

**“The Bloody Olympics Down Under”:
Sport, Politics and the 1956 Melbourne Games****Introduction**

A historical analysis of sport demonstrates that sports have frequently been used as an outlet for promoting political agendas (Tomlinson & Young, 2006; Allison, 1986). Whether it is by promoting political ideals through propaganda, or expressing national unity through sport, politics repeatedly penetrate the realm of sports and may hinder the integrity of the institution as a whole (Sage & Eitzen, 2009). Of all the types of sporting events that exist, the Olympics serve as one of the most powerful vehicles of influence due to the worldwide participation and widespread media attention they receive (Associated Press, 2008). In this report, we intend to describe and explore the political climate of the 1956 Summer Olympics and the mobilization of the Games for political purposes. The 1956 Games were held in Melbourne, Australia, and proved to be one of the most groundbreaking Games up until that point in history (International Olympic Committee, 2009a).

Several politically significant events took place, and several changes within the organizational structure of the Olympics occurred throughout the 1956 Games. Through this report, we will describe the significant changes enacted during the Melbourne Games, including the first boycott in Olympic history and the creation of the first united parading of athletes during the Closing Ceremony. More specifically, this report will outline the global political climate of 1956 and will explore the particular events in these Olympics that stemmed from them. Particular attention will be paid to the conflict between Hungary and the Soviet Union, the Suez Crisis, and the broken relations of China and Taiwan. With its drastic firsts and the political controversies surrounding the Games, the 1956 Melbourne Summer Olympics stand out as one of the most revolutionary to date.

The Sport-Politics Nexus

Modern sports have been driven by political and ideological motives since their emergence in the 19th Century and have been used as tools for political purposes throughout their long history (Mangan,

1986). Research has identified the five main political uses of sport as a vehicle for propaganda, for promoting nationalism, as an opiate for the masses, as a vehicle for change, and as a socializing agent (Sage & Eitzen, 2009). The two political mobilizations of sport that will be addressed in this report, related to the 1956 Olympics, are 1) sport as a vehicle for nationalistic expressions and 2) sport as a vehicle for change.

Defining nationalism is often problematic because of the contextual nature of the term (Maguire et al 2002). However, it has been argued that nationalism involves promoting a country's culture and beliefs, establishing national identity, and asserting recognition and dominance on an international level (Cronin, 1999). The involvement of government and politics is often motivated by the desire for national prestige, and countries commonly try to assert dominance through sport (Coakley, 2009). The 1936 Olympics in Berlin and the 2008 Olympics in Beijing are powerful examples of global sports events that have been used for nationalistic purposes. The Nazi Party exploited the Olympics in 1936 in an ostentatious attempt to promote their anti-Semitic ideals and to establish the dominance of the Aryan race and Germany over other countries in sport (Large, 2007). That year, Germany did win the most gold and total medals at the Games (IOC, 2009b). However, the degree to which Hitler's goal was successful was tempered by the feats of athletes such as Jesse Owens.

Driven by a similar desire to promote the strength of their ideological position, the Chinese government spent an estimated \$65 billion dollars in preparation for the Beijing Games in order to display China as a successful and supreme nation (Coakley, 2009). Despite the fact that promoting nationalism at the Olympics is very prevalent, it seems contradictory to the ultimate goals of the Games, as evoked in the Olympic Charter (IOC, 2010). The Olympic Charter positions the Games as a unifying agent that breaks down the barriers and prejudices that separate countries (IOC, 2010). However, others argue that the intensified patriotism and quest for prestige present during Olympic competition only further upholds the divisions existing between nations that are fueled and established through sport (Sugden & Bairner, 1986).

One of the more beneficial ways in which sport can be used politically is as a vehicle for change. For example, through the Olympics, racial ideologies can be challenged on an international scale. Jesse Owens, an African-American athlete, won four gold medals during the 1936 Games, thus challenging the Nazi ideology surrounding the dominance of the Aryan Race. Furthermore, mega sports events can be used to draw attention to social inequities and oppression. For example, during the 1968 Olympics two

African-American sprinters named Tommy Smith and John Carlos enacted a black power salute on the medal podium as a call for attention to the Civil Rights Movement ongoing in the USA.

Drawing attention to national problems, such as war or human rights issues, through these events *may* bring about progressive change. Indeed, a central goal of the Olympic Movement is to use sport as a way to promote “a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity” (IOC, 2010). The most recent Summer Olympics in Beijing brought worldwide attention to China’s human rights violations however, the degree to which any long-term change in China’s human rights record has been observed is under debate (Spencer, 2008). Although there were hopes that the situation in China would improve, many believe that China did not fulfill its bid promises to improve human rights, betrayed core Olympic values, and even used the Games as a means to continue unjust actions. Several Chinese citizens who threatened China’s harmonistic façade were jailed, and some even lost their homes in order to accommodate the construction of Olympic facilities (Spencer, 2008; MacLeod, 2009).

Furthermore, change may be detrimental to society as a whole, especially when certain propaganda is employed. In retrospect, it can be argued that the Nazis should not have been allowed to manipulate the Games to the extent that they did seeing as their ideals were in direct conflict with those outlined by the International Olympic Committee. The Olympic Charter states, the “practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport without discrimination of any kind” and that such discrimination “is incompatible with belonging to the Olympic Movement” (IOC, 2010). The influence of politics in sport has both benefits and disadvantages, and the main problems result when sport becomes solely a means for exploitation and when the values upon which sport is based are jeopardized. Several examples throughout history show that the Olympic Games have been a popular international political platform to promote ideologies to the vast array of participants and viewers (Miller, 2003).

History of the Modern Olympic Games

The Olympic Games first originated in Ancient Greece in 776 B.C. and continued until 394 A.D. when the Emperor Theodosius I of Rome banned them (Daley & Kieran, 1965). The Games were created to celebrate the youthful and militaristic Greek culture, as well as to honor the gods, and originally only consisted of a sprint race (Daley & Kieran, 1965). Slowly the Games expanded to include events such as wrestling and chariot races (Spivey, 2005). Through these events, the importance of hard work, fair play,

and competition was fostered, but at the same time, the Ancient Games became rampant with bribery, commercialism, and match-fixing (Kieran & Daley, 1965). One interesting characteristic of the Ancient Olympics was the temporary halt of wars during the Games in order to keep the peace between conflicting states, which exemplifies peace and unity values that have translated into the Modern Olympics (Spivey, 2005).

After centuries without the Olympic Games, the French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin revived the Modern Olympics in 1896 (Miller, 2003). De Coubertin was captured by the idea of the amateur athlete and the appeal to fair play and peace that the Ancient Olympics emphasized and gained enough support to revive the Games. The first Modern Games were held in Athens, a political decision driven in part, by a desire, to gain legitimacy for the revived event (Daley & Kieran, 1965). Over a century later, the Olympics are still going strong and remain a major platform for political purposes. Some of the most politically significant games include the Summer Olympics of '36, '56, '68, '72, '96, and 2008. However, for the purpose of this report attention will be directed to the Summer Olympics of 1956.

The Political Climate of the 1956 Olympics

The Summer Olympics of 1956 took place in Melbourne, Australia and established several firsts for the Olympic organization as a whole. The International Olympic Committee chose this location over Buenos Aires, Argentina, by a margin of one vote, making these Games the first to be held in the Southern Hemisphere (IOC, 2009a). However, Australia had strict laws and regulations pertaining to the quarantine of horses entering the country so the equestrian sports could not be held there (IOC, 2009a). To solve this dilemma, the equestrian competitions were held in Stockholm, Sweden in June of 1956, which marked the only time in which the unity of time and place of the Olympics, specified by its Charter, has been broken (IOC, 2009a).

During the time preceding the Melbourne Olympics, the world was experiencing much political turmoil. The Cold War was at its peak, and several countries were feuding. Hungarian and Soviet relations came to a head once Hungary, a founding member of the Warsaw Pact, made attempts at de-Stalinization, a move that did not sit well with the Soviet Union (Lomax, 1976). On October 23, 1956 the Hungarian revolution was sparked by a group of students who called for political freedom and democracy, as well as the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary. The students symbolically demonstrated their unrest by bringing down a statue of Stalin (Lomax, 1976). The Hungarian people reappointed Former

Prime Minister Imre Nagy, and martial law was imposed on the country with Soviet forces being used to tame the insurgents (Gati, 2006). After a week of fighting, Nagy withdrew Hungary's allegiance to the Warsaw Pact by declaring its neutrality. On November 4th, Soviet troops seized control of Budapest and ultimately regained Hungary with the result of a crumbled Nagy government and several Hungarian lives lost in the name of their revolutionary cause (Gati, 2006).

Another significant political conflict taking place around the time of the Melbourne Olympics was the Suez Crisis. The groundwork for the crisis occurred on July 26, 1956 following the United States retraction of grant money meant to assist with the construction of Egypt's Aswan High Dam (Meisler, 1995). Following the retraction of these funds, the President of Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal. Upset over the move to nationalize the canal because of its valuable location, French and British politicians instigated plans to invade Egypt; the Israeli Government was making similar plans and made the first move by beginning attacks on October 29, 1956 (Meisler, 1995). An ultimatum was given to the Israelis and Egyptians to withdraw their forces, and French and British forces began their air strikes on October 31st when Israel and Egypt did not comply (Meisler, 1995). A cease-fire was established the next day, and the inaugural United Nations Emergency Force was created to keep the peace until political dealings were resolved (Meisler, 1995).

The last major issue permeating the political climate of 1956 was the broken relations between China and Taiwan. In 1949, the Kuomintang nationalist party lost the Chinese Civil War to the Communists and its leader Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan with almost two million refugees (Roy, 2003). Chiang believed the government in China to be illegitimate and hoped to eventually regain the mainland. Native Taiwanese islanders began to resent the mainland refugees, and an eruption of conflict between the two groups led Chiang to impose martial law on Taiwan for the next thirty-eight years at the cost of thousands of Taiwanese lives (PBS, 2000). Relations between Communist China and Taiwan were at a stand still, and these bitter emotions were extended to the Chinese withdrawal of Olympic participation in 1956.

The Political Agenda of the 1956 Games

The political agenda of these feuding countries was made very clear during the Melbourne Olympics. Because of the political conflicts, the Olympics saw the first ever boycott of the Games. The Games began on November 22nd without the presence of several countries. Spain, Switzerland, and the

Netherlands withdrew because of the Soviet invasion of Hungary while Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq did not participate because of the Suez Crisis, and China refused to take part in the event because Taiwan was to have a team present (IOC, 2009a). These boycotts were politically significant because it was the first time that a boycott of the Olympics had occurred, and it demonstrates the connection between sport and politics. Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and China established their standing toward political events and voiced their opinion through sport and the Olympics, which was groundbreaking. Although these political statements were significant, events that actually occurred within the realm of the Olympic competition are more often remembered.

When many people think of the 1956 Summer Olympics, the event that is frequently remembered is the “Blood in the Water” water polo match. During the Games, Hungary and the Soviet Union were scheduled to play against each other in water polo. Just weeks before the Games, a revolt in Hungary had been halted by the Soviets in which thousands of Hungarians died (Gati, 2006). When the Hungarian team arrived at the Olympic village, they removed the Hungarian flag that bore a Communist symbol and replaced it with a Free Hungary banner. Emotions were running high between the Hungarian and Soviet players and they became evident during the match. The captains of each team refused to shake hands, and the game became very violent and physical. With time running out and the Hungarians leading 4-0, a Soviet player blatantly punched Hungarian player Ervin Zador in the eye (Corwin, 2008). The pool deck became flooded with angry Hungarian fans, and a referee ended the match early; police also intervened in order to prevent a fight amongst fans and the athletes. With blood running down his face, Zador was escorted to receive first aid, and the Hungarian team ended up winning the Gold medal by beating Yugoslavia in a later match. As Zador later recalled,

We were yelling at them, ‘you dirty bastards. You come over and bomb our country’. They were calling us traitors. There was fighting above the water and fighting beneath the water (Corwin, 2008).

The “Blood in the Water” game powerfully illustrates the frequent inability for sports to be devoid of political influences.

Other events occurred during these Olympics that may not be as memorable as the “Blood in the Water” match but are still just as politically relevant. During these Games, the International Olympic Committee succeeding in bringing East Germany and West Germany together to play as one team (IOC, 2009a). They did so only for the following two Olympic Games, but the ability to unite the politically

divided zones was very progressive seeing as it took nearly four more decades for the two to become unified as Germany again. Another event that showcases the unifying power of sport was the reorganization of the Closing Ceremony. Previously athletes had marched by country, but upon the idea of Australian John Ian Wing, athletes were allowed to parade together as one during the ceremony for the first time (IOC, 2009a). This action became a symbol of international unity, and this style of the Closing Ceremony remains today. The events witnessed during the 1956 Melbourne Olympic show just how intertwined politics and sport are. Almost every single significant event during the Games dealt with either political conflict or political ideals. Ideally, the Olympics intend to build a peaceful and better world by educating the youth through sport, but as the Melbourne Games show, violence and personal agendas often overshadow the values upon which the games were founded.

The boycotts of the Melbourne Olympics and the events that occurred during the Games showcase the depth of the sport-politics nexus. Of the five political uses of sport, sport as a vehicle for change and the promotion of nationalism are the two main forms that were represented in 1956. The reasons as to why Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq did not attend the Games include a desire for change. These countries were at odds with the political conflicts and dealings that were occurring around the globe, and used the Olympics in order to show their disagreement and desire for change. Each country made an internationally recognized political statement by withdrawing their participation from the Games in an attempt to provoke change amongst the issue of which they took offense, whether it be the conflict between Hungary and the Soviet Union, the Suez Crisis, or the feud between China and Taiwan. Spain, Switzerland, and the Netherlands did not agree with the Soviet aggression in Hungary while Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq were against the invasion of Egypt by Israel, Britain, and France during the Suez Crisis (IOC, 2009a). China was alone in its disagreement with Taiwan's participation in the 1956 Olympics with this dissatisfaction stemming from their 1949 civil war.

The other significant form of political permeation in the Olympics was the promotion of nationalism. "Blood in the Water" is one of the most dramatic examples of differing nationalistic ideals directly meeting head-to-head during the Games. Emotions created by the conflict between Hungary and the Soviet Union were displayed through their players in an attempt to express national pride. When faced with an opportunity to take political frustrations into their own hands, the Hungarian and Soviet players disregarded the high ideals promoted by the Olympics. Key values of fair play, unity, and world peace

were thrown to the side in order to make way for violence, the assertion of dominance of one country over another, pride, and national identification. Once again, politics were shown to have a negative influence in sport. One might ask whether or not such an event would have occurred if not for the political tension between the two countries, and the answer is most likely no.

Nationalism was also an important ideal of China and guided the country's decision to boycott the Games. Bitter feelings arose towards Taiwan's participation in the Olympics due to the previous civil war and the influence of the Kuomintang who fled to the island (Roy, 2003). In addition, nationalist ideals were important in uniting East Germany and West Germany together to compete as one team at these Games. Here sport impacts the political world. Despite the conflict and tension experienced between these two nation states, the two agreed to compete as one team and represent Germany as a whole. The IOC president, Avery Brundage, pointed out that "we have obtained in the field of sport what politicians have failed to achieve so far" (Hill, 1996). Whilst this political unity may not have extended outside of the Olympic realm, the progressive move helped establish, albeit for a short and transient period of time, national patriotism and pride for Germany during an era of serious turmoil.

While politics can influence sport, especially on the grand scale as seen with the Olympics, sport can also have the same affect on politics. Through the boycotts and events seen during the Melbourne Olympics, it is impossible to say that the political climate went completely unaffected. These first boycotting countries sent groundbreaking messages to the world about their tolerance for conflict and political aggression through sport simply by not participating in the Games. The "Blood in the Water" match also exemplified how sport can intensify political problems. If not for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, these global issues and the ultimate resolutions to them may not have been brought to light or fostered.

Concluding Thoughts

The 1956 Summer Olympics in Melbourne, Australia were dominated by political influences and represent one of the most controversial Olympics in history. Sport was primarily used as a vehicle for political change and as an outlet for nationalistic expression, yet these are not the only forms of political influence. The core values of the Olympics, such as fair play and the encouragement of world peace, were challenged and overshadowed as tensions among feuding countries were highlighted. At that time in

history, the Cold War was at a climax, conflict over the Suez Canal was ensuing, and relations between China and Taiwan were problematic. Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and China all boycotted the Olympics for the first time in history, and physical violence was witnessed amongst the players of the warring countries Hungary and the Soviet Union.

Despite the several negative aspects of the Melbourne Olympics, there were in fact positive outcomes that resulted from these infamous Games. East Germany and West Germany were united as one team and the world as a whole was symbolically brought together during the Closing Ceremony when athletes walked as one instead of as separated by country. Overall, the 1956 Summer Olympics acted as a political platform in which world issues were addressed. The relationship between sport and politics exists in an intertwined structure where the two can rarely be separated; they often rely on and need the other. The influence of politics and sport upon each other began centuries ago, remains today, and will continue into the future. Reflecting on the “Blood in the Water” incident several years later, the Hungarian water-polo player Ervin Zador summarized the relationship of sport and politics almost perfectly. He stated, “I wish sports could be exempt from politics, but that's just a dream. It'll never happen” (Corwin, 2008). As unfortunate as it may be, Zador has it right; the sport-politics nexus shows little sign of abating, and will continue to shape the future of global sport.

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