Paralympism” (p.64). The affirmation of inherent values in sport is a constant theme. It suggests that merely being exposed to sport would be enough to foster engagement and encourage the adoption of civic principles.

The ecological challenge is also prominent. The premise is clear: “The traditional model for organizing the Games was not suited to the trajectories of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to meet France’s climate commitments” (p.14). However, the ambition for a “more virtuous model” or the “emergence of innovative solutions” remains vague. As for the goal to “ensure the Games’ carbon neutrality” (p.14), the event’s requirements (construction of infrastructures, transportation, etc.) seem to contradict this neutrality.

Trickle-down legacy

The enthusiasm of the organizers is palpable, and their commitment to legacy is commendable. If we consider legacy in its broadest sense, encompassing all that remains and is linked to the event in both tangible and intangible dimensions, several aspects will indeed endure. Many facilities will be preserved, and the Games are already celebrated as an important moment in national life. This refers to what could be called a trickle-down legacy, meaning measures and initiatives tied to an event that transform both spaces and the way events are organized.

However, a trickle-down legacy, like any form of legacy, requires resources not only for its preservation but also for its sustainability. It is a long-term commitment that will determine the fate of the Games’ legacy. Several years will be needed to confirm whether there are genuine benefits. These will depend on the establishment of support structures, the recruitment of staff, and capitalizing on the Games’ outcomes. The causal link between organizing a major event and its consequences must be analyzed. The Games are one thing; structural measures are another, without which no large-scale social change will be possible.

One blind spot remains: Could the legacy be negative? This has been the case with previous Games. Anticipating such consequences could help mitigate risks.

Conclusion

Isn’t the legacy of the Games the only subject that truly matters? The narratives that suggest the Games can solve everything, and therefore justify the event through its legacy, raise doubts about an event whose nature does not align with all challenges. Other events have rethought their goals and objectives to meet the criteria needed to create a lasting legacy. This was not the approach taken for the 2024 Games. Beyond the excitement during the competitions, these Games could have marked a new era for Olympism. It is unlikely that the legacy will be fulfilled in an ambitious manner.



Prof Michaël Attali

Professor at the University of Rennes, France. He conducts research on the social effects of sport in various contexts (educational, territorial, events, etc.). He has published around twenty books and more than 100 articles in scientific journals. His latest book in French is titled *Histoire Globale des Sports Olympiques (Global History of Olympic Sports)*, published by Atlande.

Email: michael.attali@univ-rennes2.fr

Website : <https://perso.univ-rennes2.fr/michael.attali>

Twitter: @AttaliMichael

How sustainable is Paris 2024? It depends



Dr Sven Daniel Wolfe

Swiss National Science Foundation Ambizione Fellow, ETH Zurich. He researches the (geo)politics and (un)sustainability of mega-events, and is the author of More Than Sport: Soft Power and Potemkinism and editor of the The Hard Edge of Soft Power.

Email: swolfe@ethz.ch

Website: sdwolfe.com

Sustainability has become a fundamental element of the Olympics, enshrined in the Charter, put into practice through organizational reform, and ultimately reshaping the planning and delivery of the Games. Paris 2024 is the first Olympics to be wholly planned under the auspices of the Agenda 2020 / New Norm reforms, with organizers framing 'sustainability and legacy' as key priorities. This has taken shape in a number of innovations designed to soften the deleterious impacts of hosting, notably by aligning the hosting of the Games with the longer-term development agenda of the city. These are important steps that should be supported and continued.

Yet, despite this progress towards more sustainable Games, problems and oversights persist – particularly for the most vulnerable in the host city. Writing from the epicenter of Olympic Paris, three things are immediately clear: First, there is a powerful atmosphere of celebration, unity, and social lightness that should not be discounted. Second, this atmosphere is exclusive and not available to all. And third, this spectacular celebration has the potential to mask or even exacerbate serious problems in French political and social life.

Despite longstanding debates in academic, policymaking, and business circles, there is little consensus about what *sustainability* actually means. The term is often employed as a floating signifier, conveying a variety of meanings to various audiences. For its part, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has moved away from a strictly environmental definition, and now also considers social and economic dimensions of the term. This fits with the policy directions of the United Nations and the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet, despite this progress, our study found a steady decrease in Olympic sustainability from 1992–2020, measuring ecological, social, and economic dimensions. The IOC criticized our model, arguing for the inclusion of indicators that would show different—and presumably more favorable—results. This is fair criticism, not just of our work but of science in general. Our model is transparent and reproducible, but it is only a model; different models can of course show different results. Moreover, the criticism brings up questions both practical and philosophical: is this reliance on sustainability indicators good, and is it actually feasible to measure sustainability at all? In this light, perhaps it is worthwhile to move away from metrics and models, and instead explore qualitatively what has happened on the ground in Olympic Paris.

First, logistically and artistically, Paris 2024 is a triumph. The Games are spectacular in all senses of the word, for athletes and spectators alike. In

ways that many critics perhaps do not want to hear, the Olympics are indeed extraordinary and special, and they touch many people very deeply. I do not think any estimation of the sustainability of the Games can be complete without taking this social value into account, even if it is ephemeral and difficult or impossible to measure.

At the same time, this is not the full story. A closer look reveals that this spectacular party is reserved for those with means. Tickets are prohibitively expensive for locals and in my month of (admittedly non-representative) asking, I have met very few Parisians who have bought tickets to an event. There are many who want to go—even some among activist communities—but none can afford it. The entire event is segregated and regulated according to hierarchies of wealth and privilege, in the city as well as the venues and fan zones. Moreover, there are significant disruptions to the conduct of daily life, especially just before the Opening Ceremonies but also continuing throughout the Games. While clearly the city must be secured, the overwhelming police and military presence continues to cause both anxiety and disruption for many, to say nothing of the arrests of activists. Here, as in Rio 2016, Pauschinger's questions remain relevant: how much of this securitization is theater or camouflage? What practices and infrastructures will be left after the event? And most importantly, what is being secured here, and for whom?

Finally, it is vital to remember the wider context beyond the Games. These are temporary events embedded within existing socio-political and economic realities, and it is a mistake to analyze the Olympics without this context. France is currently suffering from the democratic deficits of President Macron, from the rise of the extreme right, and from deep racial and economic inequalities. The northern department of Seine-Saint-Denis, playing host to many Olympic events, is also home to some of the most marginalized populations in France. Organizers and supporters avow that investments tied to the Games will improve quality of life for many here. Yet those who spoke to me expressed their lack of faith in government at any level to provide anything better, and many are alienated not only from the event but also from participation in making their city and their lives. For them, these Olympics are a party that is taking place around them, and they do not trust matters to improve once this spectacular event has moved on.

By any reasonable definition, and despite the joy experienced by so many in the stadiums and the streets, this cannot be called sustainable.

Environment and resistance

Social, economic, and environmental devastation routinely accompanies the Olympics. Yet the latest organizers proclaimed “principles of moderation, innovation and boldness.” There was even an official *Paris 2024 Social Charter*. The propaganda included a promise to halve the carbon footprint of its disgraced London predecessor via renewable energy, vegan food, carbon capture, reduced emissions—eschewing air conditioning—and ‘green’ projects in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Relevant environmental data won’t be released until the Fall. What can we say so far?

Carbon Market Watch and *éclaircies* found Parisian ecological initiatives “incomplete” and official reportage “short of achieving transparency.” Initial claims about carbon neutrality—and beyond—were quietly dropped. Steep price hikes on mass transit followed. Aquatic events were held across the country and in Tahiti, 15,000 kilometers away, with environmental impacts that troubled local and international competitors alike. A cruise ship housed surfers and executive hangers-on. Such craft are ecological disasters.

The promise of no air conditioning in athlete accommodation in Paris was broken: 2,500 cooling units sated vulnerable Global Northerners, who’d threatened to bring their own; Australian Olympocrat Matt Carroll complained, “We’re not going for a picnic.” It certainly wasn’t some church outing for the big man—his annual salary was US \$440,000. The Australians kept whining, and a fellow Anglo moaner said, “I need meat to perform.” Vast numbers of dead animals were quickly imported. Food and other waste mounted.

France Nature Environnement obtained a confidential document indicating that corporate sponsor Coca-Cola would distribute 18 million bottles of sugar drinks during the fortnight, more than half made from plastic. And Coke poured the contents into plastic cups (The company was recently named world’s worst plastic polluter, for the 6th time in a row).

Many events were held in the Seine-Saint-Denis region on the capital’s outskirts, a *département* marked by poverty, unemployment, immigration, and poor social services, policing, and school safety. *Condé Nast Traveler* found the Games giving “hope” to Seine-Saint-Denis. But many promised infrastructure projects never came to fruition. Those that did relied on undocumented, exploited migrant labor.

The region did host the Athletes’ Village, where the fact that beds were made of cardboard was a point of pride for organizers—when they weren’t busy evicting people sleeping rough in makeshift cardboard protection across the city, or dealing with the *New York Post* mocking ‘anti-sex beds’ designed to discipline ‘horny athletes’ prone to ‘orgies.’ (Neighborhood sex workers were “moved on”).

Just a fifth of Village apartments were reserved for post-Games social housing, and the new pool came at the cost of destroying community gardens.

Forget putative Puritanism. This was gentrification—through displacement, and it also applied in Porte de la Chapelle, site of badminton and rhythmic gymnastics, which experienced “*nettoyage social*” [social cleansing]. Migrants and homeless people were exiled for the duration.

There was resistance to this brutality. Consider Saccage [havoc], among dozens of critical collectives. Saccage took its name from Paris 2024’s ecological and social destructiveness. It was dedicated to preserving Seine-Saint-Denis, making friends, mutual aid, and relaxation.

The government demonized Saccage as “ultra-left.” The police responded heavy-handedly to all non-violent direct action, arresting dozens of Climate Extinction protestors. An officer who had shot and killed a young man just before the Games was rewarded with duty at the opening ceremony. The collective *Stop violence policières à Saint-Denis* [Stop Police Violence in Saint-Denis] denounced militarization of the neighborhood. Kick Big Soda Out of Sport focused its ire on the horror to public health done by Coca-Cola, supported by *The Lancet*.

When France’s rail and fiber-optic services were disrupted, a bewildered state didn’t know whether to blame the Kremlin, local progressives, or a radicalized house marten. *Le Figaro* decreed the sabotage to be the work of a “paranoid” left. *Une délégation inattendue* [An Unexpected Delegation] issued a communiqué explaining the transport intervention in anti-nationalist, anti-capitalist, pro-environmental terms. Wonderfully, the *New York Times* deemed the activists “murky.”

We were told that 2024 was not “a sullied country using the Olympics to improve its image,” but “a sullied Olympics using a country to decontaminate itself.”

Paris did what global sports have done for sixty years: accelerate destruction, pollution, expulsion, and speculation. Its social and environmental practices set new ‘standards’ of surveillance and police harassment. And the International Olympic Committee continues to operate like a greedy corporation: its managers revel in luxury while most athletes barely make rent.

In Angelique Chrisafis’ words: “the very act of holding a planetary sporting event like the Olympics has to be completely reconsidered if the world is to reach net zero targets in 2050.”

The Games are unsustainable.

They’re illegitimate.

Stop them now.



Prof Toby Miller

Former Professor at University of California Riverside and New York University. He is author and editor of over fifty books, including *Why Journalism?*, *The Persistence of Violence*, *How Green is Your Smartphone?*, *El trabajo cultural*, *Greenwashing Culture*, and *Greenwashing Sport*.

Email: tobym69@icloud.com

Twitter: @greencitizen

Paris Olympics promote sustainability for good reason: climate change is putting athletes and the sports at risk



Dr Brian P. McCullough

Associate Professor of Sport Management, University of Michigan. His research focuses on the bidirectional relationship between sport and the natural environment in a subdiscipline of sport management called sport ecology.

Twitter: @mcculloughbrian

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Europe is in the midst of a heat wave, and while Olympic and Paralympic athletes in Paris for the 2024 Summer Games might be spared the worst of it, the weather will still be hot.

As global temperatures have risen, major sporting events like the Olympics and FIFA World Cup have had to adapt to high heat and extreme storms to keep athletes and fans safe and allow the games to go on.

Olympic organizers have moved events such as marathons to early mornings and even to cooler cities. FIFA, the governing body for world soccer, pushed the 2022 Men's World Cup back from its usual time in June to late November so it could be held in Qatar.

The heat risks and the environmental impact of major sporting events have led some people to question whether these events should be held at all. But as someone who studies sport management and sustainability in an area I coined "sport ecology," I believe that radical approach misses the benefits, including the Olympics' ability to promote sustainable actions to the public worldwide.

How rising global heat affects the Olympics

Sports have good reason for caring about sustainability: climate change can put athletes' and fans' health at risk and even put the future of some sports in doubt.

Winter sports face the greatest threats from climate change as temperatures rise and precipitation changes, dramatically shortening winter sports seasons in many areas. In 2022, the Beijing Winter Games had to artificially create snow so it could have ski runs at all. The International Olympic Committee has delayed its decision to select Winter Games host cities for 2030 and beyond because of the uncertainty of winter sports.

In the summer, global warming fuels extreme heat and storms that can affect the quality of the competition and the health of the athletes and spectators.

Major sport federations and leagues, as well as the Olympics, have responded to the risks by delaying competitions to cooler times of day or year, implementing water breaks and offering more player substitutions.

Organizers of the Tokyo Summer Games, held amid a fierce heat wave in 2021, had preemptively moved the marathon to Sapporo, more than 500 miles north of Tokyo, so athletes could run in cooler weather. They also delayed competitions during the Games to avoid extreme heat and excessive rain.

Olympic progress toward sustainability

Any large event like the Olympics and Paralympics can produce vast carbon emissions through its construction, transportation needs and energy use.

That impact, and the risks it creates for sports and their athletes, are why sustainability has been a pillar of the Olympic charter since 1996 and is a focus of its planning for the future. In 2012, the London Olympics pioneered a new international certification

standard, ISO2012, which provides guidelines for any large event to make more sustainable choices, from construction to catering.

The 2024 Paris Games, from July 26 to Aug. 11, and Paralympic Games, Aug. 28 to Sept. 8, are certified to the latest standard, and organizers are taking many steps to reduce their climate impact.

The organizers plan to power the events' operations with 100% renewable energy from wind and solar. They are using existing venues when possible, had new ones built with low-carbon concrete and recycled materials, and brought in thousands of seats made of recycled plastic.

All furniture and temporary buildings approved for the Games also must have a contractually guaranteed second life, rather than going into a landfill. All of the competition venues are on public transportation, allowing for fewer vehicles in the streets. Even the food is targeted for a 50% emissions cut compared with the average meal by increasing the use of plant-based foods. The Paralympics will use the same venues and housing in the weeks that follow.

That doesn't mean the 2024 Olympics and Paralympics won't have a large carbon footprint, however, particularly as many spectators and athletes arrive by plane. But the organizers are aiming for the construction and operations emissions to be half those of the London and Rio Games in 2012 and 2016.

World's fair of sustainability

The Paris Olympic Games is an example of what large sporting events can do to reduce their impact on the environment and promote sustainability solutions to a global audience. Spectators will experience sustainability firsthand, and organizers will promote the Games' sustainability efforts.

Such campaigns can influence people's everyday behaviors and even increase their advocacy for sustainability in their home communities.

Suggestions to reduce the scale and size of sports events or even eliminate commercialized sports, ending spectator sports as we know them, overlook the ability of sports to influence and change human behavior.

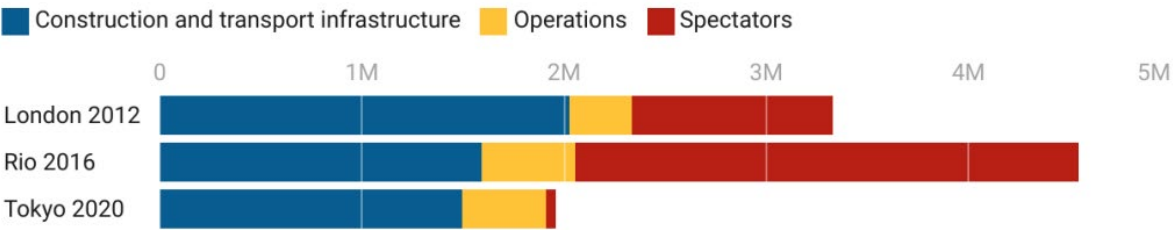
Sustainability is a constantly evolving process of learning from the past to improve for the future.

The 2024 Olympics' strategies, building on those used in previous events, and what Paris learns in carrying them out, will also help in planning for future events, including the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

In essence, the Olympic Games, the largest sporting event in the world, is a sport sustainability world's fair. It highlights what is possible for a sporting event through collaborations with international corporations to reduce its environmental impact. And it influences others to follow suit, whether that is other sporting events, leagues and federations or spectators from around the world.

Summer Games' greenhouse gas emissions

Breaking down greenhouse gas emissions from three Summer Olympic Games shows construction and spectators' activities are the largest sources. The Tokyo Games were delayed to 2021 and had a limited number of spectators because of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Measured in metric tons of carbon dioxide-equivalent emissions

Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND • Source: London, Rio and Tokyo Olympics post-games sustainability reports. • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1: Summer Games' greenhouse gas emissions

Paris the “greenest” Games in history? The case of surfing suggests otherwise



Prof Holly Thorpe

Sociologist of sport and gender working in Te Huataki Waiora School of Health at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. She has published over 130 articles and chapters, including Sport and Physical Culture in Global Pandemic Times (edited with David Andrews and Joshua Newman, 2023).

Email: holly.thorpe@waikato.ac.nz
Twitter: @waikato



Prof Belinda Wheaton

Professor in Sociology of Sport and Physical Culture at the University of Waikato, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Cultural sociologist with research interests across leisure, sport and popular culture, and a focus on identity, inclusion and inequality. She is co-author of the book Action Sports and the Olympic Games: Past, Present, Future (Wheaton and Thorpe, 2022).

Email: belinda.wheaton@waikato.ac.nz
Twitter: @Billiewhiz

Social, economic and environmental sustainability claims were central to Paris' bid to host the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The Organizing Committee promised “historic” progress on behalf of the climate, halving the carbon footprint of previous Games in Rio and London. To achieve this, Paris cut carbon measures across travel, construction and operations. All Olympic sites connect to the public electricity grid, avoiding diesel electricity generation. To enhance sustainability, new construction has been minimized through using existing and temporary venues. These measures, they argued will achieve a lower-impact event consistent with their social sustainability objectives to adapt to the needs of hosts and of their residents, while promoting responsible ways of living.

All laudable objectives that align with the IOC goal of using the games to “inspire sustainable futures around the world”. Despite the bold claims, however, the way Paris has delivered its surfing event in Tahiti illustrates how challenging it is to turn rhetoric into reality.

Surfing was first included in the Olympics in Tokyo 2020/2021. Organizing an international surfing event is challenging; limited host cities can ensure high-quality waves and ideal weather conditions during the period of competition. While the Tokyo surfing ran smoothly, the wave quality on the Japanese east coast was not ideal for high-performance competition.

Media reports initially suggested that Paris was building an artificial wave pool. This energy intensive and costly facility would have been difficult to align with Paris's sustainability goals. France's Atlantic coast then became the favoured venue, but was later supplanted by Teahupo'o in Tahiti, French Polynesia, almost 16,000 kilometres from Paris. While the IOC have been committed to the ‘one host city’ model, recent policy changes (Agenda 2020+5) have enabled increased flexibility with the definition of ‘host’, broadened to include several cities, even regions or countries.

It's not hard to see why Teahupo'o became the preferred option. One of the world's most challenging and dramatic surf breaks, it is already part of the pro surfing world circuit (although until recently it was deemed too dangerous for women, who were excluded from 2006 till 2022). In 2024 it showcases the spectacular, athletic nature of modern surfing against a stunning Polynesian island backdrop. Holding the event in Tahiti, it was claimed, would “bring a sense of belonging to overseas French territories”.

In the end, however, the choice of surfing venue has proved highly controversial, causing local and international protest.

Teahupo'o is a small settlement on the main island of Tahiti's southwestern coast. Locals became alarmed when leaked plans for an Olympic village revealed vast new infrastructure. This included two-lane roads, a car bridge, electricity groundwork,

coastal embankments, a floating pontoon for spectators and scaffolding for 200 officials. Residents and environmental groups quickly responded, raising media attention and demanding greater transparency and public participation. As Teahupo'o mayor Roniu Poaru stated: “Our population accepts the Olympic Games, but that comes with conditions [...] the goal is to preserve our environment”.

Compromises were eventually reached. New infrastructure would be kept to a minimum with competitors living on a cruise ship. Olympic staff members, press and officials housed with residents or local guesthouses. With limited capacity for live spectators, viewing screens will be set up for spectators in a local town and in the capital city, Papeeti.

The topic garnering the most concern, however, was the construction of an aluminium judging tower to replace the existing structure deemed unsafe by the Olympic organizers. This involved drilling into the coral reef, which scientists say could have dire consequences for the reef ecosystems. A global petition was launched to stop the new tower. The International Surfing Association said it would not support any new construction on the reef. Despite this, the head of the Paris organizing committee and President of French Polynesia were said to be “in lockstep together” and “united in their desire to see the judging tower built”. And so it was, albeit a scaled back version.

But many Tahitians remained upset, “offended by the lack of respect” of their “sacred place.” Tahitian surfer Vahiné Fierro who represents France in the Olympic event explained, “it's our temple. It's a spiritual belief, living incarnation of our heritage, and our ancestral land.” Ironically, as our research shows, these are the very essence of surfing's Polynesian imaginings that the IOC has been so keen to showcase.

The decision making surrounding the surfing event in the Paris Olympics highlights the challenges in delivering sustainable mega-events. Many scholars and activists remain unconvinced by the IOC's environmental claims and have questioned whether the organization is really “greenwashing gold”.

Indeed, the IOC continues to be highly selective about how it measures its operations to support various Utopian projections and environmental promises. And research evaluating Olympic sustainability between 1992 and 2020 has shown it has declined over time.

According to Georgina Grenon, the environmental excellence director for Paris 2024: “We want to show that another model is possible and create a legacy for major sporting events. We don't claim to be perfect, but we want to show that we can do things differently”.

Hosting the surfing event in Tahiti is certainly doing things differently. But it raises yet more questions about the IOC's claims of leadership in environmental sustainability.

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Murky infection control policies at the Paris Olympics

In many ways, infectious disease prevention defined the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The COVID-19 pandemic forced organizers to postpone the Games for a year. When the Games were finally held in 2021, they were accompanied by strict infection protocols, including a ban on spectators. Eager to move forward in 2024, athletes, fans, and news outlets alike hailed the “post-pandemic” Paris Olympics as an opportunity to “return to normal” and to set COVID-19 behind.

Yet, even when Olympic organizers are not navigating the initial outbreak of a novel pandemic virus, infectious diseases continue to threaten athletes’ well-being and to shape competitions. Two infection control concerns particularly affected Paris 2024: water quality issues in the Seine River and ongoing COVID-19 transmission throughout the Games.

Despite a \$1.5 billion clean-up effort, and the mayor of Paris herself taking a dip in the Seine to demonstrate its cleanliness, worries about the water persisted throughout the Games. Following heavy rains and increased E. coli levels, swimming events were postponed.

In the face of uncertainty, some Olympians sought to protect themselves by taking prophylactic antibiotics and getting vaccinated against typhoid and hepatitis A before competing. Yet other athletes described adopting far more dubious measures with no scientific basis to protect themselves. For example, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on numerous triathletes who were drinking Coca-Cola after their races on the misguided belief that the beverage would “flush out anything inside of us.” However, a can of Coca-Cola offers no additional benefit in “cleansing” one’s digestive system of harmful bacteria, because healthy human stomachs are more acidic than soft drinks.

Perhaps most disconcertingly, U.S. triathlete Seth Rider stated that he would intentionally expose himself to “a bit of E. coli” by not washing his hands after going to the bathroom. There is no evidence supporting this approach; moreover, failing to wash one’s hands after defecating is one of the best ways to put oneself at increased risk for getting sick from all kinds of illnesses (In the wake of extensive media coverage, Rider later claimed he was joking.).

Amid the confusion, rumors were quick to spread when athletes fell ill. For example, after Belgian triathlete Claire Michel withdrew from a mixed relay event, several news outlets claimed that she had been hospitalized with an E. coli infection. Michel subsequently clarified that she had contracted a virus, not E. coli. The statement of Belgium’s National Olympic Committee nonetheless included a seemingly pointed critique of the way events in the Seine river had been managed, expressing a hope that lessons

would be learned for future competitions so “that there is no uncertainty for the athletes and support personnel.” Meanwhile, a lack of trust in the water quality led other Olympians, notably Swedish marathon swimmer Victor Johansson, to preemptively pull out of events.

Turning to COVID-19, Paris 2024 organizers effectively dropped all the protocols that had defined the Tokyo 2020 Games. Spectators were welcomed back into venues without restrictions. Likewise, there were no vaccine, masking, or testing requirements for athletes. As International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach explained, COVID-19 “is being treated like flu now, so there is no obligation for any special measures or notifications.” Athletes who tested positive for COVID-19 could continue competing while ill.

Amid concerns over transmission, a few athletes, coaches, and support staff chose to don masks, and two U.S. swimmers who tested positive moved out of the Olympic Village and into a hotel. Such measures were voluntary, and news reports indicated several athletes that competed either after or shortly before a positive COVID-19 test, such as Australian swimmer Zac Stubblety-Cook and Great Britain’s Adam Peaty.

But perhaps the most publicized case of a Paris 2024 Olympian competing with COVID-19 was American sprinter Noah Lyles. After finishing the men’s 200-meter race, Lyles collapsed, received medical attention, and was assisted off the track in a wheelchair. He subsequently revealed that he had started experiencing symptoms two days prior and had tested positive for COVID-19. Lyles explained that he had avoided disclosing his positive test result beyond his inner circle to avoid giving his competitors “an edge” and to give himself the best chance to continue with the race.

As a star athlete given the option to continue the competition, Lyles made the same decision almost any other Olympian would have made. But the lack of protocols or authority to intervene to help protect Lyles’s health was troubling, particularly given that as a child, Lyles grew up with severe asthma which caused damage to his lungs. The incident raised questions about whether the absence of infection control policy sufficed to protect athletes, as well as people around them, from contagious diseases.

While Paris 2024 brought much to celebrate, these Olympics have also highlighted the ongoing importance of public health measures. If they are unable to trust the safety of their environment, athletes may respond by attempting unscientific measures to protect themselves. And in the absence of clear and consistent policies, athletes who have trained years for this moment will understandably continue trying to “play through” illness unless authorities intervene. Olympians deserve stronger health protections.



Dr Kathleen Bachynski

Assistant Professor of Public Health at Muhlenberg College, USA. Her research focuses on sports safety and youth health, with recent projects addressing traumatic brain injuries in sports, overuse injuries, the #MeToo movement, and protecting young athletes from sexual abuse.

Email: kathleenbachynski@muhlenberg.edu

Twitter: @bachyns

The Olympic contestation over political meaning: security, protest and paradoxes



Dr Jan Andre Lee Ludvigsen

Senior Lecturer in International Relations and Politics with Sociology at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. He has published widely on the politics of sport mega-events, including Sport Mega-Events, Security and Covid-19 (2022, Routledge).

Email: J.A.Ludvigsen@ljmu.ac.uk



Dr Adam Talbot

Lecturer in Event Management at the University of the West of Scotland. His research focuses on protest, housing and human rights at sport mega-events.

Email: adam.talbot@uws.ac.uk

It has become an almost standardized, quadrennial pre-Olympic ritual to describe mega-event security as resembling of contemporary warfare. The Paris 2024 Summer Olympics and Paralympics reinforced this, but concurrently represented another reference point in the Olympics' political history with the French authorities' temporary approval of – for the first time in the EU's history – the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) surveillance technology to assist crowd management, reports of a \$348 million security budget, and as many as 45,000 security staff being deployed for the opening ceremony on the River Seine. What is more, the Olympics have, for long, constituted a “testing ground” not merely for new technologies, but as Clavel writes, for international cooperation – exemplified recently by *The Guardian's* article reporting that British police officers would share their experiences from London's 2012 Games with the French organizers in the efforts to secure Paris.

What we see, therefore, is a quintessential, international political effort in the creation and maintenance of Paris 2024 as a secure, global spectacle. This is not surprising but – as this commentary argues – paradoxically all this occurs in spaces where politics are designed out, aided by “Rule 50” of the IOC's Olympic Charter holding that: “No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas”. Rule 50 represents a framework protecting the “neutrality of sport and the Olympic Games”. It means that Olympic spaces must be so-called “clean venues” – free from political messages or non-official advertising which may not only compromise the IOC's relationships with their partners but, as Klausen puts it so eloquently, it may put a damper on the organizers' much-desired “climate of joy” if the Olympics become a site for political expression or protest. The contradictions are multiple. Academics show that the imposition of political neutrality has impacted spectators and athletes' right to freedom of speech and expression at previous events and how a contradiction exist when demanding politically neutral spaces while also embracing human rights discourses in other domains. Of course, similar policies are not uncommon at other sporting events: Paris 2024 and Euro 2024 represented the summer of politicized mega-events with “no politics” rules.

Returning to the matter of security, this remains highly contested in Olympic cities. For Giulianotti and Brownell, “[i]ntensified securitization has been resisted by some institutions and movements that are associated with global civil society, for example through organized protests in and around sport mega-events”. Privacy campaign group La Quadrature du Net teamed up with local anti-Olympic groups including Saccage 2024 to campaign against the experiment with algorithmic video surveillance, where CCTV

images are monitored by AI. Activists from Saccage 2024 have been visited by activists from previous host cities, including Tokyo and Rio de Janeiro, and heard numerous examples of how temporary Olympic security infrastructure became permanent post-Games. While the legislation enabling the use of these technologies is temporary, La Quadrature du Net note that there have already been moves in the National Assembly to legalise it permanently in specific contexts, such as public transit. Indeed, the announcement on the eve of Paris 2024 that the 2030 Winter Games will be hosted in the French Alps practically guarantees that this “experiment” will continue.

Criticism has not just emerged domestically. In the Games' build-up, Amnesty International were vocal in their opposition to the mentioned AI surveillance following its parliamentary approval and have claimed that it impedes the right to peaceful protest and comes with enormous privacy and discriminatory implications. In May 2024 – two months before the opening ceremony – the organization staged a symbolic “funeral protest” where, Picazo writes, “outside Père Lachaise cemetery, men solemnly carried a coffin marked ‘privacy’ from a hearse to an impromptu roadside funeral parlour filled with mourners dressed in black”.

Considering the Olympics' “political neutral” spaces, such political contestations could not reach the Olympic spaces during the event given that the host city is obliged to design out some political acts (e.g., protests) while being completely dependent on other political acts (e.g., parliamentary approval of surveillance, a decision to bid for/fund the Olympics, or the displays of national anthems or spectators wrapped in flags or jerseys that are broadcast globally). A counter-Olympic opening ceremony organised by a coalition of social movements under the banner “le revers de la médaille” (the other side of the medal) was organised the day before the opening ceremony – but far from any Olympic venues. The ceremony highlighted a diverse array of social issues and how they have been negative impacted by plans for the Games, from the aforementioned privacy concerns to 12,500 unhoused people, many of them migrants, being bussed out of the city in preparation from the Games.

Hence, while extraordinary or exceptional legal and regulative frameworks commonly accompany the Olympics, it remains the case that these frameworks' meanings and implications cannot be contested in the same primary spaces where they are enacted, when they are enacted. Yet while the IOC are adamant that politics and the Olympics do not mix; it instead appears that contestations over the mentioned “climate of joy” is what is rendered incompatible with the Games; not “top-down” political decisions to employ the Games as a “testing ground” for new laws and rules. This perpetuates the situation where, in this case, “security”, and the means to ensure it, are solely defined through the eyes of the “powerful”.

From Long Beach to the 2024 Paris Olympics: the evolution of Snoop Dogg

Amid the many athletic accomplishments during the 2024 Paris Olympics, one major addition to the broadcast entertainment roster was the presence of Snoop Dogg. From torchbearer to host, he provided a unique perspective on various aspects of the Olympics. Few figures have enjoyed the longevity and versatility of Snoop Dogg in the vast and ever-evolving landscape of American pop culture. Born Calvin Cordozar Broadus Jr. in Long Beach, California, in 1971, Snoop Dogg has transitioned from a gritty West Coast rapper to a global icon whose influence transcends music. His presence at the 2024 Paris Olympics is not just a testament to his enduring appeal, but also a reflection of the broader cultural shifts that have seen hip-hop take center stage in arenas previously deemed inaccessible to the genre.

Yet Snoop's rise was not without controversy. His early career was marred by legal troubles and accusations of promoting violence, misogyny, and drug use in his lyrics. He was also charged and later acquitted of first and second-degree murder. However, these controversies did little to dim his star. Instead, within the context of this hip-hop subgenre, they seemed to add to his charisma, making him an embodiment of the rebellious spirit that hip-hop championed.

The reinvention of Snoop Dogg: A master of adaptation

What sets Snoop Dogg apart from many of his contemporaries is his remarkable ability to adapt to the changing tides of popular culture. While many artists struggle to stay relevant as trends shift, Snoop has consistently reinvented himself, remaining a fixture in the entertainment industry for over three decades. This flexibility has allowed him to remain relevant in an industry that often discards its stars once they outlive their initial appeal.

Snoop Dogg's influence extends far beyond the realm of music. Over the years, he has become a cultural icon whose persona is instantly recognizable even to those unfamiliar with his music. His laid-back demeanor, quick wit, and signature catchphrases have made him a beloved figure in popular culture. Snoop's ventures into television, film, and advertising have only solidified his status as a multifaceted entertainer. Perhaps most importantly, Snoop Dogg has played a significant role in normalizing hip-hop culture in mainstream society.

The 2024 Paris Olympics: Snoop Dogg takes the world stage

Including Snoop Dogg as a prominent figure at the 2024 Paris Olympics is both surprising and fitting. Surprising because the Olympics have traditionally been a platform for showcasing the world's top athletes, with musical performances often serving as a secondary attraction. Fitting

because hip-hop has become a dominant force in global culture, and Snoop Dogg is one of its most recognizable ambassadors.

Snoop's role at the Olympics is multifaceted. In addition to performing during the opening ceremonies, he has also been involved in various promotional campaigns leading up to the event. His presence is emblematic of the growing recognition of hip-hop as a legitimate cultural force that deserves to be celebrated on the world's biggest stages.

Moreover, Snoop's involvement in the Olympics reflects a broader trend of blending sports and entertainment. In recent years, the lines between these two worlds have increasingly blurred, with athletes becoming celebrities in their own right and entertainers often serving as cultural commentators on sports. With his love of sports and status as a pop culture icon, Snoop Dogg is the perfect bridge between these two worlds.

The legacy of Snoop Dogg: A symbol of resilience and reinvention

As Snoop Dogg takes the stage at the 2024 Paris Olympics, he represents more than just a successful musician; he symbolizes resilience, redemption, reinvention, and the power of cultural expression. His journey from the streets of Long Beach to the Olympic stage is a testament to his ability to adapt, innovate, and remain relevant in a constantly changing world.

Snoop Dogg's presence at the Olympics also serves as a reminder of the transformative power of hip-hop. What began as a form of artistic expression in marginalized communities has become a global phenomenon that now commands the attention of the world's biggest stages. With his decades-long career and enduring appeal, Snoop Dogg is one of the genre's most iconic representatives.

Ultimately, Snoop Dogg's appearance at the 2024 Paris Olympics is not just a moment of personal triumph but a celebration of the hip-hop genre's continual presence on the global stage. As Snoop Dogg continues to evolve and surprise us, one thing is clear: his legacy is secure, and his influence will be felt for generations to come, as long as he remains true to his reincarnation.



Prof Billy Hawkins

Professor at the University of Houston in the Department of Health and Human Performance. He is the author of several peer-reviewed articles and books, and he serves on the several journal and book editorial boards. His teaching and research focus on sociology of sport and cultural studies, sport management, and sport for development.

Email: hjbilly@Central.uh.edu



Dr April Peters-Hawkins

Associate Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (DELPS). She is also a Past President of the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA), a consortium of higher education institutions committed to advancing the preparation and practice of educational leaders for the benefit of schools and children.

Email: apetersh@cougarnet.uh.edu

The Olympics and sports betting



Dr Jason Kido Lopez

*Assistant Professor,
Department of
Communication Arts,
University of Wisconsin-
Madison. His research
focuses on sports media
and is concentrated
on athlete activism
and sports gaming.
His book, Redefining
Sports Media, analyzes
the conventions of
sports media as an
entertainment genre.*

Email: Jason.lopez@wisc.edu

Twitter: [@jasonkidolopez](https://twitter.com/jasonkidolopez)

For my previous Olympics Analysis about the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2021, I explored why NBC's coverage avoided mentioning gambling even though sports betting was federally legalized in the US in 2018. I argued that NBC distanced the Games from betting because gambling conflicts with the notion that it is a "pure" athletic event. A cursory survey of NBC's coverage of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games reveals the same patterns. However, what about the sports betting companies themselves? How do they represent the Olympics?

To answer these questions, I examined the home pages of three sportsbooks: FanDuel, DraftKings, and ESPN Bet. Despite variations in layout and design, all three pages offer a menu of leagues and events on which users can make bets, supply betting information for particular games and competitions, and suggest prearranged bets. All of these are ways to highlight the sportsbooks' offerings, and therefore make it easier for bettors to find specific wagers and potentially create engagement by advertising bets that players may not have been looking for. During the fall, these pages are mostly focused on professional and collegiate football, but they can also center on major sporting events that occur every few years. For example, the sportsbooks recommended bets on the World Cup. This made it easy for fans of the World Cup to find bets and encouraged bettors to wager on the event even if they visited the site to gamble on other sports.

The 2024 Olympics were contested during a relative dead spot in popular American sports, July 26th through August 11th. The National Football League, National Basketball Association, National Hockey League, and collegiate basketball and football were all in their off seasons. The Women's National Basketball Association and National Women's Soccer League were on hiatus due to the Olympics. Formula 1 racing started its summer break on July 28th. Major League Baseball (MLB), the only major American sport being contested, was in the midst of its "dog days" with most teams being about 60% into their 6-month season. Given the state of the US sports landscape, coupled with the fact that viewership of the Olympics drew in 34.5 million viewers over the first three days, the Olympics seemed like a great opportunity for sportsbooks to create and sustain interest in sports betting.

However, perhaps surprisingly, the Olympics were not foregrounded on the sportsbooks' home pages. Instead, MLB was represented much more prominently. All three books highlighted MLB games, offered MLB special bets, and listed MLB as a betting option in their menu before the Olympics. This isn't to say that the Olympics were absent, simply that MLB took precedence.

One reason for MLB's prominence might revolve around regular bettors' play. Baseball has

always been a popular betting sport and certainly there are more habitual MLB bettors than Olympic bettors. However, it is crucial to remember that all companies not only cater to existing customers, they also attempt to locate new ones. This is especially so for the newly legalized US sports betting market. All sportsbooks are attempting to capture and create bettors from a limited American public. So, they could highlight betting on the Olympics to garner interest, but they don't.

One reason for this might be discomfort with betting on the Olympics due to its historical connections to amateurism and unease with commodification as I explored in 2021. However, it is also worth thinking about which *specific* bettors the sportsbooks are trying to attract. It is difficult, after all, to create a brand and product that is interesting to everyone. Furthermore, some companies might not *want* to appeal to everyone and correspondingly use a construction of who uses the product in their branding (Take, for example, luxury products that are purposefully advertised as exclusively for the high class.).

Another reason why sportsbooks don't foreground the Olympics, therefore, is the contrast between who the companies are trying to attract and who tends to watch the Games. Sports bettors are largely male and between the ages of 18-34. This statistic, generated by the Fantasy Sports and Gaming Association, highlights what the industry takes to be a desirable demographic. Contrast this with the fact that more women watch the Olympics than men and that the Games are more popular with older viewers.

By backgrounding the Olympics, the sportsbooks reify the notion that sports and sports betting are the domain of younger men. That's of course not to say that the companies wouldn't mind increased traffic and demographic diversity generated by the event, but the Olympics clearly represent an unused opportunity to attract more diversity. This isn't to say we should demand that more women or older people bet on sports, but it is worth questioning mechanisms that maintain gender- and age-based hierarchies within the sporting domain.

A new chapter in Olympic sponsorship at Paris 2024

The Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games included a sponsorship “first.” The Games have their first ever beer sponsor. AB InBev signed the TOP sponsorship deal with the International Olympic Committee making Corona Cero the official beer of the Games through the 2028 Olympics to be held in Los Angeles. Corona Cero is a non-alcoholic beer. Anne-Sophie Voumard, Managing Director, International Olympic Committee Television and Marketing Services stated that “Together, we strive to promote sports and moderation, contributing to a better world.” While the non-alcoholic beer category is booming, it is still a tiny percent of the beer market. What is the strategic logic for putting a no alcohol beer in front of millions of viewers?

There are at least two perspectives to consider on the logic of this first beer sponsorship for the Games.

One perspective suggests that AB InBev is responding to marketplace changes in consumer behavior for healthy, no and low, beverage offerings. Non-alcoholic beer currently fits neatly in the classic Boston Consulting Grid Growth Share Matrix as a “question mark” of low market share and high growth. The advice here would be to invest in question marks offerings if they have a chance to become a star (with high market share and high growth). Still, TOP sponsorship is a big investment for a question mark.

Taking a broad view for a moment, AB InBev is not the only beer brand investing in their no alcohol offerings. For example, Heineken is leading with their Heineken 0.0 beer in F1 racing and tennis for the US Open. Given that no or low alcohol beers are growing for the category, they may become stars. It could be argued that Corona is responding to marketplace changes. From this viewpoint, support can be found in another unique TOP IOC sponsorship. The first-ever joint TOP partnership between Coca-Cola and Mengniu dairy products from China.

Coca-Cola has been broadening its portfolio of brands in recent years to become a consumer-oriented total beverage company. For example, after years of investment and collaboration in 2020 it acquired US dairy brand Fairlife. A product brought into the Coca-Cola portfolio with the Fairlife acquisition was Core Power protein shake—that brand now sponsors Olympic swimmer, Katie Ledecky. In China, Coca-Cola has partnered with Mengniu for branding power, distribution systems and consumer markets that are mutually beneficial. Like the Fairlife investment, the Mengniu partnership is in keeping with Coca-Cola’s evolution to a total beverage company.

Again, we must ask, is the strategic value to these two brands in responding to marketplace change? The commonality underlying these two “firsts” can be viewed as changing consumer preferences. Brands like Coca-Cola and Corona are

responding to consumer trends for products like protein rich beverages and non-alcoholic beers. Are we witnessing brand evolution?

Now, for that other perspective. Cynics might say that the AB InBev investment value is in the potential to sell more than just Corona Cero from the AB InBev stable via an event with unique international coverage. Given their sponsorship of TEAM ULTRA athletes from the US with the Michelob Ultra label, one can understand the critique. Moreover, when the Games reach Los Angeles in 2028 Michelob ULTRA will front the partnership, not Corona Cero. A critical perspective is also supported by considering how other no alcohol beers, such as Heineken, are sponsoring racing with no alcohol campaigns, in part to retain sponsorships without regulations.

While the critical perspective applied to Coca-Cola is somewhat different than that of Corona, the similarity is fundamental. Both brands want to retain their relationship with the Games. Coca-Cola began their partnership in 1928. The continuity provided by history is a key dimension of authenticity and consumers seek authentic experiences and authentic brands. Even with the understandable backlash regarding the pairing of an unhealthy soda brand with a healthy activity of sport, their shared history is known by most people on the planet. You can’t buy history; you can only make it.

Global brands like Corona and Coca-Cola value communication platforms like the Olympics and Paralympics that parallel their global distribution. These brands market in nearly every country in the world and the Olympics reaches nearly every country in the world. The IOC wants to avoid controversy since it is not good for their brand. They also want to attract and retain sponsors since 30% of their funding comes from TOP program marketing rights. In this new chapter of sponsoring, both sides want to retain their relationship, thus, the path to shared brand equity is to evolve so not to be barred from sponsoring.



Dr. T. Bettina Cornwell

Professor of Marketing, Philip H. Knight Chair, and Head, Department of Marketing, University of Oregon. Her research is at the intersection of marketing strategy and consumer experience. Author of Sponsorship in Marketing: Effective Partnerships in Sport, Arts, and Events.

Email: tbc@uoregon.edu

The evolution of ambush marketing: social media, Rule 40, and brand protection at the Paris 2024 Games



Dr John Grady

Professor of Sport and Entertainment Management at the University of South Carolina. He researches legal issues in Olympic sponsorship, including the intersection of ambush marketing, social media, and Rule 40.

Email: jgrady@sc.edu

Twitter: [@JGradySportsLaw](https://twitter.com/JGradySportsLaw)



Dr Gashaw Abeza

Associate Professor at Towson University. His research interest is in marketing communications. He has written extensively on the topic, publishing over 80 peer-reviewed works including 7 books, 48 journal articles and 31 book chapters.

Email: gabeza@towson.edu

While the Paris 2024 Olympics promised to modernize the Games to appeal to a new generation of Olympic fans, it also continues to attract multinational corporations as official sponsors of the event who seek to benefit from the halo effect and exclusivity that the Olympics provides. Meanwhile, nonsponsoring companies, such as Apple AirPods and Celsius energy drink, are increasingly developing creative strategies to capitalize on the attention, goodwill, and other benefits associated with the Games. Ambush marketing, a sophisticated practice where nonsponsors seek an association or affiliation with the event or seek to confuse consumers about who the official sponsors are, has proliferated around mega sport events. Ambush marketing is a concern for event organizers as it devalues the sponsorship rights paid by long-standing sponsors and threatens the financial viability of these events (Grady, 2024). A study by Abeza et al. (2020) used data from three Games prior to Paris and reported that ambush marketing on social media has evolved from direct distraction, confusion, and rule-breaking to more opportunistic, subtle, and sophisticated marketing communication practices. The ability of brands to capitalize on viral moments during the Olympics creates new opportunities for ambush marketing by nonsponsors to associate with the event's popularity and goodwill. Thus, social media has only fanned the flames for increased ambush marketing activities at each Olympic Games.

Social media, with its unique features—easy access, public forum, viral potential, and lack of time or border restrictions—has opened novel opportunities and expanded the sphere for ambushers to execute their creative marketing initiatives. This led the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to release subsequent social media guidelines with the most expanded version in June 2024 for the Olympic Games in Paris. These guidelines followed revisions to Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter at the behest of athletes demanding the ability to engage more with their personal sponsors if those brands are also not official sponsors of the event. Rule 40 is designed to protect the exclusivity of IOC sponsors by prohibiting nonsponsors from benefiting from the goodwill of the Olympics and to protect the reputation and monetary value of being an “official sponsor” of the Games. Rule 40 guidance for Paris 2024 states, “All participants are permitted to promote their sponsors, and all sponsors are permitted to use Participant Images, during the Game Period, in accordance with the principles in this document” (IOC, 2024). This is a more relaxed version of the athletes' guidelines compared to guidance used for the past four Games and is a direct attempt to provide athletes with new sponsorship opportunities. However, an added element of intrigue for Paris 2024 is a pilot program created by the IOC to allow athletes to engage with certain sporting goods brands who endorse them, including

Nike, Adidas and Under Armour on social media in a limited way during the Games (Marks & Clerk, 2024). This is significant as the “Games period” is typically the Rule 40 Olympic “blackout” period reserved exclusively for the sponsors and where athletes with nonsponsor endorsements are expected to be muted on social media.

Within the context of the latest guidelines, social media offers a new level of ease for nonsponsors to reach their target markets. Even with host countries' legislation and the IOC's social media guidelines in place, the distinctive features of social media are expanding the scope for ambushers to execute creative marketing initiatives. This repositions the challenge of counteracting ambush marketing from being primarily a legal concern to include the added focus of effective social media monitoring and management.

The rise of visual platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, coupled with creative imagery used by nonsponsors, further complicates efforts to control ambush marketing through traditional legal measures. These platforms transcend geographic boundaries and bypass institutional gatekeepers, making it difficult to enforce advertising restrictions. This challenge is apparent for sports that may not receive extensive traditional media coverage but have passionate fans following their athletes on social media. For instance, athletes competing in the Olympic trials, like decathlete Jack Flood, have credited social media—especially TikTok—for attracting sponsors, securing endorsement deals with Raising Canes and Panda Express (Dent, 2024).

As a result, regulating athletes' social media activities through measures like Rule 40 and the IOC's social media policies becomes increasingly complex and delicate, making the threat of ambush marketing more difficult to manage. In this marketing landscape, most Olympic athletes can be seen as both celebrities and social media influencers. Celebrity athletes now extend their offline star power to online platforms (Abeza et al., 2017). Similarly, social media influencers act as pivotal connection points between their peers and ‘what matters’ in their communities (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Social media influencers are characterized by three key factors: what they know (level of expertise), whom they know (network size), and who they are (traits and values).

Early lessons and insights from the Paris 2024 Games confirm that social media and digital engagement are key to reach a younger audience of Olympic fans. This will require new innovative approaches to tackle the challenges presented by social media ambush and developing new brand protection strategies rooted in digital innovation rather than legal recourse. Meanwhile, the reaction of the Games' top partners (TOP) to further relaxation of Rule 40 at the Paris Olympics remains to be seen.

Amidst AI-fakery, an iconic feat of visual authenticity goes viral

A landscape of media abundance tenders fertile soil for conspiracy theories to take root and blossom. The proliferation of artificial intelligence tools and the low-cost, highly convincing deepfakes they generate put chronically online populations ever on notice: Believe nothing that you see, they assure us.

Against that backdrop, Olympic surfer Gabriel Medina levitated and went viral: an image so social media-scroll-stopping and share-stimulating, it begets wonder not simply for the athletic feat itself but for the possibility that it was actually *real*. To celebrate the photo, then, was to celebrate a kind of guileless innocence that the internet had long since disabused us of – refuting ceaseless cynicism otherwise cultivated.

Indeed, allowing ourselves to be arrested by the experience and expression of online awe is, at this point, an epistemologically radical act.

It arrived during the fifth heat of the third round of the Games and the Brazilian, Medina, was some 10,000 miles from Paris, offshore from the Polynesian island of Tahiti, where the surfing competition was being held. By the time the television cameras caught Medina in frame, he was already a dim vector bolting through a hazy, cascading tunnel – “a beautiful, life-threatening wave,” the NBC announcer marveled – before emerging from the froth, carving upward, and kicking out.

The ride itself shattered records: 9.90, the highest single-wave score in Olympic history, which Medina would appeal to have rounded upward. “I’ve done a few 10s before and I was like, ‘For sure, that’s a 10,’” he enthused. “The wave was so perfect.”

Yet that accomplishment would’ve mattered comparatively little had cameras not captured and projected it: a truism that Daniel Boorstin and Guy DeBord and Jean Baudrillard theorized decades ago; a truism now amplified by smartphone-lived lives.

“Pics or it didn’t happen,” goes the meme – until the pics themselves now demand AI-era incredulity.

Jerome Brouillet, an Agence France-Presse photographer, was perched offshore on a media boat, ripping ten shots per second with his Nikon Z9. An AFP editor recognized that one had the potential to become as *Time* tabbed it, “the defining image of... the 2024 Summer Games,” and posted it to worldwide acclaim.

That shot begs disbelief: Medina floats, frozen with statuesque calm, many feet above the deep blue-green crest of Teahupo’o, a single finger skyward; his board also puzzlingly upright, shadowing surf-froth that signals the momentum. At first glance (and second, and third), the shot makes little sense: How can that *be*?

Indeed, it evokes, with uncanny suspicion, a TV-spot for Google Pixel 8 that’s run on repeat in recent months, advertising its AI-powered capacity to effortlessly reposition bodies with a quick pinch-and-drag across the smartphone screen.

Less cynically, it also evokes some of the most distinguished shots in the canon of sports photo-journalism history: Bobby Orr, arms out-stretched, expression of ecstasy from having just potted the 1970 Stanley Cup-winning goal; Michael Jordan, hurtling from the free-throw line, toward a 1988 All-Star dunk contest victory.

Defiance of gravity has tantalized humankind for millennia; it is, equally, the impassable prison of physics that many an athletic act yearns to flee free.

Miraculous, even? Medina captioned the picture on Instagram – where it earned more than 5.7 million likes and 140,000 comments – by quoting Paul from Philippians 4:13: “I can do everything in Him who strengthens me.” Like the surfer’s Christian icon of worship, his own pose a visual echo of water, implausibly, walked upon.

That theological allusion is not too far a conceptual stretch here. Sport helps fill the vacuum of institutional religious decline: It articulates the language of belief, furnishes homilies of moral judgment, structures systems of meaning-making, and paves pathways to transcendence. It simulates the human experience long derived from faith, when many are formally divorced from it. Through sport, we think, feel, and act spiritually.

Moreover, it remains *real* – “authentically” – so – amidst so much else mediated fakery. The greatest crimes against the spirit of sport – doping, gambling – violate that ideal and endanger the plausibility of the spectacle. Hundreds of billions of dollars that churn the global sports industry trace their market value to that authenticity.

Otherwise, it’s just pro wrestling: a show scripted in advance.

The manipulation of visual reality will likely get worse before it gets better – a foreboding prospect in a year when nearly half the world’s population heads to the polls. The outpouring of fervor for Medina’s feat was not just on behalf of a hitherto-little-known surfer in a lower-profile sport. It was a renewal of hope and faith in a bygone aphorism: You had to see it to believe it.



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Dr Michael Serazio

Professor of Communication, Boston College. Author of three books: The Authenticity Industries: Keeping it ‘Real’ in Media, Culture, and Politics; The Power of Sports: Media and Spectacle in American Culture; and Your Ad Here: The Cool Sell of Guerrilla Marketing.

Email: serazio@bc.edu

Instagram/Threads: [@mikeserazio](https://www.instagram.com/mikeserazio)
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As athletes became media producers, does it make sense for non-rights holders to still attend the Games?



Dr Merryn Sherwood

Senior Lecturer in Journalism in La Trobe University, Australia. She is a former sports journalist, who has worked at two Olympic Games, and two Youth Olympic Games. Her research and teaching centres on disruption in media, with a focus on sport.

Email: M.Sherwood@latrobe.edu.au

Twitter: [@mes_sherwood](https://twitter.com/mes_sherwood)

American rugby sevens player Ilona Maher already had a sizeable social audience before the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. But in the city of light, her humour, body positivity message, behind the scenes content and a surprise bronze medal blew it up. Post Olympics she is the most-followed rugby player in the world, with 3.6million followers on Instagram and 2.3million on TikTok.

Paris marked the first Games where the IOC relaxed social media guidelines for athletes, and it paid off in spades for some like Maher. But given this newfound ability of athletes to post directly to a wide audience, does it displace some media's role at the Games?

Sport and the media: A symbiotic relationship

Sport and the media have shared a symbiotic relationship, particularly as the money from television rights has supercharged sports' move from amateur to professional. In turn, sport provided television broadcasters with a highly marketable product, used to engage audiences and sell advertising.

Even outside of rights-holding media, sports tried to gain as media coverage as possible, as NBA PR lead Brian McIntyre said in Fortunato's study of NBA media relations strategies in 2000, "what a whole lot of players and coaches forget, or conveniently forget, is that the media represent the fans in an ideal perfect world, they are the eyes and the ears so if you are not talking to the media, you are not going to get the word out to your fans."

The introduction of social and digital media platforms has potential to change the sport media relationship, because sport organizations and athletes *can* now speak directly to fans. But sport and the media haven't broken up just yet, as live sport still draws consistent broadcast ratings for those who can afford the premium price tag and because broadcast rights income still makes up a significant percentage of sports overall revenue. For the IOC, it's 61%.

To protect rights-holders who have paid handsomely to broadcast the actual Games in their markets, athletes and other social influencers were not allowed to show any footage of actual events. But do athletes increased ability to post other types of Olympic content have the potential to displace other media at the Games?

Is it worth it? Non-rights holding media and attending the Games

The Olympic Broadcast Service and rights-holding broadcasters make up the bulk of media working at the Games. But the IOC also issues accreditations in the 'E' category, including online and print journalists, photographers and non-rights holding radio and television journalists, and in Paris up to 6000 were made available.

This group of media gets access to venues and can report on the events, but have strict

guidelines around what they can do. Mostly this is limited to showing short highlight clips of events in official news programs, and other reporting that uses words and still images.

These reporters do get access to athletes to record interviews which can be broadcast, but this is also mostly limited to structured media environments such as media conferences and mixed zones, which have been criticised recently for the sometimes cliched content they generate. If the access to athletes doesn't offer much more than what we can see through their social media stories, is it worth sending journalists on the ground to report back news?

As a media lecturer and longtime fan of longform journalism, I still valued the stories that came from media on the ground in Paris. Having journalists there to ask questions at press conferences is important in holding the IOC and other parties accountable. But media organisations are not as flush with funds as they used to be, is it wise for all of them to attend an event where they can only produce a limited amount of media content?

There is precedent for this way forward, in 2015, several Australian media organisations did boycott the Rugby World Cup because of restrictions World Rugby placed on their ability to publish digital content from the event.

There is no doubt that the Olympics is still an event that media organisations should and will cover, even if they do not own the rights. Similarly, the IOC had to change their social media rules that were outdated and not fit for the current social and digital landscape.

But with athletes potentially now able to post more content from the Games than some media can, it might be a worthwhile time for some media organisations to rethink their content strategy and whether they need to attend the Olympics to still cover them.

Legacy of the City of Light

Paris 2024's visual legacy shines brightly in the afterglow of the Games. For two weeks, the City of Light showed off, with postcards at every corner. At times it felt like the athletes were the tourists, instead of being the main event.

"Nothing will ever compare to this," the Irish taekwondo athlete Jack Wooley said in *The Guardian*. "You've got eyes. You can see for yourself. You look at it, it's absolutely beautiful." He was talking about the magical, shimmering Grand Palais, which also hosted the fencing, but he could have been praising many venues.

The road race winner Remco Evenepoel stopped for a memory at the finish line in front of the Eiffel Tower backdrop, just across from the stunning setting for the beach volleyball, where Brazil and Sweden won gold. The BMX freestylers and skateboarders flipped under the watch of the Luxor Obelisk of La Concorde, while the equestrians jumped in the back garden of the Versailles. The triathletes and open water swimmers eventually splashed in the Seine, where Pont Alexandre III was as much a star as the competitors.

"These were not just the Paris Games but the Games in Paris," *The Age's* chief sports columnist Greg Baum wrote. "These were by far the most visually spectacular Games of all. The biggest star of these Games, if not swimmer extraordinaire Leon Marchand, was the Eiffel Tower."

But Olympic legacy is more complicated than optics. In the eyes of the IOC it "encompasses all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated by the hosting of the Olympic Games".

Paris was the first to fall under the IOC's Olympic Agenda 2020 for host cities, which called for a greater focus on the environment. Sustainability is difficult to define neatly, involving economic and environmental elements and often-meaningless buzzwords, but Paris wanted to be "the greenest ever Games", with less waste – actual and financial.

The headline problem was the city's drains rushing E. coli and other pollution into the Seine, a result of unseasonable summer rain linked with global warming. After a day's delay, the triathletes continued undeterred – although there were reports later of stomach problems.

That the swimming happened at all was a massive relief for the city of Paris, which had spent €1.4 billion attempting to clean up the river that has been banned for swimming since 1923. Despite the noble intentions, the results of this legacy vision were as mixed as the water quality readings over the two weeks.

Other sustainability-related issues included claims of greenwashing through Coke-bottle wastage, athletes complaining there wasn't enough meat in the food halls, poor air-conditioning in the village, and single beds made of cardboard.

A photo went viral of the Italian swimming gold medalist Thomas Ceccon sleeping in a park instead of his room. "The IOC can sugar-coat it all it wants," *The Sydney Morning Herald's* chief sports writer Andrew Webster said, "but the preference for a sustainable Olympics ahead of athlete comfort and performance was a mistake."

The temporary venues and grandstands at seven venues within Paris were viewed much more positively, and avoided some of the wastage of previous Olympics when stadiums were left to decompose. It is one of the reasons why organizers' predictions of no debt from the Games were realized.

Not since Atlanta 1996 has a Games finished with a budget surplus – a result which is definitely worth a medal. As *The Guardian's* chief sports writer Barney Ronay said, Paris was "a Games that covered its costs, [and] doesn't reek of overspend and pointless legacy projects".

Sports-wise, there was a lack of sustainability in the introduction of breakdancing. It will go the same way as the one-off obstacle swimming from Paris 1900, no matter how much huffing and puffing comes from Snoop Dogg. The rapper was the Games' off-field MVP, producing a social media collage of clips and memes.

Paris delivered many other lessons for future hosts, but some key ones are impossible to match due to the city's beauty and architecture. This is especially difficult when thinking ahead to Brisbane 2032, which will stage a more modest and regional Olympics and Paralympics. But, as Thomas Bach has said, all Games are different and are encouraged to reflect "the cultural, social, environmental, sports background of the host".

The City of the Light's role was in re-illuminating the Olympics. After the sickness and soullessness of Tokyo 2021, Paris reclaimed the love for the Games and the stunning 16-day show will be remembered like the glittering of the Eiffel Tower at sunset. It is a spectacular legacy.



Dr Peter English

Senior Lecturer in Journalism, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. His research focuses on journalists, content and social media, as well as media representations of sporting issues. He is the author of Australian Sports Journalism: Power, Control and Threats. Peter has worked as a sports journalist for more than two decades.

Email: penglish@usc.edu.au

Paris 2024 and the agenda of accessibility and inclusion



Prof Laura Misener

Director and Professor at the School of Kinesiology, Western University, Canada. Her research focuses on how sport and events can be used as instruments of social change, with an emphasis on how sport for persons with a disability can positively impact community accessibility and social inclusion.

Email: lmisene@uwo.ca

A central agenda of the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games was to create an inclusive and accessible environment. There have been many news reports about the increased accessibility of the transportation network, the spectator experience around access for people with disabilities, and the accessibility improvements made to a very old and historic city. All these are really part of the requirements of hosting a large-scale international sporting event, but the Paralympic Games offers an increased focus on access issues. Accessibility is enshrined in the Paralympic values, and indeed in the mandate of hosting the Games. But often these issues are lost due to the over-reaching focus on the Olympic Games. Accessibility goes well beyond the field of play and Paris 2024 stepped up the challenge to do as much as they could with the resources brought in through hosting. Onsite, there were certainly features that have not been part of the landscape in that city previously – accessible trains, ramps for access, special venue sections for spectators, and support personnel onsite to help with access. There were also more features that supported accessible experiences such as audio description for some of the Paralympic events, tactile vision pads at some venues to follow the field of play, and low vision helmets at certain venues to support visually impaired experiences. These kinds of features are what visitors with disabilities at mega events should expect in terms of necessary and enhanced accessibility of an event. But there were also additional features in these Games that featured volunteers trained in supporting individuals with invisible disabilities, mobility cards to support priority transfers from airports, and an accommodation partner that offered accessible places to stay.

All the enhancements during the Games offer a better spectator, visitor, and athlete experience. These varied attempts to support the mission of an event that is more accessible and inclusive of persons with disabilities was apparent. Some sites offered excellent descriptions about classification and athletes enhancing spectator knowledge. Being onsite, it was hard not to notice the access features and see how there were genuine efforts being made, but also hard to miss the missteps. What remains unknown, is how long and what impact these access enhancements will really have on the landscape of Paris, the public consciousness around disability and disability related issues.

Ultimately, what will the legacy of accessibility and inclusion be post-Paris 2024. A number of festival sites offered opportunities people to try out the Paralympic sports, but not one of the sites visited had any information about how people might get involved in para sport, or even support para sport through volunteering or coaching. So, while the spectators access might be improved, will there be any leveraged effect of sport participation

for people with disabilities? The literature is quite clear about the inspiration effect, only short term increased in participation will be felt by a host city and then will return to baseline – unless sport participation is leveraged in the post-Game euphoria. At this point, it remains unclear if there is an organization responsible for the ongoing potential impact of the events and how it will be managed? Even with the IOC doing legacy evaluations years after the Games, what is consequence of not delivering on these objectives?

Even with the added event related features around accessibility, these remain predominantly focused on narrow understandings of accessibility largely embedded in institutionalized ableism. Events occupy public and private spaces that remain predominantly developed through an ableist lens. It should not be lost of anyone who attends a large-scale event, that accessible sections for entry, seating, and services are mostly segregated spaces. We have yet to really developed our thinking around events that starts with universal design in mind. Why is that we applaud Paris 2024 for creating segregated seating spaces for wheelchair users, but if that same section was a 'Blacks Only' seating section, we would not have the same perspective. Strides have been made to create more inclusion and access through events such as Paris 2024, but there is still a long way to go before really dismantle the ableist perspectives of events. Scholars need to continue to interrogate the policy landscape that supports events, sports venues, media perspectives and many related sport structures. We also need to keep in mind that events such as Paris 2024 cannot be the answer to accessibility, but only one catalytic opportunity that puts the issues of access and inclusion in the minds of policy makers. How this catalyst propels the access and inclusion agenda forward in years to come will really be the marker of the impact.



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Media Coverage and Representation

The Paralympic Games are still overshadowed by the Olympic Games in terms of media coverage

After the impressive opening ceremony of the Olympic Games set new standards, and organizers promised that the Paralympic Games would also be opened in a spectacular way, this was an excellent teaser to arouse the curiosity and interest of the public to watch the show. Paris delivered. This 2024 opening ceremony was more eye-catching than ceremonies at any other Paralympic Games before it focused on the theme of inclusion as a guiding principle. This start gave hope that there would also be a great deal of interest in the then upcoming competitions.

However, although the broadcasters in Germany were clearly motivated to generate interest in the Paralympic Games and broadcast daily live coverage, summaries, highlights and interviews, the attention given to the broadcast of the Paralympics was limited by at least two key aspects. Firstly, while the TV broadcasts of the Olympic Games competitions were mainly shown in prime time from 8pm, the Paralympic competitions were mostly shown in the late morning to early afternoon. In other words, at a time when the majority of the population was at school or at work and could not tune in. The summaries of the highlights, on the other hand, were often broadcast very late in the evening—too late for many working people. These broadcast times had a decisive influence on whether sports fans have the opportunity to watch the competitions live at all. Even if there had been re-live offers etc., live is live. If viewing figures and ratings will be published in a few days, it must be assumed that the statistics will be skewed to some extent in favor of the Olympic Games and to the detriment of the Paralympic Games simply because of the broadcast times.

A second key point to consider in Germany is other competing sporting events taking place at the same time or not. It is no secret that Germany is a soccer-crazy country. The Olympic Games took place during a period in which there were almost no soccer matches because the season and all tournaments were over. In other words, the Olympic Games were not only one of the most important mega sporting events of the year, but at that time they were virtually the only sporting event in the media with hardly any competition from other sports shown in the media. Therefore, there was hardly any competition for broadcasting slots and consequently the sole attention of the media and the public. When the European Women's Football Championship was held in 2022, the year before last, which also had hardly any parallel sporting events, record ratings were achieved. Although the German women's national soccer team was very successful (vice-European champion), this enormous viewer interest was probably also due to a lack of sporting competition from other competitions. From this perspective, the 2024 Paralympic Games once again had a more difficult

standing in Germany, as the professional soccer leagues started the new season at the same time. It is difficult to estimate how big the effect was in the end, but it can be assumed that the competition from professional soccer not only had a negative impact on the number of broadcast slots and times and therefore also on visibility of the Paralympics in the German media, but also on the interest for the Paralympics of many viewers.

It is important to be aware and to emphasize that although it is possible to draw conclusions about interest in the Olympic and Paralympic Games from the viewing figures, these factors must be taken into account critically. We must consider how we will classify this inequality in the media conditions of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It is clear that inclusion – whether in the media, in sport or in society – becomes more challenging when athletes with different backgrounds compete under different conditions.

Even if the Paralympic Games were once again overshadowed by the Olympic Games in the media, Paris did its best to respectfully offer Olympic and Paralympic athletes a large international stage. Athletes have done more than serve as role models through their sporting efforts. They have shown the world that it is possible to perform at one's best despite disabilities. They have also demonstrated that one can fight for one's destiny despite setbacks, be a hero for others, and make one's contribution to a more inclusive society.

Sport is often considered a mirror of society. The opening ceremony of the Paralympic Games conveyed profound messages, e.g., in joint dances by people with and without disabilities. However, the fact that the Paralympic Games have been taking place separately from the Olympic Games raises questions about the signals being set. There are, of course, many reasons that the events take place one after the other, including economic, organizational and other factors. However, similar arguments against realization of inclusion are also found in everyday life. As long as these cannot be refuted and resolved, staged performances for the inclusion of people with and without disabilities will remain part of the show and look nice in the media, but often fail in reality.



Dr Christiana Schallhorn

Junior Professor at the Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz (Germany). In her research and teaching, she focuses on the relationships between sport, media and society, with a particular interest in the impact of media sport on the population.

Email: Christiana.schallhorn@uni-mainz.de

A sports media system breaking down like it took a punch from Imane Khelif



Dr Michael Mirer

Assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His research focuses on sports journalism, in-house media, and evolving standards of journalistic professionalism. The sport he rediscovers every four years is Team Handball.

Email: mirer@uwm.edu

Bluesky: [@michaelmirer.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@michaelmirer.bsky.social)

Twitter/X CEO Elon Musk famously backed out of a bout with Meta's Mark Zuckerberg. The combat in JK Rowling's books involved the waving of wands rather than the throwing of hands. So maybe neither knows much about boxing. Both are, however, self-certified experts in transphobia. So, when Algerian fighter Imane Khelif landed a punch that caused Italy's Angela Carini to tap out after 46 seconds of their Olympic bout, Musk and Rowling failed recognize this as the object of a boxing match and instead took to social media to spread baseless claims about Khelif's gender.

In the initial analysis, two billionaires posting from in front of their televisions drove an attention cycle that overshadowed some of the Games and will extend beyond the closing ceremonies. This cycle saw the Boston Globe retracting headlines that parroted the Musk/Rowling axis' claims about Khelif's gender, included a bizarre press conference from a sports-sanctioning body so corrupt that not even the IOC will do business it, and served as basis for legal claims filed by Khelif in France.

The phrase "attention cycle" rather than "news cycle" above is purposeful because actual news in this dust-up was negligible. And while other experts in this volume will discuss the intersection of gender and sports, this story also offered a window into how the sports media has frayed over the last three years and what means for those who are involved in the Olympics.

First, this should further complicate the ways we look at social media as a tool or resistance. We have decades of sports media scholarship, for instance, that illustrates how hegemonic the sporting press can be, by marginalizing activist athletes, reinforcing exclusionary national identities, or driving stereotypes. Social media appeared to alter this dynamic. Athletes had the opportunity to defend themselves against others who previously had the last word. Activists could bring ideas directly to their fans and defend themselves against criticism. That positive, and it is an improvement, needs to be balanced against the harms that exist in this space as well. Athletes and sports journalists (especially women in the field) say they face sometimes merciless trolling from fans or disappointed bettors. In the Khelif story, an athlete in a minor sport without much sponsorship faced an onslaught led by two of the richest people on earth. She appears to have held up against it, at least long enough to win a gold medal. Not everyone would. No one should have to.

It also shows the degradation of the sports-media environment. The transphobic hypothesizing against Khelif occurred in something of an information vacuum, which may have perpetuated this attention cycle. Someone hearing about this controversy would have had a difficult time finding basic statistical information about the two fighters. Moreover the near absence

of sports-specific boxing media to fill in blanks meant audiences had loud voices on social media and little else to guide them through this story. The IOC credentials sport-specific journalists as a separate category within the press pack. Those voices seemed largely absent as journalists in Paris struggled to explain the various machinations in this story. While the IOC made it clear the International Boxing Association was no longer affiliated with it on Page 4 of its media guide, those points showed up on the second and third days of the cycle. The lack of independent expertise leaves audiences adrift with only their preexisting prejudices to guide them. That is not good for athletes or anyone else. Does the IOC have a responsibility to its athletes to create a better information environment around its minor sports? Might it mean an investment in in-house reporting on the IOC's platforms? It could look many ways, but it is an important conversation.

Of course, the presence of information might not have helped. There have been excellent treatments of gender controversies in the Olympics, most recently Rose Eveleth's podcast series "Tested." But for the most part, sports journalists have not equipped themselves to write about gender or, really, to understand how they were played by people like Musk and Rowling, who have defined their public identities in opposition to trans life. Their claims ended up reported as allegations rather than nonsense because of their wealth and clout rather than any access to information or insight. Moreover, the entire situation enlists athletes into framing trans people negatively. A few keystrokes from a few high-profile transphobes drove headlines, which includes people issuing denials or defending themselves against allegations. Sports journalists have been traditionally committed to gatekeeping their professional domains, but this was a total abdication. Truth is not going to protect itself.

For all the potential harm enacted in this particular story, it also offers a learning moment to understand how a sports media system that is consistently being rewired digested this controversy. Everyone can do better.

The Olympic Channel's position and content strategies on the road to Paris 2024

According to the first, sixth, and eighth recommendations of the Olympic Agenda 2020+5, the International Olympic Committee (IOC)'s strategic priorities are to "strengthen the uniqueness and the universality of the Olympic Games", "enhance and promote the Road to the Olympic Games", and "grow digital engagement with people". Launched after the Rio 2016 Closing Ceremony as a multiplatform destination and later repositioned as the sports video section of the Olympics.com website, the Olympic Channel plays an important role in meeting all of the above aims.

In a time characterized by users' preference towards video-led platforms, the Olympic Channel capitalizes on an extensive library of original programming that comprises series, films, and documentaries aimed at providing "an entertaining, inspiring and action-packed look at the everyday lives of elite athletes and their quest for success all year round". This library has experienced noticeable growth over the past few years. In March 2018, after the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, the Olympic Channel offered 50 series online, totaling 653 episodes. For Tokyo 2020, the number of original series increased to 107, with a total of 1,062 episodes being available. In preparation for Paris 2024, the Olympic Channel library reached new heights by offering 147 series, with a total of 1,312 episodes being available. Following the interface introduced before Tokyo 2020, the platform allows users to freely browse content across 13 categories: Road to Paris 2024, #MoreThanSport, Films, In Pursuit of Excellence, Olympic Memory Lane, Never Give Up, Inspired by Friendship, With Respect, Together As One, Around the Globe, Through the Years, Road to Beijing, and Road to Tokyo.

Building anticipation and promoting diversity

Considering that during the Olympics, live broadcasts, deferred coverage, and highlights of competitions are available from Media Rights-Holders (MRHs), the Olympic Channel has provided fans with content focused on building anticipation and providing visibility to disciplines and protagonists typically not platformed by mainstream media.

For example, *Last Chance to Paris* captures the journeys of athletes competing in the Olympic Qualifier Series in skateboarding, BMX cycling, climbing, and breaking. To celebrate breaking's Olympic debut, two series (*Breaking Life* and *Breaking Life: Road to Paris 2024*) give prominence to the profiles of b-girls and b-boys that would compete in the event, as well as to the growing breaking scene in countries such as France, Colombia, India, and Senegal. Capitalizing on creative storytelling, *Athletes To Watch – Paris 2024* showcases 15 different disciplines, focusing on athletes from nine different nations. These projects speak to the Olympic Channel's emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness, in contrast with the uniform, male-driven, and nationalized agenda often exhibited by sports media.

Productions such as *By Her Rules*, *Skaters*, and *Viktoriia: Ukraine's Olympic Hope* help raise

the profile of sportswomen while counteracting existing inequalities within sport and society. These series give voices to inspiring athletes such as Viktoriia Onopriienko, Lyla Nourtier, Chloe Covell, and Funa Nakayama, who share their perspectives, challenges, and expectations. Following the steps of the documentary *The Invisible Bond*, *The Starting Line* showcases Paralympic sport by promoting empowering stories involving Ezra Frech (high-jump), Shunya Takahashi (javelin), and Ni Nengah (powerlifting).

Additional productions help to fully equip audiences for Paris 2024, providing them with a comprehensive knowledge on different aspects, such as the background to the Opening Ceremony preparations (*La Grande Seine*) and the qualifying process of different sports (*Olympic Qualifier Explainers Paris 2024*).

Beyond Paris 2024: a site to showcase and preserve Olympic content

In addition to offering new content related to Paris 2024, the Olympic Channel has consolidated its position as a repository of Olympic-themed content, facilitating its preservation and wider accessibility among global audiences. The platform allows users to rewatch content created for Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 through series such as *Looking Back/ Moving Forward*, *Taking Refuge*, and *On Edge*. *Official Films* provides access to more than forty official documentaries produced by the Olympic movement between Stockholm 1912 and PyeongChang 2018. Through the combination of contemporary and archival footage, series like *Legends Live On*, *72 – A Gathering of Champions*, *The Nagano Tapes*, and *A Brilliant Curling Story* allow viewers to revisit unique moments in Olympic history while also spotlighting forgotten or lesser-known protagonists. Interestingly, a nod to the rich history of the Olympic Museum in Lausanne is made through the seven-episode series *The Vault: Treasures of the Olympics*.

Concluding remarks

On the road to Paris 2024, the Olympic Channel has capitalized on excitement and inclusiveness to produce a wide range of novel content that contributes to an already extensive video library. Beyond the playing field, the Olympic Channel has consolidated its distinctive position as a gateway for promoting athlete-centric stories, behind-the-scenes material, and archival footage that helps to engage audiences across borders. This content, complementing the offerings of MRHs, is deemed as essential to ensure "the fullest coverage" of the Games, an aim outlined in rule 48 of the Olympic Charter. Going forward, the Olympic Channel should build anticipation for the forthcoming events (Milano Cortina 2026, Los Angeles 2028, French Alps 2030, Brisbane 2032, and Salt Lake City 2034) while expanding its range of formats, enhancing content discoverability, and reinforcing strategic partnerships with National Organizing Committees (NOCs) and International Federations (IFs).



Dr Xavier Ramon

Lecturer at the Department of Communication of Pompeu Fabra University, Spain. He serves as co-chair of the Media, Communication & Sport section of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and as vice-chair of the Communication and Sport Temporary Working Group of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).

Email: xavier.ramon@upf.edu

Twitter: [@xramonv](https://twitter.com/xramonv)

Broadening the Olympics coverage from the science side of sports



Dr José Luis Rojas Torrijos

Associate Professor,
Department of Journalism
II, Universidad de
Sevilla, Spain. His
research focuses on sports
journalism, ethics
and stylebooks.

Email: jlorjas@us.es

Twitter: @rojastorrijos

The Paris 2024 Olympics turned out to be a new episode for sports media to cover a wider range of topics than usual, reporting not only about scores, medal tally updates, and athletes' quotes, but also making the global mega-event much more understandable to audiences who are not so familiar with most sports on the Summer Olympic program. Among those topics of interest that facilitate public discussion around competitions, the intersection of sports practice with science stands out as a very valuable approach for sports journalism to better explain how Olympians perform under extreme pressure or in certain environmental and climate conditions.

Apart from opening ways to disseminate scientific knowledge through their coverage during the Olympics, media outlets seize the opportunity to cultivate sports culture among citizens by reporting about technique, terminology, rules, and competition formats of each discipline on the schedule. To reach this double goal, larger newsrooms make outstanding efforts to support the work of their sports desks and enhance the coverage by involving reporters from different areas and backgrounds, as well as professionals from photography, video, multimedia and graphics, and web design departments, moving again towards innovative storytelling formats.

As shown in previous Olympics, the science side of sports provides relevant insights into athletes' performance with the help of experts from fields as diverse as biomechanics, physiology, cardiology, and psychology. During the 2014 Winter Games, *BBC Sport* produced the series of animated videos 'Science of Sochi' to explain the physics of speed, the cardiovascular effects of altitude, or the production of artificial snow and the risks associated with sports practice. In the 2016 Rio Olympics, *O Globo* launched the interactive 'Segredos Olímpicos' driven by video explainers from the lens of kinetics to offer lesser-known aspects of Olympic sports. Prior to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, *Reuters* published a graphic with data about the combination of high heat and humidity levels that Olympians would have to endure in the city during the Games, drawing public attention to health issues around sport.

In Paris, the Seine water pollution levels at the triathlon and open-water swimming venues, the discussion about the shallow depth of the pool and the scarcity of swimming records, and the controversy around gender testing of two female boxers made the front page. These big issues led media to gather quick answers from science to meet the most urgent information needs. But going far beyond the news, sports media provided very insightful reads and illustrative pieces based on data gathered from scientific sources.

Despite closing down its sports desk in 2023 and in parallel to the daily live reporting

from its online sports site *The Athletic*, *The New York Times* deployed a multidisciplinary team to offer broad coverage of the Paris mega-event and bring expertise in storytelling. As a result, *NYTimes* featured several interactive articles and visual stories focused on the detailed mechanics of athletic performance, like the one about why many of the world's top swimmers scour data analytics and mathematics to gain even a fraction of a second in their pursuit of a gold medal, or the explanatory analysis on the most frequent injuries that occur in athletes competing in the Olympics.

In a similar approach, *The Washington Post* presented in-depth reporting pieces to address issues such as the human limits to reach peak performance and set unbreakable records and devoted some articles to explain advances in training, technology and technique in different disciplines like artistic swimming. Other media outlets chose this same science angle to help Olympic fans better understand some non-mainstream disciplines. Under the label of 'Décryptage' (Deciphering), *L'Équipe* delivered infographic analysis on technical elements of an athlete or sport, such as the muscle groups used in gymnastics rings and the power pedaling rate in BMX riders.

Toronto Star published a series about the science behind the high-level sport with special emphasis on Canadian athletes. *The Guardian* analysed the biomechanics of outstanding athletes in basketball, cycling, surfing, weightlifting, athletics and tennis in the series 'Midas touch'. And the Australian *The Age* expanded the Olympics coverage into some science of sport articles on topics such as the physics behind Simone Biles' perfect technique or the importance of staying underwater to move faster and beat the water resistance in the swimming pool.

In all these examples and many others, sports media outlets proved to add value to the Paris Olympic Games coverage by broadening the agenda from the science perspective.

Vitriol in Tokyo to sexism in Paris? Narratives about Indian female athletes in Paris Olympics

Besides showcasing performances, Olympic Games reproduce images of women's potential, position and place thereby influencing reflections on national identity, gender and power. The recently concluded Paris Olympics brought women sports to centre stage as mainstream and social media focussed on female athletes more than ever before. It augers well that the conversation about women's sport on social media is an averaging an increase of 2.5% every year. From no participation of female athletes in the first Olympics to the 'Gender Equal Olympics' in Paris, mediatized sport is writing a new chapter. In India, the second most populated country in the world, an estimated 17 billion viewers watched Olympics 2024 on Sports 18, the official sports television channel, underlining that the Olympics marks high levels of interest and engagement. India, with its 47 women athletes in 117-member contingent was witnessing the changing dynamics of a mediated networked society both at official and audience level.

Extensive viewership and high participation calls for providing a glimpse into the discourse by journalists, fans and athletes from India. It would be interesting to find the dominant themes in the discursive space for conversations on sports in general and issues of gender and identity in particular.

In the context of Indian female athletes in Paris, the discourse was conflicting and uneven, both progressive and regressive at the same time. While misogyny and hate were less visible than Tokyo 2020, sexism remained a recurring frame. On the positive side, significantly more attention in terms of presence and participation was noted for female Olympic participants. For example, social media erupted in applause when 22 year old shooter Manu Bhaker became the first Indian female athlete to win two medals in a single Olympics in Paris, referenced in images of the athlete on the podium or her kissing the medal with a narrative of equality and empowerment in coverage, and appreciation of the victor irrespective of the gender. Also, Indian media used the feminist concept of solidarity among women athletes as a news value. Mainstream media underscored the double-edged nature of social media with respect to female athletes. For example two articles on the India Today website featured an Instagram post of the Badminton player and co-Olympian PV Sindhu referencing two significant aspects of women sports: how her colleague Manu Bhaker leveraged social media to support the badminton player when she was trolled online, but on the other hand the negativity and vitriol the shooter faced on social media during her Olympic loss in Tokyo. Both the news articles highlighted the antifeminist nature of social media and how it amplifies the hegemonic voices.

Women sports journalists were seen as championing the feminist cause. Lavanya Narayan,

a sports journalist from Chennai posted how social media trolling adversely affects female athletes quoting Manu Bhaker's poignant plea "I am so grateful to win two medals. Please don't be angry with me if I can't win another".

Journalists identified the conventional heroine and vamp trope in discourse when an Indian female athlete loses as it focussed on social posts that mocked and discredited the female athlete. For example, in one article by Amit Diwan, online vilification of the archer Deepika Kumari on social media after her defeat is referenced to demonstrate how the image of the potential medal winner changed to vamp from heroine in a matter of a few performances in the minds of the sports followers. However, wide engagement on the post reproducing sisterhood amongst female athletes gathered more than 700,000 likes and 1200 comments counterbalances its detrimental effects to an extent.

Sexism in sports is a constant. Paris too exposed the normalised patriarchy in Indian sports. A male journalist while interviewing the double Olympic medallist Manu Bhaker asked her 'creepy questions' about rumours of a romantic relationship with another athlete: "Not that I mean to demean your medal or your efforts ... I don't know if you see it as a compliment but, of course, you are one of the most attractive females ... in Indian's history of Olympics ... Are we right to assume that there was some sort of chemistry or it was just that he [Neeraj Chopra] wanted to snub it as one-off moment which someone clicked?" betraying the deep seated sexism in sports journalism that has spilled over to the digital spaces. In this case, the old theme of sexualisation where media concentrates on a female athletes' physical attributes and beauty more than athleticism and competence continues to persist despite new discursive spaces.

While problematic gendered narratives were manifest in the Olympic Games, what is new in Paris was the support an India athlete received from journalists and peers and to an extent sports audiences in the digital world. That signals a shift in balance of power in sports ecosystems. Several times, Indian sports journalists and female athletes collectively set the narrative by framing issues from a feminist lens, rejecting the notion of male validation and appropriation to frame success. However, freedom from some of the dominant patriarchal representations is still not a reality. With media training and focus on gender literacy, digital spaces can be liberating for women sports. Extending Litchfield and Kavanagh's argument, Paris 2024 further demonstrated that social media is both empowering and oppressive for women sports when it comes to representations of female athletes and that new spaces will require new rules and frameworks to negotiate the conflicting and competing discourses.



Dr Kulveen Trehan

*Associate Professor
University School of Mass
Communication
Guru Gobind Singh
Indraprastha University,
New Delhi, India*

Radio Olympics in the UK



Prof Raymond Boyle

Professor of Communication, Director of the Centre for Cultural Policy Research, University of Glasgow. Raymond has researched and published widely in sport and the media and is author and co-author of several books examining the media industries. His most recent book (with Richard Haynes) Streaming the Formula 1 Rivalry: Sport and the Media in the Platform Age (Peter Lang) was published in 2024 and examined the media and the sport of F1.

Email: Raymond.boyle@glasgow.ac.uk

Twitter: [@raymondboyle67](https://twitter.com/raymondboyle67)

Radio has tended to be the outlier in media terms when it comes to coverage of the Olympics in the UK. However, in recent years radio or audio coverage of sport has enjoyed a renaissance, not least as it increasingly does not involve having access to an actual radio. Rather coverage is accessed via a range of platforms including websites, apps and YouTube among others. All you now need is access radio, is a mobile phone.

What is being delivered is audio content of sport. It tends to fall into several categories. Live sports coverage (available only to rights holders), reporting of sports news and results, sometimes as a live form of what we used to call blogging (remember that) or watch along, or more traditional sports comment and discussion type programs. What Umberto Eco called, what back when, sports chatter, often augmented by the fan phone-in (nowadays including texting and WhatsApp voice messages).

Traditionally in the UK, television coverage on the BBC network dominated media coverage of the Olympics, augmented by its rolling news radio station BBC 5Live and its DAB sister station 5Live Sports Extra. While the BBC sports website embedded all this content along with its OTT platform iPlayer.

This Paris Olympics however something different happened. Just as the BBC saw its television coverage and iPlayer access to live events dramatically reduced due to access restrictions related to rights issues, they also had direct competition in the audio/radio space from a rival commercial radio network in the form of TalkSPORT and its DAB sister TalkSPORT 2.

TalkSPORT, originally Talk Radio was launched in 1999, and is now owned by UK News Ltd and is a holder of an independent UK national radio license (with a host of sister commercial radio stations including Times Radio and Virgin Radio). It has slowly been eating into the UK-wide dominance of the BBC in terms of sporting coverage of live events. In the UK, the jewel in the radio crown remains access to live English Premier League football coverage. TalkSPORT has successfully broken into this market ending the BBC radio monopoly of live match commentaries.

This year TalkSPORT extended its ambition to become, for the first time, along with the BBC an official Olympic media partner offering extended coverage of the multisport event across its radio network and platforms. The investment from TalkSPORT to covering the Olympics was extensive. Without the in-built advantage of multi-media coverage enjoyed by the BBC across television, radio and online, TalkSPORT committed to over 250 hours of live coverage, with BBC radio having over 200 hours in comparison. They had eleven commentators covering live Olympic action on their TalkSPORT platforms,

augmented by a further eleven reporters from across the Olympic venues as they dedicated the TalkSPORT2 station to the Olympics, while at times moving coverage to their TalkSPORT station, where they carried regular updates from Paris. Big name expert pundits included Sir Steve Redgrave, Dame Kelly Holmes and Tessa Sanderson, while other Olympic legends such as Daley Thompson was a regular contributor across the network.

The BBC across its radio output and through its app BBC Sounds, delivered extensive coverage, with a highly experienced team of commentators and Olympic legends including Victoria Pendleton and Louis Smith. In many ways, given the restrictions on access to live feeds for the BBC in terms of its television coverage, by way of contrast its radio coverage, with its extensive network of reports and resource allowed the BBC to move across and between events and venues in a highly professional manner. To this end BBC radio coverage appeared more dynamic than its often more ponderous television coverage (as presenters filled until they had access to the next live feed). Anchored by among others the excellent broadcaster Mark Chapman, the corporation at times appeared to be slightly more fleet of foot than its rival TalkSPORT in bringing live breaking action updates to its listeners.

The TalkSPORT platforms suffered from that inbuilt commercial disadvantage of being dependent on advertising, with advertising breaks in coverage a real challenge when covering live sporting events. Given it was the first time TalkSPORT had covered the Olympics, its coverage was both slick and insightful. Both they and the BBC unsurprisingly inflected much of their coverage of the Games through the success or otherwise of the Team GB and Northern Ireland participants.

On average BBC 5Live has around 5 million listeners, while TalkSPORT around the 3 million mark. The BBC radio coverage of the Games showcased all that is best about the BBC's ability to cover a complex multi-sport live events targeted at the UK-wide listenership. TalkSPORT, in a highly professional manner brought and extended radio coverage of the Olympics to a differing radio audience, one more used to a stable diet of football related coverage.

There is little evidence to suggest that losing the audio monopoly of live coverage of the Games, impacted on the BBC's ability to deliver for its radio audience, but rather being in competition with TalkSPORT helped bring the Games to a wider radio audience. In so doing, both BBC radio and the TalkSPORT platforms reminded us of the ongoing power and importance of live audio coverage of the Games even in this most visual of sporting ages.

Ethics and quality in journalistic coverage of Paris 2024. The case of mass media in Colombia

The Paris 2024 Olympic Games, will be one of the most relevant mega sport events of the year and will garner the world's attention due to the geopolitical context that has surrounded it, the technological deployment to be transmitted and, in the context of this research, for being the ideal epicenter to analyze the journalistic quality that was reflected in the coverage in relation to the Colombian audience.

As Alina Bernstein explains, "sports journalists can act as agents of change in society since they have a unique and powerful platform to influence public opinion, raise awareness, advocate for various issues through their reporting and commentary, and overall promote positive change in society."

Only three Colombian mass media channels had access to the competitions and transmission rights of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Two of them were private media, Caracol Televisión and RCN Televisión; and the third was a public medium, Radio Nacional de Colombia. The coverage that each channel published on their respective YouTube channels between July 26 and August 11 were reviewed based on Ramón and Gabo's *Ethical Decalogue for good coverage sports*.

The characteristics of the principles proposed by the Ethical Decalogue relate to the quality necessary in sports journalism: "The commitment to the truth is what distinguishes the journalist, made to serve the intelligence of the recipients of his information (...) as a journalist, I am serving with information, not with entertainment because journalists are there to inform all not to entertain". Ten fundamental principles are used to guide this quality: 1) Challenge the lack of representation. 2) Be rigorous and avoid speculation. 3) Do not emphasize narratives and war imagery. 4) Find authoritative and representative sources for coverage. 5) Make underrepresented sports visible. 6) Go beyond the playing field in your journalistic pieces. 7) Respect the separation between journalistic genres. 8) Don't erode the credibility of your work by fueling virality. 9) Spread the message of non-discrimination and 10) Use appropriate language.

Results

The total of 160 journalistic products were analyzed, allowing representative findings from a qualitative perspective. In relation to the first and second principles analyzed, the entirety of content generated and broadcast by Caracol Televisión, RCN Televisión and Radio Nacional de Colombia exposed coverage that was generous in addressing profiles of historically relegated people, as well as adhering to the facts and verified data. The context of the social origin of most Colombian athletes, as well as the life stories and results was handled with rigor and certainty.

Regarding principles three and four, it is important to highlight that although none of them used warlike language in the coverage, Caracol Televisión and RCN Televisión "footballized" the tone, language and journalistic descriptions to the extreme. Radio Nacional de Colombia presented greater diversity in terms of preparation and way of approaching competencies, with relevant plurality and level of specialization. Regarding the plurality of sources consulted, each network demonstrated a strong creative sense to present voices linked to the Olympic organization, the athletes, the public in Paris and even journalists of other nationalities, thus enriching the information provided.

Regarding principle five, the two private media outlets focused their coverage on country's more popular sports: soccer, cycling, boxing, but failed to allocate time and space to underrepresented sports. However, the public media outlet, Radio Nacional de Colombia dedicated more than a quarter of its total content on YouTube to representing sports and athletes from other fields less popular, including breakdancing, marathons, and swimming events. In all three cases, as a traditional and positive characteristic of Colombian sports coverage, more than a third of the total information analyzed highlighted traditions, the presence of tourists from all over the world, thus adhering to principle six.

Finally, the three Colombian media outlets showed relevant care and did not erode the credibility of the work by fueling virality, spread the message of non-discrimination and use appropriate language. These aspects were managed with precision, highlighting colorful and dynamic styles in the coverage, with good narratives, devoid of sensationalism, vulgarity or sexism. Only in the principle number seven, *Respect for the separation of journalistic genres*, did the three media outlets reflect weakness, since two thirds of their coverage available on YouTube focused on the genres of news and current affairs interviews, without offering a generous margin to the chronicle, the profile or the report – genres essential for high-quality coverage, even more so in the context of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.



Prof Francisco Buitrago Castillo

University Lecturer and Researcher at Fundación Universitaria Los Libertadores, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Bogotá, Colombia. He works in the field of Sport Communication, in the lines of geopolitics, mediatization, mega events, gender in journalism and journalism innovation.

E-mail: lfbuitragoc@libertadores.edu.co

Twitter: [@franbuitragoc](https://twitter.com/franbuitragoc)

Breaking the rings: Twitter's role in fragmenting Israel's Olympic media event



Dr Haim Hagay

Lecturer at the Department of Communication Studies, Kinneret Academic College, Israel. His research interests include: the intersection of sports media and nationalism, sports media and gender, sports journalism and media production studies.

Email: haimhagay@mx.kinneret.ac.il

Twitter: [@haimhagay](https://twitter.com/haimhagay)



Dr Alina Bernstein

Senior lecturer at the School of Communication of the Academic College of Management School of media studies (COMAS) and the Steve Tisch School of Film and Television, Tel Aviv University, Israel. Her main area of research is media and sport.

Email: alinabernstein@gmail.com

Nationalistic discourse has long been central to media narratives around global sporting events. Traditional media play a key role in constructing and reinforcing national identities, often framing these events as contests of national pride beyond mere athletic competition. Research shows that such narratives shape viewers' perceptions with heavy consumers exhibiting heightened nationalism and patriotism.

However, with the rise of social media, the dynamics of sports discourse have evolved, adding new dimensions to how narratives are constructed. Unlike the controlled and unified messages of traditional media, social platforms like Twitter (X) have become spaces where polarization and fragmentation thrive. This shift profoundly impacts how sporting media events are discussed in the public sphere.

This preliminary analysis explores how sports discourse on Twitter during the 2024 Olympics reflects deep divisions within Israeli society. Unlike the unified nationalistic narrative in traditional media, Twitter reveals a fragmented and polarized conversation. This discourse, including both patriotic expressions and critiques of national celebration, highlights the societal fragmentation characteristic of contemporary social media.

Patriotic tweets take various forms. Some directly celebrate sporting success as a national achievement: "Thank you for this medal. Am Yisrael Chai!!!" Others express Schadenfreude when athletes perceived as enemies fail: "Karma? The anti-Israel judoka from Tajikistan who refused to shake hands with Shmailov... won't be fit for the repechage. Delightful!" Additionally, there are tweets reinforcing the particularistic national narrative that the "whole world is against us": "Peter and Oren break down together after the nightmare caused by antisemitic judges." Some tweets also melodramatically link sporting success to the ongoing war in Gaza: "An Olympic medalist with a freshly bereaved father. How sad. How joyous."

Alongside the patriotic tweets, there are also tweets opposing the national celebration, especially during times of war: "I can't understand how the Olympic broadcasts and the Israeli delegation continue as usual... Who cares about Primo right now... 12 children were murdered yesterday."

However, a significant portion of the tweets we sampled seriously addresses various political, gender and religious rifts that are tearing Israeli society apart.

The political divide is the most prominent rift in the Olympic discourse, encompassing both criticism of the government and opposition. When Prime Minister Netanyahu tweeted, "You fought like lions and brought great honor to all of us," numerous responses were critical, such as, "Israel is emerging as a judo powerhouse. It's time to adopt another Japanese custom and encourage failed leaders to commit harakiri." Coalition ministers also face criticism: "If the State of Israel were made

up of successful, accomplished Inbars, and not of pathetic, spineless Ben-Gvirs, we would be in a much better situation."

Amidst the opposition voices, there are also tweets expressing support for the government and its leader. Some tweets praise the Prime Minister: "... It's all thanks to you... Bibi brought us two medals in Rio, four in Tokyo, and six in Paris." Others target left-wing voters, with comments such as, "Maybe you should learn something, leftists. During Lapid's days, we didn't even get a single medal." Left-wing politicians who congratulate medal winners also face backlash. For instance, when Lapid tweeted, "Such Israeli pride. Much light in the darkness," responses included, "They brought light into the darkness that you spread... Scum."

Even the President, usually above political disputes, faces criticism. After he suggested that athletes imagine hostages watching them, he received tweets like, "There's a medal! How great for the hostages now in Bougie's mind."

The IDF, one of Israel's most revered institutions, is also a subject of the discourse. On one side, right-wing tweets criticize figures like the Chief of Staff: "It's time to get rid of Herzi and bring in someone as aggressive as Raz Hershko." On the other, anti-militaristic tweets state, "We're not a sports nation, more of a military nation."

Gender struggles are also evident in the sports discourse on Twitter. On one side, there are feminist tweets highlighting the unequal coverage in traditional media: "Equal coverage only comes when a woman wins a medal." On the other side, anti-feminist tweets mock the feminist discourse: "I'm just waiting for a tweet from the feminist feed comparing Kantor's silver medal coverage to Raubeni's gold medal, and it's a perfect day."

We also see tweets related to the religious divide from opponents of religious coercion: "Turns out Jews who compete on Shabbat get divine assistance"; Tweets against right-wing media channels: "On 7/10 they didn't broadcast. But now that there's a medal that can be attributed to Bibi, why not?"; Against civil protest organizations: "Brothers in Arms: We brought Israel its sixth medal"; Against the military prosecution: "Why are they interviewing Sagi Muki now!... Let the prosecutor take her hands off our fighters," and in favor of the prosecution: "Two medals in one day. Thanks, Gali."

In summary, the sports discourse surrounding the Olympic Games, once perceived as a unifying media event that reduced conflicts and strengthened national pride, has shifted on social media. Even during medal victories, the polarized discourse on Twitter reflects the deep rifts dividing Israeli society. Rather than uniting, athletes often become symbols that deepen these divides, raising the question of whether we can still consider these moments as media events in an era where social networks drive polarization.

Olympics in the age of Netflix

Exactly one week before the opening of the Paris Olympics, *Simone Biles Rising* has arrived on Netflix. This documentary series, consisting of two episodes, follows the struggles of the most decorated gymnast in history against mental health problems. Beyond setting the scene for Biles' coverage at the Games, *Simone Biles Rising* exemplifies how sports have moved towards "prestige TV" in their quest for storytelling and quality content.

It's no surprise, then, that two more episodes of *Simone Biles Rising* are already scheduled for release by Netflix in the fall of 2024, presumably to showcase Biles' performance at the Paris Games. Like other recent sports docuseries such as *All or Nothing* (Amazon), *Drive to Survive*, and *Break Point* (both Netflix), the focus has shifted from securing expensive broadcast rights to finding competitions, tournaments, seasons, clubs, or individual athletes capable of producing compelling stories for serial consumption. Even better if these stories can be framed within the modes of fictional TV shows.

Despite being classified as documentaries by the streaming platform and even by scholars, shows like *Simone Biles Rising* crosses television genres: it is both documentary and narrative show, journalism and drama, prime-time television and advertising campaign. This blending of genres highlights a broader trend in media and shows how TV producers have (re)discovered the incredible storytelling potential of sports, now disassociated from the journalistic coverage of sports as "hard news".

One of the most well-known descriptions of sports is from American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's research into the Balinese cockfight, in which Geertz characterizes sports as "stories we tell about ourselves". Sports are culturally formed "meaningful" experiences that are woven into common narratives. Hollywood and hours of TV fiction have an impact on these stories.

Victoria Johnson observed recently that while sports TV offers a wide range of programs, its predominant style is melodramatic. Ten years ago, Linda Williams proposed a different definition of melodrama, one that went beyond the idea of excess. Rather, she suggested that melodrama be viewed as a "narrative mode" that use suspense to establish "moral legibility," so enabling the viewers to empathize with the differences between the opposing sides. It's no surprise then that Biles' story fits well into a "hero's arc" with her "reward" in Paris (three golds and one silver) portrayed as a direct consequence of her grueling "ordeal" at the last Games.

Like blockbuster heroes, Simone Biles displays her virtue not only in her spectacular actions but also in her particular form of suffering, which makes these subsequent actions morally

comprehensible. This is the foundation of the melodramatic mode: the *pathos* of the suffering victim converted into righteous action is part of the cultural strength of melodrama—and Hollywood (Rocky Balboa, anyone?).

More than the action on the court, these new narrative forms aim to reveal the sport and its competitors from the "inside out." These documentaries operate under the premise of "total access," which promises unfiltered footage and quotes—especially considering the increasingly stale press area interviews. But in the end, by offering the "ultimate truth," these shows use fiction as their main narrative device.

Given that sports may serve as story devices, the distinction between information and story—which has sustained sports news coverage for decades—seems to have lost its meaning. What we have now are basic facts—that Manchester City won the treble in 2022–2023 and that Biles is an undisputed talent—told inside the narrative frameworks of fictional television shows.

These stories have protagonists, who act as the main characters, and antagonists. In a series like *Break Point*, which depicts the next generation of tennis players who may outperform the older GOAT generation, Rafael Nadal is portrayed as the scary villain to be defeated, including the typical horn *leitmotif* employed for antagonists in contemporary superhero films.

If live sports were "the magic bullet for the streaming wars," VoD platforms may have found a new weapon. Following *Break Point's* debut on the networks last year, the ATP reported a notable rise in its online engagement. However, the same could not be true for the live viewership of the circuit's broadcasting. F1's ratings in the US may have grown following *Drive to Survive*, but there's no denying that the show appeals to a younger audience that is impatient with dull and more technical races by providing far more drama and intrigue than traditional sportscasts. These days, a Sunday afternoon spent in front of the TV set watching the live broadcast devoid of access to drivers and team strategies is not as exciting as watching the Formula One season as a TV show, with all its melodramatic confrontations between heroes and villains.

Even if television continues to be the primary platform for the Olympics, we also need to consider the television formats in which sports are mediated. As sports are being presented in a more story-driven format, sports may finally be entering the era of time-shifting. Detached from live coverage, sports TV is now following, with a few decades of delay, other television formats. In the age of Netflix, sport is more than media-tized—it is "narrativized."



Dr Marcio Telles

Associate Professor in the Tuiuti University of Paraná, Brazil. He teaches and conducts research on the relationships between media, technology and sports, with an emphasis on sports television.

Email: tellesjournal@gmail.com

Twitter: [@tellesjournal](https://twitter.com/tellesjournal)

Team Brazil on YouTube: the content production of the Brazilian Olympic Committee



Dr William Douglas de Almeida

PhD in Physical Education and Sports from the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil. Journalist and a member of the Olympic Studies Group (USP).

E-mail: jornalismo_william@yahoo.com.br

Website: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/William-Almeida-2>



Prof Katia Rubio

PhD in Education from the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil. Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of São Paulo (USP), Brazil. Psychologist, journalist and leader of the Olympic Studies Group (USP).

E-mail: katrubio@usp.br

Instagram: [@katia_rubio](https://www.instagram.com/katia_rubio)

Communication is one of the pillars of sports management organisations. Far beyond simply being resources, today's national Olympic committees have become content producers and are able to communicate directly with a large part of the public. Maintaining profiles on social networks is customary and requires a great deal of work to update. This analysis will focus on the profile maintained by the Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB) on YouTube.

The first point to emphasise is that the profile does not bear the name of the COB, but "Time Brasil", in an attempt to get closer to the public and remove the institutional character. According to data from the "Social Blade" platform, between 28 July and 12 August 2024 the Time Brasil page saw an increase of 28,000 new registrations. Also according to the tool, there were more than 7 million video views between July 22th and August 9th.

COB's communication strategy on YouTube was very proactive. Different products were created for the period of the Olympic competition: in *Live Olímpica* a remote interview was held daily with athletes, former athletes and officials. *Bonsoir* was a program made up of reports that had already been produced and made available in the run-up to the Paris Olympics, mixing frames with videos of athletes recently posted on social networks. In this way, COB took advantage of a large volume of previously produced videos and re-exhibited them. The major product of the period was the *COBCast* program, which had two daily editions: one at 2pm Brazilian time – with an average duration of two hours; and another at 8:30 pm Brazilian time – with an average duration of one hour. Presented by two journalists, the program gave a daily summary of the results and schedules of Brazilian athletes competing, featured analysis from commentators and was also a space used for interviews with confederation leaders, COB staff members, sponsors and even celebrities from the artistic world. The program featured live appearances by athletes, especially Brazilian Olympic medallists, and some of the actions carried out by COB in Paris were shown live, as well as reports produced with athletes during the preparation period for the Olympic Games.

It's interesting to note that, even though it's an official COB channel, as it doesn't have the rights to broadcast the Olympic Games, the Channel uses photos and athletes' audios, but never videos of the competitions. The presence of officials and athletes, and the fact that it was on an official channel of the national Olympic committee, could lead one to believe that the programme was just a tool for publicising and flattering the national Olympic committee. However, this was not the case: analysis and commentary, including some criticism of the performance or speeches of Brazilian teams and athletes, were broadcast, as well as criticism of

the organisation of the Games, on topics such as refereeing in judo, or even pollution in the River Seine. The program also reported on important events in sports and competitions in which there were no Brazilian athletes. Even the edition that ran between 1.30am and 2.30am Paris time featured live interviewees. In addition to this content, a series of "one-off" reports and mainly cuts from interviews with athletes were published on YouTube by Time Brasil.

There were also partnerships: one of them with *Canal GB*, run by journalist Galvão Bueno, a professional who for 40 years was an announcer for Rede Globo, Brazil's most popular broadcaster, which produced a daily one-hour programme with commentary, interviews and behind-the-scenes reports from Paris. In one of them, reporter Marcos Uchôa spoke about the actions taken by the Russian embassy in Paris, highlighting Russia's suspension from the Olympic Games. The reporter even criticises Olympic policy. "But the war in Ukraine, the invasion of another country, was the reason for the most serious punishment against the Russians. But it's good to emphasise that the IOC, the International Olympic Committee, is closer to the West. For example, invading a country is forbidden by international law, but there was never any thought of punishing the United States for invading Iraq. The truth is that in sport the rule is clear, or the rules are clearer. In international politics, on the other hand, the game is completely different, double standards."

Another partnership for Time Brasil was with Embratur, the Brazilian Agency for the International Promotion of Tourism, a federal government agency, which produced nine editions of a program called *Borogodó*, in the format of interviews.

More than simply responding to press demands, today the communications departments of major sports organisations have become content producers. A major challenge is to do this in an attractive way, without making the content produced mere advertising and thus uninteresting to the public. The work carried out by COB on YouTube shows an interesting direction that can be followed and has achieved significant results.

The streaming games: analyzing NBC's coverage of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games on Peacock

When the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, France wrapped up, the United States finished atop the medal count with 126 medals, including 40 gold medals, 44 silver, and 42 bronze medals. When the Games ended, the United States had 35 more medals than any other country, with China ranking second with 91 overall medals. The top five was rounded out by Great Britain (65), France (64), and Australia (53). Along with the success of the American Olympic Team, another success within the NBCUniversal company was the coverage offered by NBC across its linear channels and Peacock streaming service. This essay discusses the impact of streaming the Olympic Games to American viewers, and the future impact on entertainment consumers.

In early 2019, NBCUniversal announced plans to launch a direct-to-consumer streaming platform to offer in-house entertainment to customers. They joined the likes of Apple and The Walt Disney Company by stating their case for entering the streaming entertainment marketplace. When Netflix launched in 2007, NBCUniversal was one of the major entertainment companies to join forces in the creation of Hulu. They planned to launch their streaming service in 2020, shortly after rival Disney would launch Disney+. A major promotional tactic for NBCUniversal in the launch of what would be called Peacock was the ability of consumers in the United States and select European countries to stream the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games.

In March 2020, when much of the world was placed under mandatory lockdowns amid the pandemic, NBCUniversal had to postpone much of their offerings for the service until 2021. Further, it was announced that the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games would be postponed until summer 2021, leaving Peacock without its marquee event to help support its launch. Falling behind other streaming services that grew in popularity during the early days of the pandemic like Disney+ and Apple TV+, NBCUniversal looked toward summer 2021 and the Olympic Games to entice people to consume Peacock. According to Statista, in the first quarter of 2021, Peacock reported only 4 million subscribers. However, during the Tokyo Olympic Games held in the summer of 2021, strict lockdowns kept people from attending events live, and viewership suffered as people didn't want to watch events without sizable crowds to add excitement. By the end of the year, Peacock reported 9 million subscribers.

Jump to the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, Peacock had 33 million subscribers. During the Games, NBCUniversal produced 7,000 hours of coverage over its linear channels and Peacock. Through their various channel offerings, NBCUniversal showed all 329 events, and averaged 30.6 million viewers during Paris prime time and

United States prime time hours. Viewers were treated to the comeback story of Simone Biles, the swimming rivalry between the United States and Australia, and many other moments during the Games. The ability to watch live events with full, or close to full venues resulted in an 82% increase in viewership over the Tokyo Olympic Games.

The combination of full venues, the ability to see the sights of Paris, and the excitement of an Olympic Games with live spectators present helped coverage outpace that of the Rio de Janeiro Games (27.5 million) and London Games (30.3 million). Regarding Peacock specifically, viewers streamed 23.5 billion minutes of coverage, a 40% increase over the Tokyo Games and Beijing Winter Games combined. Further, the coverage on Peacock was much improved in viewers ability to browse and search for specific events.

The question raised by the impressive streaming performance of the Paris Olympic Games is how it will impact the future of live sports entertainment. As the National Basketball Association announced its latest media rights deal, games will be shown on Disney-owned channels and platforms, NBCUniversal offerings, including Peacock, and Amazon Prime Video. With the ever-evolving streaming marketplace, and the importance of live sports to streaming, did the 2024 Paris Olympic Games represent the unofficial launch of Peacock and their ability to compete in the future of consumer entertainment?



Dr Cody T. Havard

Professor in the Kemmons Wilson School at The University of Memphis, USA. He researches about rivalry and group behavior to better understand its impact on greater society. He produces and hosts Being a Fan of Disney: The Podcast, and is the author of Being a Fan of Disney: The Book, which accompanies classes where he discusses how Disney influences consumer lives.

Email: chavard@memphis.edu

Twitter: [@chavardphd](https://twitter.com/chavardphd)

Threads: [@cody.havard](https://www.threads.net/@cody.havard)

Media coverage of the Olympic refugee team and sportswashing



Dr Steve Bien-Aimé
Assistant Professor in
the William Allen White
School of Journalism and
Mass Communications at
the University of Kansas.

Email: bienaime@ku.edu
Twitter: @Steve_BienAime



Dr Umer Hussain
Assistant Professor of
Sports Management at
Wilkes University, USA.
His research explores the
intersection of race, religion,
and gender in sports.

Email: umer.hussain@wilkes.edu
Twitter: @umerhussain222



Hanbo Liu
Doctoral Student in the
William Allen White
School of Journalism and
Mass Communications at
the University of Kansas.

Email: liuh2@ku.edu

The 2024 Refugee Team served as the largest Refugee Team in its brief Olympics history, with the increase likely connected to the United Nations figures saying, “Compared to a decade ago, the total number of refugees globally has more than tripled.” Undoubtedly, the situations causing tens of millions to be forcibly displaced should rightly shame the global community. However, that discomfort contrasts sharply with the so-called purpose of sport: Sport should be a place where athletes (and their sponsors), as well as fans, can escape the troubles of everyday life, thus placing sport in an apolitical and noncontroversial space. An examination of the media coverage of the 2024 Refugee Team unveils that sport journalists engaged in sportswashing, celebrating the athletes’ achievements while downplaying the broader global refugee crisis. This approach served to polish the image of both the Olympic movement and the host country, France, overshadowing the critical issues facing displaced individuals worldwide and within the host nation.

Sportswashing explains that various regimes and institutional bodies use athletics to both obscure their own societal ills and provide a public relations boost through image repair. For the international community, the fact that “1.5 per cent of the entire world’s population ... is now forcibly displaced” should move nations to take more decisive actions.

Besides the high number of Refugee Team members, this year’s team was notable as it earned its first Olympic medal. Boxer Cindy Ngamba, originally from Cameroon and now living in Great Britain, won bronze. The first half of the article described the match and the historic medal. The audience learned halfway down why Ngamba lives in Britain: “She moved to the UK aged 10 and is unable to return to the country of her birth, Cameroon, because of her sexuality – homosexuality is punishable with up to five years in prison in the African country.” The BBC report did not explain the enormity of the refugee crisis.

The Japan Times differed from other news outlets in that it provided fuller context to understand the plight of displaced people: “I’m also very proud that there are 37 athletes who are representing the more than 100 million displaced people at these Olympic Games. They demonstrated what refugees can achieve if they are welcomed into their new communities.” The statement came from Masomah Ali Zada, the Chef de Mission for the Refugee Team who represented the Refugee Team in 2021 Tokyo for road cycling. That statement came in the bottom quarter of the article that was titled “Refugee Olympic Team representing displaced people and making its mark in Paris.” The findings for this Olympics align with previous research on sports media coverage of Refugee teams, which often downplays or ignores

the underlying refugee crisis in favor of promoting feel-good narratives.

The Olympic movement prides itself on embracing diversity yet remains largely silent on the mistreatment of the very people it claims to defend, particularly by host nations. This is particularly evident in France’s long-standing policies that limit the religious freedom of Muslim women (i.e., including refugees) and the IOC silence. The Hijab ban, which started in schools in 2004 and expanded to a full-face veil ban in 2010, has now extended to sports, further marginalizing Muslim refugees. The case of French sprinter Soukamba Sylla, who was barred from the Paris Olympics’ opening ceremony due to her Hijab and had to wear a cap to cover her hair, highlights these restrictions’ tangible, immediate impact on athletes of color. France also removed homeless people and migrants from various neighborhoods in preparation for the Games. However, International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach said of the Refugee Team, “This will be a symbol of hope for all refugees in the world and will make the world better aware of the magnitude of this crisis. It is also a signal to the international community that refugees are our fellow human beings and are an enrichment to society.” The hypocrisy would be comical if were not real. To be fair, various media outlets globally, including French news companies, covered the displacement of marginalized people in Paris, but that coverage was widely overshadowed by the actual Olympic Games contests.

Scholars have also posited that various media outlets have historically downplayed human rights abuses related to mega-events in the Western world. Perhaps seeing how the plight of displaced people comes in second to sporting and feel-good narratives within media coverage, Refugee Team member Manizha Talash got “disqualified after displaying the words ‘Free Afghan Women’ on her cape” in the breakdance competition. The Reuters report, published globally, including in neighboring Pakistan, focused on Talash’s statement and the treatment of women in Afghanistan. Coincidentally, while the Refugee Team was created to highlight the refugee crisis, Talash got “disqualified for displaying a political slogan on her attire,” the World DanceSport Federation said in a statement.”

Parenting at the Olympics – how medal-winning mothers and fathers are portrayed in the media

Statistically, elite athletes have few children during their active careers, because having a child seriously interrupts the routines of training and competing, for female athletes in particular. However, the Paris Olympics 2024 demonstrate that motherhood and participation in elite sport are not mutually exclusive, and a considerable number of women return to the Olympic spotlight after giving birth.

Studies show an increase of media attention to such situations. In fact, the media, sponsors, and athletes themselves have utilized maternity as an advertising vehicle. A central ideological premise appears to be that caring for a child while returning to peak athletic performance defines the athlete-mother's achievements as even more remarkable, and her personality as even tougher, and even more tenacious.

Critical research on such media coverage hint at a *mélange* of ideological undertones. Progressive notes emphasize and support women's accomplishments in balancing family with professionalism. On the other hand, narratives about athlete-mothers may in fact be embedded in reactionary, patriarchal patterns. By over-idealizing motherhood, and 'selling it' in advertising as 'the greatest victory' a woman can achieve, their athletic achievements may actually be devalued through this discourse.

I suggest that a full analysis of the ideological value projected on parenting in sports can only be complete if it includes 'the other side of the aisle' as a *tertium comparationis*: athlete-fathers. In fact, they have received little attention in scholarly work, which can only partially be explained by biology. Obviously, male athletes miss pregnancy, but once the child is born, there is – in societies that emphasize gender equity, at least in theory – no reason why an athlete-father's and an athlete-mother's routines of balancing childcare with their job should drastically differ.

An analysis of media discourse about successful athlete-parents at the Paris Olympics hints at remarkable patterns. To start with two examples from Germany: Angelique Kerber (silver-medalist in Rio 2016) received extensive attention concerning her comeback for the Olympic tournament in 2024, particularly because she had a daughter in 2023. It became a noteworthy topic in German media that Kerber was *not staying in the Olympic Village*, but rented an apartment in Paris for her family, in order to live with her daughter during the Olympics. When asked about that choice on German television, Kerber noted: "Without her, it wouldn't work at all. I think many mothers will understand that", emphasizing her priorities, and discursively alluding to a sense of solidarity among mothers. Laura Ludwig, beach volleyball gold medalist in 2016, gave a long interview to *Der SPIEGEL* about her ambitions for the 2024

Olympics. The interview discussed at length the challenges of being a star athlete and a mother of two. Ludwig recounted doubts, frustrations, and "the feeling of tearing apart my family" when travelling to competitions alone and shared how sleep deprivation impedes efficient training.

So how do athlete-fathers in the same situation speak about these challenges? How do the media report about fatherhood of Olympic medal aspirants?

The answer is: they don't.

Again, two examples must suffice: Dennis Schröder, star basketball player and German flag bearer at Paris 2024, has three small children, who are regularly seen with him on the court after games. If and in how far childcare affects his career and training routine is never mentioned though. It is quietly assumed (or explicitly narrated by tabloid press) that his wife takes care of everything, so that he can fully concentrate on sports. Michael Jung, four times gold-winning equestrian, is a father of two, and footage of his Paris 2024 medal celebration with his three-year-old son on his arm was widely shared in German media. But whether lack of a good night's sleep is ever a problem for his performance, or where his wife and children stayed while he was competing in Paris, is impossible to know for German audiences: nobody asked Jung, and he did not volunteer any information on those matters.

The analysis of sports reporting about fatherhood by Olympic athletes indicates that, here too, ideological presuppositions appear to be commonplace: being an elite athlete requires time and dedication, so it appears to be common sense that the athlete's child's mother must be a stay-at-home mom, caring for child and household, and giving him the opportunity to normally train, travel, and compete. For female athletes, however, this is not the dominant narrative: their need to fulfill both roles, mother and athlete, is explicitly and extensively topicalized in interviews, and portrayed as an indicator of athlete-mothers' tenacity and 'bravery'.

In reality, there is reason to believe that female elite athletes with children rely on their partners and extended family in largely the same way as their male counterparts. Many female athletes in fact have gone on record explicitly remarking that family members picking up the slack (including their child's father) are the cornerstones of their continued career. Still, the media rarely resist the urge to frame athlete-mothers as 'supermoms'. Meanwhile, athlete-fatherhood appears as a side-note, in which children are cute, but largely unimportant mascots to their dad's success.

As long as motherhood and fatherhood of elite athletes are framed so differently by the sports media, reactionary ideologies about femininity, masculinity, and parenting (by all genders) will remain in place and might stand in the way of true gender equity.



Dr Karsten Senkbeil

Teaches and researches at the University of Hildesheim, Germany, in the Department of Intercultural Communication. He has researched and published on sports cultures worldwide, and focuses on inter- and transcultural exchange processes between North America and Europe through sports and other forms of popular culture.

Email: senkbeil@uni-hildesheim.de

Sexist framing in the media coverage of the Paris Olympic Games (OG)



Dr Sandy Montañola

Lecturer at the Department of Journalism at Rennes University, France. Her research focuses on gender in media coverage of sports. She is particularly interested in field work to understand how working conditions influences gender in sports journalism.

Email: sandy.montanola@univ-rennes.fr

Twitter: [@smontanola](https://twitter.com/smontanola)

Making Paris 2024 “the first strictly parity OG in History”, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) focused on gender equality as a defining feature of this edition. This symbolic strategy is not new to the Olympics: The 2012 London edition “were heralded as the ‘Year of the Woman’ as every delegation sent one female athlete to compete” and the 2021 Tokyo event was “the first OG of History to respect the principle of gender balance”. Such angle also provided an opportunity for journalists to treat the OG under the light of gender. Here, we explore if the media talked and how they talked about gender-related issues during the event.

A subject imposed by polemics

We found that, ahead of the OG, media discussed the evolution of the presence of women in order to verify the IOC declarations. Other topics that emerged were demands made by female athletes about outfits and maternity. However, media coverage of gender-related issues only emerged as polemics that happened during the Olympic Games. We selected two: the camera framing of naked body parts of women athletes, and the sexist comments made by journalists.

During the IOC daily press conference on July 28th, Yiannis Exarchos, chief executive of Olympic Broadcasting System (OBS), IOC subsidiary that provides images to media rights holders, answered about gender-related concerns: “Unfortunately, in some events, [women] are still being filmed in a way that you can identify that stereotypes and sexism remains, even from the way in which some camera operators are framing differently men and women athletes”. He explained that sexualization was a result of camera operators being “mainly males” and that they could differentially film male and female athletes because of an “unconscious bias”.

The content of this conference was taken up the next day by media outlets from all over the world as a progress, presenting the words of Yiannis Exarchos as a break with an unequal past. The trigger of such declaration is a controversy around sexist framing, but media widely echoed OBS’s position about operational measures in place for an egalitarian coverage or for parity within teams with specific training for women. Media outlets also referred to the IOC guidelines (2018; 2021; 2024) which underline “the importance of treating women’s competitions with the same approach as those of men, focusing on their performance rather than the aesthetics of the athletes”.

Different discourses that coexist in the media

The fact that the same framing was found in media outlets around the world can be explained by the replication of *Agence France Presse* coverage. Media narratives ahead of the

OG seems to coexist with various gender controversies without questioning the IOC’s narrative about parity.

In fact, the lack of media memory do not seem to allow the IOC’s declarations to be put into historical perspective: the analysis of previous OG allows us to observe that in 2021, in Tokyo, Yiannis Exarchos declared: “You will not see in our coverage some things that we have been seeing in the past, with details and close-up on parts of the body.” A Canadian title headlined “Olympic broadcasters want to put an end to sexualized images of athletes”. However, the 2024 media coverage presents the OBS’ declaration as an act aimed at triggering a change in “ways of filming”: “Olympics camera operators urged to avoid ‘sexism’ in filming female athletes”, or even “the camera operators finally ordered to film in a non-sexist way.” This angle seems to come from the individualization made by OBS attributing such sexualized frames to certain male operators and to the presupposition that women will produce not stereotyped images. We found the same process in the case of sexist comments. They are treated as an individual error, as in the case the article “Top 10 sexist remarks heard at the Rio Olympics” and, more recently, in Bob Ballard media coverage.

The OG has favored an individual angle rather than a structural perspective. As a result, production conditions, such as sponsors’ expectations and commercial pressure from audiences which push for sexualization, are not taken into consideration. In the same way, difficulties to integrate female journalists (which corresponded to only 20% of the accredited professionals in Tokyo) are not taken into account. While the OBS has 53% of male and 47% of female journalists, this only represents the 160 permanent employees of the company. But OBS is “by far, the largest contingent among all accredited media” in Paris with 8,300 temporary staff, and the gender balance within the technical teams, including camera operators, are not equal. The conditions and short-term contracts are unfavorable to women (Decree no. 2023-1078 of November 23) and unfavorable to capitalize action in order to avoid sexism.

The media coverage of gender-related issues during the OG could appear as a paradox since OG are the most favorable event to media coverage of female athletes (far from the 10% of global coverage during ordinary times). As we found, to be covered, gender inequalities must be 1/ pointed by female athletes or 2/ revealed by a particular polemics during the event. In that perspective, social media can be considered as a good sentinel to detect inequality between male and female athletes, but the narrative of the institutions seems to impose themselves in the tempo of the OG.

Framing a retiring female athlete in the media – The legacy of a minority rugby star



Dr Riikka Turtiainen

University Lecturer in Digital Culture at the University of Turku, Finland. Her research interests focus on the equality of media sports, particularly representations of female athletes, social media and gender in the context of team sports, and athlete activists. She is one of the editors of the forthcoming book Women in a Digitized Sports Culture: Nordic Perspectives (2024, Routledge).

Email: rmturt@utu.fi

The official slogan of the 2024 Paris Olympics was “Games wide open”. It refers primarily to the unprecedented use of urban space, transforming the city center into a venue for the opening ceremony and a sports arena for certain sports. It can also be seen as a reference to equality in sports. As stated on the official website of the Games: “It’s about delivering Games that are more responsible, more inclusive, more equal and more spectacular than ever before”. However, the controversial reception of the opening ceremony with its intersectional representations designed by a queer director, and the media discourse on the questioning of the gender of the female boxers suggest that openness was not fully achieved.

For one of the sport’s legends and LGBTQ icons, these Games were in any case her last, as New Zealander Portia Woodman-Wickliffe announced that she would end her international rugby career at these Olympics. “One last dance with my sisters in Paris”, she ended her Instagram post at the beginning of July. As a Maori athlete, she has represented not only sexual minorities but also an ethnic minority in a sport considered very masculine. Portia Woodman-Wickliffe has dominated both the sevens and XV’s rugby over a decade, breaking scoring records and showing her physical strength with incredible tackles. In civil life, she is married to another female rugby player, Renee Woodman-Wickliffe. The greatness of the Black Ferns star, therefore, lies in the fact that she has provided an unconventional representation of a female athlete with whom followers of sport from very different backgrounds have been able to identify. Her career came to a glorious end in terms of success when New Zealand won a second consecutive Olympic gold medal. But the interesting question is how the farewell of a retiring female player was framed in the media during the Olympics?

The media treatment of athletes who have announced their retirement has been studied mainly in the context of injuries, and in the case of athletes who have already retired, the focus has been on the media coverage of their mental health issues. There is often a public debate about the ‘right time’ for an athlete to end the career. Quitting because of injury or age is often seen in the media as an acceptable and honorable reason. Conversely, when an athlete actively chooses when to retire, the media may speculate that the retirement is either too early or that the career has gone on too long. In the case of 33-year-old Portia Woodman-Wickliffe, the media did not question her decision to quit after the Paris Olympics. At the end of the final match, the Eurosport commentator said that “one of the best ever” and her teammate Tyla King “leave on a high”, which could be interpreted here as meaning that their international sports careers have gone on long enough to reach a generally acceptable right time.

Woodman-Wickliffe’s retirement was also noticed on social media. She re-posted messages of support she received during the Olympics on her Instagram, such as a post by her former teammate Kayla McAlister in which she stated: “Give it to her’ All the best Sis @porshwoodman Bloody beast, enjoy the last ride”. The original publication was a compilation of Woodman-Wickliffe’s career highlights, which is a typical way to acknowledge the end of an athlete’s career, also in the mass media. In addition to highlighting achievements, the media tends in these situations to frame what is in itself a sad event as a joyful one. This was also the case with Woodman-Wickliffe: she was seen in Paris for the last time in international competition, but the news coverage did not mention it as a loss for fans who had to give up their idol or for a sport that lost one of its brightest stars. Instead, the media highlighted her importance to the sport as a whole and in particular her trailblazer role in the development of women’s rugby. The media coverage of the end of a sporting career, with all its metaphors, can therefore even be compared to obituaries.

During the Olympic Games broadcasts, Portia Woodman-Wickliffe was often picked for close-ups, even in the opening match, which she started from the bench. Woodman-Wickliffe herself took advantage of the media attention and the Olympic Committee’s new, more permissive social media guidelines by posting stories on Instagram about a Maori flag on the wall of her Olympic Village accommodation and her wife and daughter cheering her on at the stadium. Woodman-Wickliffe is said to have said after the Olympic final that her future plans include “lounging on the couch, eating Maccas and KFC and popping out babies”. However, there are rumors that she could be on her way to playing in the National Women’s Rugby League, and she herself has expressed an interest in becoming a rugby commentator, for example. Either way, she leaves a great legacy, and the field should be wide open to the former rugby star and the influential athlete whose expertise could be used in many different areas of sport.

Women's participation in the Brazilian journalistic coverage of the Paris Olympic Games

The 2024 Olympic Games, held in Paris, has revealed a significant shift in the composition of Brazilian journalistic coverage: the increasing presence of female journalists, commentators, and announcers. This phenomenon reflects a slow yet crucial transformation in the field of sports journalism, traditionally dominated by men, which follows changes also in the gender composition of athletes. Of the 10,500 athletes in the Paris Olympics, 50% were men and 50% women, which equates to 5,250 for each group. There were 152 women's events, 157 men's events, and 20 mixed events. In terms of the Brazilian delegation, more women than men competed. Of the 277 athletes, 153 were women, representing 55% of the country's delegation.

Historically, much like the participation of athletes in competitions, sports journalism has also been a predominantly male field. Female journalists face numerous barriers to entering and especially remaining in this sector, ranging from the lack of opportunities shaped by explicit and implicit gender biases regarding women's ability to understand and cover sports effectively to the constant cases of harassment. However, with the advancement of feminist movements and the debate promoted, particularly in the media, by the so-called feminist spring (De Hollanda, 2018), there has been a growing awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion in the management of media conglomerates and among the audience itself. Moreover, the growth of alternative media outlets providing on-demand streaming services, such as the YouTube channel Cazé TV by streamer Casimiro Miguel, as well as profiles, blogs, and sites that practice so-called situated journalism (Miguel; Biroli, 2010) or feminist journalism, like Dibradoras, which features an all-female team focusing on women's sports, underscores the importance of gender perspectives. By recognizing that the concept of neutrality inherited by journalism from positivist science, as well as the shield of objectivity and impartiality, does not necessarily generate balance, gender-based coverage can promote changes in the dynamics, agendas, and details of sports journalism coverage.

It is noteworthy that media visibility for women sports has only gained traction in the last five years. Previously, what was observed was the so-called accordion effect (Mourão; Morel, 2008), with sporadic coverage of major sporting events. Studies developed within the scope of Obmídia UFPE support these claims. A study we conducted reveals a 533% increase in news coverage of women's football on major Brazilian sports websites between the 2015 and 2019 World Cups. In 2019, 437 news articles were identified, compared to 69 in 2015, indicating a transformation in the visibility of women's football in Brazil. The latest edition of the 2023 championship saw

a 43,7% increase compared to the 2019 edition, which was considered the boom in Brazilian media coverage of the sport (Januário, 2023).

Thus, the 2024 Olympic Games mark a milestone in this transformation. More female journalists were involved in covering the event than in any previous edition. Many media outlets have implemented diversity and inclusion policies aimed at balancing gender representation in their sports coverage teams, as is the case with Brazil's largest media conglomerate, Globo. One of the programs conceived for competition coverage on its open TV, *Central Olímpica*, was hosted by former volleyball player Fernanda Garay, in partnership with journalist Tadeu Schmidt. The program also featured journalist Karine Alves as a reporter directly from Paris. On the closed TV channel of the same group, Sport TV 2, former volleyball player and two-time Olympic champion Fabi Alvim hosted the program *Ça Va Paris*, in partnership with journalist André Rizek. Additionally, the broadcaster invested in female announcers such as Natalia Lara, Renata Silveira, and Isabelly Moraes, along with a team of various former athletes and commentators, including gymnast Daiane dos Santos, former and current female football players Cristiane and Aline Calandrini, former basketball players Paula Pequeno and Hortência, skateboarder Letícia Bufoni, athlete Ellen dos Santos, and journalist Ana Thaís Matos, among many others. Notably, for the first time, 43% of the network's broadcasts included women. Meanwhile, Cazé TV, following the model of coverage and broadcasts from the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand, continued with a diverse team of journalists, reporters, announcers, and commentators. Journalist Fernanda Gentil remained the primary person responsible for on-site interviews and content, with commentators Janeth Arcain, a former basketball player, and former gymnast Lais de Souza.

The increased presence of women journalists not only enriches the diversity of the coverage team but also brings new perspectives and approaches to the narration of sports events. Women journalists often focus on aspects that are typically overlooked by their male colleagues, such as personal stories of overcoming challenges from a gender perspective, the importance of family support, motherhood, harassment, pay disparity, and many other gender equity issues in sports. These narratives broaden the scope of sports coverage and offer the audience a more comprehensive and multifaceted view of the Games. As more women take on prominent roles in covering major sports events, it is expected that they will inspire more young women to pursue careers in journalism, promoting a virtuous cycle of diversity and inclusion. Over time, it is hoped that these advances will solidify, establishing a new standard for future generations of journalists.



Dr Soraya Barreto Januário

Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at The Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), Brazil. Her research revolves around the intersections of sports with gender, sexuality, masculinity, advertising and human rights discussions.

Email: soraya.barreto@ufpe.br

Instagram: @soraya_barretoj

“The half-naked versus the covered”: the development of sexualization in women’s competitive sport



Dr Daniela Schaaf

Associated Scientist at German Sport University Cologne. She teaches and conducts research at the intersection of sports, media and culture. Her next book about sport documentaries (together with Jörg-Uwe Nieland and Dietrich Leder) will be published in 2025.

Email: Daniela.schaaf@icloud.com



Dr Jörg-Uwe Nieland

Senior Scientist at the Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt and associate at the Institute for European Sport Development and Leisure Research at the German Sport University Cologne. His work focuses on sport mediatization, sport policy, politics in sport, and media development.

Email: joerg-uwe.nieland@gmx.net

Twitter: [@JoergUweNieland](https://twitter.com/JoergUweNieland)

The history of sport and the Olympic Games cannot be told and researched without women. A monumental achievement was celebrated at the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris: For the first time in history, there was complete gender parity, as the IOC allocated quota places to female and male athletes on a 50:50 basis. This also applies to media coverage: women’s sports received 51.12% of the coverage while men’s sports received 47.04%. James R. Angelini and Paul J. MacArthur explain, “Women’s sports have now received more coverage than men’s sports on NBC’s primetime broadcasts in six of the past seven Olympic Games.”

However, these equality successes were marred in the run-up to the Olympic Games by the presentation of skimpy outfits for female athletes from outfitter Nike. The sportswear manufacturer was accused of subordinating functionality to the principle of “sex sells.” This reinforces a longstanding inequity in sports, one that puts the body of a female athlete on display in a way it does not for the male athlete. For years the old patriarchy of officials has been trying to make various disciplines “sexier” by dictating dress codes (e.g. beach volleyball, beach handball, tennis, etc.) in the hope of gaining more media attention.

In recent years, there have been public controversies about “the half-naked versus the covered,” as the biggest German newspaper BILD headlined. In 2021, the German gymnasts competed in full-body suits instead of revealing leotards at the European Gymnastics Championships. This campaign received widespread international media coverage: from the BBC, *The New York Times* and *Times of India*, the protest against sexualization in sports and a revolution in women’s gymnastics. These examples show that the sexualization and de-sexualization of the female body are two sides of the same coin. The public and often controversial debates are not only about the “right” clothing for female athletes but also about women’s rights and their restrictions, as well as the globally applicable (clothing) rules of professional sport (and the signal effect on clothing in recreational and school sports). What is new about this discourse is that the initiatives and activities to defend themselves against the rules imposed by the official patriarchy come from the female athletes themselves.

Sport has long been part of the “hyper-culture of commercial sexuality.” In this context, however, it should be noted that it is primarily federations, media, and sponsors that benefit from the sexualization strategy, with the individual athlete gaining very little (especially in monetary terms). But, in recent years, more and more sportswomen (and few men) have joined the erotic social media platform OnlyFans.com to decide for themselves how much of their bodies they want to show. They also earn more money because

they no longer need managers and agencies to promote themselves. Although this platform is mainly used by former female athletes, at least five active Parisian Olympians have an account on Onlyfans.com. The best known is the Canadian pole vaulter and bronze medal winner Alysha Newman who made headlines for performing a twerk celebration. According to reports, Newman has added 20,000+ new subscribers since her Olympic performance. Her monthly rate is \$7.79 per subscription, implying that she increased her income by over \$150,000 per month – significantly more earnings than for her sporting success. In this context, the question arises as to how feminist the social media platform really is. An overabundance of postfeminist substitute identifications can be observed in the media, popular, and consumer culture. Using terms such as “self-empowerment” and “freedom of choice,” women are told that they have control over all aspects of their lives.

In particular, the buzzword “self-empowerment” is used to describe the equal rights efforts of women in this androcentric cultural space. In this way, female athletes receive confirmation from the media and sponsors for the presentation of their erotic capital in the form of coverage and well-paid advertising contracts. This attention is intended to lull them into the false sense of security that they have guardianship over their media self-presentation and a right of self-determination over their own bodies. Similar observations can be made on the social media platform OnlyFans.com: Here too, female athletes submit first and foremost to the male gaze. Because only if they meet the Western female beauty and erotic ideals, are male users willing to pay for a monthly subscription.

For future research on the (re)presentation of bodies, gender, and stereotypes in production, reporting, and reception the following questions arise: Is the de-sexualization of some women’s sports, such as beach volleyball or gymnastics, to be seen as a step backward? Conversely, does this protest/boycott mean that in the future, female athletes who continue to compete in scant outfits will be encouraging the sexualization of their bodies? Does the bikini or the full-body suit in professional sports now stand for self-determination and emancipation? The sports system must also allow itself to ask who is in charge of setting the (clothing) regulations of professional women’s sports and to what extent cultural or religious rules must be adhered to.

2024 Paralympics para equestrians showcase interspecies interdependence on world stage

Para dressage was first included in the 1996 Atlanta Paralympics as therapy, with participants benefiting from interacting with horses. Athletes with eligible impairments can participate in Para dressage according to different grades of functional capacity. Para dressage is the only para equestrian sport included in the Paralympics. The event has been recognized as “a sport where rider and horse become one”.

In this article, I argue that the relationship between horse and rider in para dressage is so symbiotic that it forces the media to look beyond the usual signifiers of disability and the Paralympics they typically invoke. This interdependence prevents the media from reducing the athletes’ achievements to paralympic media frames of inspiration porn or superhuman achievement. Media can shift dominant discourses of disability by creating narratives that broadly emphasize the value of interdependence between rider, horse, and society.

Media narratives of para equestrian and the Paralympics

Cultural disability theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that disability is produced and reproduced in “cultural sites” where people with disabilities are categorized. The Paralympics are a cultural location of disability and have been instrumental in shaping media narratives of disability. Paralympians often, if not always, have a visible signifier of their disability, such as a wheelchair or prosthesis. These signifiers are then reproduced using media frames. The Paralympics and media coverage have been criticized for furthering an inspiration porn narrative. Australian activist Stella Young first described inspiration porn as:

“An image of a person with a disability, often a kid, doing something completely ordinary – like playing, or talking, or running, or drawing a picture, or hitting a tennis ball – carrying a caption like ‘your excuse is invalid’ or ‘before you quit, try’.”

In her landmark Ted X speech, Young argued that inspiration porn was a “lie, propagated by social media” that has influenced society to perceive the achievements of people with disabilities as exceptional. She argued that inspiration porn was the process of “objectifying disabled people for the benefit of non-disabled people”.

Inspiration porn has developed from earlier critical disability studies of the super cripple, defined by David Howe and Carla Filomena Silva as “a stereotype narrative displaying the plot of someone who must ‘fight his or her impairment’ to overcome it and achieve unlikely success”. Typically, this narrative focuses on the individual ‘overcoming’ their impairment. However, in para dressage, athletes do not ‘overcome’ their impairments alone; the skill and ability of the horse are also factors. In para dressage, commentators emphasize how these aids promote the

harmony between horse and rider rather than as performance enhancing. The aids permitted only compensate for a rider’s physical impairment or aid safety. Compensation differs from performance enhancement as it only aims to standardize riders’ physical abilities within their grades. Drawing on Susan Wendell’s and others’ work, we observe that these aids do not *compensate*; instead, they illustrate interspecies interdependence. In doing so, para dressage athletes can neither be so easily reduced to inspiration porn nor elevated to super cripple status.

Interdependence

Human-inter-species interdependence for a person with a disability is common in media portrayals of people with disabilities, e.g. guide dogs. In contrast, in para dressage, neither the horse nor rider can perform without the other. For interdependence, there needs to be an equal partnership between a person with a disability and an animal. Academic and disability activist Sunaura Taylor argues that interdependency is “self-sufficiency”.

Susan Wendell’s interdependence analysis demonstrates the false dichotomy of independence and dependence by illustrating the “value in being dependent on others and being depended on”. Wendell argues that “independence,” like “disability,” is defined according to society’s expectations about what people “normally” do for themselves and how they do it”. Wendell argues that although these ideals of normalcy have advantages, [independence] “undervalues relationships of dependency or interdependence”.

Para dressage riders’ horses help them be self-sufficient and make them feel physically stronger. Beatrice Vincenzi et al. argue that interdependence illustrates how “bodies, technologies, settings, etc., are unceasingly entwined to make actors more or less able.” Through interspecies interdependence, the body of the horse and rider are entwined, influencing new spheres of ability outside traditional interdependence frameworks. It provides a deep emotional connection in a world that can often be isolating and disempowering.

Attempts to frame para dressage riders as super cripples or inspirational have had limited success. By comparison, the interdependence between horse and rider demonstrates the power of para dressage for challenging negative dependence assumptions associated with disability. By focusing on para dressage interdependence, the media can potentially change narratives about disability. Para dressage rider Noella Angel states her horse is her “reason to get up; he makes me feel normal.” By priming audiences to focus on the interdependence between horse and rider, media can change existing social narratives of disability.



Melissa Marsden

PhD candidate in the Curtin University School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry. She is currently undertaking research on media representation of Para dressage riders in the Paralympic Games. She is a freelance journalist with degrees in politics, history and journalism.

Email: melissa.marsden@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

Website: <https://www.framingthenarrative.com/>

They're mistaking rugby for basketball! How can this happen when national media cover the Paralympics?



Dr Kristin Vindhol Evensen

Associate Professor, The Norwegian School of Sport Sciences. Evensen is head of study program Adapted Physical Activity. Her main field of research is embodied meaning, intellectual disabilities and adapted physical activities.

Email: k.v.evensen@nih.no



Dr Marte Bentzen

Associate Professor, The Norwegian School of Sport Science. Her main field of research is sport psychology. She is involved in research projects related to motivational adherence, prolonged engagement in activities and recovery in sport/para-sport, rehabilitation and work.

Email: marte@nih.no

As the Paralympics ends with a dazzling closing ceremony, it is time to reflect upon the paradoxical media coverage that has shrouded it. There has been expert opinion, good intentions but at times a serious lapse in knowledge and oversights. Case in point a recent Norwegian newspaper article titled “Brawny in the Olympic shadow. The Paralympics are fantastic but can never be fair”. The text is a tribute to Paralympic achievements and the Paralympic movement, yet look at the caption under this picture saying, “Wheelchair basketball is among the events in Paris”. The picture shows wheelchair rugby players playing with a wheelchair rugby ball with wheelchair rugby equipment in wheelchair rugby chairs.

Should we shrug our shoulders if a professional media mistook rugby for basketball in the Olympics? We think not.

The Paralympics are the second largest sporting event in the world after the Olympics, yet media coverage of the Paralympics has been limited and of mixed quality. Several researchers have pointed out that not only have Paralympic athletes been object to less media attention than Olympic athletes. They also have had to put up with presentations that describe them as suffering, victims or as heroes that are inspirational to those living without disabilities. Thus, media coverage has tended to present the disability itself as something that is of greater interest to the audience than the actual athletic achievement.

The aforementioned article avoids many of these pitfalls and provides information in a balanced way. The article skillfully credits the Paralympic games, the athletes, the opening ceremony, as well as questioning if classification of a wide range of bodies is a difficult and perhaps impossible task when the aim is fair competition – a resemblance to the discussion about gender diversity and Olympic sports. The article does however make a careless error that should be highlighted through mistaking wheelchair rugby for wheelchair basketball – something that those crafting the article should have picked up.

Sports journalists have been ascribed a professional and ethical responsibility to challenge stereotypes when they cover the Paralympics. They play an important role when it comes to end the trend of negative stereotyping describing Paralympic athletes as “bound to”, “suffering from” and “overcoming tragedies”. In this work, photos are efficient means that hide or emphasize different hallmarks of disabilities. This is what we will call a layered paradox: Experienced sport journalists and editors in large national newspapers, with good intentions, do not have the competence needed to pull through with the message. The mistake appears particularly paradoxical as the article finishes with the following phrase: “An important part when taking para-sports seriously

is to pay attention to what is achieved, not to which functionalities that are missing. And that should not be too hard”.

We have asked ourselves if we are too critical about our reactions to this mistake. However, this is a symbolic mistake, made by a top sport media outlet, who often advocate to inform the readers about the importance of turning attention towards the Paralympic sport and performances of athletes. As such, whilst their intentions are good – yet competence due to basic oversight is stark.

Excusing mistakes because intentions were good when fairness and equal opportunities fails for people with disabilities is an old story that has been repeated. This is a too old story to be accepted in 2024. If we accept that good intentions cover up mistakes, the responsibility of reacting to what can be labelled small mistakes lays upon the individual or group that reacts.

However, it should be expected for editorial offices to educate their readers about different types of Paralympic sport and Paralympic performance. The Paralympic games are held, and portrayed in media, every second year, and it is a great opportunity to broadcast sports for all for the broader audience at home. Although when doing so, please know the difference between basketball and rugby. This battle needs to be fought.

How the U.S. women's basketball team did without Caitlin Clark – regardless of the gold medal

USA Basketball made the news official on June 11, 2024, but the rumors had been circulating for a week: Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) rookie sensation Caitlin Clark was not on the team that would compete for an eighth consecutive gold medal in Paris.

Clark had spent the better part of the last two years mesmerizing sports fans and transforming even the most casual among them into basketball—no, into *women's* basketball—fans.

After leading her Iowa Hawkeyes team to the NCAA Championship game in 2023, Clark took them all on a breathtaking ride that witnessed her long-range shoot her way to the top of the NCAA all-time scoring list and ended in a second failed attempt at a national championship when her Iowa team ran into the South Carolina Gamecocks on April 7 in Cleveland, Ohio.

It is likely only Clark and her Hawkeyes viewed the two-season long run as a failure, however. Every TV rating for women's college basketball was left in the wake of that run. And it didn't stop there.

When the Indiana Fever drafted Clark first in the 2024 WNBA draft a week after the NCAA title game, another TV ratings record fell. The Fever sold out its arena for home games. Attendance figures for the Fever's away games set records. Viewership across media platform, merchandise sales, season-ticket numbers all exploded.

The nation embraced women's basketball like it never had and the face at the center of it all was that of a thin, brash, pony-tailed young woman from the U.S. heartland.

Yet, when the national team roster was announced, Clark's name was not on it.

The reaction was swift and emotional. Barstool Sports founder Dave Portnoy asked in a two-minute rant on TikTok, "How dumb are these women?" of the selection committee, insisting that Clark's popularity coupled with her talent should have landed her on the squad.

ESPN's Stephen A. Smith said on his *First Take* morning show, "You know good and goddamn well that with or without Caitlin Clark, they probably going (sic) to get the gold again. ... This is about the idiocy of USA Basketball. How dare you make this decision? It's stupid."

Former Olympian and ESPN analyst Rebecca Lobo countered their arguments. She told Mike Greenberg on ESPN's *Get Up*: "When it comes to forming the women's Olympic team, it's a three-year process."

Lobo had a more reasoned, nuanced approach to the matter compared to the sound-byte-seeking gentlemen.

Team chemistry mattered. Winning the gold medal mattered. Experience on the national stage mattered. But some other things mattered,

too – namely, like letting Clark get some rest after a two-year sprint, for example, Lobo contended.

Half of the 12 players that made the squad had eight or more seasons in the WNBA. The least experienced player was Sabrina Ionescu, a player with a toolbox much like Clark's – slick passing skills, consistent 3-point shooting, an athlete who can play the one or two. Ionescu, interestingly, played a limited role in Paris. She finished the tournament with the fourth-fewest minutes (13.2 per game) on her team. Among those behind her were women who play the same position: Jewel Loyd and Diana Taurasi, the latter of whom was the U.S.' oldest player at 42.

The omission seemed to make sense from a practical standpoint. Still, so many fans wanted to see Clark in the spectacle of the Olympics. One fan even compared Clark to Google stock on Reddit, suggesting we get in the action as soon as possible.

The fans had a point; they simply wanted to see this young juggernaut on the global scene.

Smith was right; the U.S. won its eighth consecutive gold medal and its 61st consecutive win in the Olympics.

Lobo was right, too. Clark rested and roared back into the WNBA schedule after the Olympics break. Prior to the break, she averaged 16.8 points and 6.3 assists per game. The first five games back she was on fire, averaging 22.6 and 7.8.

Portnoy, however, split the difference. On one hand, USA Basketball showed out just fine. The gold-medal game against France drew 7.8 million viewers on NBC and Peacock in the U.S. with a tipoff time of 9:30 a.m. Eastern Time and 6:30 a.m. on the west coast. It peaked at 10.9 million views for the final hour, The Athletic's Richard Deitsch reported. But it was a far cry from the highest viewed Olympics game, which took place in the U.S. in 1996. The Aug. 6 gold-medal game from Atlanta netted more than twice as many viewers (23.4 million) of the team that launched the WNBA and began that 61-game winning streak.

Was Clark needed? Certainly not. Was she wanted? Very likely.

The only thing we know for certain is that we will likely find out in 2028.



Dr Molly Yanity

Professor and Director in the Department of Sports Media & Communication at the University of Rhode Island.

Email: molly.yanity@uri.edu

India and Pakistan celebrate Arshad Nadeem together



Dr M. Fahad Humayun

Assistant Professor in the University of Evansville, USA, Department of Communication. His research focuses on contemporary sports journalism, particularly in the global south.

Email: fahad.humayun@colorado.edu

Twitter: @Humayun_fahad

Sporting events, particularly the Olympics, have the potential to function as a mechanism for fostering collective national identity by generating a shared experience among citizens. The act of watching and supporting national athletes can facilitate a sense of social cohesion that often transcends the prevailing social, political, and economic divisions. Moreover, the achievements of athletes on the global stage frequently become symbols of national resilience, particularly during periods of adversity. These victories can enhance national morale and contribute to a heightened sense of collective accomplishment, reinforcing a shared national consciousness. Arshad Nadeem of Pakistan managed to do just that with a javelin throw in the Paris Olympics 2024.

During the Paris 2024 Olympics, Arshad Nadeem made history by breaking a sixteen-year-old Olympic record in javelin, a record previously held by Norway's Andreas Thorkildsen, who set the mark of 90.57 meters at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Nadeem's achievement not only set a new Olympic standard but also secured him a place in history as the first athlete from Pakistan, a nation of over 235 million people, to win an individual gold medal. His remarkable success garnered extensive media coverage, not only in Pakistan but also internationally, including in India and across major global news outlets such as Reuters, Time Magazine, NBC News, Deutsche Welle, and Al-Jazeera, some of which published multiple articles highlighting his accomplishment. Notably, Nadeem's victory was even celebrated in India despite the historically tense diplomatic relations between the two nations, with Indian media and social media lauding his success. One reason for the global appraisal of his achievement could be that Nadeem's triumph epitomizes the classic "David vs. Goliath" narrative in sports.

Nadeem began his javelin-throwing career under remarkably modest circumstances, crafting homemade javelins from long eucalyptus branches found in the fields of his village. His weight training apparatus consisted of improvised materials, such as oil canisters and concrete blocks. Financial support from his fellow villagers enabled him to participate in early competitions. Despite winning a silver medal—the first individual silver for Pakistan—at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, Nadeem continued to face a lack of institutional support. As recently as April of this year, he publicly requested a new javelin for practice, a plea that was amplified by his Indian rival, Neeraj Chopra. Nevertheless, Nadeem's gold medal victory served as a significant morale booster for a nation grappling with economic challenges.

Upon his return to Pakistan, Nadeem was awarded approximately one million dollars in cash gifts from national and provincial governments.

His arrival was marked by a ceremonial water cannon salute for his plane, and he was greeted by thousands of supporters, including several federal ministers. Plans are underway to establish a new sports training facility in his hometown and to issue a commemorative postage stamp in his honor. Nadeem's triumph notably coincided with Pakistan's Independence Day, and he was the chief guest at several celebratory events, traveling between cities on a private plane to attend these ceremonies.

The sports media coverage of Nadeem's success offers both familiar insights and potentially new directions for research. The use of athletic achievements in the construction of national identity, the promotion of symbolic nationalism, the creation of heroic narratives, and the deployment of sports as political tools are well-documented themes in existing literature. Typically, sports media contributes to national identity by intensifying national rivalries, often highlighting historical or geopolitical tensions between nations. Competitions are frequently portrayed as symbolic contests for national honor, with media coverage of victories reinforcing these broader enmities.

However, the case of Nadeem presents an intriguing deviation from this pattern. Despite his closest competitor being Neeraj Chopra of India—Pakistan's longstanding rival off the field—there was a notable absence of amplified national rivalry in the media coverage. Both Pakistani and Indian media chose to downplay the traditional narrative of rivalry, and this sentiment was echoed on social media platforms by citizens from both countries.

Several factors may explain this departure. Firstly, the close friendship between Chopra and Nadeem likely influenced the media's approach. After Nadeem's victory, Chopra's mother publicly expressed joy, remarking that the winner was like a son to her. Additionally, it is important to note that javelin throw is not a widely popular sport in either country; cricket dominates the sports landscape in both India and Pakistan. Even though cricket players from both nations often share close personal relationships, the national rivalry frame is predominantly, if not exclusively, applied to cricket.

Nadeem's case suggests that, within the field of sports media and nationalism, there is room for further exploration into how and why the amplification of nationalism may be selectively applied to certain sports only.

A critical examination for the IOC and sports journalism

The ongoing military conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East represent some of the most pressing challenges in contemporary international politics. These wars not only pose significant obstacles for the nations directly involved but also reverberate far beyond their borders, impacting various global sectors. The crises stemming from the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have profoundly affected the sporting world, particularly regarding how to address the participation of athletes from Russia and Belarus, as well as those from Israel and Palestine. This situation has created a critical juncture for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the National Olympic committees (NOCs) and other sport federations (such as World Athletics) as they grapple with whether Russian and Belarusian athletes (and teams) should be permitted to compete in international sport events, especially at the Olympics. Additionally, there are pressing concerns about how to facilitate competitions between Israeli and Palestinian athletes amidst ongoing tensions.

According to the Palestinian Olympic Committee, over 300 Palestinian athletes and coaches have lost their lives since the onset of conflict. In response, President Jibril ar-Radzhub called for the exclusion of Israeli athletes from competitions. Conversely, the IOC advocated for “peaceful coexistence” between the National Olympic Committees of Israel and Palestine. While Ukrainian athletes were celebrated for their participation and success by the public, the media and athletes from other nations, Israeli athletes felt threatened and often not integrated. The vision of Paris 2024 as a “symbol of unity and peace,” as articulated by IOC President Thomas Bach, appears to be challenged by these complex realities. The 2024 Olympics stand at a crossroads where geopolitical tensions intersect with the ideals of sport. The IOC’s ability to navigate these challenges will not only test its leadership but also shape the future landscape of international sports diplomacy.

If sport serves as both a catalyst and a casualty of political and social developments, there is a pressing need for research into sports associations from both sociological and policy perspectives. This necessity is particularly evident in the context of Russian sports diplomacy and the complex dynamics among key actors and institutions in the Middle East. Drawing on neo-institutionalist theoretical frameworks, we can identify enduring social institutions within the political realm of sport that are focused on the preparation, production, implementation, and oversight of decisions.

Additionally, interactions with the media play a crucial role in how sports associations manage crises. Utilizing communication science methodologies, we can analyze how these associations perceive media coverage of ongoing conflicts—specifically regarding calls for the exclusion of Russian and Belarus athletes versus the participation of athletes from Israel and Palestine.

From a communication science standpoint, it is essential to explore whether the space for critical sports journalism is being constructed by these circumstances. This inquiry could illuminate the challenges faced by journalists in addressing complex geopolitical issues while maintaining journalistic integrity and independence.

The ongoing survey shows, firstly, the wars are posing greater challenges to sports federations, particularly the IOC, than the COVID-19 pandemic did. Secondly, there has been a noticeable fragmentation among federations in the lead-up to the Games. Thirdly, we observe a decline in legitimacy and an increase in criticism regarding the decision-making processes and communication strategies within these federations. Fourthly, despite this growing criticism, there has been little introspection within the IOC or among the sports federations themselves. It is evident that achieving genuine peace in sport between Ukraine and Russia, as well as Israel and Palestine, remains elusive for the foreseeable future. The suffering is too profound, and the political positions are too entrenched.

Regarding media dynamics, the medialization and economization of sport have driven forward the instrumentalization of sport. Sports federations, clubs, and athletes have come under scrutiny by the media, fans, sports politics and sponsors. Medialization also led to a professionalization of communication among sports stakeholders, which is reflected in particular in the growth of owned media. But on the other hand, we see a decline in interest in major sporting events. This was due to the restrictions during COVID-19 and the debates surrounding the World Cup in Qatar.

Unfortunately, the Paris Olympics have further contributed to the decline of critical sports journalism. This decline can be attributed to several factors: rising costs associated with TV rights; a dramatic reduction in resources available to traditional media; changing working conditions; evolving perceptions of journalists’ roles; and increasingly restricted access for sports journalists to athletes. This trend has led to the adoption of sports broadcasting principles—such as event-driven coverage, entertainment focus, ritualization, and a person-centered approach—within sports journalism itself.

This limited landscape of critical sports journalism raises concerns about its future viability. The world of sport—and particularly the often-misappropriated Olympic ideal—is entering a crisis. There is an increasing emphasis on soccer, especially within social media platforms, while fans continue to lack a meaningful voice in the discourse.

The ongoing legitimacy crisis and issues surrounding acceptance necessitate long-term adjustments within the sports sector. It is imperative that these changes be critically examined and supported by robust sports journalism and critical sports communication research.



Dr Jörg-Uwe Nieland

Senior Scientist at the Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt and associate at the Institute for European Sport Development and Leisure Research at the German Sport University Cologne. His work focuses on sport mediatization, sport policy, politics in sport, and media development.

Email: joerg-uwe.nieland@gmx.net

Twitter: @JoergUweNieland

Creating more media visibility for the Paralympics



Dr David Cassilo

Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Detroit Mercy. He studies sports communication issues focused on health, including head injuries and athlete mental health. 2022 recipient of the National Communication Association's annual Lawrence A. Wenner Emerging Scholar Award.

Email: dcassilo@gmail.com

Twitter: [@dcassilo](https://twitter.com/dcassilo)

The 2024 Olympics were everywhere. The event led to a ratings bonanza in the United States, as 30.6 million viewers tuned in, making it the most-streamed Olympics of all time. Elsewhere, X reported record high usage during the Paris Olympics. As such, for a two-week period, the Games were all many could talk about on both sports and traditional news platforms.

Unlike some other sports, the Olympics typically has the ability to draw in the non-sports fan or casual sports fan. Such a widely viewed Olympics would seem to be the perfect springboard for the 2024 Paralympics to capitalize on that interest. The Paralympics, taking place just 17 days after the Olympics concludes and at many of the same Paris venues, could attract the viewing attention of anyone who wants to continue filling their Olympics fix but does not want to wait until the 2026 Winter Games in Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo or the 2028 Games in Los Angeles.

Yet, live content for the Paralympics was not as readily available in the United States as the earlier Games. During the two weeks, the Paralympics aired mainly on streaming (Peacock), while some events were broadcast on USA Network and CNBC. Only a few days during the fortnight included programming on local NBC affiliates. Unlike the Olympics, during which you could not help but turn on your television and be directed to watch live or recorded action, those wanting to watch the Paralympics largely had to seek out that content.

Those looking for online content about the Games were also met with roadblocks. While NBC Sports' website was plastered with Olympics coverage, the homepage was largely absent of Paralympics coverage during the two-week stretch. Those looking for Paralympics coverage would have to go directly to NBC's Olympics site. Meanwhile, ESPN, America's top sports network which deems itself the Worldwide Leader in Sports, had no menu option for the Paralympics. Instead, users needed to click on the "Olympics" tab, which provided limited coverage.

Having two of the United States' prominent Olympics news sources shift their approach from the Olympics to the Paralympics may not be good for generating fan interest. For instance, Google Trends tracks "Interest by Region," which is "popularity as a fraction of total searches in that location." During the Olympics, the United States ranked 13th among all nations in this metric for people who searched "Olympics." During the Paralympics, the United States was 24th. In a country like the United States with its massive population, a difference like that is a substantial drop in interest.

Of course, nothing here can be deemed as purely causal. The Olympics occurs during a relatively slow time in American sports, thus

facing little competition. The Paralympics timeline includes the start of college football season and Week 1 of the NFL season. Additionally, the Paralympics falls over Labor Day weekend, a time when many Americans may not be sitting around their television.

Still, one cannot help but consider a "if you build it, they will come" approach to the Paralympics. Essentially, how would fan interest look if it wasn't so hard to find coverage and content related to the Paralympics? If it was featured prominently on television and on sports news websites, would the interest and appetite for it increase?

The common counterargument in these instances is that the interest level just isn't there. However, that sort of argument has been debunked many times over with other sporting events, especially in recent years. Most notably, this has been seen in women's sports. With more TV coverage than ever before, sports like college softball, women's college basketball and professional women's basketball have enjoyed record ratings. In 2024, women's college basketball produced higher TV ratings for the Final Four than its male counterpart. These examples have shown benefits to when networks commit showing certain sports or competitions.

For the written media coverage out there, there's also a delicate balance that must be walked by these content creators. The Paralympics lends itself to incredible stories of perseverance and inspiration and highlighting those stories are the somewhat natural inclination of a writer looking for a good story. But these athletes should not only be discussed in terms of their disabilities. The Games' participants are athletes with superior skill and focusing on their wins and accomplishments the same way writers do in the Olympics is a necessary task. It is yet another way these athletes could be treated similarly to their Olympics peers and doing so may be another way to increase viewership or reader interest.

While the Paralympics takes place after the Olympics, it should not be considered an afterthought. These are high-level competitions with elite athletes worthy of drawing an audience. With more attention, promotion and focus from mainstream sports media, the Paralympics would have the visibility it needs to draw that audience.

Bruna Alexandre at the Olympic and Paralympic Games

This review examines the media coverage of Bruna Alexandre's participation in the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games, focusing on the stark differences between the two. As the first Brazilian Paralympic athlete to compete in the Olympics, Alexandre's story presents a unique opportunity to assess how inclusive sports coverage is approached. While her journey leading up to the Olympics was widely covered, during the Games, due to her lack of victories, the coverage of results diminished in Brazil. During the Paralympic Games, media presence decreased dramatically, where only a fraction of journalists were present, compared to the Olympics, leading to much less visibility of her achievements.

The media coverage of Alexandre's Olympic participation was overwhelmingly positive. Her story was framed as a historic milestone for inclusivity in sports, and the tone remained respectful and inspirational without veering into sensationalism. Coverage treated her as a trailblazer, highlighting her participation as a significant moment for the representation of athletes with disabilities at the highest level of competition. Leading up to the Olympics, articles celebrated her role as a barrier-breaker. They explored her life story, including her arm amputation at three months old, but her disability was presented as context rather than the focus. Reports emphasized her participation in both the Olympics and Paralympics, reflecting her exceptional skill and determination. The aspirational tone of these articles portrayed Alexandre as an athlete with clear goals, setting her up as more than just a symbol of inclusion but as a contender.

Once the Games began, coverage focused heavily on Alexandre's performance, discussing match tactics, results, and team dynamics. Her disability was mentioned, but it did not overshadow her identity as an athlete. Articles maintained a neutral tone in losses or eliminations, ensuring that her historic presence remained a central point regardless of outcomes. She was frequently quoted, which allowed her to share her mindset and reinforce her competitive drive. The consistent reference to her as a trailblazer helped maintain her significance in Olympic narratives.

Once the Paralympic Games commenced, the coverage of Alexandre significantly diminished. Despite being one of Brazil's most successful para table tennis players, media attention waned. The majority of journalists had left after the Olympics, leaving only a handful to cover the Paralympic events. Articles that did mention her focused mainly on her participation in the Olympics, rather than highlighting her ongoing achievements in the Paralympics. This discrepancy in coverage highlights a persistent gap in visibility between the two events, even for a high-profile athlete like Alexandre.

Inclusive reporting

Throughout the Olympics, articles employed person-first language, referring to Alexandre as an athlete before mentioning her disability. This approach emphasized her athleticism over her disability status, a key aspect of inclusive reporting. While her story was undoubtedly framed as inspirational, the coverage avoided reducing her to a symbol of perseverance based solely on her disability. The focus remained on her skill, determination, and achievements. By treating Alexandre's participation in the Olympics as a natural progression in sports, the media contributed to normalizing the inclusion of athletes with disabilities in mainstream competitions. This framing represented a shift towards more inclusive perspectives in sports journalism.

However, during the Paralympics, this inclusive approach was largely absent. The reduced media presence resulted in fewer opportunities for in-depth reporting on her performance, and the focus shifted back to her Paralympic status rather than maintaining the broader narrative of inclusion seen during the Olympics.

Areas for improvement in media coverage
The sharp decline in media attention during the Paralympic Games was a major shortfall. As one of Brazil's most decorated Para athletes, Alexandre's achievements deserved the same level of coverage as her Olympic performance. Greater parity in media presence across both events is crucial for equitable representation of athletes with disabilities. More in-depth reporting could have explored the systemic barriers preventing equal representation of Paralympic athletes in the media. Discussing policy changes, training adaptations, and evolving perspectives in sports governance would provide valuable context to Alexandre's journey and the broader movement towards inclusivity in sports. While Olympic coverage included direct quotes from Alexandre, more in-depth interviews during the Paralympics could have offered greater insight into the unique challenges she faces as an athlete competing in both events.

Conclusion

Bruna Alexandre's participation in the 2024 Olympic Games received positive and largely inclusive coverage, with media outlets highlighting her historic role without sensationalizing her disability. The tone was respectful, focusing on her athletic achievements and competitive spirit. However, the sharp decline in coverage during the Paralympic Games exposed a persistent disparity in how athletes with disabilities are portrayed, even for those competing at the highest levels. The situation can also refer to the tradition of Brazilian media to focus on wins and gold medalists. As Bruna didn't have a groundbreaking sporting success at the Games, the coverage was significantly impacted by this.



Gabriel Mayr

*Project Manager at
SPIELERPASS and
member of the Olympic
Studies Group – GEO US.*

Email: gmos@mayr.net.br

Twitter: [@gmayr](https://twitter.com/gmayr)



Giovana Alves Pinheiro

*Sports journalist and
member of the Olympic
Studies Group – GEO USP.*

Email: gi.alves.pinheiro@gmail.com

Twitter: [@giapinheiro](https://twitter.com/giapinheiro)

An exoskeleton on parade: Kevin Piette's "historical" steps



Dr James L. Cherney

*Associate Professor and Director of the Communication Core in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. His work examines ableism's impact throughout society, particularly in the areas of sport, law, and media. He is the author of *Ableist Rhetoric: How We Know, Value, and See Disability* (2019, Pennsylvania State University Press).*

Email: jcherney@unr.edu

On July 23rd, French paraplegic tennis player Kevin Piette “made history” when he wore a robotic exoskeleton while carrying the Olympic Torch through Yvelines, France. What made this moment “historical” was that the exoskeleton allowed Piette to “walk again,” as opposed to using other mobility-related devices that facilitate movement but not do not give the impression of walking. As one report of the event explained, “Wandercraft’s Atalante exoskeleton simulates natural movement . . . enabling the wearer to keep their hands free while remaining upright without the need for balancing aids.”

Piette should use whatever devices he chooses whether because of personal preference or appropriateness to his condition; this commentary only examines the media’s presentation and does not critique him in any way. From this perspective the moment bears some scrutiny because of the rhetorical messages it sends about disability, sport, and the ableist fantasy that disability can and should be overcome.

First, conspicuous presence of Piette’s exoskeleton as part of the *Olympic* — as opposed to the *Paralympic* — torch relay implies an ableist preference for giving the appearance of walking instead of using a wheelchair or other device. Whatever the logistical reasons for having Piette’s presence in the Olympic relay, it associates a walking disabled person with non-disabled competition while associating wheelchair using athletes exclusively with parasport, which sends the message that the semblance of walking changes the status of a disabled person. Technologies like the wheelchair can allow people to move even faster than they can walk, but they are segregated from spaces that Piette’s exoskeleton is allowed to travel.

Second, videos and coverage of the event contain various cues that indicate it functioned primarily to generate publicity and that the technology’s promise of independence remains unfulfilled. In the footage an aide walks closely behind Piette with hands at the ready to catch him should he fall or stumble, while another aide keeps pace alongside him a few feet away pushing an empty wheelchair should it be needed. Piette moves rather slowly, and his somewhat jerky motion seems less suggestive of “natural movement” than the mechanical steps of a robot. While the videos do show him taking several steps carrying the torch, the safety net of two assistants at the ready gives the impression that Piette remains insecure in an experimental device. Additionally, coverage of the exoskeleton reveals the limitations of the access it provides to the user. Disability studies scholars and activists often use inaccessible stairways as a pervasive example revealing the impact and structural persistence of ableism. “In a society of wheelchair users,”

Tobin Siebers wrote in his 2008 book *Disability Theory*, “stairs would be nonexistent” (57), so their presence effectively conveys the message “For Walkies Only.” A technology that gives a disabled person the ability to walk implies that the barrier created by stairs can be erased, but this apparent promise of Piette’s exoskeleton proves deceptive. As *IoT World Today* reported, these “exoskeletons are solely designed for rehabilitation and not for sports or stair climbing.”

That the devices do not facilitate participation in sport raises questions for the statement published on the official Olympics website that Piette’s act of using an exoskeleton to carry the Olympic Torch “inspires people to get involved in sport.” Since other assistive devices, such as the wheelchair, do not receive the same accolades, this claim also suggests that parasport remains relegated to second class status because it does not similarly encourage sport participation. Consider the claim that this technology distinguishes itself from other assistive mobility devices by being “hands free.” This only makes sense if we view other devices as restricting the hands, but the active and powerful use of the hands propels such devices as manual wheelchairs. In the context of sport, extensive use of the hands in wheelchair tennis and wheelchair rugby should completely discredit the notion that these athletes’ hands lack freedom. The claim effectively reinforces the ableist conception of wheelchair users as “wheelchair bound,” which perpetuates the view that wheelchairs limit freedom of movement when the opposite is true for more than 65 million people worldwide who use them. Such misconceptions contribute to ableist oppression by suggesting that life with a disability is less productive and satisfying, or even that it is not worth living at all.

Wandercraft’s technological prowess and innovative device likely does (or will) provide meaningful access to some people, and I applaud its attempts to accomplish that. But the way it was presented in media coverage and situated by the Olympic torch relay recalls and reinscribes ableism. The idea that Piette’s display “is what the Olympic spirit is all about,” as Billie Jean King posted on her Facebook page, overlooks the ableist assumptions that framed this moment as history in the making.

Using humor vs. inspiration as a social media strategy for the Paralympic Games

In a clear separation from their Olympic compatriots' social media approach, Paralympians' and Paralympic social media platforms implemented a controversial humor-based strategy to increase audience exposure and engagement with the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games.

Paralympics' YouTube released a short series of videos leading up to the Games featuring Paralympian Matt Stutzman driving around and interviewing other Paralympians in a style similar to James Corden's *Carpool Karaoke* and Jerry Seinfeld's *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*. Content centered on the day-to-day lives of athletes and featured a candid question and answer format. Stutzman, who drives with his feet, was asked by fellow Paralympian Scout Bassett in one video if he did yoga or got pedicures. They both shared a laugh as a result. The Paralympics official TikTok featured videos showing various aspects of Paralympian performances with viral audio dubbed over them, including cyclist Darren Hicks pedaling with his left leg (his right leg had previously been amputated) and the audio was a song that had been edited to only include the word 'left'.

As of September 2024, the Paralympics official TikTok had 4.7 million followers and over 2 billion video views. Their YouTube channel had over 1 million subscribers. It was a risk to use humor as a social media strategy, which could invite potential mockery of Paralympians, but it paid off. And there may be several reasons why. Past research has demonstrated that comedy (including digital media sketches) can reach and engage audiences to think and converse about tough social issues. This discourse, in turn, can result in prosocial outcomes. It attracts attention and reduces hostility; it can also increase the visibility of underserved and marginalized groups. Using comedy on Paralympic social media platforms presented Paralympians as complete individuals – facing challenges, employing capabilities, and embracing humor to break the ice. This strategy can actually reduce any initial discomfort experienced by audiences.

Many Paralympians were on board with the strategy and saw it as taking narrative control over their stories. Craig Spence, spokesperson for the International Paralympic Committee, also stated that Paralympians wanted to show their sense of humor as individuals. And clearly, the approach was successful in garnering views, likes, and followers. But was there a downside? Spence noted that those who criticized the accounts were largely not part of the disability community (the administrator of the Paralympic social media accounts is former Paralympian Richard Fox). However, some Paralympians saw it as capitalizing on those with disabilities as an easy way to increase engagement.

If a comedic approach is used to promote the Paralympics, it should be done ethically. Social

media platforms should feature both human-interest stories and competition of the Games in their content. There is room for humor in both of these elements. Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman, authors of *A Comedian and An Activist Walk into a Bar*, made a few key recommendations: comedy shouldn't be sanitized to make it more palatable for audiences, but it should be focused on humanizing the Paralympians, their lives, and their personalities. Using humorous content solely for increasing engagement is a faulty strategy as it could have a backfire effect, where mocking takes center stage over comedic virality. Paralympian Noelle Malkamaki also noted that the Paralympic and Olympic social media platforms should feature similar content. If Paralympians are going viral for content that humorizes performances, Olympic social media platforms should be aiming for the same.

A comedic take on disability stands in stark contrast to other (and more common) media strategies that emphasize the inspirational and aspirational aspects of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. And, there is evidence that inspirational content can work to increase empathy for and reduce stigma toward those with disabilities.

However, inspiration-based strategies can be just as controversial. Reactions to this content (sometimes referred to as 'inspiration porn') can be mixed, especially regarding the Paralympics. Audiences may burn out from seeing these types of stories. Disability activist Stella Young argued that these messages can also objectify Paralympians. Non-disabled individuals may see these images, judge Paralympian abilities in comparison to themselves, and feel better about themselves as a result. This places Paralympians as objects of pity, not as elite athletes.

To challenge these stereotypes, many Paralympians for Paris 2024 also took part in a social media campaign declaring they were not participants in the Games, but competitors. This reinforced the notion that Paralympians achieve greatness because of their skills, not because of their disability. It also framed Paralympians in the same light as their fellow Olympians – using language to level the playing field.

Whether humor, inspiration, or both are employed as Paralympic social media strategies, the Paralympian should be at the center of the messaging. Content that exposes audiences to multiple dimensions of the athlete – the challenges of preparation and practice, the stress of competition, and, yes, the laughs along the way – all serve the greater good. They all remind us of what it means to be human.



Dr Nicky Lewis

Associate Professor in the Media School at Indiana University Bloomington. Her research and teaching focus on media psychology, particularly on audience consumption of sports and entertainment.

Email: nhlewis@iu.edu

Twitter: [@nickylew42](https://twitter.com/nickylew42)



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Performance and Identity

How much is a gold medal worth?

On August 2nd 2024 a little bit more than a week after the Paris Olympic Games started, Brazil won its first gold medal. Beatriz Souza, 'Bia' Souza as she became known, a Brazilian judoka in her first Olympic Games was responsible for the achievement. A black woman won Brazil's first gold medal in Paris in a sport that has not been receiving much media attention. However, the 'buzz' that came next was expected taking into consideration the value of a gold medal.

Almost immediately after the result four of the major Brazilian news websites (Globo.com, Folha, Estadão and O Globo) celebrated the information with Beatriz pictures followed by headlines such as "Brazil's first gold medal". A few hours later these same news websites had published full stories about the athlete and the gold medal: "Bia cries when talking to her family: 'This was for grandma'", "Since she was 6 years old it was only Judo in her life", says Bia's mother", "Brazil's first gold medal was a judo fairy tale". Globo, the network which owned the rights to broadcast the Olympic Games, published five stories on its website, all of which had photos and videos that showed Beatriz's fight, and her celebration on the podium. The news also focused on Beatriz as the first woman to win a gold medal in her first Olympic Games for Brazil, and in most of the stories the journalist reminded us of how much of an accomplishment this was.

A few weeks later, on August 29th 2024, less than 24 hours after the Paralympic Games started, the Brazilian swimmer Gabriel Araújo, known as Gabrielzinho, won the country's first Paralympic gold medal of the Paris Games. But the silence was brutal. It took some time for the same websites to publish his result. More specifically Globo.com posted five full stories, but only two had Gabriel as a headline – one focused on general results of the Games' first day, and one focused on the fact that Lula, Brazil's president, had congratulated Gabriel – and only one celebrated the first gold medal: "Gabrielzinho won the first gold for Brazil at the Paralympics". The news focused only on the results, photos and videos showed Gabriel swimming, celebrating in the pool and on the podium, but several made Gabriel's disability invisible, and in three of the four news stories his disability was explained, with his achievements taking a back seat.

The whole Paralympic Games suffered from this silence and underrepresentation, which was highly criticized. Globo, the Brazilian TV channel responsible for broadcasting the event, offered to its viewers only highlights of the Games and the results of Brazilian athletes. SporTV, the Brazilian main channel on paid TV owned by Globo, had four different channels completely dedicated to the Olympic Games; during the Paralympic Games only one channel was responsible for the transmission. Adding to it there was little coverage from print media and news websites.

When the Paralympic Games and athletes are underrepresented in the media, as we concluded in the *Olympic and Paralympic Analysis 2020*, the Paralympic Games is seen as a second-class event by the media. Developing this conclusion, we can state that not only the event, but the athletes with disabilities are considered second-class individuals. This bias not only affects how Paralympians are viewed by society but also impacts their opportunities for sponsorship and public recognition.

If, on the one hand, people with disabilities are victims of a dominant ableist discourse, mainly by traditional media, that reinforce ideologies, frame certain aspects and bring its audience a symbolic network of meanings that organizes the social world, on the other hand, social media allows people with disabilities to interact directly with society, with the possibility of agreeing with, opposing or complementing what is disclosed by traditional media.

Social media is an important platform, especially for athletes. Before the gold medal Beatriz had 13,000 followers on Instagram, a few minutes later this number increased to more than 400,000 and by the end of the day she had more than 1 million followers. In addition, after the Olympic Games Beatriz was invited by many TV shows, from talk show to cooking programs, and even her husband starred in an advertising campaign.

The lack of visibility had an impact also on social media. While Bia increased her Instagram follower by almost 8 times, Gabriel only doubled his numbers, reaching 421,000 followers by the end of the Paralympics after three gold medals and two world records. At the time of writing, he has yet to be invited to join TV shows and commercials.

On a more tangible level, while Beatriz Souza received from the Brazilian Olympic Committee 350,000 Reais (approximately 63,000 dollars), Gabriel Araújo received 250,000 Reais (approximately 45,000 dollars) from the Brazilian Paralympic Committee, making the gap between the two events even more clear.



Dr Tatiane Hilgemberg

Assistant Professor in Communication and a researcher at Roraima Federal University, Brazil. She received her doctorate in Communication from State University of Rio de Janeiro and her master's in communication science from Porto University. She was a Fulbright scholar at the University of Texas at Arlington in 2023. Her research interests include disability studies and sports, stereotypes, minorities and the media.

Email: tatiane.hilgemberg@ufr.br

From sponsorship to transformational social change: the power of paralympic partnerships



Dr Olga Kolotouchkina
*Lecturer and researcher of
Communication and Branding,
Faculty of Media and
Communication, Complutense
University of Madrid, Spain.*

Email: olga.kolotouchkina@ucm.es
Twitter: [@okolotouchkina](https://twitter.com/okolotouchkina)



Prof Carmen Llorente Barroso
*Professor of Communication
and Advertising, Faculty of
Media and Communication,
Complutense University
of Madrid, Spain.*

Email: carmenllorente@ucm.es



Luis Leardy
*Communication Director,
Spanish Paralympic
Committee. PhD Candidate,
Faculty of Media and
Communication, Complutense
University of Madrid, Spain.*

Email: luis.leardy@paralimpicos.es
Twitter: [@luisleardy](https://twitter.com/luisleardy)

After winning four medals at the 2011 Spanish Adapted Swimming Championship at just 12 years old, Núria Marquès joined the AXA Paralympic Promise Team. Founded in 2010 by the AXA Foundation and the Spanish Paralympic Committee, this initiative provides holistic support to young Paralympic swimmers, helping them excel in high-performance training and participate in national and international competitions. AXA, the global insurance giant, has been a key sponsor of the Spanish Paralympic Committee since 2008, offering financial backing through the Spanish National Plan for Key Paralympic Sports, which supports top-tier Paralympic athletes, coaches, and promising young talent. Since 2010, AXA has also organized the Adapted Swimming Championships, which has evolved into the National League of Adapted Swimming.

Since her debut at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, Núria Marquès has won an impressive seven Paralympic medals in swimming, with three of these earned at the Paris 2024 Games. Her international success extends beyond the Paralympics, with an additional 32 medals from World and European Championships. In 2019, Núria became AXA's brand ambassador, where she has been actively contributing with her Paralympic experience to corporate branding, external communications, and employee engagement initiatives.

Núria's journey with AXA underscores the unique value of Paralympic sponsorship as a strategic asset for corporate brands committed to positive societal change and the promotion of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Aligning with exceptional performances in adapted sports, as well as celebrating the emotional power of athletes overcoming both sporting and everyday barriers, creates substantial value for a company's image and reputation. Beyond just financial support, Paralympic sponsorship plays a critical role in shifting societal perceptions of disability and fostering meaningful inclusion of people with disabilities in public life. The increased media visibility of Paralympic athletes and their inspiring personal stories serves as a catalyst for advancing social justice and building truly inclusive communities.

Both the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) have worked to equalize the contributions of TOP Olympic sponsors to both the Olympic and Paralympic Games. Paris 2024 was hailed as a transformational event, as highlighted in the inauguration speeches of IPC President Andrew Parsons and Paris 2024 President Tony Estanguet. For the first time in Paralympic history, live coverage was provided for all 22 sports categories, expanding the global audience with a record number of national broadcasters.

This unprecedented visibility brought several key developments to the forefront, redefining the value of Paralympic sponsorship. The growing presence of young athletes, such as 13-year-old silver medalist Iona Winniffrith and 16-year-old Spanish gold medalist Anastasiya Dmytriv (another AXA Paralympic Promise Team member), has significantly increased the appeal of the Paralympic Games for younger audiences. By showcasing these talented young athletes, the Games are transforming cultural perceptions of disability, especially among the younger generation.

Another key shift has been in the media's evolving narrative. There is now a greater emphasis on celebrating athletes' achievements and body diversity rather than focusing on disability as a "tragic" personal story. The use of enhanced mobility tools like prosthetics and wheelchairs is still a visual focal point, but the spotlight is now on the athletes' strength, resilience, and dedication to their sport. The playful Phryge mascot of the Paris 2024 Games, with its prosthetic leg, symbolizes this growing normalization and celebration of body diversity. Additionally, social media platforms have amplified the voices of Paralympic athletes, who share inspiring stories of perseverance and success, further deepening the emotional connection with global audiences.

For sponsor brands, Paralympic events offer a powerful mix of alignment with exceptional athletic performances and an active role in driving meaningful societal change. Supporting the Paralympic movement challenges persistent disability stereotypes and increases global awareness of disability issues, while demonstrating leadership in the inclusion of people with disabilities in public and business life. While Paralympic sports represent just one facet of the disability experience, they play an essential role in shaping more inclusive societies that embrace personal differences and promote mutual respect.

The “value” of participating in the Games: media, money, pressure and representation in sport

“Yeeeeees...Gold for Germany!” (ARD commentator Dirk Froberg, August 5th, 2024). For the German triathlete Laura Lindemann, crossing the finish line was probably a cumulation of exhaustion, joy, but perhaps also thoughts of finances and a ‘we showed them’. The victory of an outsider team in the mixed relay competition, a sport that is hardly noticed in its own country on TV screens and in other media.

“Of course, I felt pressure, I wanted to bring it home,” said the 28-year-old Lindemann afterwards on German television (ARD), “but of course it was fun somewhere too. I knew: OK, this can be something big.” National coach Thomas Moeller explained, “we’ve had very difficult years with insignificance in competitive sport... that’s another reason why we as triathlon Germany are super happy”.

For many athletes, the ultimate goal is to take part in the Olympic or Paralympic Games at least once. The importance of this can vary for each athlete in different disciplines and countries. The focus is on the big, attention-grabbing sports such as athletics, swimming or, increasingly, Olympic football. Here, it’s all about medals, media and lots of money. But what about the smaller sports and athletes from countries that have little chance of success? The individual goals and expectations of participating in the Olympic or Paralympic Games can also vary in light of the media background.

If you ask sports science and especially (sports) psychology, the answer to motivation is quickly and clearly clarified: a continuous phenomenon reaching from amotivation to intrinsic motivation within various degrees of controlled and autonomous motivational regulations shape self-determination, including that of athletes. But what if you ask communication science and, above all, the athletes themselves? There is hardly nothing to be found in the *Routledge Handbook of the Olympic and Paralympic Games*. Billings (2008) and Pedersen (2013) deal with the content of the media, but the influence of the media on athletes is largely missing.

But in Paris 2024, one thing was clear: the athletes are subject to constant media scrutiny at the Olympics and increasingly also at the Paralympics, cameras and sports journalists are closer than ever before, and many of the athletes’ statements clearly showed the pressure of the media. For this article, we therefore asked participants in the Olympic and Paralympic Games from various nations about their motivations, including the influence of mass media and sports journalistic reporting.

“The media pressure on me is great. The journalists’ questions always indirectly address the expectation of a medal,” says Germany’s paracanoe athlete Edina Müller, gold medalist in wheelchair basketball (2012) and paracanoe (2020/21). “In

terms of the media, a lot has happened for us during the competitions since my first Games in 2008, but unfortunately very little in the time between the Games. I don’t just want to take part. There are no clear reasons, you don’t do it for the money. National representation is nice, but it’s not my driving force. I proudly represent the flag, but above all I want to make Paralympic sport visible.”

The 41-year-old exceptional athlete, who ran as flag bearer for the German team in Paris and won a bronze medal at her fifth Games, is using the media as a means to draw attention to the situation in the sport. Rower Melani Putri from Indonesia, who competed in Tokyo in 2020/21, also points to the media: “I received a lot of attention in the media. I am participating at the Olympics to achieve personal goals, want to make the country proud, and raise the status of my parents and uphold high values in the Olympics.” And she addresses the Indonesian Ministry of Youth and Sports: “In my opinion, of course as an Indonesian athlete we want to give the best achievement in the Olympics. But in any case, there is a price that we must pay as athletes, and also the government should provide supporting facilities.”

An interesting aspect of motivation: The reward for an Olympic or Paralympic medal varies greatly from country to country, both financially and in some cases non-monetarily: In Germany, gold is worth the equivalent of around 22,300 US dollars, in Hong Kong 769,000 USD, in Indonesia 382,000 USD, and in the US 40,000 USD. In South Korea, you no longer have to do military service after winning a gold medal, and in Sweden there is nothing at all. Of the 206 countries and territories participating in the Paris Olympics, only 33 countries paid a bonus, 15 of them over 100,000 USD, the World Athletics Federation paid 50,000 USD for each gold medal independently (statistics). After a debate about remuneration in Germany, which is paid by the German Sports Aid and is fully taxable, a German drugstore chain announced that it would double the bonuses for German medal winners in Los Angeles in 2028.

The current observation of media communication in Paris 2024 and the statements of the athletes interviewed indicate an important and promising research topic for sports communication. The influence of sports and other media, the pressure on the protagonists themselves and their corresponding reaction, their dealings with (Olympic) media are growing. It would therefore be desirable to have studies that analyze this field more intensively in the future in the sense of profound (deep) mediatization, indirect (reciprocal) media effects and as Nölleke and colleagues (2021) explained “defensive mediatization strategies” of the protagonists.



Dr Thomas Horky

Professor at the Macromedia University in Germany. He worked as a journalist, at the University of Hamburg, Hamburg Institute of Sports Journalism, and the German Sports University. He was a visiting professor at Indiana University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Email: t.horky@macromedia.de

Bluesky: [@thomashorky.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/@thomashorky.bsky.social)



Dr Meistra Budiasa

Assistant Professor at Bung Karno University, Jakarta, Indonesia and Director of the Center for Sport and Communication. Doctoral in Media and Cultural Studies from Gadjah Mada University. His research interest is media sport, sport events, and cultural studies.

Email: meistra@gmail.com

Twitter: [@meistra](https://twitter.com/meistra)

On and off the field of play: equity and Paralympic sport medicine



**Dr Nancy (Quinn)
Harrington**

Adjunct Scholar in the School of Kinesiology, Western University, Canada. Her research interests include the nexus of disability and sport, use of remote technologies for athlete classification, and models for para/Para competition. She is also a Registered International Sports Physical Therapist with over 25 years of Paralympic sport medicine experience.

Email: nquinn9@uwo.ca

Instagram: [nancyhquinn](https://www.instagram.com/nancyhquinn)

While training on the road, a crash left Canadian para cyclist Mike Sametz with a fractured right hip that required surgery, leading to a withdrawal from competition and a setback to Mike's future training and competition plans. As a multi-Paralympic Games medical volunteer and passionate fan of high-performance para sport, I was part of the para cycling community that was 'gutted for Mike to not be able to race at the Paralympic Games'.

For the athlete, rehabilitation from serious injury can be long, arduous and fraught with uncertainty as to if/when they can resume training, how successful that resumption will be, and what impact the injury itself and time away from sport will have on one's sporting career.

As an International Sport Physical Therapist and proud member of Canada's Paralympic Health Science Team (HST) for six Paralympic Games, I have given much thought as to the important work Canada's HST has done on behalf of this athlete. Countless hours and at all hours of the day and night will have been spent ensuring that the athlete received the best possible emergency care, liaising with emergency personnel on site, and conferring with Host Games medical leads. Once transferred to hospital, Canada's Chief Medical Officer (CMO) would have communicated with the local trauma and orthopedic experts to determine next medical and logistical steps. The CMO and medical staff with Cycling Canada would then have sat with the athlete to explain and provide clarity around these options and provided support in their decision making. Concurrently, other members of Canada's HST would have 'all hands on deck' supporting the athlete's team mates, Cycling Canada personnel, and the larger Team Canada. Worry spreads quickly in the Paralympic Village as does misinformation. If messaging is clear and consistent, athletes and staff can focus and return to their jobs ...eat, sleep, compete!

As a large, well-resourced country in the Global North with a progressive National Paralympic Committee (NPC), Canada's athletes at the Paris Games are supported by the 'best of the best' of Canada's diverse sport medicine community, including physicians, physiotherapists, athletic therapists, chiropractors, dietitians, massage therapists and sport psychologists. The CMO for Paris 2024 and their cadre of national and global experts would have planned for every eventuality, including a training accident that took place far from the field of play.

As a social scientist whose research focuses on the para athlete experience in the high performance milieu, I am well aware that not all NPC's can provide a similar standard of medical support to their athletes at major competitions. Research that examined the experience of in-Games medical encounters informs that athletes from many lower resource countries compete at major Games, like

the Paralympic Games, without the support of dedicated medical or rehabilitation professionals from their home nation. Other NPCs from developing nations bring core medical teams, including physicians and physiotherapists, who serve dual roles as guides and personal assistants to athletes with higher access needs. This reality creates tension and conflicting priorities for both athletes and professionals. At some major para sporting events, some spaces where medical encounters take place are difficult to access due to their small footprint, and continue to lack hydraulic plinths and wide, automated doors, to ensure access for all athletes. Failure to provide information related to medical services, drug testing procedures, and therapeutic options via a medium that athletes with visual impairment (VI) can utilize during in-Games medical encounters has been noted.

Regrettably, it is remarkable but not surprising that physical access to some medicalized spaces at major Games remains problematic. The primacy of the Olympic Games, in scope, size and in fact timing, relative to the Paralympic Games, offers a potential explanation. However, medicalized assumptions regarding impaired bodies and disability imbues bodies with impairment with diminished abilities, physically, socially, sexually and athletically, persist and inform how, where, and what Paralympic athletes experience during sport medicine encounters. There is evidence to support that athletes with intellectual impairment (II) are impacted most by negative medicalized understandings of bodily impairment and sporting ability.

As Paralympic athletes return to life outside of the Games, many face hindrances to equitable access to timely, quality health care in their home nations. 14% of all Canadians, those living with and without disabilities, are hindered in by their inability to find a primary care provider. Understanding that institutionalized ableism continues to inform the practice of medicine and rehabilitation, on and off the field of play, only adds complexity to an athlete's right to accessible, equitable health care.

Mike, if you are reading this, know that many Canadians and cycling enthusiasts—including me—are sending best wishes, hopes for a speedy recovery, and a successful return to the sport you love.

Safeguarding at Paris 2024: a turning point?

Since 2007, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been formally committed to combating various forms of violence in sports. Its efforts have increasingly focused on the concepts of 'Safe Sport' and 'Safeguarding' since 2016, with the publication of a Consensus Statement on Harassment and Abuse (Non-Accidental Violence). The IOC has also implemented a framework for protecting athletes and other participants from harassment and abuse in sports since the Rio 2016 Games, providing a practical tool for international federations and national committees in 2017. In 2021, an action plan was launched, followed in 2022 by the creation of a 'Safe Sport Unit' within the organization. This issue of 'Safe Sport' was further enshrined in the Agenda 2020+5 with Recommendation No. 5 aimed at 'Strengthening Safe Sport,' linking 'Safe Sport' to the broader issue of human rights. The Paris 2024 Games seemed to mark a new milestone in this direction, both by strengthening the measures implemented by the IOC and by its active positioning to be seen as a leader in this field.

Associated primarily with children and mainly with cases of harassment and sexual abuse, the concept of safeguarding has undergone an interesting evolution. Now, this term, as used by the Olympic institution in 2024, encompasses the notion of a safe sport environment, with an emphasis on mental health, guided by a holistic approach. For example, one of the measures put in place for the Paris 2024 Games is the creation of the Athlete 365 Mind Zone within the Olympic Village fitness center. This space, designed as a place for confidential consultations and discussions with an IOC staff member trained in mental health first aid, responds to a growing demand for dedicated areas. It is also interesting to see the IOC's effort to invest in the field of mental health, a topic that has become pivotal in recent years, particularly following various testimonies from athletes like Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles, or Michael Phelps.

Crucial actors in the safeguarding plan, the safeguarding officers were present in Paris to hear from athletes if needed. As in Beijing 2022, in addition to the IOC Safeguarding officers, each national delegation has been allocated a quota of Welfare Officers, specially trained to detect and manage situations of harassment or abuse. The idea was to enable these national officers not only to ensure a continuous presence but also to be tailored to the specific realities of each delegation.

Following the launch of the Agenda 2020 in 2014 and the Olympic Agenda 2020+5 (2021), the IOC published the Olympic Agenda for AI in May 2024, seeking to address the challenges posed by the exponential development of digital technologies. Among the five areas of intervention envisioned to "transform sport and the Olympic

Games with AI," the first was entirely dedicated to "supporting athletes, clean competition, and safety in sport". More specifically, promoting a safe sports environment is a clearly identified objective, particularly through strengthening prevention initiatives and responding to situations of harassment and abuse in sports. The challenge is significant, with estimates predicting nearly 500 million social media posts during these Games. This technology is supposed to enable rapid and effective responses, identifying harassers and removing inappropriate content before it has a harmful impact on athletes.

Nevertheless, the resounding scandal surrounding the Algerian boxer Imane Khelif, an Olympic champion who became the target of a campaign of discrimination and hate, illustrates the crucial role of this unit in trying to limit hateful comments against athletes and those who defend them. This scandal has also severely tested this new system, both in terms of the scale of the cyber-harassment and its intensity. It should be noted that the boxer announced that she had filed a complaint for aggravated cyberbullying as soon as the Games were over, as did Kirsty Burrows, head of the Safe Sport Unit, who spoke at an IOC briefing to explain the IOC's position on the matter.

By broadening the concept of safeguarding to include mental health, creating dedicated spaces, reinforcing the presence of safeguarding officers, and using artificial intelligence to combat cyberbullying, the IOC seeks to expand and entrench its commitment to creating 'Safe Sport.' While it is too early to draw definitive conclusions regarding the effectiveness of these measures, especially in light of the various cyberharassment campaigns against athletes during the Olympic fortnight, the outcome warrants close attention to determine whether these initiatives have genuinely contributed to a safer environment for athletes and if they can represent a significant new step in this area.



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Carole Gomez

PhD candidate in sociology of sport, University of Lausanne, Switzerland. She has 15 years of professional experience in the sporting environment as a researcher. After working for two years as a lawyer at the French Ministry of Sport, in charge of political and parliamentary issues relating to the department of Sport, she was a research fellow at the French Institute of Strategic and Foreign affairs (IRIS), working on sport, geopolitics and integrity issues.

Email: carole.gomez.1@unil.ch

Twitter: @carole_gomez
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#Notplayinggames: social media and disability at the 2024 Paris Paralympics



Dr Filippo Trevisan

Associate Dean and Associate Professor at American University's School of Communication. He is also the Deputy Director of AU's Institute on Disability and Public Policy. His research examines how political organizations – parties, campaigns, advocacy organizations, and activist groups – use media to reach, activate, and organize people, especially those from traditionally marginalized and disenfranchised backgrounds.

Email: Trevisan@american.edu

Paris 2024 will go down in Paralympic history as a social media sensation. Although the Olympics continue to receive more traditional media coverage, this year's Paralympics' social media content, relative to following size, generated comparable and unprecedented levels of engagement, regularly raking in millions of views. In turn, this intersection of sport, technology, and disability has created new opportunities for advocacy and representation. This was not a coincidence. Rather, these developments can be traced back to a bold social media strategy by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), centered on TikTok, as well as to a more organic realignment between paralympic sports, disability representation, and the dynamics of Internet celebrity and social change advocacy.

Historically, there has been good degree of ambivalence in the Paralympic movement and among athletes about acting as disability rights advocates or even discussing their lives outside of sport. There are good reasons for that, including the fact that disability has been heavily stigmatized in media and society, which has generated the impression that it is incompatible with celebrity, and the simple fact that taking on any forms of advocacy can expose public figures to a potential backlash. In addition, advocacy that equates with protest has always had a fraught relationship with the Paralympics – as well as the Olympics – and has been relegated outside competition venues such as at the 2012 London games, or more starkly absent like in 2021 in Tokyo.

However, advocacy is changing and a range of less confrontational and more institutionally congenial options have emerged in the last decade, especially online. For example, personal stories are increasingly used as persuasive narratives and Paralympians have focused on disability access needs in partnerships with companies that see this as part of their corporate social responsibility mission. In this context, the IPC has set itself a goal to normalize Paralympic sports and disability itself through social media content, which, in turn, seems to have created a permission structure for several athletes to engage more actively with representations of disability on these platforms. In a previous article, I wrote about the need to bridge the gap between the Paralympics as the most high-profile disability-related event and a new generation of digital-born disabled people who increasingly find their voices online. There is evidence that this has been happening in the lead up to and during the Paris games.

The IPC strategy here has been two-fold. On the one hand, it successfully leveraged the TikTok algorithm to attract a young new audience. Its "secret weapon" here has been comedy, which primarily involved mounting selected video clips from disability sport

competitions with audio that creates a comedic effect. Although some have argued that this "mocks" disabled athletes, this strategy has been wildly successful at generating attention and attracting new followers. Moreover, it follows an increasingly established trend by which comedy is used by traditionally marginalized groups themselves – from LGBTQI+ people to people of color – as an innovative and powerful tool to reach new audiences and represent their perspectives. So, the answer to the question "can you really joke about that?!" is, "yes, as long as you laugh with people and not at them."

On the other hand, the IPC has also sought to empower Paralympic athletes themselves to normalize their experience, for example with template social media content that helped them jokingly announce just days before the Paris opening ceremony that they would no longer "participate" in the games, only to then clarify shortly after that they would, in fact, "compete" (Fig. 1). This was a subtle but smart way to encourage Paralympians to indirectly point out paternalistic stereotypes about disability and contribute to its normalization because it enabled them to do that from the angle from which they likely feel most comfortable with – that of sport. Some have taken this further by participating in campaigns that focus on the contrast between sporting success and everyday life with a disability, such as the #UnofficialDiscipline video, where comedy (e.g. "stairs are one of my least favorite things") and celebrity are used to highlight barriers and present disability justice as an issue that everyone should care about.

One of the critiques that some have moved against the new Paralympic social media strategy is that, to truly normalize disability, these accounts should be run like those of the Olympics, which have a much more institutional approach. However, this ignores both the structural inequities between the Paralympics and the Olympics, which enjoy a comparative advantage in terms of visibility, as well as social media dynamics where smaller and less-known actors must try something different to break through the noise. This is similar to underdog political candidates that seek to capture attention in a field crowded by influential incumbents. As in politics, new tactics can be controversial but, provided that they include input and are accountable to the disability community, they can yield transformative results.



Fig. 1 – The IPC “I will compete” template on the Instagram page of Italian Paralympic fencing athlete Bebe Vio

Champions of the mind: positive mental health narratives shaping Olympic athlete success



Dr Kim Bissell

Dean of the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. She studies the intersection of sport and health communication, with an emphasis on media effects, and body image and mental health in women athletes.

Email: kbissell@lsu.edu

Twitter: @KimLBissell

One of the top stories from the Tokyo 2021 Olympic Games was the evolving story of Simone Biles, a.k.a. “The G.O.A.T.,” removing herself from the individual all-around competition after experiencing what she called “The Twisties” during a gymnastics practice. Her decision to step back and focus on her mental health raised praise and criticism, as some questioned her ability to “tough it out.” Later, The Associated Press reported that a significant portion of Team USA athletes at the Tokyo Games faced mental health challenges. Specifically, just under half of the athletes reported experiencing issues such as anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, eating disorders, or substance abuse. This statistic highlights the growing awareness and acknowledgment of mental health issues in the sports world, reflecting the pressures and stresses that athletes often face. It also underscores the importance of providing mental health support and resources to help them manage these challenges effectively.

However, the storytelling that occurs during the Olympic Games is often focused on athletes’ challenges and triumphs with mental health remaining a relatively invisible and unspoken topic for conversation. Despite the backlash Biles received from some on social and news media, she also received tremendous support from other “G.O.A.T.s” in their respective sports—Michael Phelps and Serena Williams, among others. While Phelps and Williams have spoken publicly about their mental health struggles before Biles, some credit Biles with elevating the issue to the Olympic platform for the Paris 2024 Games.

Mental health has increasingly become a part of the narrative in sports conversations as more athletes are beginning to speak publicly about the games being more than physical. As several have noted, athletes aren’t questioned when a physical injury has occurred and an athlete has to take time off; however, that acceptance often has not carried over into recovering from a more invisible illness such as mental health.

Olympian Michael Phelps stated that he started experiencing depression following the closing of the 2004 Olympic Games and experienced it again after the 2008 Olympics. It was only in 2014 when he began to realize what he had experienced and called it a post-Olympic depression. Apolo Ohno, Shaun White, Bode Miller, Lolo Jones, and Sasha Cohen have also gone public about their struggles before, during, and after Olympic competition. However, stigma, largely, still surrounds mental health, especially in the context of sport, until Biles’ story started to unfold. In conversations following the Tokyo Games, Biles stated, “It is ok to not be ok.” This statement paired with that of other professional athletes, some who had not spoken publicly about the issue, became a turning point where

conversations about mental health and well-being were normalized rather than stigmatized.

When asked about how she has managed her mental health in between the Tokyo and Paris Games, Biles noted the use of a therapist as well as training herself in meditation to help center herself prior to a competition. While Biles is credited with initiating these mental health conversations, many other Paris 2024 athletes have used their own social media platforms to share their stories and struggles with mental health.

After winning the gold in the 100m, Noah Lyles took to Twitter to share his struggles with depression, anxiety, ADD, allergies, asthma and dyslexia, noting, “What you have does not define what you can become.” Men’s gymnastics sensation Stephen Nedoroscik, referred to as the “pommel horse guy,” was seen meditating on a chair with headphones on prior to competing in his only Olympic event where he helped his team win Olympic Bronze, saying the practice allowed him to focus and get the job done. Following the conversations across media platforms about athletes and mental health, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee expanded its mental health services, including the addition of 14 mental health professionals and making available other physical and mental health practitioners to athletes. As the 2024 Paris Olympic Games came to a close, athletes returned home, some with medals in hand, and were able to celebrate the pinnacle of global sports as Olympians. More importantly, this wave of elite athletes who have spoken publicly about mental health has allowed viewers and sports fans to see them as humans rather than machines who can’t be broken.

Giana Levy, writing for Refinery29.com said, “But for me, these games, more than ever before, have elevated mental health alongside physical health, and therefore reduced its stigma, as keys to winning in sports as well as in life. Images of athletes taking time to relax, meditate or even sleep while waiting between events is a great reminder to the millions of people watching that even the best need to focus on their inner selves, too.” Levy further elaborated, “the prize that genuinely matters for athletes has come from conquering the battle from within.”

Stories of sexual abuse point to need for increased policies and protections for athlete-survivors

Paralympic swimmer Parker Egbert is suing the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) for allegedly endangering his safety by assigning him to room with teammate Robert Griswold during the 2021 Tokyo Paralympics. Despite reports from at least six athletes about Griswold's inappropriate conduct prior to the Games, Egbert's lawsuit claims the USOPC did not take action. Griswold, who has cerebral palsy and won two gold medals in the S8 swimming classification in Tokyo, now faces charges of sexually abusing Egbert, who has autism and competed in the S14 classification in 2021.

This case is deeply disturbing, yet it is not the only instance of the dark side of sport rearing its head at the Games. The Dutch Olympic Committee sparked outrage by selecting convicted child rapist Steven van de Velde to compete in beach volleyball at the Paris Olympics. This led Safe Sport International — a UK-based non-profit that aims to end all forms of interpersonal violence, abuse, and harassment in sport — to call for an international framework for safeguarding in sport, including more stringent criteria for the exclusion of individuals who have infringed upon the dignity and autonomy of others from participation in global sporting events.

Concerns about abuse in sport were raised ahead of the Games by the Sports and Rights Alliance (SRA), a global coalition of NGOs and trade unions advocating for stronger protections against harassment, abuse, and exploitation of athletes. The SRA launched the “Hello???” campaign in the week leading up to the Olympics, urging the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to overhaul their existing reporting tool and create a trauma-informed hotline where athletes can seek help and report abuse without fear of retaliation. This campaign came in response to the publication of a report demonstrating that the IOC failed to investigate credible claims of abuse and harassment in the Wrestling Federation of India.

Currently, the IOC has an online reporting tool where athletes can anonymously report instances of sexual abuse or harassment, as well as other integrity violations. However, researchers have expressed concern that these reporting tools, as well as the investigations process of sport safeguarding efforts, may increase the risk of harm and re-traumatization for athletes using them.

U.S. Olympic and Paralympic athletes have also voiced frustration with the investigations and disciplinary decision-making process involved in reporting a case of abuse or misconduct. All U.S. cases are processed through the U.S. Center for SafeSport, a non-profit organization founded in 2017 through the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act. In a recent interview with *Sports Illustrated*, CEO Ju’Riese Colón said SafeSport oversees between 11

and 14 million athletes and is on track to receive 9,000 reports this year — all with just a \$20 million operating budget, which SafeSport has urged Congress to increase.

SafeSport’s 2024 Athlete Climate Survey reported that approximately 1 in 10 of athletes surveyed had experienced unwanted sexual contact or sexually explicit behaviors during their sports involvement, and more than 2 in 5 who had unwanted sexual experiences reported that at least one of these incidents had occurred before the age of 18. Athletes with disabilities are between two and four times more likely to experience abuse than athletes without disabilities. While prevalence rates of all athletes who have experienced sexual abuse vary between 2% to 49% across studies, elite athletes are at higher risk of abuse.

Some researchers suggest that such high rates of sexual violence in sport could be traced to the prevailing “sport ethic” — a set of norms in sport such as overcoming obstacles and ignoring pain. This culture can gradually train athletes to accept and normalize behavior that would be considered unacceptable outside of sports. The close-knit nature of high-performance sport communities can create barriers to reporting incidents, as ensuring anonymity is difficult and finding a new coach or team can be equally challenging.

During the Olympics, our media feeds are filled with adages about how we love sports for the way they challenge us, the way they bring out our best. However, the events of the 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Paris Games demonstrate that we have only just begun to grapple with a pervasive issue that exists alongside the fanfare and spectacle of the Games: the level of abuse currently present in sport. As policy and research efforts continue to make sense of the stories uncovered, it is critical that these endeavors center the well-being, dignity, and voices of survivors. When it comes to challenging our sport systems to improve, there is no finish line in sight and much more than gold medals at stake.



Lilah Drafts-Johnson

Sports and Society Program intern assisting with Project Play Summit 2024. She earned her undergraduate degree in Latin American Studies and Politics at Oberlin College, and her M.A. in Physical Cultural Studies and Kinesiology at the University of Maryland, College Park, USA.

Email: ldraftsjohnson@gmail.com

Fingernails, tattoos, and iconic photos: personal branding at the 2024 Olympics



Dr Jana Wiske

Professor of sport journalism and public relations at the Ansbach University of Applied Sciences, Germany. Prior to this she worked as a sports journalist for kicker-sportmagazin for 15 years, covering a range of events including the Olympics. She continues to work as freelance writer and advises in crisis communication and personal branding in sports.

Email: j.wiske@hs-ansbach.de

When US swimmer Regan Smith competed at the start of the Olympic events, she always sported pink mittens along with a down jacket. This was the trademark of the Paris 2024 medley relay gold medalist. This distinctive feature was not only visually striking but was also mentioned in all media coverage about Smith. Luana Alonso from Paraguay created a stir before the 2024 Olympics with an intimate tattoo, though she couldn't match the world-class performance in the pool. She was eliminated in the heats of the 100-meter butterfly. Despite this, Alonso received extreme attention thanks to the Olympic rings tattooed on a delicate part of her body. The 100-meter Olympic champion Noah Lyles from the USA is known not only for his athletic prowess but also for his flamboyant appearances and his brightly painted fingernails.

At the 2024 Olympics, the media once again served as a stage for personal brands that provided orientation in a complex sports world. Visual identifiers or orchestrations created peaks, enhanced visibility, and helped focus attention on the core of a brand.

Florence Griffith-Joyner used the media as a stage in the 1980s. Even without the support of social media channels back then, her extraordinary fingernails remained in viewers' minds. Anyone searching for her name today will find "nails" or "fingernails" among the top associations. The American athlete had already recognized the potential of this stage at that time, complementing the colorful image with extraordinary outfits.

Super sprinter Usain Bolt established the media image of an archer shooting an arrow into the sky over the years. After winning races, the Jamaican would regularly kneel to show his ritual. Once again, the pose is associated with athletic success. The "To Di World" pose was and still is Bolt's unmistakable mark.

At the 2024 Olympic Games, the stage belonged to characters like the aforementioned Noah Lyles or US sprinter Sha'Carri Richardson. The 100-meter silver medalist from Paris stood out not only with her impressive long fingernails but also her extraordinary gestures towards the sky before and after races, setting her apart from her competitors.

Top-level sports are ideal as a stepping stone for personal brands since they embody attributes like activity, health, performance, and youthfulness. Through social media, athletes can set many thematic priorities of their own – which are often picked up by the media themselves.

The influence of social media on media coverage is clearly demonstrated in the case of German athlete Alica Schmidt. Despite her lack of significant athletic success at these Olympics, German TV broadcasts focused on Schmidt, and events featuring her were often shown – even

though world-class performances were not expected. Why is that? Schmidt is considered the glamour girl of athletics and was dubbed the "World's sexiest athlete" by the British tabloid *The Sun*. The athlete now has over five million followers on Instagram. Her photos suggest more of a model than an athlete behind the account.

Marketing their fame is a crucial motive for athletes to maintain a presence on social media. In conjunction with traditional media, which often use athletes' posts and messages as sources, this can generate more attention and support images in traditional media or even trigger them. Traditional media, in turn, benefit from the existing online fame, which now spills over and also attracts attention on conventional media channels.

Schmidt's personal brand is defined by beauty, femininity, and perfect body shape – less by competition, performance, or will to win. However, without outstanding athletic performance, athletes risk being reduced to appearances. For Alica Schmidt, once again in Paris 2024, the core competence of sport took a back seat.

Other protagonists of the 2024 Olympic Games have managed better in the competitions. Swimmer Smith and sprinters Lyles and Richardson won medals. Their personal branding additionally helped highlight their relevance, create recognition value, and thus permanently capture the audience's attention.

Brazilian surfer Gabriel Medina is also on a sustainable path to attention since the 2024 Olympics. Not only did he catch a perfect wave during the competitions, but he also knew how to present himself in the media afterward. His jubilant celebration after a spectacular ride in the quarterfinals was captured in an iconic photo by photographer Jerome Brouillet, featuring a finger point and parallel surfboard in the air. The image went around the world. Medina finished the competition in Tahiti with bronze – and will likely be forever associated with this photo. Since this summer, it has become an important piece of his personal brand, creating significant recognition value.

The Ilona Maher effect

As in previous years, the 2024 Summer Olympics allowed viewers to simultaneously morph into coach, fan, referee, and commentator, temporary roles that spill out from sofas to social media. Each day of the Games offered new introductions to the personalities, potential, and problems of a sport or nation, spread through the live broadcast, recaps, and, of course, memes. To borrow a social media term, there was a lot of *main character energy* happening; that is, the self-confidence and charisma that seemingly allow for the control of one's narrative and the ability to become *the* narrative. If we were to designate a podium for Olympic main characters (a packed field, to be sure), there is an argument for Ilona Maher to take home gold.

Known on the pitch for her highlight-worthy stiff arms that helped Team USA Rugby Sevens take home bronze and off it for her viral posts on Instagram and TikTok, the 28-year-old Maher brought new eyes to a sport often celebrated on the men's side for its aggression and athleticism.

In the early coverage of Team USA's women's rugby, NBC broadcasters devoted graphics to breaking down just how dominant Maher is on Instagram: in the first few days of the Olympic Games, she was the third-most followed rugby player in the world. As of this writing, Maher's 4 million followers on Instagram make her the most followed rugby player in the world and one of the most followed Olympians online, beating out fellow American household names in swimmer Katie Ledecky and sprinter Noah Lyles *combined*.

Today, elite athletes are tasked with competing at the highest levels of their sport while producing compelling social media content to attract fans and endorsements. This work is compounded for those outside major professional leagues with access to regular eyes and check-books. It is made more difficult across markers of race, gender, class, and nationality.

Beyond the typical "day in the life" or "get ready with me" (GRWM) standards, Maher's feed contains multitudes: she is seen offering her celebration of the range of bodies represented at the Olympics, cautiously approaching the topic of pickleball with top tennis player Coco Gauff, devouring incredible French food offerings, and treating the Olympic village like her own *Love Island* villa. "Ma'am, you are CARRYING Instagram at this moment," read one comment. At the same time, she offers vulnerability, recording herself in tears in response to those chirping in the comments that she is too masculine, too big, too much. There are multiple posts where she describes learning to love her broad shoulders and muscular back and her continued work to fuel her body correctly and avoid disordered eating.

With this range, Maher has stiff-armed each of the levels previous literature has found that *platformed creative laborers* face: markets, industries, and algorithms. In a cluttered media landscape, she's managed to use her second trip to the Olympics to push beyond the noise and carve out a lane for herself, something that corporations like Visa or Delta spend significant time working to cultivate with the more than 100 Olympic and Paralympic athletes on their rosters. "But not unlike elite sport itself," Bryan Armen Graham writes, "the hard truth is some things can't be coached." I learned this recently as I participated in a set of listening sessions with sports marketing and public relations representatives, where several brought up Ilona Maher unprompted, citing her and the sport as an example of monetizing one's brand and tapping into future sponsors. In discussing other Olympic or Paralympic sports that lacked the media coverage they deserved, they referenced needing "an Ilona in that space."

When asked why she's dedicated so much time to building an online following, she told *The Guardian*, "It is really important to have a profile, and a profile for our sport," Maher said. "It's about building the brand. We are female rugby players – we're not getting million-dollar contracts, we're not getting paid the money that we should be. Me and my friends are keen on getting the sport out there and getting us noticed. It's important in the U.S. where so much attention is on other sports. And I think it's just about showing the personality that the women have. The game is very strong, not just for men, but for women too."

Maher's online aesthetic aligns with previous scholarship that identifies how elite female athletes employ a neoliberal feminism rooted in self-empowerment and self-disclosure that can offer the marketable tandem of athletic performance and normative feminine appeal. Kim Toffoletti and Holly Thorpe call this the "athletic labour of femininity," where peak performance and the simultaneous negotiation of heterosexual appeal become necessary to build one's platform and sport.

In negotiating this dual labor, Maher's bronze medal victory – the first for the U.S. women – was capped by a post-match interview where she spoke of wanting more opportunities for professional rugby for women, more packed stadiums, and deeper investments in the sport overall. Shortly after that, it was announced that Michele Kang plans to donate \$4 million to the U.S. Women's Rugby Sevens team – a dual win for Maher, her teammates, and millions of new fans of the sport. However, the moment also serves as a reminder of the (often invisible) labor placed upon athletes (especially women) and their defined, capable shoulders.



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Dr Courtney M. Cox

Assistant Professor in the University of Oregon's Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies Department. Her work examines identity, labor, and technology through sport. She is the author of the forthcoming Double Crossover: Gender, Media, and Politics in Global Basketball.

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Email: cmcox@uoregon.edu
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Life after the medal: Brazilian Rayssa Leal's challenges in high-performance skateboarding



**Monique de Souza
Sant'Anna Fogliatto**

PhD candidate at the São Paulo State University – Bauru Campus. Her research seeks to understand the representations of the Brazilian skater Rayssa Leal in the media, considering her coming of age in front of the cameras and the gender stigmas of skating.

Email: moniquefogliatto@gmail.com

At the end of another Olympic Games, skateboarding's media success is evident. The International Olympic Committee's clear bet on values such as radicalism and youth – the arguments for the inclusion of five new modalities in Tokyo – has proven right by audience ratings and important historical landmarks achieved. The youngest podium in the history of the event, which included two Japanese athletes, also had Rayssa Leal, who, in addition to the silver medal, became the Brazilian Olympic Committee's youngest medalist in 2021.

Over the course of the shortened Olympic cycle, we have seen the age and professional growth of Rayssa Leal, who was introduced to the public in 2015, nicknamed "Fairy", reached after a popularization of the video where she made tricks with a fairy costume in her homeland, Imperatriz – an inland town in the Northern region of Brazil. The transition from childhood to adolescence was also marked by important achievements, demonstrating her high technical level: two consecutive titles in the sport's biggest competition, Street League Skateboarding (SLS), a double championship at the X Games, considered the Olympic Games of extreme sports, and the admission in the select "Nine Club" – a group that brings together the athletes with the highest scores in the skate's competitions – an achievement unprecedented feat in a women's competition, at Super Crown SLS 2023, held in São Paulo, Brazil.

The landmarks reached during this Olympic cycle made her a favorite for gold at the 2024 edition, in Paris. The chosen backdrop for the skate competitions was the Place de la Concorde, an emblematic site for French's history. This time, the battles, and victories, would be sporting, with Rayssa facing her biggest opponents, the Japanese and herself, with all the questions about growing in front of the cameras. Three years after Tokyo, new challenges have been set.

Favoritism, however, gave place to uncertainty. The smile, relaxation, dances and lightness, evident in the 13-year-old girl in Tokyo, was replaced by the responsibility of representing again her country, in the first Olympics that the fans could watch in loco since the end of the pandemic. Rayssa Leal had to fight, internally and with her opponents, in a competition in which the technical level of the tricks and the athlete's performance put her place on the Olympic podium at risk.

She needed to add a 45-second lap without a fall, and of a high technical level, with two other well-scored maneuvers to keep the chance of the title alive. But it wasn't going to be easy. Already in the qualifying round, the first challenge: competing in the third of four heats, the Brazilian athlete saw her place in the final threatened after two falls in the laps, which earned her a score of 59.88, considered below the norm for her. This score would have to be added to two other well-executed maneuvers

for the dream of qualifying to continue.

And so it was: with a score of 241.43 points, Rayssa Leal was closer to her second consecutive Olympic final, adding the highest maneuver score so far, a 92.68. With this score, she depended on the fourth heat, with five athletes, which featured her biggest opponents, including Funa Nakayama, bronze medalist in Tokyo. The road wasn't easy, and the image of the favorite to be beaten was transformed into a humanized, fallible Rayssa.

The Olympic final was confirmed, despite coming seventh, something unlikely to imagine in the start of the competition. And this is undoubtedly due to the high level of the games, which put the Olympic motto "Citius, Altius, Fortius" to the test through the extremely technical and well-executed maneuvers of the street skaters. And this was unthinkable when we look at the history of women's skateboarding: considered an affront to femininity, they had to transform the scars into stories of struggle, treading a path surrounded by challenges until the moment of visibility and recognition they are experiencing today.

Gathering the eight bests in the world, the Olympic final is proof of skateboarding's new sporting moment. The Olympic podium with Coco Yoshizawa (272.75), Liz Akama (265.95) and Rayssa Leal (241.43) and the mark of the highest scores awarded in women's street skateboarding competitions – has 92.68 for Rayssa and 96.49 for the champion – were the proof. And so, we can ask: what comes after the medal? Quite apart from the individual challenges faced by Rayssa Leal, and the transformation of silver into bronze between the Tokyo and Paris Olympic editions, what we can see is the high level of women's competitive scene in world skateboarding. And Rayssa was the only one in both Olympic podiums.

And that's how she became the most consistent athlete that Sunday in the City of Light, despite the third place. For Rayssa, given the difficulties she faced, making the Olympic podium in the second edition of street skateboarding was an individual milestone, but also a very significant one. Far from a setback, the bronze she won in Paris was one of the pieces of evidence that the first Olympic cycle for street skateboarding was marked by better performances and new achievements for the sport, and that the Brazilian athlete was among them. Now we'll have to wait for the next chapter, in Los Angeles, 2028.

Hijab ban demonstrates hypocritical nature of “liberté, égalité, fraternité” for French Muslim sportswomen

You would be forgiven if among some of the other big stories facing women athletes in the Olympics including transphobia and mental health we wouldn't still be talking about what athletes wear or what more importantly they have been forbidden to wear. France believes in the principle of laïcité or secularism that separates civic life and religion. This has extended to bans on religious symbols or dress for athletes competing in the Olympics who are considered public servants. This specifically affects Muslim women who believe in the practice of dressing modestly, including donning a hijab, a veil covering the head and chest while in the presence of men.

Despite athletes from other countries being allowed to wear a headscarf, France has held firm on the ban for the Games. Muslim sprinter Soukamba Sylla was set to participate in the opening ceremony but was told she would not be allowed to if she wore a headscarf. “You are selected for the Olympics, organized in your country, but you can't participate in the opening ceremony because you wear a headscarf,” Sylla posted on Instagram. A compromise eventually came, France allowed her to wear a cap for the ceremony and her event but at what cost? When the rest of the participating countries permit its athletes to wear a hijab, what does this say about the supposed inclusivity promoted during the opening ceremony? Especially for what the IOC has touted as the first Gender Equal Olympics, one where there is the same amount of men and women competing for their respective countries.

Human rights groups including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have criticized the treatment of Muslim sportswomen in France. The country has instituted policies to limit their religious freedom due to Islamophobia despite Muslims making up 10% of the population. The hijab ban is at all levels of sport including youth and amateur, leaving many Muslim athletes with no choice but to quit the sport they love. Diaba Konate, a French basketball player who played at the collegiate level in the United States and the French national youth team in 3x3, said she was unable to play for the national team again because of a 2022 rule change by the French Basketball Federation (FFBB) banning the headscarf. “It's very hypocritical for France to call itself the country of freedom, of human rights, but at the same time not allowing Muslims or their citizens to show who they are,” said Konate.

Images of Egyptian volleyball duo Marwa Abdelhady and Doaa Elghobashy playing a bikini-clad team from Spain went viral because of their juxtaposition to their own garb, all black long sleeve shirts and leggings along with a headscarf. “I don't tell you to wear a hijab and you don't tell me to wear a bikini. No one can tell me how to dress... It's a free country, everyone should be allowed to

do what they want,” said Elghobashy. We are still unfortunately focusing on what women wear. In the 2021 Summer Olympics, stories permeated the internet about what sportswomen chose to wear or were forced to adorn themselves in the name of sport. Athletes are still subjected to sexualization due to the male gaze but Muslim women also deal with the fear that they are a weapon for the state of Islam. How should one's faith be regarded with such suspicion when one has chosen to compete for their home country?

Ibtihaj Muhammad, an American Muslim and Black saber fencer became a star for the United States when she won a bronze medal while also becoming the first U.S. Olympian to compete in a hijab. She was able to embrace all facets of her heritage and faith by competing in what she felt comfortable in. That's not to say she did not face backlash because of her religion and the color of her skin. I researched her social media to show how she navigated these spaces. Muhammad traveled widely promoting her faith and on a visit to France, posted herself wearing a hijab and proclaimed, “It's hard to believe in 2019, people are still trying to tell women what they can't wear. Please know the bigotry and Islamophobia we face in this world will never break us. PERIOD. See you this weekend Paris! I'll be in my @Nike pro hijab every damn day.” Despite the homage to the capitalistic force that is Nike, Muslim athletes globally know the discrimination French athletes face by displaying outward vestiges of their faith and offer solidarity. Companies like Nike and Adidas began manufacturing sports hijabs because of the large untapped market of the Muslim world. However, being able to wear what you want and feel comfortable in is a major win for sportswomen everywhere.

One of the last images of these Olympics was of Dutch runner Sifan Hassan standing on the podium receiving a gold medal for winning the women's marathon wearing a maroon hijab. She doesn't always compete in a hijab but in this moment chose to take a stand on the biggest stage for religious freedom. The country adopted the motto “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” (liberty, equality, and fraternity) during the French Revolution but has failed to follow these principles for all its people. Muslims have continuously endured being othered by western and white countries, hosting the mega event Olympics in France was a setback for the IOC and equality on the grandest scale.



Dr Adrianne Grubic

Independent Scholar. She received her Ph.D. in Journalism and Media from The University of Texas at Austin and has previously written on the intersection of gender and race in sports media including “Just do it: Media coverage of Muslim women in their Nike hijabs” and “Proud: Examining the Social Media Representation of Ibtihaj Muhammad” on the media representation of Muslim women in sport.

Email: adrianne.grubic@utexas.edu

Twitter: [@adrianne_grubic](https://twitter.com/adrianne_grubic)

A kayak repairer working with Olympic athletes: an unknown profession that impacts high-performance



Rémi Delafont

Ph.D. student at the French Institute of Sport.

Email: remi.delafont@insep.fr
LinkedIn: rémi-delafont-ab3391221



Dr Helene Joncheray

Researcher in Social Sciences at the French Institute of Sport, on secondment from an Associate Professor position at University Paris Cité.

Email: helene.joncheray@insep.fr
LinkedIn: helene-joncheray-06883131



Dr Sylvaine Derycke

Associate Professor at University of Western Brittany.

Email: sylvaine.derycke@univ-brest.fr

In this brief commentary, we will refer to an unknown profession working with Olympic athletes. The following paragraphs are based on an interview conducted with Justin (pseudonym), a kayak repairer. Justin does both reparation and wedging for kayaks and canoes. At the time of writing, he is the only individual engaged in this occupation on a global scale: *“It’s a bit like Formula 1, it’s very complicated to get into this business.”* In France and abroad, *“Nobody does that job, it’s often athletes or builders who do something else as well.”* While the emergence of this professional activity reflects the ongoing professionalization of the high-performance sport sector, which entails enhanced structuring and diversification of staff, we will focus on a specific pathway to employment as a kayak repairer.

How it started? Justin is a former competitive kayaker. At that time, practitioners had *“to buy and repair their own boat, to made their own wedge, their own things”* at the edge of the basin. This required both time and the transmission of expertise from the trainers themselves. Currently, the emphasis on the context of intensifying competition precludes the possibility of engaging in this time-consuming activity. Boats must be more efficient, and this prompted Justin to consider the potential for establishing his own business: *“there was a real demand.”*

In addition to his previous experience as a practitioner, Justin undertook a two-year course of study in plasturgy and material composites, and subsequently obtained the requisite state certification to work with kayakers. These conditions, which were previously regarded as *“useless”* because they seem unrelated according to him, are actually essential for the completion of his current tasks. His involvement in the field commenced informally, initially during international competitions. Upon observing athletes repairing their boats, he said to himself, *“I know how to do it,”* and started doing it for them. Through word-of-mouth, he was engaged in a significant number of repairs, first in France and then internationally, and was able to sustain himself financially through this work.

He is currently the owner of his company and works four days a week with a *“decent salary”* at a modest repair facility. He works with over a hundred athletes who came from all over the world, including a dozen of the Olympics athletes selected for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games.

What does he do and how does it help the athletes’ performance? The main part of Justin’s work is repairing kayaks. For canoeing, where the athletes are on their knees, it is wedge optimization, *“A bit like what podiatrists do with insoles.”* The athletes leave their boat in his workshop and Justin takes their measurements and makes the adjustments. So far, even though he is inspired by his

own experience and what has been done before, this way of working is now recognized and specific to him.

The technical part is no longer a concern for the athletes, allowing them to concentrate on their performance on the water. Justin also works in cooperation with his customers so that they can carry out small repairs or wedge installations themselves during competitions. The majority of athletes lack the requisite time and expertise to pursue this endeavor to the same extent as he does, due to the constraints of their training schedules and the limitations of their experience. Consequently, his approach represents a novel and valuable contribution: *“I know what it’s like to train every day and sacrifice everything for kayaking. For a sport where there’s no money.”*

What comes next? The federations are beginning to realize that they need a similar full-time intervention for their staff, but in reality, for *“98% of the teams that go to the Olympics, nobody’s looking after the boats.”* Justin encounters resistance, especially from coaches who consider that his work makes the athletes dependent. To make his activity sustainable, Justin tries to demonstrate to both coaches and federations the tangible benefits of working with athletes. By doing so, he can help them become stronger and more competitive, with the potential to become medal winners at the Paris 2024 Olympics. For the time being, Justin’s job is still *“a job behind the scenes.”*

This incomplete professionalization leads Justin to diversify his intervention, firstly as an additional income, and secondly because there is not enough work with Olympic athletes to do it every day. He is therefore planning to develop his expertise in the leisure sector with carbon bikes and paddles, and is trying to work more with international athletes where *“people have money and can pay... kayaking is popular in France.”*

In short, an Olympic performance depends on a multitude of professions. We were able to identify over 140 of them: some are fully recognized such as coaches or sports scientists, while others, such as Justin’s activity, are still in the shadows. We found that the professionalization and retention of kayak repairers are determined by multi-level factors such as previous experience and background, social networks or federal context and support. We argue that the Paris 2024 Olympics provided an opportunity to highlight these roles: the *legacy* should help to improve and democratize pathways to high performance professions.

Paris 2024 and the LGBTQ+ athlete

For at least the fifth consecutive Olympic Games, Paris 2024 saw a record number of 'out' LGBTQ+ athletes. At the time of writing, a few days after the closing ceremony, this figure stood at 195 (although this is expected to rise), most of whom – interestingly – were women, at a rough ratio of 9 to 1. For context, this is a marginal increase from Tokyo 2021 (186), and a huge increase on other recent Games: almost four times as many as Rio 2016 (53), more than eight times as London 2012 (23), and thirteen times as Beijing 2008 (15). Just like in Tokyo 2021, if such a team existed, Team LGBTQ+ would have finished in 7th place in the medals table – with a total of 42 medals (including 15 golds). LGBTQ+ sports website [Outsports](#), which compiles these lists, describes the increase as reflective of the “increasing visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ athletes.”

This is a position shared by the overwhelming majority of notable academic literature in recent years—particularly (but by no means exclusively) in contact team sports. Word restrictions unfortunately prevent a deep dive into all of this research, which has continued apace since the last Games. While there remain perceptions that sport is an unwelcoming space for LGBTQ+ athletes, an article published in [Sociological Research Online](#) a week after the Paris Games commenced – boasting a sample of almost 1000 'out' LGBTQ+ athletes in North America – reported “widespread and deep inclusion.” Specifically, more than 90% said that their teammates' responses to their coming out was “neutral” to “perfect”; fewer than 5% described teammates' responses as “bad” or worse (including only three overall who experienced the “worst-case scenario”).

Many will continue to trivialize the significance of LGBTQ+ athletes' sexual or gender identity – that being 'out' is immaterial to their sporting performance. Such a simplistic stance is shortsighted, however; many LGBTQ+ athletes, including soccer player [Thomas Beattie](#), have spoken of the liberating impact of coming out—a disposition corroborated by [academic research](#). Competing as their authentic selves allows them to “be at the top of their game,” according to British Olympic champion, Dame Kelly Holmes – who also spoke of the challenges of being closeted when she competed in previous Games. Team LGBTQ+'s success – 7th place overall, remember – is perhaps further testament to this argument. Others, such as Irish taekwondo athlete [Jack Woolley](#), also said just before the 2024 Games began that he had “noticed the benefits of being open” and that he hoped it would “inspire others.”

While the record number of 'out' athletes is hugely significant – and certainly shouldn't be downplayed – LGBTQ+ issues in Paris were perhaps dominated by the 'gender row'

surrounding female athletes [Lin Yu-ting](#) and (particularly) [Imane Khelif](#). Both athletes had been disqualified from the 2023 Women's World Boxing Championships after failing unspecified gender tests, but were cleared to participate in Paris. However, Khelif, who went on to become Algeria's first-ever gold medallist in women's boxing, became the subject of misinformation about her gender, particularly on social media, from a variety of public figures and former athletes. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) defended both athletes' inclusion, and shortly after the Games ended, Khelif filed a legal complaint against X, formerly known as Twitter, for the “immoral” online abuse that she received during the Games.

This is the latest episode of a very noisy – and still ongoing – debate about 'gender identity and fairness' and 'unfair advantage' surrounding participation in women's sports. It is also indicative – as [Monica Nelson](#), [Hollie Thorpe](#), and [Shannon Scovel](#) wrote in the wake of Tokyo 2021 – of “how highly contested challenges to the gender binary in elite sport continue to be.” From the ferocity of what we have witnessed in Paris, it also appears that these debates are set to continue for some time to come. These events also serve as an important reminder that despite the recent improvements for LGBTQ+ athletes – such as the record number of 'out' athletes in Paris – we must be quick to recognize that progress is achieved at different speeds. Indeed, there remain several challenges that must still be overcome until full LGBTQ+ equality is achieved. And as the Olympics is – without doubt – the most international sporting mega-event on the planet, it seems pertinent to remember that the 'global divide' on LGBTQ+ rights still exists. Harsh anti-gay and/or anti-trans laws exist in numerous countries across the world, and this will no doubt keep many other athletes firmly in the closet. What LA 2028 holds – and what it will mean for the LGBTQ+ athlete – will make for compelling viewing.



Dr Rory Magrath

Associate Professor of Sociology, Department of Social Sciences and Nursing at Solent University. His research focuses on sexualities and masculinities, specifically on elite-level sport – and football, in particular. His most recent book is [LGBT Football Fans: Authenticity, Belonging and Visibility](#).

Email: RoryMagrathPhD@gmail.com

Twitter: [@RoryMagrath](https://twitter.com/RoryMagrath)

Simone Biles did not need “redemption”



Dr Shanice Jones Cameron

Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her research focuses on Black women's health, well-being, and sport discourses that are distributed through social and digital media.

Email: Scamero5@charlotte.edu

Website: <https://shanicejonescameron.com>



Dr Daniel A. Grano

Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His research focuses on intersections between sport and politics, with particular emphases on race, health, religion, and public memory.

Email: dgrano@charlotte.edu

In her 1988 book, *A Burst of Light*, Black feminist writer and activist Audre Lorde famously wrote, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.” These words remain especially relevant for Black women and offer a lens for parsing public discourses surrounding Olympic gold medalist Simone Biles’s withdrawal from the 2020 Olympics due to mental health concerns and her subsequent “redemption” in 2024. Sport communication research indicates that axes of oppression, including race and gender, shape public mental health disclosures and stigma. Thus, it follows that Biles’s disclosure would be criticized and politicized.

Sport and news media, and members of the U.S. women’s gymnastics team, claimed victory in a “redemption tour” after they won gold in the team final at the Paris Olympics. The women took silver at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics after Simone Biles withdrew from the team final for mental health reasons. Her withdrawal was mostly celebrated as a powerful moment for destigmatizing mental illness. Yet commentators emphasized that without one of the greatest gymnasts of all time, the U.S. team had lost its chance to win gold.

If redemption was related to competitive glory alone, then it would be easy to resolve the contradiction behind claiming Biles’s mental health struggles as both heroic and costly: the act of supposed sin or error that required redemption would be less about Biles individually, and more about the team’s limitations. But athletic redemption is rarely a team sport, and coverage centered around Biles’s immense talent as both cause and source of hope for Team USA’s redemptive mission.

Fans, media commentators, and sport culture scholars have treated famous athletes’ mental health disclosures as heroic acts that destigmatize mental illness and encourage help-seeking behaviors. Yet athletes’ disclosures are conditioned by race and gender privilege. Black male players’ mental health advocacy has received less positive coverage than the advocacy of their white peers, and it has been conditioned by norms for “quiet” and “reserved” decorum.

Black women athletes’ disclosures are additionally and uniquely complicated by the “interplay” between their “racial and gendered identities.” This is especially due to assumptions about Black women’s anger and volatility, stigmatizations of weakness, and the “strong Black woman” ideal.

These problems of racialized and gendered diagnosis are reflected in media coverage of Black women athletes’ mental health. Throughout her career, journalists have emphasized Biles’s emotional volatility, “lack of mental fortitude,” and anger – focusing on her struggles to control these presumably “natural” challenges of Black, feminine athleticism during competition.

While coverage of her mental health disclosure at the Tokyo Games was largely positive, questions about her mental toughness lingered.

The story of Biles’s redemptive return to Olympic competition centered around her struggles to overcome the mental health challenges that led to her withdrawal, and those struggles were understood as *inherent* to her Blackness and femininity. It is therefore impossible to disentangle the possibilities of Biles’s (and by extension the American team’s) redemption from the drama and uncertainty of Black, feminine emotional control.

Biles’s Olympic return followed the familiar script of a Black athlete who needed to be publicly forgiven for a previous offense. Her 2024 interview with Alex Cooper, host of the *Call Her Daddy* podcast, can be read as a necessary stop on Biles’s “redemption tour.” Biles seemingly internalized the notion that she did something “wrong” when she withdrew for her mental health and safety. In the interview, Biles explained that during the Tokyo Olympics she struggled with the “twisties” – a condition where she dangerously lost control over her body. Her withdrawal and attempt to regain some control over her circumstances resulted in criticism aimed at undermining her autonomy, mental fortitude, and self-preservation.

Framing Biles’s withdrawal within a redemption arc pivots on the assumption that women, especially Black women, should reject self-preservation to perform for the dominant society. The underlying sentiment is that white America is entitled to Black women’s labor—even at their expense. If Biles fails to perform, she is doubly burdened with the responsibility to atone for being a person who requires care and rest. For Black women, self-preservation is an act of political warfare against the institutions that dehumanize and dominate them.

Sports journalists and sport culture scholars have rightfully criticized redemption stories as facile responses to crisis in sport that disproportionately privilege white, male athletes and that reduce complex problems (e.g. sexual violence, racial injustice) down to questions of sin and forgiveness. Instead of redemption stories, it would be appropriate for sport media to highlight resilience narratives. Resilience shifts the focus from a past “sin” that needs to be corrected to an athlete’s agency and self-efficacy. Resilience holds space for the reality that everyone encounters hardships without blaming athletes for their response to personal challenges that are outside of their control.

Black girl magic: the unprecedented triumph of three Black women gymnasts at the 2024 Paris Olympics

The 2024 Paris Olympics will be remembered for the remarkable achievements of three extraordinary athletes who not only made history but also showcased global Black athletic excellence. The podium presence of gymnasts Rebeca Andrade, Simone Biles, and Jordan Chiles inspired millions worldwide. In a sport once dominated by white women or women of European descent, their achievements mark a significant moment in the history of gymnastics and the broader landscape of sports, offering a profound commentary on race, representation, and excellence. The global image of three Black women of African descent left an impression of the potential of this sport to be more inclusive.

Rebeca Andrade

Rebeca Andrade's inclusion in this historic trio is particularly significant as she represents not only the excellence of Black athletes but also the global nature of gymnastics. As the first Brazilian woman to win an Olympic gold medal in gymnastics during the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, Andrade had already made history. In Paris, Andrade continued to showcase her exceptional skills, winning gold on the vault and silver in the all-around competition. Andrade's success at the 2024 Olympics is a testament to her resilience, having overcome multiple injuries throughout her career, including three ACL surgeries.

Andrade's accomplishments highlight the importance of representation in sports. As a Black Latina athlete, her success challenges the traditional narratives within gymnastics, a sport long dominated by athletes from North America, Europe, and Asia. Her victories symbolize the breaking of barriers for Black and Latin American athletes, inspiring a new generation to pursue their dreams regardless of the obstacles they may face.

Simone Biles: The greatest of all time

Simone Biles has been a household name for nearly a decade, often heralded as the greatest gymnast of all time. Her participation in the 2024 Olympics was met with high expectations, and she did not disappoint. Biles returned to the Olympic stage after stepping back from the 2021 Tokyo Olympics to prioritize her mental health, a decision that sparked widespread discussions about the pressures elite athletes face.

In Paris, Biles was not just competing against her peers but against her own legendary status. She won multiple gold medals, including the all-around title, making her the most decorated gymnast in Olympic history. Biles's performances were marked by her usual combination of power, grace, and technical precision, but there was an added layer of maturity and determination that was palpable. Biles's accomplishments in Paris are not just about the medals, however; they are about her resilience and the message she sends to future generations. She has redefined what it means to be a champion, emphasizing the importance of mental well-being

alongside physical prowess. For Black athletes, particularly Black women, Biles represents the possibility of excelling in spaces where they have been historically underrepresented and undervalued.

Jordan Chiles: The underdog who triumphed

Chiles made her Olympic debut in 2021 but faced challenges that left her hungry for redemption. The 2024 Olympics presented her with that opportunity, and she seized it with both hands.

Chiles's performances in Paris were extraordinary. She won her first individual Olympic medal on uneven bars, an event traditionally dominated by Eastern European and Asian gymnasts. Her routine was a blend of difficulty and elegance, executed with confidence. Chiles also played a crucial role in the U.S. women's team's victory, contributing scores that were pivotal in securing the team gold. Her success in Paris is a powerful statement about the potential of Black women athletes, specifically in gymnastics, and serves as an inspiration for young gymnasts of color who may see themselves reflected in her story.

The broader impact: Beyond medals and records

The success of Biles, Chiles, and Andrade at the 2024 Olympics transcends the world of gymnastics. Their achievements are a statement about the possibilities for Black women in a field where they have often been marginalized. These three gymnasts have not only broken records but also shattered stereotypes, proving that excellence knows no racial or ethnic boundaries.

Their accomplishments come at a time when the conversation about race and representation in sports is more critical than ever. The visibility of Black women in gymnastics is a significant step forward. It challenges the status quo and paves the way for future generations of athletes who will benefit from the trails these women have blazed.

Moreover, the triumph of Andrade, Biles, and Chiles speaks to the power of community and mentorship. Biles's role as a mentor to Chiles and the close-knit relationship among these athletes underscores the importance of support systems in achieving greatness. Their success is a collective victory, one that reflects the strength and resilience of Black women who have long been at the forefront of pushing boundaries in various fields.

Conclusion

The 2024 Olympics will be remembered as a historic moment in gymnastics, for the symbolic empowerment of the image of three Black women on the medal podium. Rebeca Andrade, Simone Biles, and Jordan Chiles have redefined the possibilities for Black women in gymnastics, challenging norms and setting new standards of excellence. Their accomplishments remind us that the fight for representation in sports is ongoing, and their legacy will inspire countless others to pursue their dreams, regardless of the barriers they may face.



Dr April Peters-Hawkins

Associate Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Houston. She is also a Past President of the University Council of Educational Administration, a consortium of higher education institutions committed to advancing the preparation and practice of educational leaders for the benefit of schools and children.

Email: apetersh@cougarnet.uh.edu



Prof Billy Hawkins

Professor at the University of Houston in the Department of Health and Human Performance. He is the author of several peer-reviewed articles and books, and serves on the several journal and book editorial boards. His teaching and research contributions are in the areas of sociology of sport and cultural studies, sport management, and sport for development.

Email: hjbilly@Central.uh.edu

Masculinity and the Asian turn at the Olympics



Dr Michelle H. S. Ho

Assistant Professor of Feminist and Queer Cultural Studies in the Department of Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore. Her interests include gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and media and popular cultures in contemporary Asia.

Email: Michelle.ho@nus.edu.sg
Twitter: [@michellehsho](https://twitter.com/michellehsho)
Website: michellehsho.com



Dr Wesley Lim

Lecturer in German Studies in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at the Australian National University in Canberra. His research focuses on the intersection of German Studies, Dance Studies, and Performance Studies.

Email: Wesley.Lim@anu.edu.au
Twitter: [@WesleyGrafWald](https://twitter.com/WesleyGrafWald)

The 2024 Paris Olympics relocated Olympic viewers of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics from the Asia Pacific to Western Europe. Hosting the Games has social, political, and economic implications for the host city, as well as enormous environmental costs. However, other areas remain such as cultural critique of national, and masculine identities, particularly male athletes in expressive sports that are often perceived as feminine, such as figure skating, artistic swimming, and rhythmic gymnastics warrant analysis. Given the relatively recent “Asian turn” in sport, how can we understand the masculinity of elite male Asian athletes in sports often labeled as feminine?

The Asian turn

Since the 2000s, there has been an “Asian turn” in sport, which scholars Jung Woo Lee and Tien-Chin Tan characterize in terms of a rise in the Asia-Pacific region hosting global mega-sport events such as the Olympics, and expanding its sport industry through consumption and labor migration of athletes, and sending its elite athletes to compete as a sign of soft power and display of national identity.

Expanding this concept, we have discussed elsewhere that the Asian turn encompasses athletes of Asian descent, such as the case of Nathan Chen, a United States Chinese American skater and 2022 Beijing Olympics gold medalist in the men’s singles. This draws on broader definitions of “Asia” and “Asian” as beyond the border of specific nations and embracing the shifting cultures of diasporic populations.

Moreover, an Asian turn in sport also denotes increased fandom and representation of Asian athletes in the media, as we have shown with the case of Yuzuru Hanyu, an elite Japanese skater and two-time Olympic gold medalist in the men’s singles. Hanyu has been likened to an anime character, and his well-known love for Winnie the Pooh have appealed to a vast number of fans from all over the world—known as “Fanyus”—who attend all his performances and throw Pooh plush toys on the ice after he performs.

Masculinities and sport

For several decades, numerous scholars have studied the relationship between sport, male athletes, and masculinity, examining their hegemonic masculinity and plural forms of masculinities, drawing on sociologist R.W. Connell’s work. Despite this impressive body of work, little has been written on the masculinities of athletes in expressive sports, such as figure skating, artistic swimming, and rhythmic gymnastics, which are usually (stereotyped as being) dominated by women.

Take, for example, artistic swimming. The Paris Games marks the first time men are allowed

to compete in artistic swimming; however, none have qualified. To encourage more boys and men to compete at the elite level, nations need to generate genuine interest in expressive sports. Currently, only a few countries like Japan, Italy, Spain, Germany, the U.S., and Mainland China have male swimmers at top international competitions such as the world championships.

Towards the 2026 Winter Olympics

Looking forward to the 2026 Winter Olympics held in the Italian cities of Milano and Cortina d’Ampezzo, we believe the Asian turn has since become normalized in the skating world. Male Asian skaters will continue to emerge on top at major global competitions accompanied by their transnational fanbases and support teams. The popularity of figure skating among Asian fans and spectators will persist alongside the charisma of champions like Chen and Hanyu. With Hanyu recently retired and Chen taking a break from competitive skating to finish college, other skaters are poised to take their place on the podium, including Japanese skater Yuma Kagiyama and U.S. skater Ilia Malinin.

Beyond football: Stefano Peschiera's Olympic legacy

As in many South American countries, football is the dominant sport in Peru. Every four years, Peruvians come together with the hope of qualifying for the FIFA World Cup, in what sociologist Noelia Chávez calls the “unifying myth.” In recent years, Peruvian football has had notable moments, such as qualifying for the 2018 World Cup in Russia and participating in the playoff for Qatar 2022. However, this intense focus on football has had a downside: it has overshadowed other sports that, ironically, have brought more Olympic success to Peru. The country has won three medals in shooting (one gold and two silvers) and one in women’s volleyball (a silver), achievements that, although significant, have not captured the same media or public attention as football.

This dominance began to be challenged in 2019 when Lima was chosen to host the Pan American Games. This event allowed Peruvians to discover and appreciate less familiar sports, such as BMX cycling, judo, or squash. It was a revealing moment when hundreds of Peruvians gathered in streets and markets to follow the competitions in disciplines like surfing and long-distance running, where Peru has had recent successes. The hope is that this interest will be revived when Lima once again hosts the Pan American Games in 2027.

The seed of interest in sports other than football began to germinate in 2019 and flourished during Paris 2024. During these Olympic Games, Peruvians closely followed the performances of their athletes, whether early in the morning, during work hours, or over the weekend. Although the Peruvian delegation was small, expectations were high, especially after a 32-year wait since the last Olympic medal in Barcelona 1992.

The television coverage of the Olympic Games in Peru was handled by ATV (channel 9), which broadcast the competitions in a fragmented manner, interrupting its regular programming only when a Peruvian athlete was competing. On weekends, other disciplines were broadcast, even if no Peruvians were involved. This coverage exposed the lack of professionalism and preparation among the sports commentators. Unlike in other countries, where sports journalism is taken more seriously, ATV’s coverage was managed by a panel of five young commentators who, despite their best efforts, were not experts in the disciplines they were covering, such as sailing, shooting, race-walking, or surfing.

The difference in the quality of coverage was notable when compared to Claro Sport, a Mexican channel that broadcasted most of the sports live through its four YouTube channels for the entire Latin American region. Each journalist was accompanied by an expert in the discipline, often a well-known former athlete. For example, for the surfing competition, Claro Sport enlisted the Peruvian two-time world champion, Sofia Mulanovich. Personally,

I chose to follow the coverage of the Olympics through Claro Sport due to the depth and knowledge provided by their commentators.

As the days passed, Peruvian athletes advanced in their competitions, but the much-anticipated medal remained elusive. However, several Olympic diplomas were achieved in race-walking, sailing, men’s surfing, shooting, and mixed relay race-walking. Finally, in a competition marked by highs and lows, with races canceled due to bad weather and perhaps a bit of luck—wouldn’t Roger Caillois say that *alea* always has a role in sports?—sailor Stefano Peschiera managed to secure third place in the dinghy sailing event, ending a 32-year Olympic medal drought for Peru.

As I write these lines, Peschiera is being awarded the *Laureles Deportivos*, the highest honor a Peruvian athlete can receive from the Peruvian State, and his name will be immortalized on the front of the *Estadio Nacional*, in Lima. This achievement, beyond breaking a medal drought, represents a milestone that could serve as a powerful incentive to promote and popularize other sports in a country where football overwhelmingly dominates the sports landscape.

However, for this to happen, solid and well-structured sports policies are necessary, something that unfortunately is still in an embryonic stage in Peru. The lack of a state vision that considers sports as a fundamental need, beyond football, prevents disciplines like sailing, surfing, or shooting from achieving the development and popularity they deserve. It is crucial that Peschiera’s success is not only seen as an individual triumph but also as a catalyst for establishing policies that promote sports in their diversity, thereby strengthening the national sports framework.

With a strategic approach that includes infrastructure, financing, and the promotion of various sports disciplines, Peru could begin to see a change in its sports landscape. Not only to generate more medals but to build a more inclusive and diverse sports culture that inspires future generations to explore and excel in sports beyond football.



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Dr Alonso Pahuacho Portella

Lecturer at the Department of Communication of Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima. His research focuses on sports journalism, sport policy and popular culture. He published in 2019, the book Football, Culture, and Society (Hipocampo Editores).

Email: apahuacho@pucp.pe

Twitter: [@pahuacho88](https://twitter.com/pahuacho88)
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Latino underrepresentation in Team USA: systemic barriers ahead of the 2028 LA Olympics



Dr Vincent Peña

Assistant Professor in sports communication and journalism at the College of Communication at DePaul University, USA. His research lies at the intersection of journalism, identity, culture, and politics, with a focus on representation and discourse in sports media. His work has been published in Communication & Sport, Sociology of Sport Journal, Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, and many others.

Email: vpena4@depaul.edu

Twitter: [@vincentpena7](https://twitter.com/vincentpena7)

Team USA is meant to represent the best athletes the United States has to offer. It promises to be “the world’s largest and most diverse team of athletes from across the United States.” And to be fair, the team is diverse — gender diversity is at an all-time high! — but the team does not necessarily resemble the country it represents. Specifically, Latino athletes were overwhelmingly underrepresented at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

The underrepresentation of Latino athletes in the Olympics, particularly within the U.S., points to a broader issue of systemic barriers that have stifled progress for Latino athletes for decades. Historically, Latino athletes have faced stereotypes and discrimination that have limited their opportunities and access to sports. This historical context underscores the importance of examining the pipelines that exist—or fail to exist—for Latino athletes in Olympic sports.

While Latinos have historically been underrepresented in sports at the highest levels, this current trend points to several broader issues, ranging from the cultural to the economic. Low Latino representation results in a lack of visibility and role models for Latino youth; limits access and opportunities; diminishes a sense of community; impacts economic earning potential and upward mobility; and can directly skew one’s sense of self and national identity. Importantly, the lack of Latino representation in the Olympics underscores broader issues of social justice and inclusion, highlighting the need for systemic changes to address discrimination, stereotypes, and barriers that prevent Latino athletes from reaching their full potential on the Olympic stage.

As the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics approach, the spotlight will inevitably turn to the city’s large Hispanic population and its cultural importance to the area. Los Angeles has a Latino population nearing 5 million, good for 49%. For the 2024 Paris Games, 20% of Team USA hailed from California. So, no matter how you look at it, Latinos are disproportionately absent. By my own count, no more than a dozen of the 594 athletes who competed in the Paris Games are Latino, good for just 2 percent of athletes.

The scarcity of Latino athletes can be attributed to myriad factors, including limited resources, lack of opportunities, access issues, immigrant status, and enduring stereotypes about their athletic ability. These obstacles are not merely about individual athletes; they reflect a structural issue where Latino athletes have historically been marginalized within the sports world. The lack of access for Latinos extends to youth sports, especially for Latina girls, who are negatively impacted by both a lack of resources and cultural expectations and messages. These expectations can be shaped by representation, or in this case, a lack of representation, of Latino athletes at the highest level.

Media coverage also reflects this lack of representation. The few Latino athletes who do make it to the Olympics often receive minimal attention compared to their counterparts. In many articles highlighting “Americans to watch,” few if any included Latino athletes, even the famous ones. This is despite many of these Latino athletes having interesting stories to tell beyond their Latino identity, such as those representing a new Olympic sport (Victor Montalvo), the youngest athlete for Team USA (Hezly Rivera), a six-time Olympian (Diana Taurasi), and many others. Some other coverage just grouped all Latinos to highlight their achievements as a group. Importantly, though, even many of these are on sites catering to a Latino audience.

Latino athletes on Team USA must navigate a space where they are practically nonexistent, their American-ness needing to be qualified by their Hispanic heritage to be recognized, but only as a homogenous group, not as individuals. This paradoxical situation results in the de facto symbolic annihilation of Latino Olympians, which furthers a long history of their marginalization in U.S. team sports. Additionally, in a country where many Latinos’ identity straddles geographical, linguistic, and cultural borders, their relative absence can render them outsiders, as the “other.”

To be sure, there was some good coverage, however rare it was. For ESPN, Roberto José Andrade Franco wrote about U.S. boxer Jennifer Lozano, highlighting her journey as an amateur boxer to her Olympic berth. The Laredo-born fighter competed in her first Olympics in Paris, bowing out in the round of 16. While Franco’s article provides a nuanced portrayal of Lozano and the importance of her Mexican-American heritage, other coverage tended to emphasize typical narratives about Latinos overcoming poverty and hardship, risking the perpetuation of Latino athlete stereotypes.

As we look toward the LA 2028 Olympics, the implications of this underrepresentation are significant. The lack of Latino athletes not only reflects broader societal inequities but also raises questions about the future of Olympic sports in a city and a country where the Latino population is proliferating. Research suggests that addressing these issues requires intentional efforts to dismantle the barriers that Latino athletes face, from youth sports through the pros. There were not many Latino athletes on Team USA in Paris, and without efforts to address these disparities, there might not be many in Los Angeles.

Paris 2024: South Korean competitive sports at a crossroads

Paris 2024 occurred at an intriguing moment for South Korean sports. It was a time when competitive sports appeared to be on the decline. Before demonstrating this, context is needed by highlighting a crucial socio-cultural aspect of South Korean society: hyper-competitiveness.

South Koreans live in a constant competitive race. One analysis described Korea as having a relentless “pervasive culture of competition.” Another observer noted: “We [Koreans] are too accustomed to competition. It’s on the level of addiction.” The endless race manifests in competing for admittance into the highest-ranking universities, landing a good job, gaining high economic status, and achieving and maintaining an attractive appearance. It is about navigating life under an extremely demanding set of familial, societal, and national norms and expectations. In 2015 the term “Hell Joseon” was coined to describe this oppressive condition and the unfair society that takes its toll on the mental health and quality of life of many young adults, and puts a heavy financial burden on them.

This hyper-competitiveness and excessive drive for success are also apparent in a preoccupation with how well the country is doing in comparison with others – namely, in terms of world rankings in various areas. For instance, often noted is the obsession to receive a Noble Prize in science. In this context, considerable attention was given to competitive sports too. Already the dictatorships of the 1970s-80s saw in internationally successful athletes a means to promote national prestige and global reputation. Accordingly, they significantly invested in elite and professional sports. Importantly, clauses that were introduced into the Military Service Act in 1973 offered talented athletes the option to serve as “sports personnel.” Thus they were exempt from the mandatory military service which every able-bodied South Korean man is required to do for 18-21 months. In 1990 the criteria for this privilege was narrowed to earning a gold medal at the Asian Games or any Olympic medal. This is an exceptionally high standard which speaks volume of the hyper-competitive environment that set it.

The investment in competitive sports soon bore fruit. In Montreal 1976 Team Korea won 6 medals – twice as many as its previous record in the Games – including its first Olympic gold as an independent state. Since then, South Korea has established a proud tradition of ranking among the top 10 in the medal table at almost every Games until Tokyo 2020. Also in the 1970s, the men’s national baseball team won its first medal in the 1978 World Cup. They continued to win medals in world-level tournaments, the Olympics included. In football – one of the two most popular sports in the country alongside baseball – the men’s national team qualified for the 1986 World Cup after a

long hiatus. Since then, the team has consistently qualified for the tournament. In 2002 it made a sensational achievement by reaching the semi-finals.

Surveys indicate the importance of sports successes for South Koreans. The 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 2002 World Cup have appeared in various opinion polls as some of the “most important events,” “proudest moments,” and “happiest events” in South Korea’s history. The World Cup Stadium came 2nd in a question on where the greatest historical scenes were created.

Yet, compared with delegations to previous Games, Team Korea for Paris 2024 has raised questions about where South Korea’s competitive sports were heading. Firstly, with 144 athletes it was, by far, the smallest squad since 1976. Secondly, the women’s handball team was the only team that qualified in team sports. For instance, the failure of the men’s football team to qualify ended a streak that began in 1988. Thirdly, said women’s team was an Olympic powerhouse until 2012, yet its achievements dropped significantly since then. Finally, South Korea was experiencing a decline in winning Olympic medals. After earning 13 gold and 31 in total in London 2012, they won 9 gold and 21 in total in Rio 2016, and 6 gold and 20 in total in Tokyo 2020. In the medal table of those Games they ranked 5th, 8th, and 16th, respectively. Set at 5 gold and 15th place in the medal table, goals for Paris were modest, mentioning population decline as a cause for low competitiveness. The squad was even perceived as being “the weakest team ever.”

However, Team Korea exceeded all expectations by winning 32 medals in total, including tying South Korea’s record of 13 gold. This ranked them 8th in the table. Among other achievements, they maintained overwhelming dominance in archery, won the first medal in women’s boxing, secured the first gold in men’s taekwondo – Korea’s national martial art and sport – in 16 years, and won the highest number of medals in judo since 2000. Importantly, Lim Jong-hoon’s bronze at the mixed doubles in table tennis reignited the debate over the fairness of conscription exemption.

Ultimately, the Summer Olympics are not the only measure of South Korea’s world-class competitive sports. However, they have solidified their place at the peak – an indication for a hyper-competitive society of being at the top. Additionally, rankings are more than current standing; they are also about whether the trend is of ascension or decline. As initial reactions stressed the contribution of South Korea’s Generation Z to the “Miracle of Paris,” it will be interesting to see how Team Korea’s performance at these Games will impact directions and perceptions of competitive sports in the country.



Dr Guy Podoler

Senior Lecturer of Korean Studies in University of Haifa, Israel. His research interests include memory and commemoration, sport diplomacy, sport nationalism, and cultural diplomacy. He is an author of *Monuments, Memory, and Identity: Constructing the Colonial Past in South Korea* (Peter Lang AG, 2011).

Email: gpodoler@research.haifa.ac.il

What is next for Olympic surfing?



Tiago Brant de Carvalho Falcao

Doctoral candidate at Griffith University in Queensland, Australia.

Email: tiago.brant@griffithuni.edu.au



Dr Kevin Filo

Deputy Head of the Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management, Griffith Business School at Griffith University.

Email: k.filo@griffith.edu.au



Dr Popi Sotiriadou

Associate Professor of Sport Management at Griffith University, Australia.

Email: p.sotiriadou@griffith.edu.au

Surfing is considered an ancient practice in the Polynesian islands of the Pacific Ocean, and on the northern coast of Peru, where fishermen in the Huanchaco region face waves with their caballitos de totora, traditional straw boats dating back more than 4,000 years. Surfing was 'revealed' to Western civilization in 1778 by Royal Navy Captain James Cook as his crew crossed the North Pacific Ocean on their way back to Europe. However, English missionaries considered surfing immoral and therefore banned the practice from Hawaiian culture for over a century. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, through swimmer and Olympic champion Duke Kahanamoku, that the Western world heard about surfing again. Gold medalist in the 100 m freestyle in Stockholm in 1912 and Antwerp in 1920, Duke participated at three Olympic Games and won five medals: in Stockholm in 1912, he received a gold medal for the 100 m freestyle and a silver medal in the 4 x 200 m freestyle; in Antwerp in 1920 he won gold in the 100 m freestyle and gold in the 4 x 200 m freestyle; and in Paris in 1924 he took out a silver medal in the 100 m freestyle.

Due to the fame stemming from his Olympic dominance, Duke became the world's ambassador for surfing, defending the practice he maintained as the source of his athletic performance. He demonstrated surfing in the United States in 1912 and in Australia in 1914, spreading the sport widely in these places. It is no coincidence that these nations have been the main protagonists of the sport since the creation of the world surfing circuit by two Hawaiian surfers, Randy Harrick and Fred Hemmings, in 1976, when they established International Professional Surfers (IPS), which later became the Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP) from 1982 to 2014, founded by Australian Ian Cairns. In that period, Australians won 20 world titles, while North Americans won 19, including the 11 world titles won by the greatest champion in history, Floridian Kelly Slater. In 2014, the ASP became the World Surf League (WSL). Since then, Brazilian surfers have started to win titles, including the first Olympic gold medal for surfing, won by Italo Ferreira.

As a result of the International Olympic Committee's desire to rejuvenate its fan base and spark the interest of a new generation of spectators, the world witnessed the inclusion of action and adventure sports in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. The coast city of Chiba, 40 minutes away from Tokyo, hosted the first Olympic surfing event on a beach known as Tsurigasaki, which has an ordinary sand bottom and good enough waves on occasion. However, surfing has an ideal image provided by the media, which is associated with offshore winds and reef bottom waves on paradise-looking Pacific Islands with clear water and tropical forests.

The above scenario describes what just happened in the Olympic program of Paris 2024. Surfing was hosted at Teahupo'o, French Polynesia, one of the most beautiful and challenging waves on the world surfing circuit, exactly 100 years after Duke Kahanamoku's last Olympic appearance in Paris in 1924. The wave of Teahupo'o lies on the corner of a coral pass, about 500 meters offshore of a small village. The village is surrounded by nature at the end of the only paved road that leads to the capital Papeete, 47 kilometres away. It was also the first time an Olympic event occurred in a remote destination, thousands of kilometres from the host city, Paris. Although the event was held under good conditions, it was not the perfect set up imagined by organisers and participants.

As predicted, the audience was impressive. However, the inconsistency of waves and judging criteria still constrains surfing supporters who want to see the Olympic competition established with a clear set of judging parameters and a more predictable timeline. As the Olympic movement embraced surfing, new technologies became available and transformed the way surfers engaged with the sport. Wave pools seem to have displaced ocean waves as the sacred place for surfing, bringing artificial environments to competition and recreational venues, just as sport climbing and canoe slalom.

Considering the need to provide clear judging parameters and specific timetables to screen Olympic sports, Los Angeles 2028 could become the first Olympic surfing event provided on artificial waves, following the example of other nature-related sports on the program, since summer is not an ideal season to produce consistent swells in California, and the Surf Ranch, one of the most successful wave pools of the world located in the state. Further research is advised for this possible outcome.

Breaking menstrual taboos during the Olympic Games

Ewa Swoboda, a Polish female sprinter, qualified for the semifinals and subsequently participated in an interview with Polish Television (TVP). During the interviews, she disclosed, “I have the first day of ‘these days,’ so I’m feeling tired and nervous”. Addressing other journalists, she added, “I’ve got my period; we’ll talk tomorrow.” Following the semifinal, Swoboda returned to the topic of her menstruation, stating, “I am on my period, and it’s a particularly challenging time for me this month. However, I won’t attribute my weaker performance to that. I was only 0.01 seconds. I am well-prepared, and I don’t know what happened.”

Prior to the Olympic Games, Natalia Kaczmarek, a Polish runner with multiple medals from the Tokyo Olympic Games 2020 and the European and World Championships, became an ambassador for the Always campaign “It’s a new period.” The campaign aims to increase awareness and foster open conversations about the impact of menstruation on female athletes. During the Olympic Games, viewers could also see an advertisement for the same campaign featuring British athlete Jazmin Sawyers. The slogan for this advertisement, “Let’s open our eyes to period anxiety and make periods an open part of the game”, could be perceived as a powerful message for women’s sport.

While menstruation is increasingly discussed in public discourse, it remains, to some extent, a taboo subject that should be concealed. This trend persists within the realm of sport. Studies indicate that the issues related to female hormonal cycles are overlooked within the sports environment. Communication regarding menstruation and the menstrual cycle between female athletes and coaches is infrequent. Key barriers to this communication include: (1) insufficient knowledge, (2) social norms related to the menstrual taboo and stigma that make conversations about menstruation embarrassing or awkward, (3) concerns about athletes’ privacy, and (4) the predominance of male coaches.

The silence surrounding menstruation may also be attributed to the specific nature of the sport, which is sex segregation based on the dichotomy between male strength and female frailty. In this context, using menstruation as an excuse for poor performance could reinforce the frailty myth and conviction that the female body, mainly during menstruation, is too frail for sport. Furthermore, disclosing menstruation can lead to perceptions of women as being influenced by “emotional fluctuations,” undermining the image of women as “real” athletes who are expected to control their bodies and emotions. As stated by Sawyers in the advertisement, “Nobody wants you to play the woman card.”

In this context, it is unsurprising that female athletes seldom publicly address menstrual

ailments despite openly discussing other physical challenges encountered during competition. Notable exceptions include Chinese swimmer Fu Yuanhui, who attributed her weaker performance in the 2016 Rio Olympics 4x100m medley relay to her menstrual period that began the previous day, and Israeli marathon runner Lonah Chemtai Salpeter, who was forced to pause her run during the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games due to menstrual cramps. The extensive media coverage of these cases, including the Polish media’s attention to Ewa Swoboda’s case during the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, emphasizes the exceptional nature of such statements.

The silence surrounding menstruation may intensify periodic anxiety. This anxiety encompasses both women’s participation in sport and performance quality. Additionally, it involves apprehension about bodily leakage and the outfits worn during competition. While often associated with white color, this concern extends to the revealing nature of some sports uniforms, such as those worn in athletics and gymnastics. High-profile female athletes openly discussing menstruation during Olympic Games media coverage draw attention to period-related issues, including period anxiety.

The Olympic Games, with their global audience and extensive coverage of women’s sports, present an ideal platform to challenge the menstrual taboo. However, significant changes are needed, not only in sport but also in media representation. While Polish sprinter Ewa Swoboda used the term “these days” (accompanied by laughter) in a brief interview with the journalist, she also employed the term “period” when speaking to Polish media. Notably, the term period was absent from discussion between journalists and experts (including a former Polish female runner). Instead of direct reference, viewers might have encountered euphemisms like “a woman’s difficult time of the month” or “this topic”, maintaining this way menstrual taboo. Given the Olympic Games’ status as both a sporting and media spectacle, how the media present menstruation-related issues during these events holds significant importance. In the sport environment, open discussion on menstruation may contribute to better communications, the development of education regarding menstrual issues and institutional support for female athletes. Moreover, female champions, as role models, impact girls worldwide and may help to mitigate the menstruation stigma beyond sport.



Dr Honorata Jakubowska

Associate Professor in the Faculty of Sociology at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland. She teaches, conducts research and publishes on the sociology of sport, gender studies and the sociology of body. She is the principal investigator of the research project “Menstruation Management in Professional Sport: A Sociological Perspective”, financed by the National Science Centre in Poland.

X: @JakubowskaH

Email: honorata.jakubowska@amu.edu.pl

From motherhood to medals: new research sheds light on postpartum guidelines for returning to sport



Dr Jenna Schulz

Physiotherapist and postdoctoral fellow at the Fowler Kennedy Sport Medicine Clinic, Western University. Her research focuses on postpartum return to sport and relative energy deficiency in sport (REDs).

Email: jschulz2@uwo.ca

Twitter: [@jennaschulz_1](https://twitter.com/jennaschulz_1)



Dr Jane Thornton

Sport and Exercise Medicine Physician and Clinician Scientist. She's a Canada Research Chair and Associate Professor at Western University, specializing in athlete health and physical activity for chronic disease prevention and treatment.

Email: jane.s.thornton@gmail.com

Twitter: [@JaneSThornton](https://twitter.com/JaneSThornton)

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The 2024 Paris Olympic Games is historic for a number of reasons. For the first time in modern Olympic history, there is an equal number of female and male athletes competing at the Games.

The Games are also more mom-friendly than ever before, thanks to the advocacy of former and current athletes. For instance, a new initiative called MOMentum is creating resources to help athlete-mothers navigate family planning and their careers. MOMentum is led by Canadian rower Jill Moffatt, alongside fellow Canadian athletes Melissa Bishop-Nriagu, Erica Wiebe, Erica Gavel and two other athletes who almost missed the Tokyo Games due to pregnancy and postpartum policies: basketball player Kim Gaucher and boxer Mandy Bujold.

The French Olympic Committee is also providing hotel rooms to their athletes for breastfeeding during the Games. This announcement came after French judoka and Olympic medallist Clarisse Agbegnenou told President Emmanuel Macron during a team visit that she wanted her daughter with her in the Olympic Village to “feel good and be fully committed in my final stretch of the Olympic Games.”

In addition, Allyson Felix, an 11-time American Olympic medallist and mother of two, has teamed up with Pampers to set up a nursery in the heart of the Olympic Village.

Until recently, many female athletes have had to choose between sport participation and starting a family. However, there are a growing number of Olympian athlete-mothers who have been breaking records and changing the narrative. Among them is track and field athlete Shelly-Ann Fraser Pryce, who is participating in her fifth Olympic Games at 37, having given birth to a son in 2017. Elle Purrier St. Pierre broke the American record for both the indoor mile and 3000m at just under one year postpartum. Faith Kipyegon broke her own 1500m world record on July 7, having had her daughter in 2018. These athletes are proving that motherhood and elite athletic performance can go hand-in-hand. But despite the increase in athlete-mother successes and improved advocacy, there is still a lack of evidence for a safe postpartum return to sport.

Our research group recently conducted a review on return to activity/sport guidelines for postpartum women. We found most studies stated that return to activity could start once “medically safe” around six weeks postpartum, but this term was generally left undefined. Only 11 out of 36 studies had specific return-to-sport guidelines, and only six studies considered the importance of mental health. A study on elite athlete's experiences returning to sport after childbirth demonstrated that athlete-mothers felt pressures and expectations to return to sport too quickly after childbirth, at a detriment to their physical and emotional health.

Traditional return to sport frameworks after

injury involve assessment of strength, endurance and functional abilities, but also emphasize the importance of mental readiness. Our team suggests that return to sport postpartum should follow a similar framework.

Our research proposes a five-step process for postpartum athletes, ranging from return to activity to return to sport. Before beginning this process, athletes should obtain clearance from a medical professional who has expertise in women's health. These clinicians should offer evidence-based, personalized recommendations and conduct regular follow-ups. Athletes should be screened for any risk factors that may impede success, such as pelvic floor dysfunction, Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (REDs) and postpartum anxiety and/or depression. Clinicians should offer evidence-based, personalized recommendations and conduct regular follow-ups.

Instead of focusing on timelines, athletes should progress as tolerance, confidence, goals, and physical and mental readiness indicate. Similar frameworks have been developed that emphasize the importance of a multidisciplinary care team, with a biopsychosocial approach that considers the athlete as a whole person beyond their musculoskeletal system. A biopsychosocial approach assesses both physical and mental readiness, and includes considering sleep patterns, fatigue, breastfeeding, REDs, psychological well-being, fear of movement, socioeconomic considerations and support systems.

With the right supports in place, athlete-mothers generally report positive experiences when returning to sport. More than half may return to at least their pre-pregnancy performance level, and some will even exceed it.

Beyond performance and podiums, their new “dual identity” can result in a newfound sense of pride, motivation, resilience and enjoyment for their sport. Beyond sport, exercise and physical activity during pregnancy has long been shown to have positive health outcomes for both mother and baby, making the benefits a win-win for more than one generation.

While there have been large advances and successes for athlete-mothers and progress since the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, there is still work to be done to improve postpartum care and support. We need more high-quality research to inform evidence-based recommendations for postpartum policy and clinical practice. Sport policies from organization and sponsors need to evolve to support athlete-mothers, to navigate a safe return to sport. This will reduce the likelihood of long-term injury, alleviating the decision between becoming a mother or remaining an athlete. If we can improve the overall health and well-being of athlete-mothers as well as promote longevity in sport, then female athletes can live in a world where competing after pregnancy becomes the norm.

Weber & Duplantis & Paris 2024 - an unlikely love story?

Armand Duplantis' world record in the pole vault, reaching an unprecedented height of 6.25 meters during the Paris 2024 Olympics, and the extraordinary atmosphere created by 80,000 enthusiastic spectators cheering him on, can be analyzed through the lens of Max Weber's concept of the "ideal type." Weber's ideal type is a methodological tool used to abstract and isolate the key features of a social phenomenon, serving as a benchmark against which reality can be compared. In this context, Duplantis' achievement, alongside the collective support from the audience, can be seen as a near-perfect realization of the Olympic ideal—a manifestation of what the Games are designed to represent. In this text we will demonstrate in what way Duplantis' performance (not only the record *per se*) can be seen as an ideal type and problematize the representation.

At the core of this analysis is the understanding that Duplantis' record-breaking performance exemplifies the pinnacle of human athletic achievement, which is a central tenet of the Olympic ethos. The Olympics are historically and symbolically a stage for the demonstration of the highest levels of physical and mental excellence. From a Weberian perspective, Duplantis' achievement can be viewed as an "ideal type" of athletic perfection—a distilled and exaggerated example of what the Olympics are meant to celebrate. His performance does not merely represent a victory; it symbolizes the human capacity to transcend previous limits, embodying the Olympic motto of *Citius, Altius, Fortius* (Faster, Higher, Stronger). It is worth remembering that Duplantis had already won the gold medal when he requested the officials to raise the bar. In other words, he had already jumped the highest – but the motto 'higher' was demonstrated when he was not satisfied with winning the medal.

The enthusiastic support Duplantis received from the crowd, which extended beyond national loyalties to also embrace the silver medalist from the United States, Sam Kendricks, and the bronze medalist from Greece, Emmanouil Karalis underscores another critical dimension of the Olympic ideal: international unity and sportsmanship:

Kendricks (5.95m, 30cm shorter than Duplantis) commanded the crowd's applause and created an unlikely good atmosphere in the stadium. Karalis (5.90 m) bandaged Duplantis' injured hand between the various attempts—an ideal image of what sport strives for. Weber's concept of the ideal type emphasizes the importance of shared values and norms in defining social phenomena. In this case, the collective celebration of not just one, but multiple athletes from different nations, highlights the Olympics as a unique platform where international competition fosters, rather than undermines, global solidarity and mutual respect. This scenario aligns closely

with Weber's ideal type of the Olympics as an event that transcends political and nationalistic divides, promoting a spirit of camaraderie and shared humanity through sport.

The role of the audience in creating a "magical" atmosphere is also significant when viewed through Weber's concept of the ideal type. The intense and unified support from the 80,000 spectators watching and cheering for Duplantis exemplifies the ideal of the Olympics as a communal experience that transcends individual interests and national affiliations. The audience's engagement, characterized by a collective joy in the athletes' achievements, reflects the Olympic ideal of inclusivity and universalism. This collective celebration represents a realization of the Olympic spirit in its purest form—where the competition is not just about national pride, but about a shared appreciation for human endeavor and excellence. Furthermore, Duplantis' achievement exemplifies the narrative of a sport hero. His first two trials failed, which increased the tension. When he reached the record height in the third attempt tensions were released—possibly increasing the feeling of togetherness.

Finally, Duplantis' record-breaking feat contributes to the cultural and historical legacy of the Paris 2024 Olympics, resonating far beyond the immediate context of the event. Weber's ideal types are often used to identify enduring patterns and structures within social phenomena. In this case, Duplantis' achievement not only elevates the status of the Paris Games but also reinforces the broader legacy of the Olympics as a venue for creating lasting memories and defining historical milestones. This aspect of his performance resonates with the ideal type of the Olympics as a stage for the creation of cultural and historical narratives that persist long after the Games themselves have concluded.

From a Weberian perspective, this event serves as an ideal type of a successful Olympic Games—one that perfectly encapsulates the values and aspirations that the Olympics are supposed to uphold but which is rarely reached. Well, the ideal type of the Olympic performance, could also serve as a blessing in disguise. As researchers we often become flies in the ointment, but we still want to ask the provoking question: if the Weberian ideal type of the Olympic Games can be encapsulated in one athlete and one performance of a very specific type – a white man, in an individual sport, who does not take a stand in any of the contemporary political issues (such as climate change, wars, racism, sexism)—there is a risk that the Games (and ideals connected to them) become outdated. Will our children and grandchildren look back at the Paris Games (just as we do when discussing the Olympic Games in Berlin 1936) and ask – did they not recognize that they could have changed the future?



Prof Aage Radmann

Norwegian School of Sport Sciences. He is sociologist and sport scientist who researches (social) media, gender, supporter culture, outdoor life, and youth cultures.

Email: aager@nih.no



Prof Susanna Hedenborg

Malmö University, Sweden. She is historian and sports scientist who researches children & young people, equestrian sports, outdoor life, sustainability, and gender.

Email: Susanna.hedenborg@mau.se

On the Paris 2024 Olympic marathon qualification controversy: is it worth fighting for a dream?



Dr Kateřina Turková

Researcher and Associate Lecturer at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. Kateřina Turková primarily focuses on issues associated with sports, social media, and quantitative research methods in her academic career. She is currently a member of the research team ReMeD, supported by the Horizon Europe grant.

*Email: katerina.turkova@fsv.cuni.cz
Twitter: @KaterinaTurkova*

As “the highest-profile multidiscipline sport event in human history”, the Olympic Games consist of many sports; hence, track and field, as a leading sport, has taken part in the Games from their ancient era. Marathon is a traditional track and field event that is Olympic in its nature, while it is both internationally well-established and seeks to comply with the Olympics’ values and ideals. For all the selected runners, it is a privilege to call themselves Olympic marathoners. But the question that has been again publicly raised before the Paris 2024 Olympics is who deserves to stand at the starting line of the Olympic marathon. Should the IOC aim for a the high-quality, elite field targeting the top performances and records, or are they willing to let the “Games wide open” and allow a significant number of runners qualified thanks to the universality rule to attend the event and pursue their best?

Due to the controversies related to the selection process, the athletes’ road to the Paris 2024 Olympic marathon was highly followed in the months preceding the start of the race. While in the women’s category, the disputes mainly concerned the (un)fair nominations of the “best” runners over more eligible ones, which was further publicly medialized and discussed, the men’s selection came into the conversation even more intensely. Besides the decisions made by the national committees, whose motivations and criteria in many cases remain unclear, the still relatively recently adopted World Athletics’ ranking system (and the possibility of replacing the qualified marathoners with alternates of the same nationality, applied for example by the USATF) enables athletes to qualify for the Games not only by Olympic standards but also through their ranking positions, which reflect their competition results. Whereas in the women’s category, the standard was a necessary condition for qualification (besides universality placings), some ranking-based spots in the men’s category were yet in place.

Although discussions about the (un)fairness of the ranking system commonly appear in the track and field community, these debates have special importance in the case of the marathon, where the number of attempts to achieve certain times and placings is largely limited by the length and hardness of the event. As the Games approached, the marathoners “in the danger zone”, specifically those who were within the desired quota of eighty best men but had not met the standard, began to count and consider their chances. The qualification period closed on May 5th, 2024, and the ranking system initially indicated that nine athletes, including Liam Adams, Ser-Od Bat-Ochir, Hugo Catrileo, Tachlowini Gabriyesos, Elroy Gelant, Abdi Ali Gelelchu, Ilham Tanui Özbilen, and Samuel Tsegay Tesfamariam, secured

their attendance due to gained points in Road to Paris. Thanks to his countryman CJ Albertson’s placing, American Leonard Korir seemed to be eligible to stand at the starting line in the French capital too.

Unfortunately for the aforementioned athletes, the updated Olympic marathon selection was published a few days after the first one; hence, these runners without the Olympic standard were substituted by universality-placed marathoners. After the athletes named above, who had sat safely in the originally presented quota, found out that they would be robbed of the Olympic dream, they followed the famous principle associated with the Games and began to fight to take part in Paris 2024. Amongst the personal appeals, protests, advocacy and medialization of the case, the online petition entitled “Reinstate Olympic Marathon Prospects Unfairly Disqualified by World Athletics” was quickly launched by Wink Solutions (the employer of Liam Adams). The petition then circulated in the public sphere and was signed by thousands of supporters on short notice. Finally, the efforts led to the happy ending; the reinstatement of eliminated marathoners to the entry list and the rise of the participants’ quota to take in the universality-placed runners.

Overall, the public interest in the controversies surrounding the 2024 Olympic marathon selection confirmed that the Olympic candidates deserved fair treatment, transparent rules, and clear communication from the side of decision-makers. Track and field, as a traditional Olympic sport, should set the standard and serve as a good example. Athletes’ endeavors for change were brave and necessary, and their involvement contributed to the adjustment of the entry criteria. On a side note, the results of the marathon still complied with the general Olympic principles and motto of this year’s Olympics: “Games wide open”. The Ethiopian alternate Tamirat Tola, who was called to action after the injury of his training partner Sisay Lemma, won and broke the Olympic record. Vice versa, passing up a preciously earned spot was a true act of Olympism from Lemma. In addition, the universality placings enriched the field with future prospects, such as Yaseen Abdalla, who ran a Sudanese record (2:11:41) without previous marathon experience.

The situation caused by the dramatic qualification process thus revealed that the answer to the posed question is two-sided. At first, pursuing the best possible field by setting transparent rules and seeking fair competition is a non-negotiable condition. In this regard, the marathoners, who claimed their rights, set a precedent enabling further changes. On the contrary, universality places proved to be enriching for the event. Although achieving a balance regarding this issue may be challenging, it is still worth fighting for a dream.

Glory, gold and GoFundMe: Who really profits at the Olympic Games

Before the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, U.S. water polo player, Maggie Steffens posted on Instagram to share her excitement and draw attention to the women's water polo team. The three-time gold medalist called for exposure and support "... most Olympians need a 2nd (or 3rd) job to support chasing the dream...most teams rely on sponsors for travel, accommodations, nutritional support, rent/lodging, and simply afford to live in this day and age. Especially female sports and female athletes".

To her surprise, Steffens received a comment from rapper and reality show star, Flavor Flav, promising to sponsor the entire team. During the Olympics, the cameras often found Flavor Flav poolside cheering for the team and followed their unlikely partnership during the competition. The media framing was light and airy, and little space was given to exploring why his sponsorship was needed, or why a four-time Olympian and three-time gold medalist had taken to Instagram asking for support in the first place.

Steffens post was an important reminder that while the Olympics generate billions of dollars, the athletes who captivate the world do not receive direct compensation. Many of them often struggle for support and financial stability.

Pierre Coubertin and the inaugural Olympic Congress were clear when they revived the games in 1892: the Modern Olympics would be for men and amateurs. No one who earned money in sports as a player or teacher would be eligible to compete. It also banned monetary prizes for earning medals. Over the next century, ideas about amateurism would continue to govern the games, even as the official rules were progressively relaxed (and women were eventually allowed to compete). While professional athletes have been welcomed at the Olympics since 1988, the IOC still does not offer direct compensation for medals earned, or athletic labor performed at the Games.

Today, the Olympics has grown into a big money machine. While host cities are left with exorbitant bills, the IOC gets the ever-increasing revenue from ballooning media rights deals and sponsorships. The media deals for the 2024 Games are estimated to bring in around \$3.4 billion alone.

While the IOC proudly claims to distribute 90% of the revenue back to the federations via investments and support, the disparities between the Olympic have and have-nots are increasingly stark. While IOC officials enjoy large per diems and generous accommodations at the games, 45,000 volunteers who make the games run, are paid simply in lunches and a t-shirt. The athletic labor at the heart of the Olympics is celebrated and profited off of, there are still too many athletes saying that they are experiencing financial precarity and who are turning to crowd-sourcing platforms like GoFundMe to supplement their income while they train and compete.

The IOC leaves compensation up to governing bodies and national federations, and support for

athletes can vary widely. For example, in Hungary, a gold medalist gets a \$148,362 payout, while in the United States, a gold medalist earns \$37,500.

This year, World Athletics became the first federation to offer compensation to medalists, guaranteeing monetary rewards for track and field citing the fact that "the revenue share that we receive is in large part because our athletes are the stars of the show". Still, not everyone was supportive of this move. With detractors claiming that these awards will "threaten the integrity of the Olympic Games."

The IOC and federations such as the USOPC, cite athletes earning potential as justification for the lack of monetary support. Yet the ability to earn sponsorships is heavily determined by the sports athletes compete in, and their perceived "marketability" which is often influenced by their gender, race, and sexuality. A few superstars can cash in big, but most Olympians are not in that position. Even for athletes with sponsorships, the IOC's Rule 40, restricts the content athletes can make with their individual sponsors for the weeks before, during, and after the Olympics. The IOC does this to protect and prioritize its own branding relationships.

Still, athletes are using their platforms to create new sponsorship pipelines, outside of traditional media markets. They are also speaking candidly about the realities of being an Olympian. Rugby bronze medalist, Ariana Ramsey, went viral for her videos about using her time in the Olympic Village to get health care, vision, and pap smears. Ramsey wanted to raise awareness about U.S. health inequalities and the challenges she had accessing care back home.

Athletes continue to assert the value of their athletic labor, and organizations like Global Athlete are helping to unite Olympians as a labor force. The payments to medalists are a start but what support will there be for most Olympians who will not win medals, but are laboring just the same?

Individual celebrities, taxpayers, crowd-sourced support campaigns, and athletes working night jobs as content creators, are mere band-aids for the festering wounds of exploitation and financial disparity between the Olympic haves and have-nots.

As the Opening Ceremony came to life on the Seine this summer, a beheaded Marie Antoinette stood in a window of the tower where she was historically imprisoned. Long understood as a symbol of "excess and indulgence", the headless monarch appeared while "Let the People Sing" turned into a rock song in the background. The IOC officials ironically applauded this symbolism from their perch under the Eiffel Tower, while the unpaid volunteers served as their umbrella holders to shield them from the rain. Boats of athletes floated down the river and crowds pressed into security gates restricting access to the Ceremony. Olympian Veronica Farley took it all in- this was her dream! Tomorrow she would wake up in the Olympic village, prepare to compete- and try not to worry about how she would pay her rent.



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Dr Amira Rose Davis

Assistant Professor in the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas-Austin, where she specializes in 20th Century American History with an emphasis on race, gender, sports, and politics.

Email: amirarosedavis@utexas.edu

Twitter: @mirarose88

Website: amirarosedavis.com
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Athletes with intellectual impairments and the Paralympics: achievements and challenges



Prof Jan Burns

Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychology, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. Jan's research interests are in the area of athletes with Intellectual Impairments. She is Head of Eligibility, Classification and Research for Virtus, the International Federation for athletes with Intellectual Impairments, and currently Chair of the IPC Classification Compliance and Oversight Committee.

Email: Jan.burns@canterbury.ac.uk

Since the re-introduction of athletes with Intellectual Impairments (II) into the London 2012 Paralympics, acceptance has grown and the focus has shifted to their achievements and away from past controversies. To most eyes watching the Paralympics now they are elite athletes in the categories S/SB14 in swimming, T/F20 and TT11 for Table Tennis just like any other athletes competing for medals and representing their countries. Across the four Games since 2012, the number of II athletes has remained fairly similar, with 151 athletes, unusually more females (82) than males (69), representing 42 nations, about a quarter of the nations competing in the Paris Games. However, the number of sports which include these athletes has not grown from the three re-introduced in London, the events have increased slightly for example with the addition of swimming medleys, but of the 549 medal events across the 22 sports in Paris this still represents a very small proportion for what is one of the largest disability sports in the world, and questions should be asked why this is.

There were some definite wins in Paris with many World records broken, new stars born such as Poppy Maskill in swimming who brought home not only the first medal for GB, but also topped the table as winning the most medals in the Games. In terms of inclusive representation outside of the field of play, one French athlete with II was included in the flame ceremony at both the opening and closing ceremonies, but this was not visible if you did not know the athlete. However, what was most disappointing was that in the video montages produced by the IPC, whilst both athletes with physical and visual impairments were included no athletes with II were included. Such a missed opportunity, for a group whose disability is often invisible. Whilst the establishment may be slow to turn it seems the athletes are not, and for the first time an athlete with II, Lenine Cuhna, a Portuguese Paralympian, put forward by Virtus, the International Federation for II athletes, was elected onto the IPC Athlete's Council. After an energetic campaign, Lenine achieved the endorsement of having the most votes of all the contenders. This is a turnaround indeed, influenced by the experience of including athletes with II in national teams, demonstrating how attitudes can be changed by inclusion.

Nevertheless, the question remains, why are there so few sports with II athletes in the Paralympic Games? This is a complex and multi-layered question, with one answer dominating – space. To increase the number of II athletes, the IPC cap of 4,400 cannot be broken and so other athletes would be excluded. This pushes the decision making down to National Paralympic Committees and to International Federations in terms of their decision making around who they may

include. Here many factors come into play. For example, the existence of a classification system for these athletes in that sport, the breadth, depth, and quality of competition, pressures within in terms of the who may medal, representation, attitudes and advocacy. Whilst some National Paralympic Committees will argue that they need the athletes to be able to choose from and point to the International Federations to develop these opportunities for II athletes, there are some shifts occurring. National Paralympic Committees are starting to recognise the strength of their II athletes, whilst disappointingly still only a quarter of nations bringing II athletes to the Games. Some International Federations are also recognising the need and benefits of including II athletes and are working hard to develop their classification systems and competition opportunities. For example, World Taekwondo are energetically pursuing the inclusion of Para Poomsae for II athletes for LA 2028.

The other remaining anomaly is that whilst physical and visual impairment groups have multiple competition classes in the majority of sports, all II athletes compete in one class. This is certainly not because all II athletes have similar levels of impairment meaning that the impact on the performance of the sport is the similar for all. Far from it, the impairment levels of II athletes are as variable as in any other group. This needs to change and steps are in progress to achieve this development. Virtus has now introduced two levels of competition II1 and II2 to represent those with additional significant impairments, and an eligibility system to support this. This system is increasingly being adopted by International Federations in their competitions, and hence growing the volume, competition levels, and representation of a wider range of II athletes.

Whilst overall growth has been slow at the Paralympic Games, acceptance has largely been achieved, attitudes are changing, sporting opportunities and partnerships are growing, and the voice of the athletes with II is starting to be heard. Athletes with II have come a very long way since 2012, the path ahead is long in terms of full inclusion, but there is now a visible path.



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Fandom and National Identity

Renewing the fandom of the Olympic Games young audiences, videogames and esports.

In the media-fragmented space, the IOC's bet to increase its media production and double down on digital media channels paid off; Paris 2024 reached audience records all over the world. As reported by the IOC the Opening Ceremony broadcast in France reached a total of 23.4 million viewers; while in the USA, NBC Universal, reports an audience of 30.6 million viewers 82% more than Tokyo 2020. As more data becomes available it will become clear if the strategies applied by the IOC, such as the "enhancing the youth vibe" by including breaking, BMX freestyle, skateboarding and 3X3 basketball to Paris 2024 sports line up worked out to attract younger audiences. These younger audiences are a focal point for the long-term profitability of Olympic Games as attracting and engaging this demographic that will soon have more spending power, is going to be key to securing sponsorships and media partnerships for the future.

According to McKinsey and Company, Gen Zers consume sports through gaming, digital media and adjacent entertainment, and only one in five don't watch live sports. It is in this context that following the Olympic Agenda 2020+5 that the IOC took actions to capitalize on the new trends in the ways that sports are consumed and practiced. The biggest announcement in this regard was the 12 years partnership between the IOC and Saudi Arabia National Olympic Committee (NOC) to hold the Olympics Esports Games in 2025, ratified unanimously in the 142nd IOC Session. No doubt that this move attempts to capitalize on the popularity of esports, especially with younger demographics, as the expected total audience is expected to surpass 640 million people worldwide in 2025 according to NewZoo.

Even when at first glance, this might be a moment to celebrate the acceptance of esports as a recognized sport by the IOC, the announcement comes with several questions and points of concern. First, the selection of the host country's record with women's and LGBTQ+ rights are in stern opposition to values that the target audiences are passionate about, and with those of Olympic Games. Even the IOC recognizes that credibility plays a big role in engaging with younger generations stating in their own agenda that these demand purpose from organizations and business. In the same order of ideas esports have an inclusion debt as they have little female representation in professional leagues. To illustrate this the first female athlete according to esports earnings appears only in the 538th place in the highest overall earnings ranking.

On the other hand, esports include a wide variety of videogame genres and a plethora of publishers and developers. Thus, the organization and selection of the esports that will be featured in the Olympic Esports Games will include complex

negotiations for media rights with all the actors involved in the esports industry. Even when, at the moment of writing neither the IOC or the NOC have released a potential list of games to be included, there are concerns that Shooters due to their nature might not be considered in the first edition. This a genre that includes popular games like Counter Strike Global Offensive, Valorant among other esports. According to Newzoo's Global Games Market Report 2024 Shooters represent 17% of the market share in PC and 16% of the market share in console; and a big following in the esports scene. Added to this, there also the question of what versions of the games are going to be used and if there's going to be any censorship to accommodate the host country's laws and other restrictions in other regions of the world.

The success of the event will not only depend on the IOC capacity to address all the logistical and planning challenges esports represent, but it's also contingent of how the event can find a market share in an already packed esports scene. Added to this, there are the looming concerns of the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia and how this will influence or not the participation of publishers, teams and esports athletes and gamers. Whether the Olympic Esports Games can really become the promised new era for the Olympics, where new ways to practice and enjoy sports are embraced or it ends up being regarded as an opportunistic move to sportswash Saudi Arabia's image and as an attempt to capitalize on esports popularity by the IOC remains to be seen.



Dr. Adolfo Gracia Vázquez

Associate Professor of the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the National Autonomous University of México (UNAM). He serves as the head of the Division of the System of Open University and Distance Education of Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, UNAM. His research focuses on esports, digital culture and online advertising.

Email: adolfogracia@politicas.unam.mx

Fringe to flag: nation, the Olympics, and the popularization of golf



Dr. Lou Antolihao

Senior Lecturer of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of three books and several articles on sociology, development, and basketball. His current research is on mobility, smart technologies, and golf communities in Southeast Asia.

Email: lantolihao@gmail.com

The sight of Olympic gold medalist Scottie Scheffler tearing up at the podium as the US national anthem played during the medal ceremony captures the momentous progress in the effort to popularize golf as an Olympic event and a major global sport. First, Scheffler's masterful, come-from-behind win in the final round is widely heralded as one of the top performances during the 2024 Paris Games, and even as one of the Olympics' all-time best. Second, his thrilling victory, along with the overall spectacular competitions in men's and women's events, attracted wide media attention that could turn golf from a "boring" inaccessible game to an action-packed and drama-filled sport worthy of a place among the world's premier sports. Finally, the image of Scheffler overwhelmed by the magnitude of the moment has made him an endearing All-American hero who marked the path between a notably individualistic and elitist game to the larger ideals of patriotism and internationalism.

Ironically, Scheffler's emotional outpouring connects golf to the nation while simultaneously affirming its weak ties to this important institution. Factors such as the emphasis on individual performance (vis-a-vis team) and relative inaccessibility (elite membership clubs) hamper the development of a strong national fan base in golf. As shown in the Paris Games, the Olympics can be the perfect venue for golf to forge stronger ties with the nation-state. It allows players, followers, and organizations to find a more profound connection that sustains interest and loyalty to the game. Despite its weak ties to the nation-state, how did golf manage to sustain a successful professional circuit and a continually growing number of followers worldwide?

Golf has displayed exceptional growth since the Covid-19 pandemic when the sport provided a respite for many who were seeking a socially distanced recreational activity. Last year, the R&A Global Golf Participation Report noted a 34 percent increase in the number of golfers across the globe (except in the US and Mexico) since 2016. In South Korea, a golf boom saw around 10 percent of its population take up the sport since 2021. Consequently, discussions emerged on how to tap into remarkable growth to further increase the global influence of golf, including raising its status in the Olympics.

Compared to many sports, the Olympics do not stand as the most prominent tournament in golf. Golf is technically new to the Olympics. After the first official matches were held during the 1900 Paris Games, the golf tournaments were discontinued after the 1904 St. Louis Games and were only reinstated more than a century later at the 2016 Rio Games. During this long period, golf developed its own political and cultural characteristics that are distinct from Olympic-centric sports.

One of its unique features is the Ryder Cup, golf's most prestigious tournament. Established in 1927, the biennial event started as a tournament between the United States and Great Britain until it was expanded to include continental European golfers in 1979. The Ryder Cup has provided golf fans with unforgettable stories of excellence (e.g., Ian Poulter, 2012), rivalries (e.g., Azinger vs Ballesteros), drama (e.g., "Battle of Brookline," 1999), epic stories (e.g., Nicklaus vs. Jacklin, 1969), and traditions (e.g., "captain's picks"), just as the Olympics provide such to many other sports. Nonetheless, the Ryder Cup remains an exclusive intercontinental affair that has marginalized many top golfers from countries such as South Africa, Australia, and South Korea.

Like Scheffler, women's Olympic golf champion Lydia Ko also cried during the medal awarding ceremony. Her path to the center podium was just as arduous and electrifying as Scheffler's – she won by only three shots against the bronze medal winner and a five-shot lead from the ninth-place finisher. With her gold medal, Ko achieved an Olympic medal trifecta, having won silver in 2016 and bronze in 2021. Her victory also allowed her to accumulate enough points for induction into the LPGA Hall of Fame. Beyond the Games, Lydia Ko is also the epitome of the globalization of golf. Born in South Korea, Ko migrated with her family to New Zealand when four years old. She is one of a handful of celebrity golfers whose cultural links and commercial appeal transcend national boundaries.

Various media outlets juxtaposed Scottie Scheffler's (and Lydia Ko's) spectacular final-round performances with the heartbreaking ending of Jon Rahm's Olympic campaign. The Spanish golfer is one of the most prominent players of LIV Golf, a professional men's golf league founded in 2021, which is engaged in a much-publicized spat with the PGA Tour, with which Scheffler is affiliated. This juxtaposition shows how the Olympics can be used as a site for other contestations beyond those of athletes and the nations that they represent. Moreover, the Olympics can also become an occasion wherein nation-states opportunistically re-assert their power and display their continuing relevance amidst narratives of their decline in our globalized world. For instance, three Dutch golfers were barred from participating in the Olympics for not meeting their national sports authorities' criteria despite meeting IOC requirements. These shifting loyalties and belongingness will help determine golf's defining character and overall appeal to discerning global sports fans.

Coco Gauff and LeBron James cross the Delaware

The Olympic opening ceremony has always been ripe for academic analysis on nationalism, sports communication and culture. This year's games were no different, with viewers quickly drawn to certain viral moments in the opening ceremony that made waves on social media platforms. The hooded person running on Paris rooftops reminded a segment of the audience of video games like *Assassin's Creed*, and I would be remiss to not mention the final supper controversy that garnered negative responses from members of the right-wing. However, a moment that captured attention was when audiences quickly made the visual connection between Coco Gauff and LeBron James carrying the American flag on their boat and Emanuel Leutze's painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware*.

I have previously done research on how images convey ideological messages in news media during significant events. My work on newspaper images of Hurricane Harvey showed that photojournalism both constructs myths of heroism and draws from prior socially constructed forms of photographs. That is, that images taken during news moments often reproduce or replicate prior images that the photographer may have already been thinking about subconsciously. In turn, these images reinforce certain ideological values, such as nationalism, capitalism, masculinity and whiteness. These images also construct gender and racial stereotypes, where men are portrayed as heroes restoring order to chaos. Conversely, women and people of color are painted as victims that are reliant on powerful men to save them from suffering. Together, images rhetorically communicate men's dominant status in society.

When audiences receive these images, they are quick to appropriate and twist iconography to their own needs, which are then circulated and appropriated in a wide variety of contexts. Context can also change depending on the perceived gender, race and class of the image subject. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites argued in chapter 11 of *Rhetorical Audience Studies and Reception of Rhetoric*:

A crucial feature in the study of iconic photographs is tracking how meaning and effect are produced not only by the image itself and through its circulation but also through appropriation into other artifacts.

We can see the image of Gauff and James take upon these meanings as social media users were quick to not only make the connection to Washington Crossing the Delaware, but appropriate the image to celebrate ideological values they hold near and dear. The original painting is an iconic image of American exceptionalism and militarism, one that reinforces the mythology surrounding one of the country's founding fathers and his military prowess. Moreover, it also carries connotations of freedom, grit and endurance, all

coded in masculine undertones. There is also one more dominant organizing principle in the original image, *whiteness*.

One of the first social media posts that went viral at the moment was from a user on X that posted a phone recording of Coco and LeBron with the caption "telling my kids this was George Washington." The post efficiently draws a semiotic connection between the two images, granting iconic power to the Olympic moment. Most importantly, it de-centers the whiteness from the original Washington painting and reorients Coco and LeBron image into an explicitly Black celebratory rhetoric. This reading of the image in the moment, showcases how marginalized groups draw from prior iconography and appropriate images to communicate a rhetoric of emancipation under white supremacy. Allowing them to create messages of resistance, hope and change. Another widely circulated user post on X read "LeBron James looks like he just founded America." A powerful statement that constructs a representation of Blackness that is central to American national identity.

You may have noticed that I keep putting Coco Gauff's name in front of LeBron James, and that is done intentionally. In most of the articles I've looked at so far, Coco Gauff's presence in the photograph is widely ignored if outright omitted. It's important to acknowledge she was Team USA's second flag bearer, and in the photo she stands next to James gripping the American flag. In other words, a clear gendered dynamic in conversations about the image is taking form and these conversations are unfortunately sidelining if not erasing women's presence and power at the Olympics. It's here that I urge media and sports writers to remain vigilant of internalized biases towards women. LeBron James isn't crossing the Delaware alone, he stands with other women who are just as much a part of United States multi-racial democracy, and their presence should be acknowledged.



Dr. Ever Josue Figueroa

Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His primary research interests include sports communication, media sociology and media representations of race, gender and class.

Email: ever.figueroa@colorado.edu

Fanship and the Caitlin Clark “snub”: social media and U.S. women’s 5x5 Olympic basketball



Prof. Pam Crendon

Professor Emerita, The University of Iowa. Co-editor of Media, Women and the Transformation of Sport: From Title IX to NIL (Routledge, 2024), she edited Media, Women and Sport: Challenging Gender Values (Sage, 1994). She continues her research in gender and inclusion focused on political intersection.

Email: pam-crendon@uiowa.edu



Dr. Laura A. Wackwitz

Director at Cable Creek Publishing & Productions. Co-editor of Media, Women and the Transformation of Sport: From Title IX to NIL (2024, Routledge). Her research examines the intersection of discourse, power, and sport, including an early history of sex testing and an analysis of the category “women.”

Email: laura@cablecreekpublishing.com

Fan interest in the 2024 U.S. women’s Olympic 5x5 basketball team dribbled around the selection of Caitlin Clark, the first WNBA draft pick in 2024. When Caitlin didn’t make the Olympic roster, social media dubbed it the “Clark Snub.”

The 2024 U.S. women’s team, which had won gold in the previous seven Olympics, raised fan concern over the player selection process. Some questioned the selection of Chelsea Gray over Clark, both of whom are guards. Gray, who hadn’t played for nearly a year in the WNBA due to a foot injury, attended the Olympic training camp in March but did not return to game play until June 19, 2024. Clark couldn’t attend Olympic training camp because her University of Iowa team was in the NCAA Final Four.

Concern over player selection for Team USA women’s basketball is not confined to the Paris Games. Thirty-year-old Candace Parker was snubbed in 2016, arguably because the Olympic team coach Geno Auriemma didn’t want her. In 2021, 30-year-old Nneka Ogumike reportedly was snubbed by then Olympic coach Dawn Staley’s decision regarding the status of Ogumike’s knee injury.

The “Clark Snub” controversy rested on the five-member U.S. Women’s National Team Player Selection Committee that chose the 2024 team players. Seven of the 12 players selected have Olympic 5x5 experience, two have 3x3 experience and three are first time Olympians. The committee was comprised of Staley, University of South Carolina women’s basketball coach, U.S. Olympic Tokyo games coach, and three time Olympic gold medalist (2008, 2012, 2016); Seimone Augustus, Louisiana State University assistant women’s basketball coach, who played on three U.S. Gold medal teams (2008, 2012, 2016); Delisha Milton-Jones, Old Dominion University basketball coach and two time Olympic gold medalist (2000, 2008); Jennifer Rizzotti, Connecticut Sun president, who is head coach of the 2024 U.S. 3x3 Olympic team; and Bethany Donaphin, WNBA head of league operations, who played two seasons in the WNBA. Rizzotti explained the committee’s team selection, saying: “The 12 that we selected, we felt were the best when it boiled down to a basketball decision.”

The Selection Committee “Clark Snub” was a three-pointer for Christine Brennan of USA Today. Brennan, who has reported on every summer Olympics since 1984, described the decision not to include Clark as an “airball on opportunity,” lamenting that “USA Basketball had it within its power to give women’s basketball the most significant global platform it has ever had...and it failed to do so.”

ESPN sports analyst Stephen A. Smith would agree. He called the decision “dumb period,” arguing that Clark provided the

ultimate opportunity for the WNBA to build its brand. Brand building is an Olympic sport as well with the 2024 U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) positioning Team USA as a brand at center court for the Paris games. The USOPC has a new power forward: One for All, a brand platform to improve fan engagement by bringing Team USA to “the center of cultural conversation.” Of this effort, Jess Park, USOPC Chief of Brand & Fan Engagement, asks the question, “How do we ignite that talkability of Team USA and our athletes so that we are unavoidable?” Clark fans have an answer.

Clark’s global fan appeal and visibility in the games garnered social media posts clamoring less than a week before the Paris opening ceremony, when the WNBA All-Stars beat the Olympic Team USA. Later, during Team USA’s preliminary Olympic game—a rematch of the 2021 Olympic games between 2021 Gold U.S. and Silver Japan—a Japanese fan held up a poster “You need Caitlin Clark to beat us.” Fans trolled his image, and the baiting went around the world. Headlines described it as brutal and a disaster. At the next preliminary game, German fans wearing Clark #22 shirts spotted in the stands said they had been “following her since high school.” And the image of young girls cheering Team USA hit social media with the combination of their Clark jerseys and a sign that read “Make us dream.”

Interviewed at the start of the Olympic games, Selection Committee member Staley summed it up: “If we had it to do over all again... she would be in really high consideration of making the team because she is playing head and shoulders above a lot of people.”

For her part, Clark has demonstrated her ability to score deep threes on and off the court, showcasing her worth as a team player with a winning attitude. Clark commended the 2024 U.S. Olympic team, adding “I was a kid that grew up watching the Olympics. It’ll be fun to watch them.”

Without Clark, Team USA added to its gold medal count, defeating France by a single point. But it lost an opportunity to turn around lackluster fan performance on the world stage—according to a recent Gallup study of summer Olympic sport viewing choices, women’s basketball was at the bottom of respondents’ first choices with only 2%. Brennan summed it up, saying, “USA Basketball left the woman who would have changed all of this at home.”

Propagating ideological discourse through sports and media framing in Iran

In nations where policy and diplomacy are explicitly aligned with a specific ideology, such as Iran with its adherence to Islamic principles, the potential for politicization extends to all facets of society, including sports and media. This report examines how Iranian state-run media functions as a tool to disseminate the regime's political agenda, particularly within the context of sports mega events (e.g., Olympic Games). Textual analysis of media content suggests that the Iranian state utilizes media as a platform for propagating its political viewpoints, employing framing techniques to portray the United States as a non-hegemonic power and Israel as an apartheid state—which they characterize as the system of institutionalized discrimination in Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. These media portrayals are facilitated by the centralized nature of the Iranian media system, where all outlets are state-owned, allowing for direct governmental control over messaging. Through a comprehensive review of Iranian television and radio programming, specific media strategies employed to convey the regime's political agenda are identified and discussed.

Politicization of Sporting Achievements. Iranian broadcasters have framed the United States' medal success in the Olympics as a product of political influence, rather than purely athletic merit. This claim was supported by anecdotal evidence, such as Sport Network (the specialized broadcaster for sport events) highlighting the presence of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at the Taekwondo competition at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, implying that his involvement unfairly favored US athletes over Iranian competitors.

Constructing an East-West Dichotomy. Iranian media aimed to emphasize an 'East vs. West' narrative throughout the Games. With the US initially trailing in the gold medal count of the 2024 Olympics with Australia, China, and Japan taking the early lead, Iranian broadcasters, such as Sport Network and Third Television (IRIB TV3), characterized the initial dominance as a 'monopoly by the East bloc.' This framing was strategically employed despite the predictable rise of the United States to the top of the medal table, likely to bolster the perception of Eastern nations and simultaneously undermine the perceived sporting dominance of Western countries, particularly the US.

Sweeping Censorship. The Iranian media system exhibits a long-standing history of censorship, deeply intertwined with the government's ideological control. This control is evident in the regime's monopoly over mass communication outlets, particularly television. A consistent time lag between live events and their broadcast on Iranian television provides a mechanism for censorship, allowing authorities to selectively edit or remove content deemed objectionable. This

is illustrated by the 2024 Paris Olympics opening ceremony on Sport Network and Third Television, where viewers were presented with pre-recorded, censored footage of the Parade of Nations when it reached the IOC Refugee Olympic Team; 14 of the 37 athletes were Iranian refugees who fled the nation. This censorship operates in tandem with framing techniques, which, in turn, reinforce the regime's narrative. Another prominent example is the censorship of female athlete participation in certain sports like swimming and gymnastics. The regime's strict interpretation of Islamic ideology (mandating the use of a hijab during sporting events) motivates this censorship, as the representation of uncovered female athletes could potentially challenge political authority and inspire dissent among Iranian women. Therefore, censorship within Iranian media serves not only to suppress information but also to actively shape public perception and maintain ideological control.

Competitive Framing. The Iranian media system employed a competitive framing strategy during the 2024 Paris Olympics, aimed at amplifying the regime's antagonistic stance towards Israel. This strategy, rooted in the regime's long-standing policy of opposition to Israel, manifested in calls for a boycott of Israeli athletes participating in the Games. To reinforce this narrative, Iranian media—encompassing television (e.g., Sport Network and Third Television), radio (e.g., Sport Radio), newspapers (e.g., Kayhan Newspaper), and news agencies (e.g., Fars News Agency)—constructed a competitive framing strategy. They referenced the IOC's decision to ban Russian athletes from the Games due to the ongoing conflict with Ukraine, creating a parallel between Russia's exclusion and their demand for Israel's removal. Despite Russian athletes ultimately participating under the banner of AIN (translated as *Individual Neutral Athletes*), Iranian media deliberately omitted this detail, focusing instead on the perceived double standard applied to Israel. By highlighting this perceived disparity, Iranian media sought to propagate the assertion that the IOC is complicit in Israel's actions in Palestine, further solidifying the regime's anti-Israel narrative within the international sporting arena. This approach is a clear example of Iranian media's role as a state-owned propaganda tool, omitting important information to advance the regime's political agenda.



Dr. Mahdi Latififard

PhD in Sports Management from Tarbiat Modares University, Iran. He conducts research on communication in the sports realm. He has been working as the guest editor of special issues in the journal of Communication & Sport and the International Journal of Sport Communication.

Email: Mahdilatififard@gmail.com
Twitter: @Mahdii_fard



Dr. Sean R. Sadri

Assistant Professor of Sports Media in the Department of Journalism and Creative Media at the University of Alabama. He teaches and conducts research on sports journalism in the modern media ecosystem. He has published manuscripts in Communication & Sport, Journalism Studies, and Journalism Practice.

Email: srsadri@ua.edu
Twitter: @seansadri

The appeal of watching the Paralympic Games: “I care about my relatives, not about the sports”



Dr. Veronika Macková
Researcher and Associate Lecturer at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. In her academic publications, she focuses mainly on Para sports. She is currently a member of the research team ReMeD, supported by the Horizon Europe grant.

Email: veronika.mackova@fsv.cuni.cz

Twitter: @Verca_Mackova



Dr. Ondřej Trunečka
Researcher and Associate Lecturer at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. He focuses his research on sports journalism. At the same time, he is editor-in-chief of one of the biggest sports websites in the Czech Republic.

Email: Ondrej.trunekca@fsv.cuni.cz

The Paris 2024 Paralympic Games were unique in several ways. Notably, for the first time, the unified Organizing Committee managed both the Paralympic and Olympic Games, making a major advancement towards greater integration of the two movements. The opening ceremonies for both events reinforced this idea by leading the participants outside the traditional stadium. The Paralympic athletes started their event in a historic atmosphere in front of the legendary and iconic monuments such as the Avenue des Champs-Élysées or Place de la Concorde. This unprecedented vision emphasizes the values of equality, as this Parisian square symbolizes.

The approach of the International Paralympic Committee aimed to increase fairness between the two events and optimize organization and logistics. The IPC actively seeks to change the perception of people with a disability through sport and the promotion of social inclusion. The Paralympic Games serve as a key tool to achieve this goal and try to disprove stereotypes and prejudices about para-athletes. In addition, it also emphasizes improving media coverage not only of the Paralympic Games, to spread awareness about para-athletes.

The visibility increases but the underestimation persists

For the first time in history, the organizers of the Paris Paralympic Games provided live broadcasts of all 22 sports. Increasing visibility helps draw more attention not only to para-athletes but also to disability issues. Additionally, para sport can be shown as a full-fledged professional sport. However, the perception of athletes with a disability is also changing due to media attention, para sport is still considered in many countries only as a therapeutic element.

“Some people think that Para sport is just for fun; no competition, no rivalry, and everybody who participates automatically wins the medal. Despite the smaller number of athletes with a disability, winning remains challenging. Many people are unaware of the rigorous training and immense effort required to achieve success in para sport. Many people do not know how the training is hard or how much power is needed to win a race,” described one Paralympic winner we spoke to. Many Paralympians still do not feel equal to Olympians. “The journalists underestimated it. The para sport or the women’s sport is the same sport; there is only one sport with the same emotions,” added another athlete we spoke to, who won Paralympic gold medals.

Coming to Paris means supporting the family and friends

It is not just the perception of para-athletes by TV viewers, or the feelings of Paralympians compared to Olympians that is different. Major sporting

events attract a global audience, and thus sports tourism occurs. The motivations driving these sports tourists often vary. Many Olympic fans travel to satisfy their passion for the sport, to feel like a part of a team, or to explore new destinations. Others enjoy engaging with like-minded individuals and experiencing the atmosphere of a prestigious event of global importance. But the motivation of fans of the Paralympic Games is often different.

This is usually the desire to share emotions with someone from family or friends. They don’t go to support personally unknown athletes or just watch the sport. “I came to the Paralympic Games because my relative plays boccia, and that’s why I came to Paris. It’s great that he found something he enjoys,” revealed a fan from Great Britain we spoke to. “I’m here in Paris to watch my family relatives, but otherwise I don’t follow para sports,” added a fan from Portugal.

The support of family members is very important for athletes, which is why there were many of them in the stands. “I’m nervous when I watch my husband, but we came to cheer him on with his whole family and mine,” described the wife of a para-athlete from the Czech Republic during the competition at Chateauroux Shooting Center.

The passion of the host city for para sport

Although foreign visitors were not among those classic fans who support athletes they do not know personally or follow their favorite sport, the locals and foreigners living in Paris came to watch the Paralympic Games as sports competition. “I’m from Mexico, but I’ve been living here in Paris for a while, so I wanted to watch the games and support our athletes,” revealed a woman from Mexico at the para-archery.

More than two million tickets were already sold out before the games even started, 92% of these tickets were bought by people living in France. “We live in Paris, but we come from China, so we went out to support our athletes,” commented the young couple on their participation in the sports fields.

The Paris Paralympic Games can be a model for the following ones. Indeed, the Joint Organizing Committee enabled greater cooperation and coordination, which led to more efficient management and a positive impact on the perception of Paralympic sports.

Additionally, this model reinforces the idea that sporting events should be accessible to all and speak to and celebrate the achievements of all athletes.

Brazilian soccer legend Marta massively attacked by hate speech at the Paris Olympics

With tears in her eyes and the silver medal hanging around her neck, Marta said goodbye to Brazil's national soccer team at the Paris Olympic Games. The Queen was applauded by all the players from the three teams that made up the podium (USA, Brazil and Germany) and by the fans who filled the Stade de France in the final on August 10th. But, in Brazil, she became a target of hate speech, mainly on social media.

Marta was sent off in the last match of the group stage for hitting a shot at the head of Spain's defender Olga Carmona. She had to serve a two-game suspension. Without their main player, the Brazilian team managed to play well and beat France, in the quarterfinals, and Spain, in the semifinals, to reach the gold medal match against the USA. Nevertheless, the red card was never forgiven and was the spark for numerous attacks against her.

These messages range from criticism supposedly aimed at Marta's technical performance, despite her having done well in previous games, to those that mock or minimize her achievements in her successful career or, ultimately, underestimate women's soccer. This perception, based on an initial approach to social media data, allows us important reflections on what, in fact, these attacks against a prominent figure in Brazilian sport means.

The main one is that the target was not specifically Marta, but women's soccer as a whole. Several studies, within the scope of Communication and Law, indicate that hate speech is directed at minority groups or specific people who represent these groups. This is what we observe here: there is no one who better symbolizes women's soccer in Brazil and, probably, in the world.

The Brazilian superstar is the record holder, among women, in the number of awards for the best soccer player in the world. She has won six Ballon d'Or so far, five of them consecutively, something that no one has achieved. "Marta was, without a doubt, the player I most admired when I was a child. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for her, I think she changed the game and continues to do so," said forward Sophia Smith, from the USA, before the final match in Paris.

If Marta is so recognized nationally and internationally, why did she become the victim of so much criticism precisely when she was saying goodbye to the Brazilian team? Why did such a small slip in the middle of a glorious career open the door to attacks on social media?

Early perceptions indicate that this is not just an individualized attack. More than that, it seems like a political-ideological struggle, which has reached several levels of debate in Brazil in recent years. As in many parts of the world, the South American country is experiencing a conservative wave, which resulted, for example, in the election

of Jair Bolsonaro (representative of the extreme right) for president in 2018. But, more than an electoral choice, it is a representation of values and beliefs of a significant part of Brazilians.

Therefore, criticizing a player may not just mean showing dissatisfaction purely due to her technical performance. Often, this movement symbolizes an attack against groups she represents. Marta is a woman, from the Northeast (that is, born in a historically stigmatized and marginalized region in Brazilian society), LGBT and contextually, in Brazil, in conjunction with her social and geographic origin, a black woman.

Thinking about it in an intersectional way, articulating gender, race, class and sexuality, is the key to understanding the meanings of hate speech. After all, many of the attacks identified in comments on social media are sexist and LGBTphobic. Others disguise themselves as mere physical, technical or tactical analysis, but often indicate that the real motivation is something else.

In Brazil, as in many parts of the world, playing soccer is still a "man's thing". And, if a woman practices this sport, she is seen in a masculine way. These perceptions and representations, which constantly articulate sexual and gender identity and are widely reaffirmed in the media, have been noticed especially since the 1980s in the country, according to a study by Ana Carolina Vimieiro, Flaviane Eugênio and Olivia Pilar (2024).

Marta is the "ideal target". It is clear how this wave of criticism – which sometimes seems coordinated, a perception that can instigate next steps of research – affects the players themselves. "All the titles we have won, whether individual or collective, in women's soccer, are for those people who have always believed, from the first moment. To those others who take advantage of the moment and talk a lot of shit, we owe nothing", said the Queen, in her last interview as an Olympic athlete.

In the so-called "Gender Equality Games" – supposedly Paris would have the same number of male and female athletes, which was not confirmed in practice -, Marta suffered attacks that were intensified for being who she is and representing what she represents. But, at the end, she smiled as she celebrated the third Olympic medal of her career and helped boost Brazil's results, which left Paris with 20 medals – 12 of them (60%) won by women, including the only three gold medals of the country.



João Vitor Marques

Sports journalist and master's student at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. He researches hate speech and xenophobia in the context of soccer in Brazil.

Email: jvnmarques@gmail.com

Paris 2024: Spanish women break barriers and make Olympic history



Dr. Nahuel Ivan Faedo

Assistant Professor at the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia. His research interests include sports journalism and women in sports media. He is a member of the TRACTE (Audiovisual Translation, Communication, and Territory) research group and the SPRING research network.

Email: nahuelivan.faedo@uvic.cat

Twitter: [@faedonahuel](https://twitter.com/faedonahuel)

In Paris 1924, Rosa Torras and Lili Álvarez became the first Spanish women to participate in the Olympic Games. One hundred years later, women led the Olympic dream. For the first time in the history of Spanish sports, the delegation for Paris 2024 included more women than men—192 compared to 190.

However, it is important to note that since the inception of the Olympic Games, female athletes have faced significant challenges to secure their place in the competition. In Spain, as in other parts of the world, their participation in the Olympic Games has been progressively increasing over the years. After Paris 1924, women did not participate in the Olympics for more than 30 years. Spanish women made a comeback in Rome 1960 with 11 female participants, saw an increase in Moscow 1980, and peaked in Barcelona 1992 with 129 female athletes. That year, Miriam Blasco secured the first individual gold, and the women's hockey team won the first team gold. In London 2012, women surpassed men in medals, earning 65% of Spain's total. During the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro, 143 female athletes competed, winning 9 of the 17 medals, including four golds. Notable achievements included Ruth Beitia's individual gold and a silver for the rhythmic gymnastics team. At Tokyo 2020, 137 Spanish women participated and earned 7 medals.

During the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Spain had both triumphs and challenges in a variety of sporting disciplines, showcasing historic achievements and the emergence of new talent. The women's water polo team achieved a historic first-ever triumph, winning gold in an exciting 11-9 victory over Australia. In addition to solidifying the team's status as among the best in the world, this triumph was Spain's first-ever Olympic gold medal in women's water polo. Álvaro Martín and María Pérez won gold in the mixed race walking relay with a time of 2:50:31, surpassing Ecuador and Australia.

María Pérez also distinguished out in the 20 km walk, winning the silver medal with a timing of 1:13:36 and establishing herself as one of the top Spanish athletes. The women's 3x3 basketball team came close to winning an unforgettable gold medal, but lost to Germany in the final with a tight 17-16. Thus, the Spanish team took silver against all odds in its debut at the Olympic Games. In tennis, Cristina Bucsa and Sara Sorribes won the bronze medal in women's doubles after beating Karolína Muchová and Linda Nosková 6-2, 6-2. Also, the Spanish artistic swimming team won bronze in the team final.

However, not everything was a victory. Several Spanish athletes arrived with high expectations but failed to reach the podium. The rhythmic gymnastics team, Ana Peleteiro in athletics, Adriana Cerezo in taekwondo, María

de Valdés in open water, and Carolina Marín in badminton, who suffered a serious injury at a crucial moment, were some of the athletes who fell just short of a medal. The women's national football team, world champions with players who have won the last three Ballon d'Or (Alexia Putellas in 2021 and 2022 and Aitana Bonmatí in 2023), also disappointed by falling in the semifinals and finishing without a medal.

Despite these results, new promises emerged at these Games. Valeria Antolino, who qualified after a two-year break from trampoline competition, achieved the best result ever for a Spanish jumper at the Games. Leslie Romero, Spain's first Olympic climber, and Águeda Marqués, who reached the athletics final and beat her personal best twice, also excelled in Paris. In beach volleyball, Tania Moreno and Daniela Álvarez earned a diploma by reaching the quarterfinals for the first time. Carmen Weiler, at just 19 years old, reached two semifinals and achieved her personal best performances.

In surfing, Nadia Erostarbe advanced to the quarterfinals. Judoka Laura Martínez finished fourth as one of the debutants on the Spanish team. Angela Martínez was tenth in open water, the best result in this event since London 2012. Mavi García, at the age of 40, was sixth in the cycling road race and came close to the medal. Naia Laso was seventh in park (skate) at the age of 15. The shooter Mar Molné fought until the end for the metal signing a perfect classification despite her young age. María Xiao and Álvaro Robles won the first diploma for Spanish table tennis.

In short, the Paris 2024 Olympic Games will always be remembered by Spain. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Spanish Olympic delegation included more women than men for the first time in history. This achievement is a fundamental and hopeful change in female representation in an event as important as the Olympic Games. Although it is true that not all efforts resulted in medals won, the success lies in the progress and greater visibility of the female athletes. Each effort, competition and challenge overcome creates a legacy of perseverance and hope that will encourage future generations to dream big and achieve more.

Gang members and a German who forfeited her citizenship: Kenya's fencers for 2024 Paris

On the Olympic schedule since 1896 in Athens, fencing in the Games has involved three weapons: foil, epee, and sabre, in which the first to reach 15 points with hits on designated target areas is the winner. For the 2024 Paris Games, the venue was the Grand Palais, held before capacity crowds of 8,000 where 212 fencers (106 men and 106 women) competed.

Considered a royal sport, the Sport of Kings remains an expensive recreation—costing about USD \$2,500/year for non-competitors and \$20,000 for international competitive fencers—and it requires many years of practice. It has always been popular in France, with classical fencing dating to the 17th century of King Louis XIV and many terms based on the French language. Women have been “allowed” to fence since 1924 Paris. Requiring good mental agility along with physical skills of balance, dexterity, and power, fencing asks combatants to wear white not so that blood will be shown but because historically an ink spot was imprinted to show where touches had been delt. A classic combat sport, its participants have been known as battlers, belligerents, fighters, and scrappers, and the language of fencing’s sabreurs and belle sabreuses is fascinating.

Even more fascinating are some of the fencers’ stories. This research focuses on two, both related to Kenya, which didn’t make any medal tables but are nevertheless worth of attention:

1.) A group of gang members from Nairobi who decided to “change their ways” and channel their energies into the sport of fencing: As reported in the Christian Science Monitor, this group concluded that their lives had reached a dead end, and they decided to channel their energy into fencing. They formed a club where they had formerly been smuggling guns, formed teams, and eventually got to the point where they qualified for the Games. For those of us involved in Sport for Development (S4D), this is an encouraging story.

2.) Alexandra Ndolo, fresh from claiming Silver for Germany at the World Championships, decided to represent her father’s homeland of Kenya for 2024 Paris. As such, the left-handed 37-year-old changed her citizenship, became a founding member of the Kenyan Fencing Federation, was crowned the “African Epee,” and took advantage of touring her newly adopted country. Unfortunately, Ndolo lost 12-13 to Olena Kryvytska of Ukraine at 5:40am on July 27th at the Games. “I had prepared myself mentally in advance with my sports psychologist,” she reported on Facebook. “Or so I thought. But then I was there on my own, wearing the Kenyan colours for the first time, seeing the Kenyan flag...If, in 30 years’ time, people recognise fencing in Kenya as an established sport, then that will be enough for

me.” Her heritage will also remain in the many fencing schools she helped set up in Nairobi—and so we are sure to see other more joyful results.

En garde!



Dr. Linda K. Fuller

Professor Emerita of Communications, Worcester State University. Author of Female Olympians: A Mediated Socio-Cultural/Political-Economic Timeline; Female Olympian and Paralympian Events: Analyses, Backgrounds, and Timelines; and Female Olympian and Paralympian Athlete Activists: Breaking Records, Glass Ceilings, and Social Codes.

Email: lfuller@worcester.edu

Website: www.LKFullerSport.com

It's not all about you: American perceptions of the 2024 Olympic opening ceremony



Dr Dorothy Collins

Associate Professor of Sport Management at Lake Erie College in Painesville, Ohio. Dr. Collins' primary research interests center on sport fan identity and the extent to which individuals use sport to create communities rich in social capital.

Email: dcollins@lec.edu

The 2024 Summer Olympics held in Paris marked a return to the spectacular global mega-event that has become the expectation for the Olympics since the 1976 Montreal Games. After COVID-19 led to a delayed and scaled down 2020 Tokyo games (held in 2021) that had no spectators, the 2024 Games kicked off with an opening ceremony that was not only a spectacle celebrating French culture and camp. According to the Thomas Jolly, the architect of the opening ceremonies, the production was meant to highlight themes of inclusion and freedom that he associates with what it means to be French.

That said, the modern Olympic Games are a “made for TV” event, and American audiences see only what the media chooses to broadcast. The opening ceremony proved especially challenging in this regard because it occurred as a live procession through the city. As a result, the primetime broadcast in America was not even close to identical to the live broadcast, which aired in the afternoon, with the taped version focusing more heavily on Americans and storytelling than the live broadcast. Perhaps because of this Americanized primetime version, many people seem to forget that the Olympics, and its opening ceremony, is an international global event, that is meant to highlight the culture and values of the host nation.

Watching from their living rooms, however, Americans had widely divergent reactions to the opening ceremony. In the days after the opening ceremony, social media fueled a firestorm over what some Americans perceived as making a mockery of Christianity, based on a scene featuring drag queens, a transgender model, and a naked singer at a long table, reminiscent of Da Vinci's The Last Supper. The organizers, however, intended to display a pagan party, honoring the Gods of Olympus, and in particular Dionysus (the naked singer) the god of wine, celebration, and the father of Sequana, the goddess associated with the river Seine which runs through, and which hosted not only the boat parade of athletes but several Olympic events.

Perusing social media makes it easy to surmise which social identities are most salient for many individuals, based on what they post about. Surprisingly, it was not individuals for whom social identity based on religious affiliation was dominant that were unequivocally outraged over the display. Other social identities based on sexual orientation, gender identification, level of education, generational group, and level of sport fandom also failed to create a clear consensus about the opening ceremony. In fact, the only social identity that was a consistent predictor of how individuals reacted to the opening ceremony was a strong sense of political affiliation.

After the primetime version aired, social media made it clear that if the salience of

individuals' social identity based on their political affiliations was high, it would influence their opinions of the opening ceremony and color their perceptions of the games themselves.

Devotees of former president Donald Trump have often been described as cult-like and, as such, it is unsurprising that affiliation with Trump is a very important, if not the most salient, social identity for many of these individuals. Social media postings from these individuals, while discussing the inappropriateness of what they saw as making a mockery of Christianity, did so regardless of whether they held a strong sense of identity connected to Christianity. Much like their rhetoric in other aspects of life, these individuals displayed outrage at the existence of anything that does not honor or depict their perception of traditional American values and norms. Similarly, individuals with a strong sense of identity based on an affiliation with left-leaning politicians and groups were quick to praise the opening ceremony for preaching a message of tolerance and inclusion. Furthermore, these individuals were likely to post content criticizing those offended by the opening ceremony as poorly educated, unwilling to accept diversity or culture that was not their own, and opponents of freedom. As such, the controversy surrounding the opening ceremony provides a mirror of the societal divides created social identity based on political affiliation.

In addition, social media postings demonstrated that individuals' views of the opening ceremony influenced their perception of the Games themselves. For example, those who displayed strong social identity connected to right-wing political affiliation, were deeply committed to the idea that left-wing conspiracies influenced the results of competition to favor racial minorities and LGBTQIA+ individuals. To the contrary, those individuals whose social media sites showed strong identification with liberal political groups and politicians applauded the increased diversity in sports such as gymnastics and the acceptance of transgender athletes in the Games.

The IOC has decried the politicization of the Olympics; however, this controversy demonstrates how Americans have politicized the Games. Those with social identities based on right wing political affiliations suggest that the Games prove that there is an imminent threat to the American way of life. Social identity based on political affiliation has a high level of salience for many Americans, who used social media and the Olympics to promote the political ideology espousing that they are victims, robbed of the social power to which they feel entitled. By choosing a global event to apply American social norms to, and condemning it based on those norms signifies that they attempt to reinforce the “American first” ideology, which is central to their social identity.

The Queen's Legacy: Brazil can play without Marta

In 2008, when the Brazilian national team won its second consecutive silver medal, Marta was on the podium to receive it. A total of 16 years passed before the team returned to play in an Olympic Games final. Again, came the silver. And once again, Marta took the podium. The year 2024, however, marks the farewell of Queen Marta, as she is commonly called, the Brazilian player with the most successful career in women's football.

Marta and Brazil's national team were synonymous for a long time, their names inseparable. This phenomenon largely derives from the power of idols to condense upon themselves the direction of our affections. But in the case of women's football, the central position Marta holds generated a doubt and a fear: what about when Marta is no longer on the football field?

The national team's participation in the 2024 Games answered that question: yes, Brazil can play and compete without Marta.

Marta founded her career in the 2000s, a period that, despite the persistence of many obstacles and prejudices, also proved to be of important and had positive transformations, especially in the international scenario of women's football. In that period, we saw the organization of relevant club competitions—such as the UEFA Women's Champions League—of which Marta was champion a few times. In 2001, FIFA created the Best Women's Player award, of which Marta would become a six-time winner. It is in this context that Marta's football finds conditions to mature her unquestionable talent, to make it globally seen and recognized.

The athlete combined talent and a victorious career, full of titles for the clubs in which she played internationally. As an idol, the player was a fundamental piece in configuring an imaginary of success in national women's football. Marta's name and image monopolized the media coverage of the Brazil's national team, and we were proud have the one who had been elected the best in the world six times.

However, what to do with time? The time that usually passes quickly in athletic life and that already heralded Marta's retirement. How would it be possible to conceive of a national team without Marta?

The silver medal, an award that few of us honestly expected, did not come from losing to the United States, but from the incredible victories against the powerful France and Spain. In both victories—the two best performances of the Brazilian team in 2024, I believe—Marta was not on the field. Obviously, her absence was felt by many of us used to looking for her, believing that her mere presence could change the course of a match in our favor.

However, when we did not direct our focus to Marta, we observed more closely the performances of Ludmila, Gabi Portilho and the excellent

goalkeeper Lorena. Sports coverage has managed to broaden its lens and notice the potential of a generation that has been emerging amidst important actions to make Brazilian football a more receptive environment to the presence of women.

At the organizational level, former player Aline Peregrino stands out. She became director at the São Paulo Football Federation, managing to reinvigorate the championships and teams during her administration. Since 2020, Aline has been the Coordinator of Women's Competitions at the Brazilian Football Confederation.

We can highlight the performance of fans who through social media and in the stands demand respect and security against harassment. The same type of gesture can be noticed in sports newsrooms in actions such as the manifesto video "[Deixa Ela Trabalhar](#) [Let Her Work]." It is noteworthy the emergence of communication channels focused exclusively on news about women's football, as the Brazilian portal Dibradoras created in 2015.

It is no exaggeration to say that a kind of "football feminism"—or even sports feminism—has arisen in Brazil in the last 10 years, which means that football has been an important arena for debates, visibility and promotion of actions linked to struggles for gender equality, not restricted to sport, but which resonate in society as a whole.

In this process, Marta played an important role in linking her powerful image to progressive agendas, including the announcement of her engagement to Toni Deion Pressley.

Women's football can and needs to create heroines, as well as evoke the memory of the women at the forefront of women's football in Brazil who helped pave the way for players like Marta to play and have their abilities recognized.

After all, how many Martas were left by the wayside? How many absolutely talented women have not even managed to continue playing football? I imagine many. Hence the importance of associations committing to women's football, investing in the basic categories and forming competitive teams to act in strengthened and organized national championships.

Marta was a giant. Her name has been immortalized. To her we are immensely grateful for all these years of commitment to the Brazilian team. Let's celebrate Marta, but with the hope that women's football should be a cultivation field for new generations of players, many of whom will play in the expected Women's World Cup 2027, to be hosted by Brazil.



Dr Leda Maria da Costa

Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Communication at the Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ), Brazil. She is a researcher at the Laboratory of Media and Sports Studies.

Email: ledamonte@hotmail.com

Site: www.leme.uerj.br

From gold medal to cyberbullying: Imane Khelif's Olympic experience highlights persistent issues of online abuse



Dr Tammy Rae Matthews

Assistant Professor of Digital Journalism and Sports Journalism in the Jandoli School of Communication at St. Bonaventure University, USA. Her research interests focus on power structures in international and domestic constructions of sport, media and gender. She studies oral histories of international and LGBTQI+ athletes as well as historical and contemporary representations of transgender and queer athletes in media.

Email: trmatthews@sbu.edu

Cyberbullying ran rampant during the 2024 Paris Olympics. Many athletes faced appalling abuse online. Athletes, from gymnasts to break dancers, became subjects of merciless social media posts.

In February 2024, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) published a statement saying it has prioritized addressing online abuse, which undermines the mental and emotional well-being of athletes as well as poses risks to safety and careers. During Olympic Esports Week, the IOC tested a measure to use AI to identify and address online abuse proactively. Athletes with public-facing social media channels participating in the 2024 Paris Olympics were automatically enrolled in the measure, although they could opt out if desired.

Nonetheless, abuse ensued. On Aug. 1, 2024, Imane Khelif, a cisgender woman Algerian boxer, competed against Italian boxer Angela Carini. The bout concluded in 46 seconds after Carini forfeited. Subsequently, Khelif's participation in the Games became a focal point on social media. That day, "biologically male" in quotation marks repeatedly headlined stories without concrete evidence or facts substantiating the flagrant claim.

Watching the consistent outcries, uneducated comments and insensate disparaging judgment calls about Khelif flood the internet felt painfully and horrifyingly overwhelming.

During an Aug. 3 briefing, the IOC unequivocally articulated its position, stating that it would not tolerate any form of slander against its athletes. "Let's be very clear here: We are talking about women's boxing," reportedly said the president of the committee, Thomas Bach. "We have two boxers who are born as a woman, who have been raised a woman, who have a passport as a woman, and who have competed for many years as women. And this is the clear definition of a woman."

Khelif is a cisgender woman. Subsequently, media should follow the paramount and ethical tenets of self-determination. IBA claims that it conducted tests revealing that Khelif has XY chromosomes, but the organization has not shown proof. Previously, on June 23, 2023, Aljazeera reported that the IOC had formally expelled the IBA from its membership, citing the organization's inability to implement necessary reforms related to corruption, governance, financial management and ethical standards. Khelif does not identify as a transgender or intersex person, and the IOC does not recognize any previous testing done by the International Boxing Association (IBA) as accurate or reliable. An increase in gender self-determination creates spaces for gendered embodiments and expressions, as Stanley wrote, in all contexts, including the cultures established by sport.

Transgender and intersex individuals should have equal opportunities to participate in sports without discrimination. The 2024 LGBTQ Paris Olympic and Paralympic Guide asserts that gender discrimination faced by transgender athletes inevitably affects cisgender athletes, especially women and girls of color, and people with intersex conditions. A person could be one of three sexes: intersex, female or male. Despite the modern belief that intersex conditions are rare, intersex

people are as common as redheads or green eyes, and they are even more common than identical twins. In Khelif's case, some media organizations used the word "h*rmaphr*dite," which GLAAD clearly states that media should not use without consulting the person in question. Further, talking about someone's genitalia on the internet is horribly invasive, even if trying to prove a person is cisgender.

A necessary note: Algeria criminalizes LGBTQ+ identities and imposes severe restrictions on gender-affirming care and the modification of gender identity on official documents. Therefore, making these accusations could put Khelif's safety in jeopardy. As it happened, in the wake of these allegations, Algerian crowds responded with fervent support for Khelif.

On Aug. 9, 2024, Khelif secured the gold medal with a decisive victory in the women's welterweight boxing division. Khelif's performance was particularly notable for its tactical precision and resilience under pressure. This achievement elevated her status as a national hero in Algeria and garnered significant international attention for women's boxing.

While watching social media flood with unresearched stories and uneducated comments about Khelif's identity, I thought about libel and defamation. Libel is publishing written injurious statements that negatively impact a reputation. Defamation is communicating false statements, whether spoken (slander) or written (libel), that could harm an individual's reputation. As it happens, Khelif took legal action after she won her medal.

A statement sent to *Variety* reported that, on Aug. 13, The National Center for the Fight Against Online Hatred "contacted the OCLCH (Central Office for the Fight Against Crimes Against Humanity and Hate Crimes) to conduct an investigation into the counts of cyber harassment due to gender, public insult because of gender, public incitement to discrimination and public insult because of origin."

Nabil Boudi, Khelif's Paris-based attorney, said the lawsuit is against the French legal designation of X, indicating unidentified persons and allowing the prosecution to investigate anyone sharing defamatory messages under legal names or aliases. The cyberbullying complaint about gender-based harassment did name J.K. Rowling and Elon Musk. Boudi characterized the boxer's experience as the subject of a "misogynistic, racist, and sexist campaign."

Not only does cyberbullying threaten athletes' mental and physical health, but now cyberbullying has legal ramifications. Many people posted apologies or retractions based on their initial reactions to the stories about Khelif.

Before engaging in conversations about controversial sports topics, please avoid relying on flagrant news and memes. Please remember media literacy. Research. Please talk to people who have been in the situation rather than listen to people who are mindlessly disparaging and have little knowledge about the topics. Please don't haphazardly comment if you don't know the whole story.

The influencers' games: communication strategies of the Brazilian Olympic Committee for Paris 2024

At the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, the presence of digital influencers promised to bring a new dynamic to the coverage of the mega-event. Recognized as significant social actors in contemporary society, these Internet personalities have the power to shape perceptions and engage the audience in various ways. In this article, we explore the possible impact of influencers on the sports scene and the originality of their presence in Paris.

In recent years, there has been exponential growth in the digital influencer market. According to the Influencer Marketing Hub, the global influencer marketing industry is expected to reach approximately US\$24 billion in 2024. In Brazil, three out of four Internet users follow influencers on their digital social media, according to a survey by Opinion Box and Influency.me. This percentage rises to 80% among women and 86% among young people aged 16 to 29.

Issaaf Karhawi, one of the leading Brazilian experts on the subject, emphasizes that “it is not possible to talk about digital influencers, in the ways we perceive them today, at any other time than our own”. Communication theory has been discussing for decades the conditions of possibility for this phenomenon: the spectacularization and exposure of our images in the public sphere, the liberation of the information transmission pole, the centrality of digital devices in social interactions, and the individual's protagonism in digital culture (anyone is potentially an opinion maker). The inclusion of influencers in the coverage of the Paris Olympics represents the consolidation of this scenario, requiring attention from media and sports researchers.

For this year's Games, the Brazilian Olympic Committee (BOC) developed a media plan aimed at expanding the event's reach through collaboration with influencers. One such initiative was the partnership with the agency Play9 and YouTube in the *Paris é Brasa* project, which sent numerous influencers, including athletes, journalists, and artists, to the French capital to “provide Olympic coverage from a different perspective”. But what is truly “different” about this content? Influencers like the journalist Caio Braz, who is producing a series of videos about the Games from Paris, use their platforms to create a sense of community and involvement among their followers. The direct and personal connection is a distinguishing feature of influencers' coverage, capable of engaging young people with Olympic sports.

The differences in approach become even more evident when comparing how influencers and journalists treat people, themes, and events. While traditional journalists have an editorial agenda based on public utility and interest, influencers tend to create a personalized agenda, more focused on direct interactions with their followers. This dichotomy was evident, for instance, in the controversy involving Nathaly Dias, the “Blogueira de Baixa Renda”, during a broadcast on Cazé TV. Nathaly

mentioned an alleged fight between volleyball players Gabi and Sheilla, which led to an on-air “scolding” from Adenizia da Silva, who emphasized that the program was “family-oriented” and not a space for “gossip”. After the broadcast, Nathaly posted a video apologizing, saying that her goal was to be “light”, following the show's proposal. This case suggests that there seem to be clear distinctions between the expectations of a more professional and informed analysis and the one delivered by influencers in the role of sports commentators, as well as the ensuing criticisms and controversies.

Another important point is that many athletes become influencers themselves, as digital presence is becoming essential in managing their careers and engaging with their target audiences. Douglas Souza, a volleyball player who gained prominence on social media during the Tokyo 2021 Olympic Games by showcasing his daily life in the Olympic Village, exemplifies this new dynamic of connecting with fans. At the beginning of the Olympic competitions, Douglas had just over 300,000 followers, reaching two million in less than a week. This growth resulted in significant commercial partnerships, including contracts with brands such as Adidas, Gillette, Heineken, and PlayStation. Understanding the impact of the number of followers on athletes' visibility, Cazé TV's sports broadcasts have been notable for encouraging viewers to follow Brazilian athletes on Instagram.

This type of interaction demonstrates how athletes, by becoming influencers, can build their public images, attract visibility to the sports they practice, and secure sponsorships. In Paris, many Brazilian athletes arrived at the Games with millions of followers on their social media, sharing their training routines, behind-the-scenes of competitions, and daily happenings, among other content specific to their audiences. Aware of the benefits of this visibility but concerned about its risks, the BOC held a seminar in June of this year for the national delegation members, focusing on best practices in the digital environment. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) also created a manual with clear rules regarding permissions and prohibitions for athletes' posts during the Games.

The inclusion of digital influencers in the coverage of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games reflects a growing trend in marketing and communication, offering new possibilities for audience engagement, especially Generation Z. This innovative strategy cannot only expand the reach of the Games but also position influencers as important mediators in the sports field. However, the real impact of this participation is still uncertain and requires further study. For now, we can only speculate on the potential and threats of this partnership between media, sports, and influencers.



Dr Fausto Amaro

Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Communication at the Rio de Janeiro State University, Brazil. He is a researcher at the Laboratory of Media and Sports Studies.

Email: faustoamaro@outlook.com
Site: www.leme.uerj.br



Isadora Ortiz

Journalist and Master's student at the Rio de Janeiro State University, Brazil. She researches media culture, imaginary, and fan studies.

Email: isadoraortiz.98@gmail.com

IOC's positive social media shift: Paris 2024 online reactions



Dr. Roxane Coche

Associate Professor and Department Chair in the University of Florida, College of Journalism and Communications. She covered three Olympic games as a journalist, publishes on sports communication and sports sociology, and teaches sports media.

Email: rcoche@ufl.edu
Twitter: [@roxanecoche](https://twitter.com/roxanecoche)
Instagram: [@cjc.drc](https://www.instagram.com/cjc.drc)
Website: <http://linkedin.com/in/roxanecoche>



Dr. Nathan Carpenter

Director of the Atlas Social Media Listening Lab in the University of Florida, College of Journalism and Communications. He analyzes social media for academia and industry and is co-author of the textbook Social Media Research Methods (2023, Cognella Academic Publishing).

Email: nathancarpenter@ufl.edu
Bluesky: [@n8carp.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@n8carp)
Instagram: [@ufatlaslab](https://www.instagram.com/ufatlaslab)
Website: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/nathan-carpenter-phd-654140a/>

With emoticons and capital letters to show his excitement, soccer superstar Antoine Griezmann reported every French Olympic medal on X (formerly Twitter). This prompted French fans to joke about the 2018 World Champion being the community manager the Paris Olympics didn't know they needed. Even President Macron alluded to Griezmann's much appreciated initiative. When a rumor suggested the French President had asked his team to create an application to allow him to follow all French Olympic athletes' results in real time, he took to X with a touch of humor: "The app is called @AntoGriezmann," he wrote—in French.

Social media have been a major tool for real-time interaction and engagement for almost two decades, but the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has had strict rules about social media use from Olympic actors (athletes, broadcasters, volunteers, etc.) in order to safeguard the Olympic movement's intellectual property. These restrictions likely played a role in NBC's unimaginative use of social media during the Rio Olympics in 2016, as the network used Twitter fairly traditionally, according to Sipocz and Coche—almost exclusively for one-way communications to generate excitement for its broadcast programs rather than attempting to engage in dialogue.

In January 2024, though, the IOC introduced a significant overhaul of its social and digital media guidelines shifting to a more nuanced approach that balances commercial interests with the desire for authentic athlete engagement. Paris 2024 showed the IOC's decision to relinquish some control paid off as social media use from Olympic actors and publics remained largely positive all while offering a less sanitized, more authentic portrayal of the Games.

Indeed, the Atlas Lab at the University of Florida College of Journalism and Communications tracked more than 140 keywords and terms related to the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, using the Quid social media listening platform. This search found more than 93.7 million posts across 48 languages created between July 26th, the day of the opening ceremony, and August 12th, the day after the closing ceremony.

The majority of these posts were on X (88.4 million). The other 5 million were YouTube posts or comments (1.4 million), public Instagram posts or comments (1.2 million), Reddit posts or comments (536,000), public Facebook page posts or comments (226,000) or from other sources including news stories, blog posts, and other online content. In total, these almost 100 million online posts had the collective capacity to generate 8.2 trillion potential impressions.

Those millions of reactions and impressions generated 5% more positive posts than negative posts, and only two moments accounted for the great majority of negative sentiment.

First, the opening ceremony on July 26th created controversy because of what some believed to be a representation of the last supper (a famous meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his crucifixion) with drag queens, which offended many Christians. International calls for boycotts lasted for days after the opening ceremony, though the Paris 2024 organizers explained the scene was actually inspired by a painting of the Greek gods of Olympus at the Musée Magnin in Dijon (a French city about 200 miles from Paris).

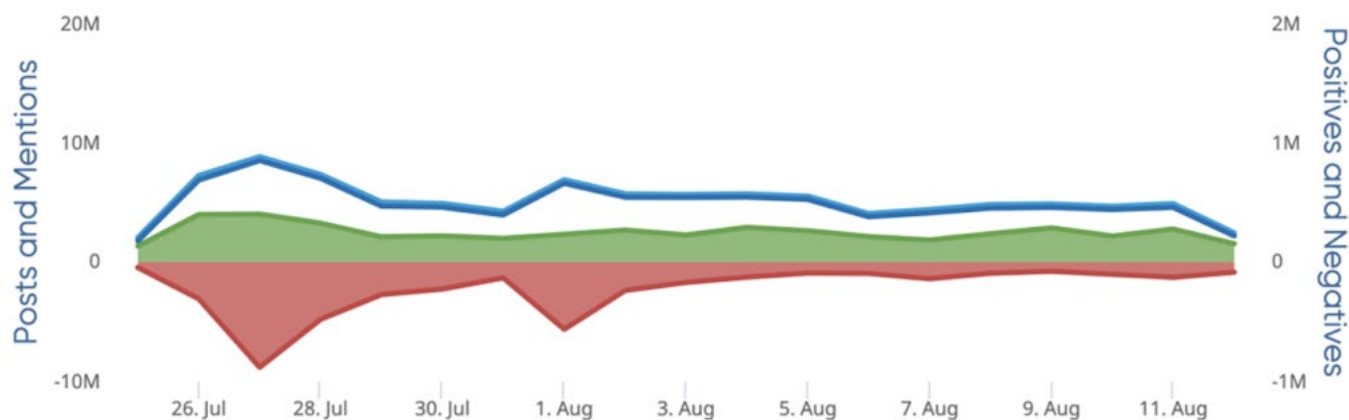
Second, another controversy started on August 1st about the gender identity of Algerian boxer Imane Khelif following her first-round opponent's decision to abandon after 46 seconds because of Khelif's powerful punches. The opponent, Angela Carini from Italy, subsequently insisted her decision and actions were not politically motivated, but people still took to social media to comment on the participation of trans athletes in women's sports—even though Khelif is not trans. French prosecutors have opened an investigation to address the online harassment Khelif faced.

Because of those two controversies, many posts with a negative sentiment included words like "Christianity," "disgrace," "satanic," "disgusting," "opponent," or the two boxers' names.

Meanwhile, posts with positive sentiment often focused on athletic performance, medals and the pride people felt for their country or athletes. The aesthetics of the Olympics and the presence of other stars, like singer Celine Dion, who closed the Opening Ceremony, and rapper Snoop Dogg, who was in Paris to promote the next Summer Games in his native Los Angeles, also generated positive sentiment.

There is no doubt that this overall positive Olympic sentiment is also in part thanks to athletes' own posts and thus the revised IOC guidelines. Athletes embraced the opportunity to share their experiences with honesty, such as American gymnast Simone Biles' "get ready with meeee for all around finals" video on Tik Tok, and/or humor, like Norwegian swimmer Henrik Christiansen's dozen or so videos about chocolate muffins from the Olympic village's cafeteria. Several athletes used irony and meme culture to offer candid reflections on their performances, giving fans a chance to interact in a more personal and engaging way, which was met with enthusiasm.

Hence, the IOC has struck a better balance between athlete autonomy and commercial protection. Its next frontier is artificial intelligence, as the current guidelines ban AI-generated content in an effort to maintain the authenticity of the content shared during the Games.



Success or failure? Mediated national expectations and reactions on Olympic performance in Hungary



Dr Dunja Antunovic

Assistant Professor of Sport Sociology at the School of Kinesiology at the University of Minnesota, USA. Her research focuses on the mediated visibility of women's sports and on cross-national comparisons of Olympic and Paralympic Games coverage.

Email: dunjaant@umn.edu



Dr Tamás Dóczi

Associate professor at the Hungarian University of Sports Science, Budapest, Hungary. His research includes sport and globalization, the relationship of sport and identity, the role of sport in public diplomacy, and the media representation of athletes.

Email: doczi.tamas@tf.hu

LinkedIn: [Tamas Doczi](#)

On August 1st, well into the Games, Hungary still did not have a gold medal, leaving some to ask the question whether Hungarians should really be looking forward to medals, or just be happy with a place in the finals. Behind the question lies the contradiction that, while the difficulty of these feats is recognized, expectations towards Hungarian athletes remain high. Indeed, media narratives around sports associated with national success rearticulated the “small country, great accomplishments” imagination and placing tension between state sporting expectations and individual athletes’ agency.

In Hungary, sport is an institutionalized tool in nation-building and public diplomacy, and media organizations serve as an essential avenue. The government has a strong hand in the media landscape, and sport is no exception. Public service media have taken on the role to construct sport history, through introducing to a sport-focused channel, M4Sport in 2015, and a sport radio channel in 2024.

During the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the social media platform M4Sport followed the routine coverage of events, driven by the performance times of Hungarian athletes. Swimmer Katinka Hosszú, who won three gold and one silver medals in Rio did not win a medal in Tokyo. The perceived failure in relation to national expectations generated dramatic coverage of a swimmer, whose life, marriage, and career was already a point of politicization that presented a tension around state-paternalism vis-a-vis capitalist models of sport.

In preparation for the 2024 Paris Olympics, the Hungarian media once again set high expectations for athletes. The Hungarian delegation sent 178 athletes, the 15th largest delegation overall. The Games concluded with 19 medals, ranking the country in 14th place on the medal table. The overall medal count aligned with the expectations voiced by the Hungarian Olympic Committee and the State Secretary for Sport, but did not meet the predictions of the state-owned daily sports newspaper *Nemzeti Sport*: 25 medals.

While the medal count is still to be considered “business as usual,” the cases of some of the medal-winning athletes are worthy of consideration in the context of national identity, politics, and sports media. A recent study revealed that many Hungarian athletes perceived that journalists were superficial in their interviews and spread inaccuracies in articles.

Long before the Paris Games, conversations about medal expectations for swimmer Kristof Milák were discussed. However, the Swimming Federation and the Hungarian media had limited information about Milák’s preparation, and the president of the Federation claimed that Milák owes the country and should take training seriously. Milák refused to give any interviews

before the Olympic competition, where he eventually finished 2nd in the 200m and then won gold in 100m butterfly. His silence continued after the competition, which triggered various negative and speculative reflections by sport journalists. Milák and the Hungarian media, while likely an extreme case, reflects a pattern of distrust between Olympic athletes and journalists who cover them.

Another worthy example pertains to Viviana Márton, 2024 Olympic gold medal winner in taekwondo, a sport without previous success and an athlete who had been mostly unknown. While the national federation did mention her as a potential medal winner, her eventual success came out of nowhere for the public. Viviana Márton was born to Hungarian parents living in the Canary Islands. Celebrating her win with her Finnish coach while displaying Hungary and Canary Island national flags left viewers focusing on national identity. The feeling was further complicated by the interview she gave, clearly with an accent in Hungarian. Even so, the process of making the athlete ‘our own’ started immediately.

Both the case of Milák and that of Márton illustrate how elite athletes, if they are successful and contribute to the “small country, great accomplishments” narrative, they become public property, and as such are treated by the media with care and scrutiny at once. Milák, having this status for longer, found himself struggling with the entire national sport system when he was hesitant to hunt further medals, yet, after his repeated glory, he was selected to be a flag bearer at the closing ceremony. On the other hand, Márton, coming from outside, offers limited legitimation for the sport leaders and the system in general, but the construction of the narrative of her Hungarianness began with full force following her success.

While these narratives around sporting performances reveal specifics to the Hungarian context, at the center of these narratives lie tensions between the role of journalists, the voices of athletes, and the responsibilities of governing bodies in setting national expectations. Considering the state support for (certain) sports, do stakeholders, such as federations, journalists, and audiences view athletes as public property? How do or how should journalists treat statements from federation officials pertaining to athlete accomplishments? These questions could also be useful for studies on hybrid sport and media systems in the wider region.

Online violence and the 2024 Paris Olympic Games

Social media has changed the ways that people can communicate, allowing increased connection and access to information. However, it has also created environments where negative behaviours are present and may even be fostered. The attributes that make online spaces appealing such as freedom of expression, perceived anonymity, reduced inhibitions, and open sharing of thoughts also contribute to the challenges in regulating and policing these environments. As a result, online environments are now recognised as spaces where violence is often an accepted and expected part of interaction and social commentary.

Online violence serves as a reflection of the broader social dynamics, where gendered, racialised, and sexualised power struggles are often played out in extreme forms. Although anyone might encounter violence online, women and girls are disproportionately the targets of online violence and oppression in the form of gender-based violence (GBV). The likelihood of being a target is even greater for high-profile or celebrity women including politicians, journalists, and athletes.

Developments in artificial intelligence have enabled companies not only to remove discriminatory content but also to prevent it from being posted and report offending users, thereby shielding users from harmful material and facilitating investigations. This technology is increasingly used in various sports contexts to protect those competing from online violence. These technologies shift the responsibility for online safety away from individuals, easing the burden of safety work required to navigate online environments.

There has been a growing concern surrounding the relationship between online violence and major sporting events. Recent reports on the frequency of online violence during the 2022 FIFA World Cup support this assertion. The frequency and volume of abusive messages that can target particular figures (such as athletes or officials) or events further enhances the severity of the impact on recipients. It is recognised that a contagion effect can occur in online spaces whereby online vitriol spreads, along with a corresponding increase in tolerance for these behaviours in online social commentary.

In light of such risk, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) enacted protocols, including artificial intelligence (AI), to police online environments during the Paris Games. The need for this was heightened due to the explosion of social media use by athletes, broadcasters, and organisers to an extent that the Paris Games were referred to as the TikTok Games.

The IOC utilised Threat Matrix, an AI surveillance tool from Signify, to police online spaces during the Games as part of a 'package of safeguarding systems'. Other delegations added additional measures to prioritise the safety of their teams online. For example, Team Germany partnered with Sport Radar and Arwen to protect German athletes online. Despite the measures that the IOC

and its partners implemented, online violence at the Paris Olympics was described as "rampant".

The case of Algerian boxer Imane Khelif, who won the Olympic gold medal in the women's 66 kg boxing competition is of note. She was the subject of considerable online GBV during the Games from a range of high-profile individuals. According to Variety, J.K. Rowling and Elon Musk were named in a criminal complaint that Khelif filed with Paris Prosecutor's Office (National Center for the Fight Against Online Hatred). Not just athletes at risk, the head of the IOC's Safe Sport Unit, Kirsty Burrows, became the target of abuse online after speaking about the IOC safe sport services at the games and subsequently coming under scrutiny based on the case of Imane Khelif. Burrows has similarly filed a complaint with the Paris Prosecutor's Office.

The involvement of celebrity figures in online violence is not a new occurrence. Such individuals, acting as celebrity online violence perpetrators, use their platforms to abuse, encourage violence online, and often spread unchecked misinformation.

Abuse can also occur in the aftermath of major events, when athletes may not be protected in the same ways. For example, American gymnast Jordan Chiles said that she was exposed to racial violence on social media, which was linked to the ongoing controversy surrounding the decision to strip her of a bronze medal.

Australian breakdancer Rachael 'Raygun' Gunn received 'devastating' abuse both during and following her participation at Paris 2024. An anonymous online petition was registered that criticised her selection for the Australian team, which according to Australian Olympic officials should be considered "bullying and harassment and is defamatory".

Our initial analysis from the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics has shown that online violence remains a pervasive global issue. It must be recognised as a serious and immediate threat to the safety of those targeted, as well as to individuals who witness violence on online platforms. Although steps have been taken to keep those involved in sport safe in online spaces, it is clear that online violence continued to cut through and thus infiltrate the Games experience. It is likely that the sheer volume of online violence and its evolving nature challenge even the most sophisticated technologies.

Manifestations of online violence contribute to a new kind of anxiety for performers that needs to be specifically addressed as a global public health crisis. Given the complex global nature of online violence — shaped by cultural norms, policies, and legal systems across different regions — it is crucial to focus on safeguarding online spaces as these online environments play an increasingly vital role in society. There is much that can be learned from what did and did not work at these Games, allowing future iterations to be safer.



Dr Emma Kavanagh

Associate Professor of Sport Psychology and Safe Sport and an HCPC-Registered Sport and Exercise Psychologist. With extensive experience in high-performance environments, she has prepared athletes and teams for major global competitions, including the Commonwealth, Olympic, and Paralympic Games.

Email: ekavanagh@bournemouth.ac.uk
Twitter: [@EmjKavanagh](https://twitter.com/EmjKavanagh)



Dr Keith D. Parry

Head of the Department of Sport and Event Management at Bournemouth University and an Adjunct Fellow of Western Sydney University. His recent research has focussed on media coverage and framing of a variety of topics such as LGBT inclusivity, women's football, concussion in association football and rugby, and racism.

Email: kparry@bournemouth.ac.uk
Twitter: [@sportinaus](https://twitter.com/sportinaus)

Bidding for a future capital: Indonesia's worlding ambitions for Nusantara 2036



Dr. Friederike Trotier

Assistant Professor in University of Passau (Germany) Critical Development Studies – Southeast Asia. She holds a PhD in Southeast Asian Studies and teaches and conducts research on urbanism, development and sport in Southeast Asia. She is the author of the monograph Nation, City, Arena: Sports Events, Nation Building and City Politics in Indonesia (2021, NIAS Press/NUS Press).

Email: Friederike.trotier@uni-passau.de

Tokyo, Paris and Los Angeles, all global cities with outstanding (sport) histories were appointed host cities for the Olympic Summer Games in 2020, 2024 and 2028 respectively. All three cities can already look back on milestone events of the Olympic Games. Overall, host cities usually fit into categories of mega, global or worlding cities. Having this in mind, the potential bid of Indonesia for the 2036 Games with its new capital Nusantara (Ibu Kota Nusantara, IKN) as host city stands out as unique. Even though at this point of time there are several candidates for 2036, the Indonesian case invites us to reflect on the interest of the largest Southeast Asian country in the Olympic Games and even more on the role of the host city of a sports mega-event. I will discuss the Indonesian hosting ambitions in the context of worlding practices, which entail speculative and future-oriented urban visions that bespeak political, economic and social ideas of a good future with the aim of being recognized in the world.

Compared to other world regions, Southeast Asia does not feature prominently in the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, sports events of different levels play an important role in the region, the Asian Games and the Southeast Asian Games in addition to the Olympic Games. Recently, Indonesia's hosting of the 2018 Asian Games put the country on the sporting map and began to revive hosting ambitions of the 1960s when the archipelago state hosted the Asian Games and GANEFO as a challenge to the Olympic Games and international politics.

In 2019, the Indonesian President Joko Widodo (known as Jokowi) officially proposed to relocate the capital from Jakarta to Kalimantan. Although there are multiple reasons for moving the capital, the project of Ibu Kota Nusantara has been highly controversial due to the politization of the project, financial risks and the dangers of corruption, environmental degradation and neglect of indigenous rights. The bid for the 2036 Games followed a first but fruitless attempt of President Jokowi to make Jakarta host of the 2032 Games. During the Paris Olympics, an Indonesian delegation stressed the country's hosting ambitions.

In the larger picture, putting forward a bid for a city-in-the-making can be described as worlding practice of speculative nature with different possible outcomes of success and failure. Successes could be based on the relative spacious freedom for (sporting) infrastructure compared to an already existing city. A city-in-process provides space – in the figurative as well as in the real sense – for urban experiment linking Olympic ideals with national and local needs and desires. In the history of the Olympic Games, the organizers have used the events to address urban development needs of the host cities in return for the extraordinary investment of resources, effort and

time. These perceived needs were embedded in the existing urban spaces limiting the efforts for improvement to the given circumstances. Fewer existing structures in a city-in-process could thus mean a wider scope to follow ideas of sustainable, environmentally friendly and people-centered sports venues and other facilities. The cooperation with the IOC and the international attention as Olympic host city could increase the pressure on the government and organizers to follow high standards and transparency regulations.

In the Indonesian case, a grand design to make Nusantara a “sustainable, green and smart forest city” claims to spearhead urban (utopian) trends of eco-friendliness, resilience, green infrastructure, smart technology, high quality of life and social justice. The terminology certainly resonates with the Olympic Agenda 2020+5 with its emphasis on sustainable development, resilience, digitalization and solidarity and could be the base for a close cooperation between Indonesia and the IOC. To counter criticism, the Indonesian organizers could meet the new IOC requirement to use a maximum of existing and temporary venues with the argument that a new capital would need sports facilities for its citizens and different sports clubs. A convincing concept of a long-term use of the different venues in IKN and the province of East Kalimantan could become a competitive edge in the bidding process. The long life of several sports venues in Jakarta – the Bung Karno Stadium in particular – which had been built for the 1962 Asian Games and were renovated for the 2018 Asian Games could serve as reference point.

In spite of these opportunities, the Indonesian case also reveals the pitfalls of an Olympic host city in-the-making. As a worlding practice, the aspiration for the Olympic Games in Nusantara is highly speculative and unstable, which is even amplified by its situatedness in an already risky experiment of building a new capital. The risk of failure is most visible in the overtly ambitious master plan to make the city green, smart, livable and just at the same time. The pressure to have venues and facilities ready for the 2036 Games would increase the chances to fall short of the many targets. This links to the double financial burden of constructing IKN and covering the expenses for the Olympics Games at the same time. Olympic Games in Nusantara would certainly contribute to the new capital's recognition in the world and would reflect urban aspirations, the highly speculative nature of IKN and the bidding, however, raises considerable doubts about Indonesia's persuasive power with the IOC.



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Politics of Sport

The optics of parity

The promise of the Paris Olympics to be the first with an equal number of men and women competing begs for interrogation beyond whether or not an equal number of men and women competed across sixteen days of competition. Paris's Olympic slate featured 329 events — 151 for women, 157 for men, and 21 mixed events in relays, or open events such as equestrian.

Beyond the numbers, every day saw a new headline about swimmers Katie Ledecky and Summer MacIntosh, gymnast Simone Biles, or the entirety of women's rugby, from American Ilona Maher's Tik Tok account to New Zealand's gold medal Haka. The scheduling of women's finals after men's in marquee events like track, soccer, and basketball felt significant. Women's basketball concluded the final day of competition with an intense face-off between the host country and the U.S. in a dramatic ending. More notably was the women's marathon medal ceremony concluding during the Closing Ceremony, an honor usually reserved for the men's race, ensuring that France's determination for an "Equality Games" remained center stage until the very end.

But parity does not necessarily mean equity. Dutch distance runner Sifan Hassan, for example, took bronze medals in both the 5,000m and 10,000m and then went on to win the marathon, something that hadn't been done in 72 years. Her final mark on her unprecedented performance was accepting her gold in hijab, a notable slap in the face to France's hijab ban for its own Muslim athletes — a mandate that asked them to obscure their identity while still professing *liberté, égalité, fraternité* for the home team.

The transvestigation of boxer (and now gold medallist) Imane Khelif, too, showed cracks in equity's armor, with everyone from author JK Rowling to American Republican VP Candidate JD Vance accusing her of being a "man" after Italy's Angela Carini stopped their bout just 46 seconds in. The IOC adamantly affirmed Khelif as a cisgender woman, but that did nothing to deter the Boston Globe from incorrectly referring to her as a "transgender boxer," demonstrating how quickly transvestigation weaponizes the look of female athletes, deeming everything from short hair to pronounced biceps as proof of competing as a man.

To be clear: no transgender female athletes competed in Paris. And Khelif, born female, raised female, has now announced plans to take legal action for the online harassment she experienced.

Rugby's Maher, too, faced online vitriol that questioned both her gender and her level of physical fitness. "I get the comments of being called a man, being called too masculine, because I have muscles," Maher told *Time*. "I know that it's from very sad, insecure people... But I know they're saying it to other girls as well. And that's what I don't like."

But promoting body positivity is difficult when the head of Olympic Broadcasting Services had to issue a missive asking camera operators to eliminate "stereotypes and sexism," or when Eurosport's Bob Ballard explained the delay after the 4x100m freestyle relay, won by Australia, with: "Well, the women just finishing up. You know what women are like — hanging around, doing their makeup."

His apology did nothing to save his job.

Equity is, without question, a work in progress. It's judoka Clarisse Agbénénou advocating for space to breastfeed during the Games. It is track legend Allyson Felix launching a nursery in the Olympic Village. It is Ledecky sharing the medals podium with teammate Paige Madden, an icon acknowledging the next generation.

Yet someone like Ledecky embodies how parity is also at odds with a central goal in sport: winning. Parity ends once the race starts, something particularly apparent not only in Ledecky's dominant 1500m swim, but also in Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone's run, Biles' vault, Quan Hongchan's dives and Hassan's runs — performances far and away better than anyone else in their respective sports.

Arguably, McLaughlin-Levrone and Ledecky foiled broadcast production teams attempts to create inclusive shots of those battling for silver. McLaughlin-Levrone's time of 50.37 over hurdles led to comparisons of how she would've done against athletes in events she didn't even enter: her gold in the hurdles was just 0.2 seconds off qualifying for the flat 400m final.

The Games are not just about winning, but rather a sentiment exemplified when Biles and teammate Jordan Chiles, silver and bronze medalists in the floor exercise, bowed to gold medalist Rebeca Andrade of Brazil on the medals podium. Setting aside the horrific controversy that surrounded Chiles' bronze in the days that followed, the image of three black women understanding the moment better than anyone tells us exactly why it matters that women are in the game.



Dr Amy Bass

Professor of Sport Studies, Chair, Division of Social Science and Communication, Manhattanville University, USA.

Email: Amy.Bass@mville.edu

Twitter: [@bassab1](https://twitter.com/bassab1)

Threads: [@bassab1](https://www.threads.net/@bassab1)

Website: www.amybass.net

How Paris 2024 exposed a nexus of governance gaps, gender eligibility chaos and universality utopia



Prof Dikaia Chatziefstathiou

Professor of Applied Olympic Studies at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. She is the Founder and Director of the Sport, Human Rights & Safeguarding Research Group. Her books include Discourses of Olympism: From the Sorbonne 1894 to London 2012.

Email: Dikaia.Chatziefstathiou@canterbury.ac.uk

Twitter: [@dikaiaic](https://twitter.com/dikaiaic)

Paris 2024 was “the most complex event ever organised in France,” admitted Tony Estanguet, President of the Paris Organising Committee, one day before the Closing Ceremony. The Games will be memorable for historical novelties such as the Opening Ceremony that took place outside the stadium for the first time in the history of the Olympics with the athletes parading on boats in river Seine, as well as the temporary sports venues situated in iconic landmarks of the ‘City of Light’, e.g., beach volleyball at the Eiffel Tower, equestrian events at the Palace of Versailles, fencing and taekwondo at the Grand Palais.

But, as I reiterated in one of my TV commentaries for France 24, each version of the Games also unpacks several controversies. One of the ‘loudest’ attached to the fabric of the Paris event was over the gender eligibility criteria for women’s boxing (and beyond) when the Italian boxer Angela Carini gave up just after 46 seconds into the match with the Algerian Imane Khelif. There were claims that Khelif and Taiwan’s Lin Yu-ting should not have qualified for Paris 2024 as they had been banned from participating in the 2023 IBA World Championship after failing sex verification tests, the validity of which has been largely questioned and disputed. The tests were conducted by the International Boxing Association (IBA), whose recognition was withdrawn by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2023 following its suspension in 2019 over its failure to implement reforms on governance and finance. Boxing at the Olympics was organized by the Paris 2024 Boxing Unit (PBU). What we saw unfolding during the Paris Games was a ‘ping pong’ of statements between the IOC and the IBA. The IBA hosted a two-hour press conference in Paris just 24 hours before Khelif’s scheduled semi-final against Janjaem Suwannapheng. The press conference was described by journalists as “extraordinary, chaotic and shambolic.”

These conflicts are related to a larger discussion concerning sex differences, gender identity, and Olympic participation. The IOC Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-Discrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity and Sex Variations (2021) was released four months after the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The IOC encouraged each sport to create its own rules based on the ten inclusion and non-discrimination principles, rather than providing clear guidelines for gender-based participation in elite sports. The European Federation of Sports Medicine Associations (EFSMA) and the International Federation of Sports Medicine (FIMS) responded by releasing a joint statement denouncing the IOC for releasing a framework that prioritizes human rights over medical and scientific considerations. FIMS and EFSMA stated, “it is essential that multisport international organisations such as the IOC take the responsibility to

set standards and expectations based on competitive fairness and the best available science that all International Federations (IFs) can follow.”

Thus, what we saw at the Paris Games was that: a) there was a governance issue between the IOC and the IBA; and b) there was a gender eligibility gap that necessitated the creation of a more robust and clear policy. These issues culminated in abuse and hate speech unfairly directed towards the athletes, especially Imane Khelif.

Another controversy was the debate over the importance of universality, as seen by the viewers’ varying responses to the Opening Ceremony. The exhibition of scenes illustrating trans dramaturgy and symbolisms caused a rift in terms of religion and culture. One thing is certain, despite the drag queens’ questionable intentions — whether they were celebrating the pagan god of indulgence or purposefully mocking the Last Supper — the Olympics have a wide range of cultural connotations and values in the modern world. As I have argued and evidenced in my book, *Discourses of Olympism*, building consensus around the Olympic ideals is one of the main challenges facing those who cherish the Games in a multicultural and multipolar world. This construction can only be accomplished by creating avenues for communication between the different parties; it should be viewed as a process rather than a final product because, as the Olympic Movement’s last century has shown, change is one of the few constants that can be relied upon. Olympism as an ‘ideal’ may in such circumstances be defined, not as a set of immutable values, but as a process for consensus construction in terms of values in the world of global sport. A broadly humanistic interpretation of shared values in sport and the Olympics is what our times require. This expression should be the result of negotiated consensus that settles on general statements of values but allows them to be interpreted in various ways depending on the socio-political context. A shared space can be achieved with good faith for harmony, diversity, but also as Kleovoulos o Lindios advised in the sixth century B.C., “all in good measure” (πᾶν μέτρον ἄριστον).

Even with all the ideological conflicts and pluralist issues that coexist in the one worldwide cultural arena that is the Olympics, humanity can still benefit greatly from its ideals. The Olympics are still one of the biggest mega-events in modern history, and they could still provide a platform for opposing worldviews and epistemologies.

Paris 2024 turned into a platform for geopolitical contention

From the outset, the 2024 Olympic Summer Games in Paris was entangled with geopolitical tensions in different parts of the world. With the neoliberal international order being challenged by emerging non-Western powers, the structure of global politics has rapidly become volatile. Paris 2024 took place at this historical juncture. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) hoped this Olympics to present a beacon of international peace. Yet, a few incidents at this Games only revealed deep divisions between the nations in conflicts.

The suspension of Russia from this Olympics triggered a controversy. The IOC penalized Russia when it invaded Ukraine a few days after the end of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. The IOC regarded this aggression as a violation of the Olympic Truce. Yet, the sport governing body allowed athletes from Russia to participate in the Summer Olympics in Paris as Individual Neutral Athletes. Nearly all international federations supported the IOC's decision while World Athletics imposed a blanket ban on Team Russia.

Both Russia and Ukraine were unsatisfied with this situation. Moscow condemned the IOC for being a pro-Western organization and submitted an appeal against the suspension to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). Kyiv requested a full exclusion of Russians arguing that there was no such thing as a neutral person. With the prospect of seeing Russian athletes in Paris, Ukraine once considered boycotting the Olympics completely.

Later, Russia lost its appeal and Ukraine sent its delegation to the French capital. Just fifteen Russians appeared in the Olympic venues but they were not allowed to attend the opening ceremony due to the war in Ukraine. The Russian neutrals only earned one silver medal. Uninvited Russia denigrated the fifteen individuals as traitors and scorned the Olympics as the "Games of Satan". On the other hand, 140 Ukraine athletes participated in Paris 2024, and they won twelve medals including two Olympic golds. The victory in the stadium may represent Ukraine's determination to defend their country.

The war between Israel and Hamas also infused politics into the Olympics. Despite the ongoing war in Gaza, the IOC invited both the Israel and Palestine delegations to Paris. Russia immediately criticized the sport governing body for having a double standard. The conflicts in the Middle East were escalating during the Olympics, especially after the assassination of the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran. Nevertheless, the IOC was reluctant to comment on the worsening tensions in the region.

The Palestine Olympic Committee (POC) asked the IOC to ban Israel from Paris 2024, arguing that the Jewish state violated the Olympic Truce. The IOC remained unmoved. The leader of the POC refused to greet Israel at the Olympics until they recognised its sovereignty. Only eight athletes took part in this competition but none

of them stood on the podium. However, for Palestine, carrying the flag at the opening and closing ceremonies is equally important. This "non-member observer state" of the United Nations, the Olympic Games indeed presented a rare opportunity for Palestine to demonstrate their existence.

In the shadow of the conflicts, Israeli athletes received death threats during the Olympics. This is a striking reminder of Munich 1972 when eleven members of the Israel delegations were murdered by terrorists linked to the Palestine Liberation Organisation. Coincidentally, the Israel delegation observed a ceremony in Paris to remember the victim of the Munich Massacre. The safety of the Jewish athletes was at risk in Paris, and France had to deploy its elite police force to protect them throughout the Olympics.

A symptom of the geopolitical rivalry between the USA and China also emerged during Paris 2024. The Olympic swimming pool turned into the stage where two parties confronted. At the Men's 4x 100m medley relay, Team China beat the American quartet. However, American media questioned the Chinese athletic prowess in the water because two of the four members tested positive before the previous Olympics in Tokyo. Later, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) concluded that the positive result was due to the consumption of contaminated meat and permitted the Chinese swimmers to enter the Olympic contest.

Nevertheless, the USA was still suspicious of the Chinese swimmers. Before the opening of the current Olympics, the US Department of Justice started a separate investigation into the case of the Chinese swimmers. The WADA, in response to such a challenge, announced that it would take the American counterpart to its Independent Compliance Review Committee. The Anti-Doping Agency also warned American media not to circulate misleading information to the public.

China blamed the USA for smearing the Chinese swimmers' hard work and its anti-doping standards. The communist state media also condemned this doping allegation raised by American media for politicising the Olympics and WADA's anti-doping regulations. This Sino-American dispute over doping was spread to athletic events because China, in retaliation, began to request a more comprehensive review of American track and field athletes. Seemingly, the Olympic Games turned into a surrogate battlefield between the two superpowers.

At the closing ceremony, the President of the IOC, Thomas Bach, praised the Olympic athletes from different countries for competing peacefully and demonstrating a culture of peace to the world. This may be true. Nonetheless, those nations involved in the current geopolitical tensions exposed their rivalries and hostilities to each other in Paris. Such contention may also prove that the Olympic Truce has become a mere cliché.



Dr Jung Woo Lee

Senior Lecturer in the University of Edinburgh, Sport and Leisure Policy and founding Research Director of the Scottish Centre for Olympic Research and Education. He teaches the Olympic movement and international relations, and his research interests lie in sport, diplomacy and global politics. He co-edited The Routledge Handbook of Sport and Politics (2017) and Sport Mega-Events in Asia (Palgrave, 2023).

Email: J.W.Lee@ed.ac.uk

The new era of the Olympic movement



Dr Yoav Dubinsky

Senior Instructor of sports business in the Lundquist College of Business at the University of Oregon. His research focuses on sports, nation branding and public diplomacy, especially in the contexts of international sports and the Olympic Movement. He covered or researched five Olympic Games from Beijing, London, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, and Paris. He is the author of the book Nation Branding and Sports Diplomacy: Country Image Games in Times of Change.

Email: yoavd@uoregon.edu

Twitter: [@YoavDubinsky](https://twitter.com/YoavDubinsky)

Following research in Japan on Tokyo 2020, I published my reflections in [Place Branding & Public Diplomacy](#), referring the postponed Olympic Games as a beginning of new era of the Olympic Movement. I classified it as a survival-oriented era, emphasizing how the International Olympic Committee (IOC) kept changing its own protocols for practicality purposes to be able to hold Olympic Games and secure the future of the Movement. A few months later, IOC President Thomas Bach used the words “new era” when marking [two years to Paris 2024](#), setting the upcoming Olympic Games in France as the starting point. Either way, the Olympic Movement is going through a fundamental change. Through Paris 2024, during [press conferences](#) and public speeches, Bach repeated and reiterated that these Olympic Games mark a beginning of a new era of the Olympic Movement. The Games ended with Bach himself announcing he will not seek to modify the Olympic Charter to run for reelection and in 2025 a new IOC president will be elected, as [“new times are calling for new leaders”](#).

Bach’s main legacy as a proactive IOC President is the creation, launching and implementation of [Olympic Agenda 2020 – 40](#) strategic recommendations about the future of the Olympic Movement from 2014. They were updated in the 2021 version – [Olympic Agenda 2020+5](#). These recommendations also enabled more flexibility in the bidding process. The 2024 Olympic bid was the first one that started after launching Agenda 2020 and ended with an unprecedented decision to award the next two Olympic Games at the same time; Paris to host the Olympic Games in 2024 and Los Angeles in 2028. Since then, the bidding process was further revised into a dialogue system and just before the start of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games the IOC awarded the French Alps and Salt Lake City the Winter Olympic Games in 2030 and 2034 respectively, assuming both hosts will meet the pre-requirements. The joint award and the dialogue system give IOC leadership and bidding cities more flexibility and control in the bidding process, yet it also receives criticism for lack of transparency. Thus, from the bidding perspective, Paris 2024 is the first product of Agenda 2020 that is changing the Olympic Movement.

From a delivery perspective, Paris 2024 is also unique in the sense of diffusion of venues beyond the host city and reducing the dependency on the Olympic Village. It was common even before Paris 2024 to have the football tournament across the country and the sailing competitions in a different port-city if the host city did not have an equitable beach. Paris 2024 went beyond that, having the basketball group stages and the handball knockout stages in Lille, the shooting competitions at Chateauroux and the surfing competition in Tahiti, the French Polynesian island in the Pacific Ocean.

These exemplify multiple opportunities for flexible and sustainable hosting that reduce the need of new permanent venues and enable more satellite cities or even more countries or regions opportunities to take part in hosting Olympic competitions beyond the main host city.

Beyond the bidding and hosting flexibilities, Paris 2024 also embodied challenges and forced changes the Olympic Movement will be facing moving forward. Climate change, heat waves in the summer, and shorter winters that reduce the number of potential hosting countries, are now immediate threats that impact every host city. The technological developments, from dependency on social media and record breaking exposure of the Olympic Games to the strategic use of artificial intelligence (AI), were manifested in Paris 2024 through using AI to detect and delete online cyberbullying. Creating the Olympic Esports Games and having the first ones in Saudi Arabia in 2025 reflects the digital and technological change, more countries playing leading roles in the Olympic Movement and trying to attract younger generations. There are social and political demographic shifts with ideological preferences and values of younger audiences, which reflects in the types of competitions held during the Olympic Games and in the question of free speech and activism. While in Tokyo 2020 the IOC created a space for athletes to kneel prior to competitions, in Paris 2024, despite a contested geopolitical climate, most social political demonstrations were left outside the field of play.

Since the implementation of Agenda 2020 in 2014 and through Paris 2024, Thomas Bach kept repeating the mantra about the Olympic Movement “change or be changed”. After turbulent Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022 that were held under COVID-19 restrictions and during a divisive geopolitical climate, Paris 2024 were the Games the Olympic Movement needed. Paris 2024 was held mostly in existing or temporary facilities, exposing the iconic venues of the city along with its global appeal and the diverse local population and culture, while also celebrating gender parity, and overall held without major geopolitical disruptions and stayed true to the branding “Games Wide Open”. Paris 2024 was not without faults, nor is it a copy-paste template. Yet, in the sense of a new era, the Games showed how Agenda 2020 can be interpreted to successfully host the Olympics. Now it is up to the IOC, next hosts, and other Olympic stakeholders to authentically capitalize on these future opportunities. Or as Bach said in his concluding press briefing of the 2024 Olympic Games: [“If L.A. would like to copy the Eiffel Tower, it would be a recipe for disaster”](#).

The sports diplomacy of Paris '24

The 2024 Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games provided a spotlight on the French capital epitomised by the daily, nee almost daily due to weather, raising of the Olympic Cauldron attached to a balloon in the *Tuileries Garden*. That weather intervened to shape the Organising Committee's intent serves to demonstrate how uncertainty can shape outcomes. Dealing with such uncertainty is a staple of diplomatic practice; and the Sport Mega Event (SME) provides a focal point for the practice of sports diplomacy. "Sport diplomacy is the explanatory overlay to the network of evolving networks within the worlds of sport and diplomacy" (Rofe, 2018). To paraphrase founding sports diplomacy scholar, Stuart Murray, it is 'a new term for an old practice' and put colloquially it provides spaces for dialogues that wouldn't have happened otherwise. The spaces, or 'sites' as diplomat-turned-scholar Iver Nueman identified, have a particular resonance at the Games. Paris '24 was no different.

The sports diplomacy of Paris '24 was prevalent across a number of areas: To identify them is to recognise the domestic and global context in which the 2024 Games took place. The longer-term context stretches back to the turn of the millennia. In the aftermath of the home team's success in France '98 Men's FIFA World Cup and hosting the Athletics World Championships (2003) Paris geared up to bid for and host the 2012 summer Games. That did not come to pass, as it would be London's honour to host the XXX Olympiad: instead, Paris waited, observed and learnt from the London, Rio and the Covid-impacted Tokyo Games, while France hosted the FIFA Women's World Cup (2019) and the Men's UEFA European Championships (2016).

The more immediate domestic context to Paris 2024 was provided by President Macron's snap election which yielded an uncertain political environment for the Games after years of political jousting with Marie Le Pen's National Front. The French populous were largely indifferent, perhaps even sceptical: tales of gridlock and hiked prices leading to an exodus were a consistent narrative in the months leading up to the Olympics Opening Ceremony on July 26th. While familiar to the pattern from other Games, the sport diplomacy resonance here is to highlight the importance of different audiences for, and stakeholders in, the Games. A bilateral distinction of domestic and global is but one classification; rudimentary in lacking the nuance to the variety and overlap of cooperating and competing identities. Instead, a snapshot of the practice and concept of sports diplomacy mapped against a couple of episodes from Paris '24 provide for a more fulsome analysis.

These four practices:

1. Sports governance, law and ethics
2. Sustainability and accessibility

3. "Diplomats in tracksuits": Sports diplomats
4. Sport has the great convening powers – at all levels;

and four concepts:

- The power to change the world.
- Sport is dynamic, dramatic and emotional – and *négociation continuelle*
- Soft power potential for 'networks of networks'
- "Fundamentally, I believe sport is the best diplomat we have" (Lord Sebastian Coe, 2019)

While both practices and concepts were evident across the Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games a longer paper would be needed to do justice to each dimension and the blended relationship between them, so to focus on one of the four practices that was clear in Paris; that of 'Diplomats in Tracksuits'. In one respect there was French President, Emmanuel Macron who played the role of Sports Diplomat in Chief. Reprising his role at the Russia 2018 Men's World Cup Final where he joined the victorious French team on a rain-soaked pitch, Macron was visible at many of the events from the Stade de France to La Défense Arena – the latter alongside French poster boy Leon Marchand as he won four gold medals in the Olympic Pool. Some might consider this a savvy political move to reinforce his position against a challenging backdrop; however more intriguingly for the practice of sports diplomacy were the activities his government's Ambassador for Sport, Samuel Ducroquet. To have the post of Ambassador for Sport in the first instance is noteworthy. Ducroquet's role was far less evident than Macron; and his schedule not always in the public domain. Nonetheless, he did play host for an International Forum on Sports Diplomacy with half a dozen nations, conducted numerous bilaterals and sought to build out the legacy that the Paris Organising Committee had conceived of. The measure of success of his endeavours, supported by the associated civil servants, is still to be fully realised but the practices bode well.

A further point to 'Diplomats in tracksuits' were not restricted to presidents or governmental officials: two leading figures evident at the Olympics Games were West Coast Rapper Snoop Dogg and Hollywood Actor, Tom Cruise. The former a consistent presence as U.S. athletes competed across a variety of sports as a function of a contract with U.S. Olympic broadcaster NBC, itself engaged in the biggest national broadcast deal with the IOC of over \$10 billion; and the latter a global celebrity of 30+ years standing. Both acted as links to the next Olympic Cycle, leading into Los Angeles 2028 as was evident in the closing ceremony of Paris '24, and speak to the dimension of *négociation continuelle* therefore.



Dr J. Simon Rofe

Co-founder of the field of Sports Diplomacy, Senior Research Fellow and Assistant Programme Director for the MA Leadership in Sports at the Institute for Sport Humanities, UK. Through his scholarship he is working with key stakeholders: most notably practitioners. Simon is the author and editor of a numerous books and articles including: Sport and Diplomacy: Games within Games. He is currently teaching Sports Diplomacy as Associate Professor in International Politics at the University of Leeds.

Email: j.s.rofe@leeds.ac.uk

Twitter: [@drjsimonrofe](https://twitter.com/drjsimonrofe)

Stepping into the void: American conservative outrage about the Paris 2024 opening ceremony



Dr Michael L. Butterworth

Director of the Center for Sports Communication & Media and Professor of Communication Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. His research explores connections between rhetoric, democracy, and sport, with particular interests in national identity, militarism, and public memory.

Email: michael.butterworth@austin.utexas.edu

Twitter: @BurntO_Butterworth



Dr Douglas Hartmann

*Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. Hartmann is author of *Midnight Basketball: Race, Sports, and Neoliberal Social Policy* (Chicago 2016); his current project is *“Ballers and Backlash: Ten Years of Protest, Populism, and Polarization in American Sports.”**

Email: hartm021@umn.edu

Twitter: @hartm021

The opening ceremony for the 2024 Summer Olympics was a true spectacle. Set along the River Seine, with downtown Paris and the Eiffel Tower providing the backdrop, organizers arranged nods to French history (Les Misérables, Marie Antoinette, Joan of Arc), staged impressive musical performances (from Lady Gaga to Celine Dion, from mezzo-soprano Axelle Saint-Cirel to heavy metal band Gojira), and celebrated French influences on fashion and culture. And, yes, there was a ménage à trois and a portrayal of the 17th Century painting by Jan van Bijlert called “The Feast of the Gods.” Or, was it Leonardo da Vinci’s 15th Century depiction of Christ at “The Last Supper”?

The performance’s creative director, Thomas Jolly, insists the scene portrays Dionysus, because “he’s the god of feasting, of wine, and the father of Sequana, the goddess of the River Seine.” For some Christian conservatives, however, especially in the United States, the resemblance of the scene’s composition to the Last Supper and the presence of “drag queens, a transgender model, [and] a naked singer dressed up as the Greek god of wine Dionysus” was a form of religious blasphemy, with even the Vatican issuing a statement insisting, “At a prestigious event where the whole world comes together to share *com En Plumes* values, there should be no allusions ridiculing the religious convictions of many people.”

There are critiques to be made about the legitimacy of bringing religious and domestic objections to a ceremony that is supposed to allow a host nation to present itself and its vision of culture, history, and sport to the world. However, our interest lies in what this controversy reveals about the state of conservative politics in the United States and its relationship to sports, and how this alliance was enabled, inadvertently we believe, by NBC’s coverage of the ceremony for American television audiences.

Paris is six hours ahead of the East Coast, meaning that US viewers were tuning in to live coverage of the ceremony, which lasted over four hours, between 10:30 am and 1:30 pm. The more highly-packaged and truncated prime time broadcast, hosted by Mike Tirico, Kelly Clarkson, and Peyton Manning, began at 7:30 pm EDT. Combined, 28.6 million viewers tuned in, the highest ratings since the London Olympics of 2012. Immediate reactions to the spectacle were varied, but a recurring theme was that it was big, bold, very French, and more than a little confusing. For the US audience, that confusion stems, at least partly, from the NBC production.

NBC’s broadcast was heavy on expressions of awe by Clarkson and Manning and light on substantive narration or historical context from Tirico. The announcers were given little help by editing decisions that jumped from one glimpse of the spectacle to another, leaving

those watching at home to infer connections between, say, Lady Gaga’s pre-recorded version of the French standard, “*Mon Truc En Plumes*,” a dizzying sequence in which a decapitated Marie Antoinette sang along with Gojira, and a sudden cross-promotional appearance by the Minions. The French organizers probably could have done more to develop the ritual aspects of the ceremony or the symbolic meaning of the torch relay. With spectacle overtaking ritual and insufficient direction from NBC, viewers were left to craft their own uncertain and perhaps uncomfortable interpretations. And it is this gap, this relative void of historical context and cultural specificity, which Christian conservatives jumped to fill.

First, we are struck by the projection of US politics into a global event hosted by France. Fueled, at least in part, by the “America First” rhetoric of Donald Trump, US conservatives have become increasingly hostile to forces of globalization and internationalism. Coupled with long-standing patterns of anti-intellectualism, such a position shuns cultural and political understandings of those outside the United States. That the displays of the ceremony were French only intensifies the antipathy; the French, after all, have long been the avatar of an effeminate, weak form of political liberalism. Here, the conservative reaction to the French Olympic ceremony lines up with an implicit critique of American progressive politicians who, presumably, would bring similar moral depravity to the nation.

Second, we contend the shifting conditions of the 2024 presidential race have left conservatives grasping for new strategies. Indeed, since President Joe Biden’s announcement on June 21 that he would not seek reelection, political momentum appears to have swung in favor of the Democratic Party. Democrats have consolidated support for Vice President Kamala Harris, and few of the Republican counters have yet found traction. This context may help to explain why conservatives, who have doubled down on identity politics such as Trump expressing doubts about Harris’s racial authenticity, saw fit to focus on the opening to the Paris Games.

It is not clear how much sympathy these criticisms will find among the American electorate. In the Olympic context, one senses that viewers may find the energy and festival nature that seems to be building in Paris to be compelling. Strong ratings for the Summer Games thus far suggest that millions of viewers are watching, even if religious conservatives are not among them. And only time will tell if or how the competitions and cultural politics being played out in the Paris Games manifest themselves in various domestic and international contexts.

Ageism is an overlooked form of discrimination when it comes to Olympic participation

During a pre-tournament press conference in Paris, 42-year-old US basketballer Diana Taurasi responded to questions regarding her age by saying, “When you dedicate your whole life and career to something and you get the question of ‘why don’t you just retire’?...It is a bit disrespectful.”

Taurasi, whose career spans six Olympics, also jokingly pointed out that that the journalists in the room would feel the same.

Ageism is a systematic form of prejudice that occurs regularly and, often, subtly. While older adults are frequent targets, in sport, where peak performance is associated with youth, athletes can be subject to ageist attitudes even earlier. And even people who are uncomfortable with other forms of discrimination such as sexism and racism may feel justified expressing negative attitudes about older athletes’ participation in elite sport because of the intrinsic relationship between ageing and physical deterioration.

While the Olympic Games have always been about finding the fastest, highest and strongest, “youngest” and “oldest” frequently enter the conversation due to a longtime media fascination with the age extremes of participants. We see it in headlines celebrating the “youngest” medallist or listicles highlighting the oldest athletes at the Games as rarities. This creates associations between youth and exceptionalism and age and breaking barriers. Older athletes become “exceptions” to the rules of peak performance. Andrew Hoy, who won an Olympic medal in equestrian in Tokyo at 62, said he felt his age began to overshadow his accomplishments.

Another way attitudes to age are deployed is through eligibility rules. Rule 42 of the IOC Charter stipulates no age limits to Olympic participant except “as prescribed in the competition rules of an IF [International Federation] as approved by the IOC Executive Board.” This means that *some* athletes in *some* sports are restricted by age, *sometimes*.

Minimum age rules are often justified as a form of protection of minors who are considered vulnerable to physical and mental risks in elite sports. And in some cases, like gymnastics and figure skating, increases in minimum age eligibility have been directly prompted by child welfare issues within the sport.

But athletes can also be limited by maximum age rules. Olympic boxers must be under 40, a rule the sports’ former governing body has linked to the medical risks associated with long-term boxing. In football, FIFA Olympic age rules essentially render the Olympic competition an under-23 tournament, with limited exceptions for older players. This decision has been attributed to a desire to minimise the chances of the Olympics creating competition with the World Cup as the sport’s premier event.

More recently, World Aquatics instituted an upper age limit that impact swimmers taking up “universality” places, a qualification pathway designed by the IOC to increase participation of underrepresented NOCs. In Paris, universality swimmers had to be under the age of 30 and could not have already competed in two Olympics to encourage the development of youth talent in these nations.

While minimum age rules appear justifiable when instituted to protect minors, as Sarah Teetzel has already argued, upper age rules could constitute discrimination in that they restrict adult athlete’s autonomy regarding participation decisions.

Some older athletes like boxers Mary Kom and Kaye Scott have publicly voiced their discontent regarding age rules. There has also been attempts to appeal them. In 2023, the Cook Islands Aquatics Federation appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) for an exemption to the new universality rule, as two-time Olympian Wesley Roberts was the highest-ranked athlete competing for that nation. Earlier this year, the Philippine Olympic Committee submitted an appeal to the IOC for 45-year-old boxer Manny Pacquiao compete at the Paris Games. Both athletes were rejected.

Another issue regarding ageism is that while prejudice impacts both men and women, it can be further intensified at the intersection of gender. Diana Taurasi signalled her awareness of this during the same press conference when she told reporters that “only a woman would have 20 years of experience and it’s an Achilles heel.” Similarly, the Olympics website profiled 71-year-old marathon runner Kathrine Switzer, who said she finished battling through a youth of encountering sexism toward female distance runners only to then encounter ageism.

Australian boxer Kaye Scott has also pointed out that boxing’s upper age limits particularly impact women, as they are typically the ones who take out time for their career to have children. Some minimum age rules also impact disciplines differently. For example, ITF eligibility rules state that male tennis players can enter the Olympics younger (at 14) than women (at 15).

Age is an immutable element of identity outside the control of Olympic participants, yet ageism can manifest in a range of ways. It is expressed in cultural attitudes to age participation, expressed by media coverage and sports fans, but also through rules about who is allowed to participate in the Games. The sport-specific approach to Olympic age rules creates an inconsistency that appears to run contra to the IOC’s inclusive philosophy. Meanwhile, the less codified forms of ageism that are ingrained in sport culture can manifest in both subtle and overt ways.



Dr Brigid McCarthy

Lecturer at in La Trobe University School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Her broader research interests include sports, fandom and social media, with a particular focus on the online abuse of athletes, and media representations of athletes at the intersection of age and gender.

Email: brigid.mccarthy@latrobe.edu.au

Twitter: [@ItsBrigidMcC](https://twitter.com/ItsBrigidMcC)

Unpredictability in competitive surfing raises discussions on use of wave pools in the future



André Tavares

PhD student in Communication at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), Brazil. He conducts research on media and sports with an emphasis on mediatization and commodification, discourses, representations, race, gender, urban spaces, surfing and wave pools.

E-mail: andretavares@gmail.com

In its second appearance at the Summer Olympics, surfing allowed audiences to witness both the best and the worst of competitive surfing. Held nearly 16,000 kilometers from Paris, the competitions took place in Tahiti, a French overseas territory renowned for its Teahupo'o waves. Known for hosting a stage of the World Surfing Championship, the Tahiti Pro features powerful, barreling lefts that break over a shallow and perilous reef. The site was chosen not only for the quality of its waves but also for the opportunity to engage French communities across the sea.

Despite the competition venue being planned to protect the island's extraordinary natural environment during the "greenest" games in history, a controversy emerged before the first day of competition regarding the construction of a new judging tower. The local community united to protest the replacement of the old wooden tower, citing the environmental impact that the new aluminum structure could have on local coral reefs. In response to pressure from residents, environmental groups, and the local mayor, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) decided to modify the original plan, including accommodating some competitors on a cruise ship during the Games. However, this incident highlighted how an event of this magnitude can obscure environmental issues behind the banner of sustainability.

Throughout the competitions, further controversies arose, including the policy employed by the International Surfing Association (ISA) for the distribution of athletes in heats and the removal of an Australian judge following the release of a photograph of him with Australian surfer Ethan Ewing and national team coach Bede Durbidge. According to the ISA executive committee, "the judge's behavior was inappropriate, and to protect the integrity and fairness of the competition, the decision was made to remove the judge from the panel."

What was undoubtedly made clear in this edition is the role that nature's unpredictability plays in competitive surfing. Due to the ocean conditions, the event was postponed several times, and the finals were only held on the last day of the waiting period. In addition to the usual fans of the sport, millions of people around the world, including Brazil, were able to observe both the best and worst wave conditions during the championship. In the men's third round, perfect waves provided a true spectacle of surfing that included a score of 9.9 from Gabriel Medina following an incredible tube ride. The image of the surfer airborne after the tube with a finger raised to signify "number one" went viral on social media. Conversely, a heat occurred that experienced a 17-minute lull without waves.

In this regard, surfing remains a controversial sport—captivating and appealing, especially to younger audiences, yet exceedingly challenging to broadcast and fit into television programming schedules due to the dependence on weather conditions for competitions to occur. This is why, despite the organizers' efforts to hold surfing events in locations associated with surf culture, such as Tahiti, as well as potential sites like Los Angeles or Brisbane, Australia, it is likely that Olympic surfing will sooner or later be conducted in wave pools. In a predictable and controlled environment, where each surfer has the opportunity to surf the same number of identical waves, competitions and judgments can be ostensibly fairer.

Although the official site for the Los Angeles 2028 Games has yet to indicate the next location for Olympic surfing, rumors are already circulating online regarding possibilities such as Huntington Beach, Venice, San Clemente, and Trestles. However, athletes like Filipe Toledo and Gabriel Medina have already expressed their preference on social media for competitions to occur in pools. Medina stated, "The wave pool would be fairer because it would give everyone the opportunity to show their best." Toledo remarked, "I love the ocean, and I don't think anything surpasses nature! But when it comes to the Olympics, I think it would be the fairest way! Everyone would have enough chance to put their best into the wave!"

What may happen to Olympic surfing after the Tahiti edition? A longer waiting period? Changes in judging criteria to make them less subjective? Or the certainty of man-made waves? In that case, Olympic surfing could evolve into a new category of sport—a form more akin to a rehearsed choreography, resembling artistic gymnastics.

Technology has helped para-athletes compete for decades. But it can also create an unfair advantage

The Paralympic Games, now a major global event, has a history rooted in rehabilitation. The first official Paralympic Games was held in Rome in 1960. But its origins trace back to 1948, when neurologist Ludwig Guttmann organised the Stoke Mandeville Games in England for World War II veterans with spinal cord injuries. He believed sport could play a powerful role in rehabilitation, pushing the boundaries of human performance in ways other approaches could not.

Today's Paralympic Games continue this legacy, with technology playing a central role in these achievements. Technology has enabled athletes with disabilities to reach incredible heights. However, it has also introduced new challenges, particularly in ensuring fairness and equity in competition.

From simple to sophisticated

In the early days, Paralympic technology was basic by today's standards. Athletes competed in regular wheelchairs and used simple strapping to assist. As the Paralympic Games grew, competitive success became increasingly prized. As a result, athletes used specialised technology to gain a competitive edge. Running blades, for example, are carbon fibre prosthetics designed to mimic natural leg movement while enhancing speed and bounciness. These blades have revolutionised track events. They enable athletes with lower-limb amputations to compete at speeds comparable to, and sometimes even faster than, able-bodied athletes. South African sprinter and convicted murderer Oscar Pistorius was the first double amputee with running blades who competed in the London Olympics in 2012 as part of the men's 4x400 relay.

A shifting conversation

By the end of the 2010s, however, the conversation about assistive technology used by athletes had shifted from celebrating integration to debating unfair advantage. In 2019, Blake Leeper, a bilateral amputee sprinter, applied to World Athletics to compete in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics against able-bodied athletes. The international governing body for athletics received independent scientific advice that Leeper's prosthetics gave him a competitive advantage and rejected the application.

Leeper contested this decision in the Court of Arbitration for Sport. But the court ruled against him. Leeper, who is African-American, appealed the decision on the grounds the scientific advice provided to World Athletics was based on racially prejudiced science. But the court rejected his appeal. It ruled the evidence to be fair and unbiased.

As technology continues to advance, running blades may soon seem modest compared to what the future brings. Neuroprosthetics are a notable example. These are devices that interface with the human nervous system to overcome losses in muscular strength and endurance that result from neurological impairments such as spinal cord injury. The devices can be attached externally or

surgically implanted. They can improve functions such as sitting stability and rowing machine performance. It's not hard to imagine some athletes using these devices to gain a significant – but possibly undetectable – advantage over competitors.

The International Paralympic Committee has a sport equipment policy. One of the principles is that sports performance should be determined primarily by human performance, and the effect of technology and equipment should be secondary. However, upholding this principle requires enforceable rules. As technology advances, this will become increasingly challenging – just as it is in the Olympics.

Levelling the playing field

Technology can also play a crucial role when it comes to classifying athletes. Each of the 22 Paralympic sports uses a classification system to ensure competition is fair and meaningful. Each athlete is classified according to the type and severity of their impairment.

However, classification is not without its challenges. Despite significant research advances, the best and most valid processes available still rely on expert judgement. And even when classifiers follow strict guidelines, there is an incredibly wide array of test results for classifiers to consider. Many classification tests also require athletes to give a full effort. This leaves open the possibility an athlete wishing to gain an unfair competitive advantage might deliberately underperform on these tests to exaggerate their impairment severity. They might then be placed in a class of athletes with more severe impairments.

To address these challenges, we are part of a research team that is currently developing an artificial intelligence-driven classification system. We will use computer vision of para-athletes performing a wide array of movements over time to train the system and develop an app. The app will allow athletes anywhere in the world to video themselves performing sports-related tasks, submit the video and receive an accurate, objective sports class. This will make classifications more trustworthy and will improve access for athletes in rural and remote areas or developing countries.

However, the diversity of para-athletes is enormous and the process of recruiting and filming a representative sample of high-level para-athletes will not be easy. The system also can't fully protect against athletes deliberately under-performing. But it is able to detect variations in performance that occur over time which would not otherwise be detectable to the human eye.

This will give greater confidence in the accuracy of the athlete's classification. Once the system is developed, its success will also depend on gaining the trust of the whole Paralympic community. Using technology to gain an unfair advantage is as old as sport itself. But technology is also the very tool we must use to ensure fairness and to level the playing field.



Prof John Cairney
Head of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences; Director, The Queensland Centre for Olympic and Paralympic Studies, The University of Queensland
Email: j.cairney@uq.edu.au



Dr Emma Beckman
Associate Professor in clinical exercise physiology and sport science in the School of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences, University of Queensland
Email: e.beckman@uq.edu.au



Prof Sean Tweedy
Professor of Physical Activity and Disability in the School of Human Movement Sciences and Principal Investigator for the International Paralympic Committee's Classification Research and Development Centre, University of Queensland.
Email: s.tweedy@uq.edu.au

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A growing basketball rivalry: writing new chapters in France and U.S. sports diplomacy



Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

*Visiting Assistant Clinical Professor in New York University Preston Robert Tisch Institute for global sport. She specializes in the history of global sport, communications and diplomacy. She is authors of *Basketball Empire: France and the Making of a Global NBA and WNBA* (2003, Bloomsbury).*

Email: lkrasnoff@gmail.com

L'impossible n'est pas français (the impossible is not French). That sentiment reigned for more than thirty minutes of play during the Olympic basketball gold medal matches as the hosts pressed the U.S. men and women to a brace of thrilling finishes.

It was the first time that the same two countries contested both finals, and the matchups did not disappoint. Les Bleus were neck-and-neck with Team USA until Steph Curry, arguably one of the best all-time shooters, unleashed a series of three-point shots in the game's dying minutes to seal the gold medal. The next day, Les Bleues pushed the United States to the edge, and if a two-point buzzer-beater basket by Franco-American ace Gabby Williams was taken a few centimeters further away, France would have won.

The Paris 2024 Games will be remembered as one of the greatest in modern memory and basketball was a notable standout. Throughout two weeks of competition, first in Lille then in the City of Light, twenty-four of the world's elite women's and men's teams hooped, entertained, and provided fans with a range of roller-coaster emotions. The depth and quality of play was arguably the best-ever, a legacy of how the 1992 U.S. Dream Team opened the floodgates to a game already indigenous across all continents. Some of basketball's biggest stars represented their country this summer, which added glamour and encouraged a record 1,078,319 spectators to attend.

Each team engaged in sports diplomacy as their presence and performances communicated, represented, and negotiated about their country and hoops game. But none more so than France and its Olympic vice champion teams. Paris 2024 was an example of French sports diplomacy and cultivation of soft power in how the national teams bolstered a "Made in France" brand and identity as one of the world's great basketball countries.

It's a story more than 130 years in the making, when the first basketball match was played on European soil in Paris December 1893. The game remained a niche sport in France until the First World War spread its gospel. The first female leagues began play in the 1920s, while the sport was adopted by the military and Catholic schools. Arrival of U.S. G.I.s in 1944-45 reassociated the game with modernity, while thousands of French flocked to watch the Harlem Globetrotters in the 1950s. Players like Martin Feinberg and Henry Fields reintroduced the hexagone's hardcourts in the 1950s and 1960s to the tactics, techniques, and stylings of its *ami américain*, while early U.S. female pioneers and Olympians found a place to play after high school in the 1970s. Then French players started to play in the United States as part of their team's starting five, first in the NCAA in the mid-1980s, then in the WNBA and NBA as of 1997.

Since then, the transatlantic flow of players, coaches, and *savoir faire* has flowed in both directions. The resultant informal citizen-to-citizen sports diplomacy cultivated cultural, technical, and knowledge exchanges that imprinted the French game, and began to influence U.S. leagues. That's part of the story told in *Basketball Empire: France and the Making of a Global NBA and WNBA*, and the Olympic basketball tournaments notched the next chapters.

At Paris 2024, French basketball diplomacy was on full display as the national teams communicated, represented, and negotiated about the country and its hoops culture. They showcased France's best talent, women and men who hone their skills in the NBA, WNBA, and Euroleagues and whose meritocratic successes speak to the aspirational ideals of a twenty-first century Fifth Republic. They come from a range of family backgrounds, some with a parent who was born in the United States, Africa, or the French Caribbean, others who are second or third generation elite or professional athletes. Many grew up in the country's basketball bastions of Normandy, Brittany, the North (Nord-pas-de-Calais), and greater Paris, and thus bring different experiences and references to team alchemy.

France's on-court performances also communicated, represented, and negotiated about French basketball. The players' tenacity, particularly in playing such closely contested matches with the favored U.S. teams, spoke to development of a winner's mentality, something that was not always part of a culture that historically prioritized participation. They displayed a high basketball IQ, as well as why Team France are known as "the United States of basketball in Europe": for their physicality and athleticism.

The host's twin silver medals reinforced the country's twenty-first century identity as a basketball breeding ground. It's a "Made in France" brand of excellence in youth sports development that feeds the world's elite professional championships. First recognized within the ranks of football (soccer), increasingly it is acknowledged in basketball, too, as season after season French teenagers are among the top draft selections in the NBA and WNBA. That mark was bolstered by the Paris 2024 tournament turnouts, television spectatorship, and by national team results, thus further legitimizing France's place as one of the world's big basketball powers.

That's why the gold medal matchups were a clash in sporting power as two of the leading hoops nations inscribed new chapters in their growing (friendly) basketball rivalry. Hoops sensation Victor Wembanyama, perhaps the most famous Frenchman today, noted of his France vs Team USA experience, "I am learning, and I am worried for our opponents in the years to come."

The Olympic drone-spying scandal and Nike ad campaign: why the myth of sport always wins

Winning is everything, and not surprisingly, some will bend the rules. Take, for example, the Canadian women's soccer team who, along with the men's national team, were found guilty of using drones to routinely spy on opponents. Canada received a 6-point penalty, after losing their appeal, for spying on New Zealand's practices before the opening games of the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics. According to Graham Dunbar of the Associated Press, the "drone-spying scandal threatens to spread beyond the Olympics, where Canada is the defending women's champion, to the men's team at the 2026 World Cup."

The incident calls into question, again, how ethical violations impact athletics. And, let's be clear, these violations happen with the top athletes and teams in the world – not just athletes scratching and clawing to win. Zinedine Zidane famously ended his international career with a red card in the 2006 World Cup final after headbutting an opponent. Tom Brady, one of the greatest National Football League players, was suspended in 2015 for under inflating footballs, making them easier to catch. Major League Baseball's, Houston Astros, fought a long public relations battle after being found guilty of stealing signs from opponents in 2019. And in 2024, the Canadian women's soccer team used drone footage to cheat. Cheating is part of sport, which begs the question – does cheating in sport matter?

No. At least, not really.

While these violations can turn into short term reputational crises for teams and athletes, sport is a unique realm where there is always the ability of the myth of sport to alleviate the pain of a transgression. Sport myths tend to revolve around sport as a character, moral, and teambuilding experience. For example, "sports build character" is a popular refrain, athletes are seen as role models, and the best athletes are spoken of as heroes. Even the Olympic Charter echoes how sport is a positive endeavor and promotes the myth: "Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for internationally recognized human rights and universal fundamental ethical principles within the remit of the Olympic Movement."

The myth is communicated through mass media over and over again to build the power of the myth. From movies, to advertisements, to commentary, and to books, communication outlets help perpetuate the message, but one of the largest myth-producing sporting events is the Olympics. When casual and die-hard fans turn on the Olympics, they are met with repeated narratives of how sport changes lives for the better. And the mythical package producers, fans, and advertisers wrap the Olympics in makes it an almost impenetrable force to allow the reality of sport to

puncture. Even when there are rips in the myth and athletes cheat, athletes and teams are able to move on as the power of the sport myth remains with its ability to shape attitudes.

Repeatedly, sports fans show that they are willing to move on. Zidane was featured in the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympics to cheering fans. Brady is affectionately called the G.O.A.T., the Houston Astros were able to keep their 2017 World Series championship title, and the Canadian women's soccer team made the quarterfinals despite the six point deduction. Media outlets pushed the heroic myth of the team coming back by using titles with words such as "team battles back," "perseveres," and how they are "still alive."

Interestingly, while the Olympics and media outlets pushed the narrative of sport as a positive endeavor, Nike pushed back on this myth in an Olympics advertising campaign titled "Winning Isn't for Everyone." The campaign features LeBron James, Sha'Carri Richardson, Bebe Vio, and Serena Williams with actor William Dafoe saying: "Am I a bad person? Tell me. Am I? I'm single minded. I'm deceptive. I'm obsessive. I'm selfish. Does that make me a bad person? Am I a bad person? Am I? I have no empathy. I don't respect you. I'm never satisfied. I have an obsession with power. I'm irrational. I have zero remorse. I have no sense of compassion. I'm delusional. I'm maniacal. Do you think I'm a bad person? Tell me. [...]" The campaign was met with mixed reviews with some praising it as inspirational and some criticizing its hostility to good sportsmanship.

The ad campaign pushes back on the myth of sport building moral character and exposes sport and athletes for often who they are – people with extraordinary physical attributes that push themselves to immoral and impolite ends to win and who are often, yes, bad people. But the power of the myth is so strong and with events such as commentary, movies, books, and the Olympic narrative machine pitching sport as a character building experience, the myth will continue to have power. The Nike ad is one moment where sport is called out for what it is and the uncomfortable reception is due to its contradiction of the myth. While it remains to be seen what will happen with the Canadian women's soccer team's reputation in the long term, sports history suggests that fans will easily move past ethical violations to look for the next win that will uphold the myth of sport.



Dr Karen L. Hartman

Professor in the Department of Communication, Media, and Persuasion at Idaho State University. Her research analyzes how language and public relations efforts frame athletes, institutions, and laws.

Email: karenhartman@isu.edu

Media sports events and soft disempowerment: spotlight on the Zimbabwean delegation



Dr Tendai Chari

Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of Venda, South Africa. He is also a C1 National Research Foundation (NRF) rated Researcher. Tendai teaches and conducts research on media and sports, political communication, digital media and society. He is co-editor of several books, the latest being Communication Rights in Africa: Emerging Discourses and Perspectives (2023, Routledge/Taylor & Francis, with Prof Ufuoma Akpojivi).

Email: tendai.chari@univen.ac.za

Twitter: [@Chari_Tendai](https://twitter.com/Chari_Tendai)

Mega sports events such as the Olympics provide nation states with a rare opportunity to display their most positive image. Even non-hosting nations go out of their way to extract symbolic benefits from mega events by sponsoring as many athletes as possible to boost national pride and foreign policy endeavors.

In the age of digital media, the multiplicity of information sources and the avalanche of information shared may undercut these official narratives in a way that offsets the soft power benefits of participating in mega sporting events. Instead of boosting their prestige on the global stage, nations may inadvertently expose their dark spots. This can result in 'soft disempowerment,' where negative news about the nation alienates rather than attracts other countries. Global South nations burdened by multilayered socio-economic cleavages occasioned by colonialism are particularly prone to soft disempowerment during mega sports events because participation at mega sports events is often viewed as a 'vainglorious course of action' given competing fiscal demands.

One nation where soft disempowerment was at work during the 2024 Paris Olympic games is Zimbabwe. Like any other country Zimbabwe hoped to reap symbolic dividends from the mega sport event by sending seven athletes to the Olympic Games. In the buildup to the Olympic Games in Paris Games the Zimbabwe Olympic Committee (ZOC), pumped a surfeit of optimistic rhetoric through its website and social media platforms rallying the nation behind '#TEAM Zimbabwe', '#The Flag Bearers' and '#Zim Pride'. "Let's raise the Zim flag high and cheer them to the finishing line... We are on the map; we are making waves" ZOC appealed to citizens through its X handle. The organisation's website was awash with sanguine posts about the athletes who were described as "the talented individuals" who would "conquer tracks, fields, pools, inspiring the next generation and leaving their mark on the world stage". This was a clear indication, that the country was determined to tap into the 'Olympic spirit' to construct narratives that would foster admiration and prestige for the country on the international stage.

However, this optimistic narrative was abruptly dampened after a breaking story which alleged that Zimbabwe was sending only seven athletes and a 'bloated' delegation comprising of 67 officials to the Olympics, resulting in a glut of scornful and derisive comments both offline and online directed at the government of Zimbabwe. While the truthfulness of the story was never established, it is significant to note that the optimism which had been generated about the country's participation at the Olympics was buried into the cacophonous voices in the cybersphere, and in the process, invalidating the Zimbabwean government's ability to harness its participation at the Olympics as a soft power resource.

Given the rhetoric prior the games, it was evident that Zimbabwe hoped to conscript its presence at the Olympics to shape the desires and preferences of other countries, particularly given its isolation from the 'community of nations' and the persistent negative images in the global media. The phenomenal attention on the alleged bloated delegation and the negativity around it undermined the country's efforts to rebrand after the 2017 military coup. While the big story would have been the country's participation and performance of the athletes at the Olympics, it unwittingly resurrected narratives about misgovernance, 'corruption', 'looting of resources', 'mismanagement', 'bad leadership', 'heartless leaders', 'human abuses', and lack of sports infrastructure in the country – issues that have been an albatross to the country. On X, the overrepresentation at the Olympics was described as 'embarrassing', 'crazy', 'misplacement of priorities', 'looting', 'outrageous', 'plundering of national resources' while the country's leaders were described as 'crooks', 'goblins', 'evil people', 'an embarrassment', and the country was described as a 'Banana Republic' and 'cursed'. Commentators on X queried why the country was sending a bloated delegation to the Olympic Games at a time when the country did not have a "single football stadium". The country was pilloried for wasting resources when the national team was using Rwanda as its home ground for the FIFA 2026 qualifier games after condemnation of local stadia by FIFA. Some queried why the country was wasting resources when the country could not "afford clean-tap water in the capital nor medicines in our hospitals". Another posted a collage of the photographs of political activists who had been incarcerated the previous week, pointing out these were the real heroes and not the athletes going to the Paris Olympics.

The negative narratives undermined Zimbabwe's efforts to deploy the Paris 2024 Olympic Games as a soft power resource to enhance its international image. Given the wide coverage of the story, it is highly unlikely that Zimbabwe would be remembered for its prowess in sports. Instead, even people who could hardly spot the country on the world cup before the Olympics in Paris would associate the country with bad governance, corruption, autocracy, dysfunctionality, and other social ills which inhibits a broader and more nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe. As story about the 'bloated delegation' became the peg upon which negative discourses oscillated in the global arena, efforts by Zimbabwe to leverage the Olympic Games as a soft power resource boomeranged, resulting in soft disempowerment. This demonstrates the fragility of sports as a soft power asset in developing nations with pending national questions and unfinished socio-economic business.

Fighting for the country: mediated Ukrainian athletes' success in Paris

Politicians and presidents of sporting bodies often claim that politics should not be brought into sports. Sometimes athletes, fans, and even journalists echo this sentiment. In fact, these two are inseparable. In the past, we have witnessed critical political gestures and societal changes that have started to unroll during the mega sports events, namely the Olympic Games. The 2024 Paris Olympics were crucial for Ukraine to raise international awareness of its challenging situation differently than through the tragic stories, causing reportedly news avoidance and news fatigue in some audiences (Reuters Institute, 2023). The Ukrainian athletes (they got 12 medals, 3 of them were gold) did not miss a single opportunity to use it positively in any interview. The Media also covered the stories of athletes unable to compete in Paris due to being in the Ukrainian army, killed in the war or having their sporting dreams shattered due to it.

One of the most closely watched and mediated causes preceding the 2024 Paris Olympics has been the inclusion or exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes due to these two states' invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia as a country was already banned in 2017 because of doping rules' systematic violation, with the extension for another four years in 2019. The International Olympic Committee's decision from December 2023 that qualified athletes from Russia and Belarus who "have not acted against the peace mission of the Olympic Movement by actively supporting the war in Ukraine" may participate in the 2024 Paris Olympics raised many objections. Ukraine and Russia criticized the decision, even though, logically, for different reasons. Sports federations, which previously banned the Russian and Belarusian athletes from their competitions, stuck to it, and the athletes competed in only 12 sports in Paris under the abbreviation AIN, Individual Neutral Athletes.

Unfortunately, according to Politico, several athletes, including medalists in Paris (AIN gained five medals), have not complied with the IOC's rules and supported a war against Ukraine. Still, the athletes from AIN have been in isolation during the whole Games, and their position at home may also be fragile. AP or Euro Newswrote that Russian media do not cover the 2024 Paris Olympics or write negatively about it. As AP reminded, the last time Soviet TV was not broadcasting the Olympics was in 1984 when the Soviet Union and a majority of states from the Eastern Bloc boycotted the Games in Los Angeles. The athletes starting as the AIN were called "traitors" back home in Russia (this criticism was one of the reasons why some qualified athletes declined the invitations to start in Paris).

Medals for those who cannot be here

On the other hand, Ukrainian athletes have been at the center of attention, supported by many fellow athletes and the media. During the opening ceremony, the Ukrainian flag was borne by tennis star Elina Svitolina, one of the most visible Ukrainian athletic ambassadors. Even though she did not win any medal at these Games, due to her celebrity and previous notoriety, strong news values, her stance and support for her country's case were mediated worldwide. A fencer, Olga Kharlan (who in the past refused to shake hands with her Russian opponent at the World Championships in 2023 and almost was not competing in Paris), was the first Ukrainian athlete to get the medal in Paris (bronze in sabre event) and dedicated it to "all the Ukrainian athletes 'who couldn't come here because they were killed by Russia'". The same did another Olympic winner in Paris, high jumper Yaroslava Mahuchikh. Kharlan, already a four-time Olympic medalist before Paris, added the first Ukrainian medal on the table and strongly contributed to the gold one in the team sabre event, becoming the most decorated Ukrainian athlete at these Games. It brought her the most media attention, which she used to highlight her country's cause. In the interviews after winning a gold medal, she dedicated it to all of Ukraine, especially its troops fighting for its freedom.

There were other strong mediated stories published because of the 2024 Paris Olympics, e.g., an NBC document, "Fighting for Olympic Gold: Ukraine's Athletes at War", featuring former rower Volodymyr Dzubinskij who voluntarily enlisted in 2022, lost his leg on the front and has been fighting for his place in Ukrainian Paralympic Team after that. Some media decided to support the Ukrainian athletes, even when referring to AIN ones; CBS started one of its online articles directly with a video about Ukrainian karate medalist from the Tokyo Games, Stanislav Horuna, who has been fighting on the frontline.

When scrolling through all the media coverage, it is evident that the decision of the Ukrainian government not to force the athletes to boycott the Olympic qualifications (or even the Games), where also Russian and Belarusian athletes were competing, was a good one. Otherwise, the already tortured country would be stripped of its sports pride and the possibility to positively represent its case for worldwide audiences in other than "tiring" political columns.



Dr Alice Němcová Tejkalová

Head of Journalism Department in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Czech Republic. Her research interests are in journalism studies and sports journalism. Since 2019, she has been a regional co-coordinator for Central & Eastern Europe in Worlds of Journalism Study. She authored numerous articles and book chapters and serves as the Czech Olympic Committee's Equal Opportunities in Sport Commission's Vice-Chair.

Email: alice.tejkalova@fsv.cuni.cz

Twitter: [@antejkalova](https://twitter.com/antejkalova)

Gender equality at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games: the enduring legacy and unfinished work of Alice Milliat

The word historic is often referenced when describing the Olympic Games. Athlete performances are memorialized in record books and captured on camera as part of a larger human story, witnessed and appreciated in the moment by cheering fans in arenas and by mass audiences through digital technologies. The lingering memories of the Olympic Games serve as beacons for the next generation of athletes to meet and surpass and as inspiring symbols of what human beings are capable of.

In the case of Paris 2024, it was lauded by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as the “first Olympic Games in history with full gender parity on the field of play”. Of the 32 sports offered, 28 provided full gender equality for women and men participants. By the conclusion of the Games, 46% of the medals were awarded to women; 48% to men; and 6% to athletes on mixed-gender teams.

According to media scholars James Angelini and Paul J. MacArthur, women’s sports received more coverage during the 17 nights of NBC’s primetime coverage for the fifth Olympiad in a row. By the Closing Ceremony, women had garnered 51% of media coverage with men at 47% and athletes in mixed-gender events receiving just under two percent. An already historic moment was amplified by the gold-medal performance of Dutch marathoner, Sifan Hassan, who earlier in the Games also earned bronze medals in the 5,000- and 10,000-meter events, becoming the first woman to accomplish such a feat and only the second athlete in history to do so.

The gender parity in the 2024 Games stands in sharp contrast with the Games hosted in Paris a century earlier when women comprised 4.4% of athletes. The French president of the Olympic Games, Pierre de Coubertin, was fixed in his objection to women athletes, espousing the view that the role women played at the Games was to crown the men who won. As part of the Opening Ceremony this time around, the Paris Organizing Committee honored the lives and legacies of ten of their “golden women”, feminists and activists who worked for the emancipation of women, one of whom was the sportswoman and suffragist Alice Milliat.

It was Milliat who rejected the notion that women were too frail to compete in sport. In 1921 she created the Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale (FSFI). The FSFI became a platform to organize women athletes from other countries and to cultivate women’s sport governing bodies around the world. When de Coubertin rejected her request for more women to be permitted to participate in the 1924 Olympic Games, she created the Women’s Olympic Games, which hosted 77 athletes in 13 events in 1922 before an estimated crowd of 22,000.

The road that Milliat traveled was a difficult one, reflected in the degree to which women were

included in the Olympic Games throughout most of the 20th century. Continuing to run women’s events such as the Women’s World Games in 1930 and 1934, Milliat appealed to men sport leaders to recognize the value and importance of women’s sports. Behind the scenes, J Sigfrid Edstrom (International Amateur Athletics Federation) and Avery Brundage (United States Olympic Committee) who would both eventually take their turns as presidents of the IOC, communicated on strategies to limit the growth of women’s sport federations. By 1972, 50 years after the Women’s Olympics, less than 15% of athletes competing in the Games were women.

Milliat’s work and that of many other women and their allies would be taken up. The first World Conference on Women and Sport held in Brighton, England in 1994, followed the next year by the United Nations World Conference on Women, produced the momentum for the IOC to include in its Charter a reference to promoting women in sport. That moment in the 1990s has been recognized as a turning point in accelerating the pace for greater women’s inclusion in the Olympics.

There is something powerfully moving in the example of Alice Milliat, a woman who understood that having access to the right to vote worked in tandem with a woman’s right to move. She used that sensibility to navigate economic, political, and social forces to lay the groundwork for future generations of women. But her fortitude and sacrifice also begs contemplation. She was recognized as a “golden woman” by the Paris Organizing Committee and yet when the opportunity arose to name a venue in her honor, the choice was made to give preference to the global corporation, Adidas instead.

That decision serves as a reminder of the tenuous nature of gender equality in Paris 2024. As historic as women’s myriad accomplishments were, so too was the scrutiny on women’s athletic bodies. While gender equality is within reach in terms of women’s participation in the Games, only 25% of the coaches at the Games were women. Gold medalist boxers, Algerian Imane Khelif and Lin Yu-Ting from Taiwan, who had competed in women’s boxing for years, were subjected to a global conversation about their gender. Sport sociologist Cheryl Cooky points out that the positive narrative around gender equality in the Games does not play out in the same way in every country. As enduring as Milliat’s legacy is, and as much as progress has been made in realizing some aspects of gender equality, her work remains unfinished.



Prof Ellen Staurowsky

Internationally recognized as an expert on social justice issues in sport including college athletes’ rights, gender equity and Title IX, and the misappropriation of American Indian imagery in sport. She is co-author of College Athletes for Hire: The Evolution and Legacy of the NCAA Amateur Myth and editor and author of Women and Sport: Continuing a Journey of Liberation and Celebration.

Email: staurows@ithaca.edu

Dualism at play: the politics of sport for development and peace



Prof Shaun Anderson

John S. and James L. Knight Chair of Sports, Race, and Media for the Hussman School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Prior to joining the UNC faculty, he was Chair and Associate Professor for the Department of Communication Studies at Loyola Marymount University.

The opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, France marked the beginning of one thing and a continuation of the other: the first time that the opening ceremony was not in a stadium and the continuation of sport being an avenue to discuss pressing social issues. While the entertainment value of sports may be apparent, one cannot forget the spotlight that sport can place on many global issues.

For example, one of the most well-known sports protests occurred during the 1968 Olympic Games. Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in solidarity with the civic unrest that was happening in the United States during their medal ceremony, demonstrating that sport on the global stage can be used as a tool for social change.

The 2020 Games in Tokyo, Japan ushered in the concerns of mental health through sport when Olympic superstar, Simone Biles, pulled herself out of competition for feeling that she was not at full capacity to compete. She, along with other athletes, would go on to say how they are more than just entertainment vessels. They have concerns, thoughts, and fears just like anyone else.

For the Paris Games, athletes were ushered in boats across the Seine River to display which countries competed. When the United States athletes arrived, it was LeBron James and Coco Gauff who were the flag bearers. Controversy ensued as social media became abuzz with some being upset that these athletes were representing a flag that they were once criticizing during the height of the 2020 racial reckoning, where athletes were not only protesting but pushing for policy reform.

While sport and politics have always been a controversial pairing, an alternative aspect of it has burgeoned: can one both have a love for country and be hyper-critical of it when necessary?

LeBron James and Coco Gauff are representatives of accepting this duality. Both athletes have used their platforms to call out racial injustice, educational inequality, poverty, and other pressing social issues. Yet, both are proud individuals who love their sport and love representing the United States in competition. Still, the internet was rife with the “stick to sports” or “shut up and dribble” mantras that often signify the lack of intelligence they believe these athletes have when it comes to matters of development and peace.

It has been 24 years since the late former President of South Africa declared that “Sport has the power to change the world...”. He would go on to discuss how sport can bring about global unity and has the power to eradicate social issues better than any government could. In 2015, the United Nations declared sport as a viable tool to aid in their Sustainable Development Goals. These 17 goals are to:

- End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
- End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture.
- Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
- Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all
- Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
- Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation
- Reduce inequality within and among countries Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development.
- Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

While many may consider these lofty expectations, especially with the hope to accomplish these goals by 2030, hope remains. What the Paris game showed us during the opening ceremony was a love of country and a desire to eradicate social ills. Traditionally, only athletes light the Olympic torch; however, everyday citizens were involved in 2024 Paris Games torch lighting ceremony. Young and old, men and women, all individuals came together through the lens of sport. In what was his final closing as President of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach mentioned “We know that the Olympic Games cannot create peace, but the Olympic Games can create a culture of peace that inspires the world.”

To achieve development and peace, there must be the acceptance that sport and politics will have to continue to coexist. The duality of love and criticism for one’s country must co-exist. These are necessary for tangible social change.

Brazilian media coverage of Olympians' protests and demonstrations in Paris 2024

Athletes are embedded in highly institutionalized and, thus, regulated environments. Historically, under the auspices of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Olympians must abide by the Olympic Charter, with rules addressed to them, such as the amateurism code, which excluded professional athletes for much of the twentieth century, and Rule 50, which was introduced in the 1970s, following John Carlos and Tom Smith's famous Black Power Salute on the podium.

Rule 50 limited athletes' expressions in Olympic venues in order to protect the supposed political neutrality of the IOC. About five decades later, before the Games in Tokyo, the IOC Athletes' Commission consulted Olympians and professional athletes from different parts of the world to amend Rule 50, after some of them called for athletes' right of freedom of expression. As a result, changes came into effect in Tokyo 2020, and now Rule 50.2 regulates athletes' use of their space and momentum of visibility during the Olympic Games, allowing them to use their own social media and interviews to do so, including for Paris 2024.

This analysis examines further developments of Rule 50.2. It aims to discuss Brazilian media coverage of athletes' manifestations in Paris 2024. We cataloged news on open access websites, from July 26th to August 11th. The website news included for this analysis should mention athletes' manifestations during or immediately after their performances, as well as before or after their introduction to the public.

In total, Brazilian media covered five different manifestations that challenged Rule 50.2 in the Paris 2024 Olympics. We found three main categories: civil rights, religion, and conflicts.

Thirteen news articles were found on the Algerian delegation throwing roses into the Seine River during the opening ceremony to honor the victims of a massacre that took place in France in 1961, in which there was a mass killing of Algerians who lived in Paris by the French National Police. Algerian people's bodies were thrown into the river. The news portal [UOL](#) explained the historical context in which the country was involved, and listed the number of victims, as well as the motivations for the massacre. It stated that France did not recognize the act of violence until 2021. The Algerian delegation's demonstration is not acceptable in the scope of Rule 50.2. By using the opening ceremony to promote the manifestation, the athletes drew attention to socio-political tensions surrounding the host city. Athletes mobilized their symbolic capital and used a global stage to draw attention to issues that impact society beyond sport.

Other demonstrations related to the geopolitical context. Eighteen articles were found about Marcelat Sakobi, from the Democratic Republic

of Congo, highlighting the boxer's gesture after her defeat in the Olympic boxing semi-finals. She pretended to point a gun at her own head, she had tears in her eyes, and with her other hand she covered her mouth. The news portal [O Antagonista](#) emphasized that "the movement symbolizes her denunciation of the violence and genocide in her home country." Another extract reads, "Athletes use their platforms to draw attention to neglected conflicts." This statement is in line with the argument that the athlete is a social actor who can promote ruptures in the hegemonic structures to which he/she is subjected. By making this demonstration, the athlete not only called attention to a political concern, but also created tension in relation to the rule proposed by the IOC.

Demonstrations for general civil rights were also carried out by athletes. Kimia Yousofi, from Afghanistan, while crossing the finish line in the preliminary round of 100-meter athletics, showed a written message on the back of her identification number, that read, "Education, sports, our rights." The news website [SBT](#) contextualized the tense political context that her country is experiencing.

Alongside the sprinter, another demonstration for rights was performed by breakdance athlete Manizha Talsh, from the Refugee Athletes team. During her performance, she wore a cape with the inscription "Free Afghan women" as part of her clothing. In the specific case of this demonstration, there were 18 news reports found, and they all referred to the disqualification of the athlete as punishment because of this demonstration. The [GE](#) news portal emphasized, "Slogans and political statements are banned during presentations and on podiums at the Olympic Games." Although there were other demonstrations that neglected Rule 50.2, no other athlete was disqualified.

In the case of Brazilian athlete Rayssa Leal, she used Brazilian Sign Language to disseminate a Christian message during her introduction to the public at the skateboarding finals. She showed the camera, "Jesus is the way, the truth and life." This is the most covered episode in Brazilian media, with a total of 99 publications. Media discourses not only reported the athlete's possible punishment by the IOC, but also supported the athlete's demonstration, and emphasized the importance of sign language.

Although Rule 50.2 was seen as a relaxation allowing athletes to position themselves, it has been violated, and media coverage does not always claim for sanctions. Finally, it is important to emphasize that the figure of the athlete as a political subject has promoted a particular form of activism in Olympic sports that challenges the image of the athlete as a myth detached from socio-political issues, a theme that requires more academic attention.

Clarisse Silva Caetano

M.sc, Member of the Laboratory of Olympic and Sociocultural Studies of Sports (LEOS), Brazil.

Email: clarissescaetano@gmail.com

Dr Doiara Silva dos Santos

Tenured Assistant Professor, Federal University of Viçosa, and Director of the Laboratory of Olympic and Sociocultural Studies of Sports (LEOS), Brazil.

Email: santosdoiara@ufv.br

Dr Thaise Ramos Varnier Antunes

Conducts research with an emphasis on Olympics, sports and comprehensive education.

Email: thaisevarnier@gmail.com

Donaldson Rodrigues Thompson

Ph.D. student in Physical Education (PPGEF-UFES). He is a member of ARETE—Center for Olympic Studies.

Email: donaldson.rodrigues.thompson@gmail.com

Bruno Malias

Masters student, Federal University of Espirito Santo., and member of Arete—Olympic Studies Center (CEFD-UFES).

Email: bruno.malias@hotmail.com

Beyond the podium: the role of protest at the Olympic Games and rule 50



Dr Jake Kucek

Assistant Professor in the John Carroll School of Communication, USA. He teaches Integrated Marketed Communication and researches Corporate Social Responsibility in sports and the rapidly evolving field of Esports. His work explores the intersections of communication and social media.

Email: jkucek@jcu.edu

The Olympic Games have always been more than just a showcase of athletic talent; they serve as a global stage for national pride and international unity. Nonetheless, they have also become a platform for political expression and protest. Over the years, athletes have used the Olympics to highlight pressing social, political, and racial issues, sparking debate and controversy.

Protests at the Olympics are not new. One of the most memorable examples occurred during the 1968 Mexico City Olympics when American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in a Black Power salute during the medal ceremony for the 200-meter race. This act of defiance protested racial discrimination and inequality in the United States. The image of Smith and Carlos standing with their fists raised has become an enduring symbol of the civil rights movement, illustrating the intersection of sports and politics (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Another significant instance of protest took place at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. In response to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, over 60 countries, led by the United States, boycotted the Games. This boycott demonstrated how international relations and geopolitical conflicts could directly impact participation in the Olympics. The 2008 Beijing Olympics were marked by protests against China's human rights record, particularly concerning Tibet. Activists used the global attention on the Games to draw attention to issues of oppression and the lack of freedom in the region. Similarly, the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics saw protests against Russia's anti-LGBTQ+ laws, with many athletes and supporters expressing solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community.

In the modern era, athlete activism has gained significant momentum. Prominent figures such as Naomi Osaka, who has spoken out on racial injustice and mental health issues, Kyrie Irving, known for his stance on vaccine hesitancy, Colin Kaepernick, who protested against police brutality, and Megan Rapinoe, an advocate for social justice, have used their platforms to champion causes they believe in. These cases illustrate the personal and professional risks and rewards associated with speaking out.

However, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has implemented specific measures to limit athlete protests. The IOC enforces Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter, which prohibits athletes from engaging in demonstrations or promoting political, religious, or racial propaganda at Olympic sites, venues, or other areas. The intent behind Rule 50 is to preserve the neutrality of the Olympic Games and keep the focus on sport rather than on political or social issues.

Rule 50 states: "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other

areas." In recent years, the IOC has softened its stance somewhat. In 2021, the IOC updated Rule 50 to allow athletes to express their views before the start of competitions, provided these expressions are not disruptive and respect other competitors. Nevertheless, the rule continues to prohibit protests during medal ceremonies, on the podium, or during official Olympic events.

The Olympic Charter also outlines the potential consequences for "any violation of the Olympic Charter." For individual athletes and teams, these penalties can include "temporary or permanent ineligibility or exclusion from the Olympic Games" and "disqualification or withdrawal of accreditation." In cases of disqualification or exclusion, athletes must return any medals and diplomas awarded in connection with the violation to the IOC.

However, this has not stopped spectators from voicing their opinions, and today's platforms such as TikTok offer new ways to galvanize demonstrations for the Olympics. Environmental concerns sparked protests ahead of the 2024 Olympics. Pollution in the Seine River became a major issue, with residents voicing their frustrations just weeks before Olympic athletes were scheduled to compete in its waters. Some residents threatened to hold a large-scale protest by defecating in the river on June 23, using the viral hashtag [#JeChieDansLaSeineLe23Juin](#), which translates to "I shit in the Seine on June 23." Although the planned protest did not materialize, the issue remains significant, as evidenced by Belgium's withdrawal from their mixed triathlon race after one of their participants fell ill following a swim in the Seine.

While iconic moments like Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their fists in 1968 may seem distant due to the new IOC rulings, citizens have not hesitated to share their views, document protests, and engage with supporters. In the lead-up to the 2024 Paris Olympics, the Union of Ukrainians of France organized a peaceful march in Paris to honor fallen sports heroes and highlight the ongoing impact of the conflict on Ukraine's athletic community. Similarly, around 300 people rallied at the Paris Organizing Committee's headquarters, waving Palestinian flags and chanting slogans opposing Israel's "institutional participation" in the Games due to the ongoing war in Gaza. The Olympics remains an outlet to protest global tensions.

Did that upset you? Activism at the Paris 2024 Games

Athlete activism was different at the Paris Games than in Tokyo. The differences between social and political activism have been researched, but uncovering the rhetorical strategies of athletes and demonstrators continue to provide us with insight about how audiences attend to and react to nuanced forms of expression.

Strikingly different from the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2021, the Paris Olympics did not include as much social justice activism (SJA). Instead, athletes and fans engaged in what we found to be conflict activism (CA), which is activism focusing on conflicts between nations or within a country. Fans and protesters took part in a marches that honored fallen Ukrainian athletes who fought in the Russia-Ukraine war, demonstrated during a race to show solidarity with Palestine, and were disqualified from competition after showcasing a “Free Afghan Women” cape during Afghani breakdancer and refugee athlete Manizha Talash events. Protests during the Paris Olympics, while equally symbolic, were vastly different than what was communicated during the Tokyo Olympics.

Throughout Olympic history, athletes have made symbolic gestures to communicate a range of political statements. The Tokyo Games allowed for leeway with regards to athlete activism, and Rule 50 was relaxed compared to the Paris Games. In Tokyo, Olympic competition occurred amidst the backdrop of the pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. There were no fans. Strict COVID testing and surveillance of athletes were standard. The paradoxes between the Tokyo and Paris Olympics can be witnessed when U.S. track and field athlete Noah Lyles placing third in the men’s 200m a few days after testing positive for COVID. In short, the athlete experience was significantly different in Paris, and to a large extent, so was the viewing experience for audiences around the world.

In 2024, conflicts between Israel and Hamas, the Russian war against Ukraine, and global elections shifted what Olympic athletes protests from SJA to CA. Conflict Activism (CA) emphasizes and articulates a sense of unity through displaying how protesters align themselves with a particular side of regional conflicts. While demonstrators gathering at a cycling event or marching prior to the Olympics may look similar to the Tokyo Games, the type of conflict protesters are advocating for is different. Social justice activism (SJA) communicates demands about equality for historically marginalized and under-represented groups (women; LGBTQI+; people of color; ability/disability; etc.). Frequently, athletes who engage in this activism are often members of these groups. Conversely, CA communicates demands for citizens of countries brought about by war or oppression from their government, and

are typically performed by people who are not always citizens of those countries or members of a particular group.

One form of activism is not morally superior or inferior to another. At the Paris Games, CA framed unity differently than SJA. Unity became accessible to people, and upheld Olympic virtues that promote rallying behind the athletes competing for your country. It is here that CA becomes distinct from political activism. The invitation to watch or become involved may be perceived as less threatening than social justice protests due to its emphasis on war, something that many Americans have never experienced first-hand. CA may not receive as much audience opposition and resistance compared to SJA, especially when placed within the broader context of sport and occurring at the Olympics.

To measure activism solely from the viewers perspective also misses the mark entirely—the act of protest is deeply personal, and the struggle experienced by people is what drives the passionate motivation fueling the message. But audience acceptance of a protest message is important. Peeling back the layers of both SJA and CA causes us to understand, and acknowledge the perspectives of the people involved and why mobilizing to bring about change is so vital.

In the U.S., the tension between sports and politics is still polarizing for many people. CA may be less inflammatory than social justice demands. SJA requires audiences to acknowledge their own biases and beliefs, whereas CA may communicate more universally-held beliefs about death and sacrifice that come with war. In the U.S., groups who engage in backlash or dissent over athletes engaging in SJA be more open to athlete and fan demonstrations about conflict. Perhaps a main reason for this, arguably, widespread acceptance is that the CA in Paris may not directly impact as many Americans as SJA. Strategies used by athletes to amplify their message take on greater importance as activism continues, attracts diverse audiences, and becomes appealing to athletes. As Los Angeles prepares for the 2028 Summer Games, the resources available to athletes and people protesting will only increase. The need to balance the form and content of activist expression may need to be balanced against wider audience acceptance of the message.



Dr Anthony Cavaiani

Associate Professor of Communication in the College of Art, Design, & Media at William Woods University, USA. He teaches courses in communication and sport, persuasion, and argumentation, among others. His research examines the intersection of rhetoric, sport, and space/place.

Email: acavaiani10@gmail.com



Dr Megan Klukowski
English Faculty at Columbia Public Schools, USA. She teaches classes in English Composition and World Studies. Her research studies the relationships between gender, emotional intelligence, and burnout in educational leadership.

Email: megan.a.klukowski@gmail.com

Anti-Olympics activism



Prof Jules Boykoff

Professor and Politics and Government Department Chair at Pacific University, USA. He teaches political science. Jules is author of six book on the politics of the Olympics, most recently, What Are the Olympics For?

Email: boykoff@pacificu.edu

Twitter: [@JulesBoykoff](https://twitter.com/JulesBoykoff)

When activist Natsuko Sasaki took the stage at the “Counter-Opening Ceremony of the Olympics” the evening before the official opening of the Paris 2024 Summer Games, she had a special surprise. Partway through her remarks in front of more than a thousand people gathered at Place de la République, the activist with the group [Saccage 2024](#) revealed that she possessed the “Anti-Olympics Torch.” First created in Vancouver to protest the 2010 Winter Olympics, the alternative torch had wended around the world, bouncing to London, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo. The torch, a toilet plunger decorated with cloth ribbons displaying anti-Games slogans made by groups in numerous Olympic cities, symbolized resolute international resistance to the Olympics, regardless of host city.

Sasaki was speaking at an event featuring more than eighty grassroots organizations, from environmental groups to trade unions to civil-liberties collectives. Ahead of the event, these groups released a joint statement “Des Jeux, mais pour qui?” (“Games, but for whom?”). Members of the watchdog group [Vigilance JO \[Jeux Olympiques\]](#) [Saint Denis](#) were present with banners and fliers on issues related to Saint Denis, the area in northern Paris that featured the Olympic Village which received a sharp dose of gentrification from hosting the Games. Groups were supplemented by hundreds of pro-Palestinian activists waving flags and asking why Israel was allowed to participate in the Paris Games, despite the ravages it was inflicting on Gaza. One sticker affixed to an activist’s shirt sleeve read, “Genocide Is Not An Olympic Sport.”

One of the prime movers behind activism challenging the Paris Olympics was the activist collective [Le Revers de la Médaille](#) (the Other Side of the Medal). The group zeroed in on the displacement processes that intensified ahead of the Olympics, and continued during the Games themselves. They dubbed this “nettoyage social,” or social cleansing. Paul Alauzy, a spokesperson for the group, explained, “In Paris, the social cleansing can be understood with a double logic of dispersion: a dispersion within the Olympic city’s public space, to avoid tent cities, slums, squats, and disperse the marginalized people, and a dispersion within the whole country, so that to delocalize the unwanted and push the misery away from the Olympic city.”

Security forces in the Olympic host country also take advantage of the exception the Games bring to militarize weapons stocks done to protect the Olympic spectacle from terrorist attacks. However, the same weapons and control tactics can also be wielded against activists. This dynamic unfolded in Paris on 28 July 2024 when Noah Farjon, an anti-Olympics activist with [Saccage](#) 2024, was in the process of shepherding two

journalists toward a “Toxic Tour” of Saint Denis led by Natsuko Sasaki.

These Toxic Tours are mobile informational events involving journalists, local advocates, and others that enable them to better understand the impacts that the Paris 2024 Games were having on working-class people in Saint Denis. Before the journalists and activist were able to join the group for the tour, four police cars blocked them as they emerged from the Saint Denis-Porte de Paris Metro stop. After carrying out identity check and physical searches, the police discovered hand-outs and stickers critical of the Olympics. The police arrested all three of them—including the journalists—and brought them into custody, where they stayed for 10 hours. Their charges were eventually dropped. After his release, Farjon said that the Paris Games instigated “a lockdown on dissent” and that “Paris is basically under occupation.” A few days later, Farjon was arrested again while organizing another Toxic Tour this one focused, ironically, on police repression.

Modern-day anti-Games campaigns typically bring together already-existing movements and advocates into temporary coalitions that pool resources to contest the political logic of the Olympics. This has made anti-Olympics organizing more of an extended *moment* of movements than a *movement* of moments, per se. As such, anti-Olympics activism is less a social movement and more what political scientist Sidney Tarrow calls an event coalition: a temporary convergence of activist organizations that coalesce around common goals, tactics, and strategies during a particular episode of contention.

In recent years, though, activists have moved to create a transnational social movement that transcends a particular host city and is sustained between Games. With leadership from anti-Games groups in Tokyo and Los Angeles, activists staged the [first-ever transnational anti-Olympics summit](#) in Tokyo in 2019. Activists converged to share stories and strategies emerging from their battles in Japan, South Korea, France, Brazil, England, the US, and elsewhere. This was followed by a [second international summit](#) in Paris in 2022.

Activists in Los Angeles from the group [NO-lympicsLA](#) are prime movers in this milieu. They issued a solidarity statement with activists in Paris. With the Los Angeles 2028 Summer Olympics on the horizon, anti-Games activism will continue to be an important political dynamic to track.



Natsuko Sasaki speaks at the "Counter-Opening Ceremony of the Olympics" in Paris, 25 July 2024.
Photo credit: Jules Boykoff

Cover and section images:

Section 1

Blind football courts.

Photo by John Pendygraft. Assistant Teaching Professor of Visual Journalism
Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications. Penn State University.

Section 2

Gymnastics podium

Photo by Leandro Couri/Estado de Minas/No Ataque

Section 3

Frech celebration

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Section 4

Leon Marchand

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Section 5

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