Sociología del Deporte (SD)
Vol. 1 • Número 1 • Junio 2020 • pp. 35-40
ISSN: 2660-8456
DOI: http://doi.org/10.46661/socioldeporte.5009

Recibido/*Received:* 29-06-2020
Aceptado/*Accepted:* 13-07-2020

We are the games[1]: The COVID-19 pandemic and athletes' voices

Somos los juegos[1]: la pandemia de la COVID-19 y las voces de los/as atletas

Peter Donnelly
University of Toronto
peter.donnelly@utoronto.ca

On Sunday evening, March 22, 2020, the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) and the Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC) announced that Canadian athletes would not attend the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics unless they were postponed. On Tuesday, March 24, 2020, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that the Tokyo 2020 Olympics would be postponed for one year.

This paper begins by describing the strong part played by athletes in Canada's decision, and the IOC's decision to postpone the Olympics; continues with a brief examination of the suppression of athlete voices, and their renewed growth in recent years; and concludes with some thoughts on the potential for athletes to continue, given the circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, their increasingly successful struggle against the culture of control that is modern high performance and professional sport.

"Insensitive and irresponsible"

As professional sports leagues in Europe and North America began to close down during the week of March 8, followed by international sports events (including 2020 Olympic qualifying events), athletes who had qualified, or who were waiting to qualify for the Tokyo Olympics became increasingly concerned. The continuing message from the IOC was that the Games would be held, and that athletes should continue to prepare as usual.

By the end of the week, athletes in various countries were beginning to have serious conversations about whether the Games could continue as planned when they were facing quarantine regulations and fear of contagion, closed training facilities, travel bans and postponed qualifying competitions (especially crucial for those seeking the 43% of Olympic positions still to be earned). In Canada, these conversations became more public on Tuesday, March 17th. The IOC released a communiqué stating that it remained "fully committed to… Tokyo 2020, and with more than four months to go… there is no need for drastic decisions at this stage" (Ewing, 2020). That evening, the COC sent an open letter to Canadian national team athletes in support of the IOC's decision.

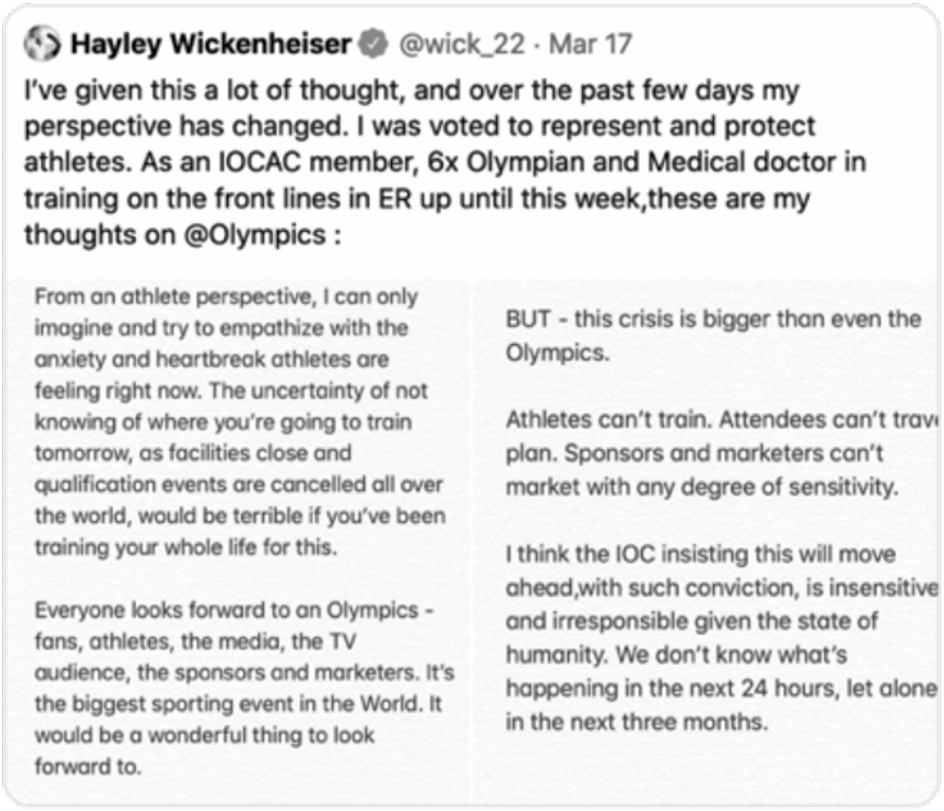
Between the communiqué and the open letter, Hayley Wickenheiser posted a tweet that would make

[1] Acknowledgements. Thank you to Bruce Kidd and Michele K. Donnelly for their careful reading and constructive comments on the first draft of this paper.
The title is intended to paraphrase the slogan of the National Football League Players' Association strike in 1982 (NHLPA, 1981). The union demanded that a percentage (55%) of the total league revenue be assigned to the salaries and benefits of players because, as they had argued in a pamphlet produced the previous year, without the players there would be no league and no games. In other words, 'we are the game'.

a significant contribution to the discussions. Wickenheiser is a 6-time Canadian Olympian, and a 4-time gold medalist in ice hockey. In 2014 she was elected to the International Olympic Committee as a member of the Athletes Commission. She is also (at the time of writing) a 4th year medical student who has been working at Toronto hospitals during the height of the coronavirus pandemic in the city. That frontline medical experience, and her concern for athletes who were unable to train despite messages from the IOC and the COC that they should continue to prepare for Tokyo, led her to contact two other former Canadian Olympians, Becky Scott and Mark Tewksbury, to discuss the situation. Although Wickenheiser, Scott and Tewksbury have all ascended to the international sport establishment, they have remained (unlike so many others who have made the same ascent) activists on behalf of athletes.[2]

Following their discussion, Wickenheiser posted a long tweet calling the IOC's failure to make a firm decision about Tokyo "insensitive and irresponsible" (see Figure 1). The following day, March 18, IOC President Thomas Bach held a conference call with over 200 athlete representatives to assure them that the IOC would "keep acting in a responsible way that is in the interest of the athletes" (Morgan, 2020). But Wickenheiser's tweet was spreading rapidly and other athletes (e.g., Katerina Stefanidi, the Greek pole vaulter) and former athletes (e.g., Sir Matthew Pinsent, the British rower) also began to criticize the IOC's position. And Wickenheiser received a message of censure from the IOC, stating 'what a pity' it was that she had spoken out without permission. "My message back to them was that we could agree to disagree, but I thought they would be on the wrong side of history on this one" (cited by Rowbottom, 2020a, 2020b).

Figure 1. Screenshot of tweet from Hayley Wickenheiser, March 17, 2020



[2] Wickenheiser, as noted, is an IOC member; she has been partnering recently with Canadian actor Ryan Reynolds to fund and collect 'personal protective equipment' for health care workers. Scott also served as a member of the IOC Athletes Commission between 2006 and 2014, and until recently she chaired the World Anti-Doping Agency's Athletes Commission. Tewksbury joined the international sport establishment for a short time before resigning to found OATH, an athlete organization to hold the IOC to its own ideals. He served as Chef de Mission for the Canadian team at the London Olympics, has been active in support of gay athletes, and is now a director of the COC.

By the end of the week athletes around the world had inserted themselves into the discussion. It became increasingly clear that no decision about the future of the Tokyo Games could occur without them. Rosie MacLennan, a Canadian Olympian with 2 gold medals in trampoline, and a member of the COC Athletes Commission, began to put the issue into perspective noting that, "...the pandemic is so much bigger than sport," and "we need to be a citizen before an athlete at this time." On Saturday, March 21, AthletesCAN (the Canadian national team athletes' association) sent a message to its members noting that IOC "communication has lacked empathy in recognizing athletes as humans first, and athletes second" (Estefanell, 2020).

Some national sport federations (e.g., USA Swimming, Swimming Canada and USA Track and Field) also joined in the call for postponement of Tokyo 2020.

Under increasing pressure, the IOC announced on Sunday, March 22 that it would make a decision about whether the Games would be postponed in four weeks. Meanwhile the COC and the CPC had scheduled all day meetings to decide whether Canadian athletes would be sent to Tokyo if the Games were to be held as scheduled. The COC Athletes Commission was a key part of those meetings and, by the end of the day a decision had been made that, if the Games were to proceed on July 24, Canadian athletes would not be there.

It was an enormously difficult decision to make. The COC and the CPC had broken ranks with the IOC -- with all of the potential future sanctions that might cause -- and it was a heartbreaking decision for athletes to make. And yet some athletes also pointed out that the heartbreak was mixed with some feelings of relief. As Tricia Smith, COC President said, adding further perspective to the decision, "Lives are at risk, so c'mon. Sport, in terms of that, is pretty far down the line" (Kelly, 2020).

Canada's decision was quickly affirmed as Australia and Norway joined in to say that their athletes would not attend if the Games were not postponed, and on March 24 the IOC announced that the Games would be postponed.

The rise of athletes' voices[3]

The great monopsonies and monopolies of modern sport (professional leagues, international sport federations, and multi-sport organizations such as the IOC) began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, fueled by the globalization of television, the massive commercialization of sport, by gambling and technological innovation and communication, and in part by the growth of a 'sporting arms' race' as a surrogate for the Cold War. These prolympic sports (Donnelly, 1996) are defined by: i) their extraordinary degree of autonomy -- an implicit and explicit exemption from many aspects of national and international law (Mrkonjic, 2013); ii) an increasing emphasis on outcome (success, victory, excellence, etc.); and iii) an increasing emphasis on control, which is related to a decreasing ability on the part of athletes to determine the form, the circumstances, and the meanings of their participation.

Prolympic sports may be characterized as a 'culture of control' (Donnelly and Young, 2004), in which high levels of incompetence and corruption have flourished. As Katwala pointed out at the time of the Sydney Olympics, **"**it is difficult to find anything else in the world quite so badly governed as international sport" (2000, 90). The effect of the culture of control on athletes' voices became evident early -- Muhammad Ali being refused his right, in 1966, to become a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, with sport adding a ban on participation to his imprisonment by the state; and John Carlos and Tommie Smith were banned for life from sport in 1968 because of their support for the struggle against racial injustice, and Peter Norman (the silver medalist) was blacklisted by the Australian Olympic Committee for supporting them. The severity of the sanctions was clearly meant as a message to other athletes. There are many examples of athletes protesting and facing sanctions over the years, but the culture of control was still strongly in evidence 50 years later, when Colin Kaepernick was effectively blacklisted from the NFL in 2017 for his protests against racial injustice, despite widespread acknowledgement that his skills could have benefited any number of teams in the following years.

Athletes continued to organize: professional team sport athletes formed unions; national team athletes formed advocacy associations in some countries (e.g., AthletesCAN, Athleten Deutschland); and gained (often marginalized) places on boards of national and international sport organizations, or were even further segregated on Athletes Councils. But the owners and administrators of prolympic sports found it easy to maintain their culture of control. For example, as

[3] Parts of the following section are drawn from Donnelly (2015a, 2015b**)**.

tennis player Vasek Pospisil (2019) recently pointed out, there is no transparency to the economics of tennis tournaments: "The players are given the bare minimum of what the governing bodies feel will avoid a revolution or an extremely angry group of players." Control is aided by the uncertainty of prolympic athletes' careers -- careers that may end with the next injury, with the selection of a talented younger athlete, or as a result of questioning a management decision or voicing an unpopular opinion. In the short career of a prolympic athlete, any form of job action may be seen as an unwarranted risk. And if career uncertainty fails to silence athletes, the IOC has Rule 50 to silence dissent (international federations and professional leagues and tournaments have similar rules). Under the culture of control, the human rights and labour rights of prolympic athletes are routinely violated.

Despite all of this, the voice of athletes has been on the rise in recent years. It has been aided by the increasing power of celebrity, by social media, by first hand evidence (from athlete board members) of the incompetence and corruption of many who are 'in charge' of sport, and by increasing evidence from investigative journalists and 'public sociologists' of sport who are pulling back the curtain on the culture of control. This work helps athletes to outline, and give voice to a path to good governance in sport (democratic, transparent and accountable), and toward a sport culture that respects the human and labour rights of athletes.

COVID-19 and the future of athletes' voices

"[O]ne can hope that one of the unintended consequences of the coronavirus quarantines in cities around the world will be that some people at least will use their time released from hectic activity and think about the (non)sense of their predicament" (Zizek, 2020, p. 57).

Even before their release "from hectic activity" many athletes were reflecting on "the (non)sense of their predicament." The theme for the October 2019 Play the Game conference was, *Athlete Power on the Rise*, and delegates heard athletes speaking strongly against Russian state doping, about athlete abuse and safe sport, about whistleblowing and activism, and about corruption and good governance in sport. Even before the conference, athletes had begun to speak publicly about issues of, for example, historical abuse (e.g., numerous female gymnasts in the US, male soccer players in the UK, and many, many others) and current abuse (e.g., Afghani and Haitian women's national soccer teams, and many, many others), racial and gender injustice, and other violations of human rights. And when the pandemic began, athletes had time -- despite other pandemic related commitments such as caring for family members -- to "think about the (non) sense of their predicament," and their reasoned arguments drove the IOC to postpone the Olympics.

Evidence of athletes' use of their available time was everywhere. The recently established Centre for Sport and Human Rights (2020) produced "guidance for sport on how to respond to the COVID-19 crisis." Prolympic, and especially professional athletes were extensively involved in return to play negotiations with their teams and leagues. Others used available time to work towards abuse prevention policy, often in the face of resistance from their national sport organizations. Global Athlete continued its work with, and on behalf of national team athletes everywhere and, with Ryerson University produced a report outlining precisely how little of Olympic revenue goes to athletes (4.1% of $1.4bn in annual revenue) (Bradish, Koehler and Bailey, 2019).[4]

And then, on May 26, George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer. And while this evil event appears to have nothing to do with the coronavirus or sport, so many people -- including athletes -- had available time because of the pandemic to respond to issues of racial injustice that had long been simmering. "[E]ven horrible events can have unpredictable consequences" (Zizek, 2020, p. 58). Perhaps as important as 'time' is athletes having a sense of release, at least temporarily, from the culture of control, and a growing sense of solidarity with other athletes. At the time of writing, that response is evident around the world with people demonstrating in solidarity with Black Americans, but also in response to racial injustice and police violence in their own countries. Athletes' voices have been prominent in this, from the Bundesliga to the NBA, and the consequences have been astonishing. The NFL apologized, admitting it

[4] The report was completed in December, 2019, but not released until April 23, 2020: https://semiprodint.ryerson.ca/tedrogersschool/news-events/2020/04/the-future-of-olympic-movement-and-collective-bargaining-for-athletes/Global
Athlete (2020) echoed the NFLPA (Note 1) and the title of this paper, on June 14, when they stated: "Athletes rarely get a say on the rules and development of sport, despite being the most important stakeholder. Without athletes, sport does not exist."

was mistaken in its treatment of Kaepernick; the Boston Red Sox have admitted to racist behaviour among their fans; NASCAR has banned confederate flags. Many sports organizations have posted announcements in support of Black Lives Matter. The responses from FIFA and the IOC would have been impossible to imagine just a few weeks ago, but athletes are now attuned to hypocrisy, and their new found voice is being heard (Figure 2).

The two pandemics -- COVID-19 and racism -- have each helped to boost athletes' voices. There is a surprising parallel between responses of states and the responses of the sports establishment. "Those in charge of the state are in a panic because they know not only that they are not in control of the situation, but also that we… know this" (Zizek, 2020, p. 124). We all hope that the pandemic is creating the possibility of new alternatives for societies, for a new social contract. And we hope that athletes' voices have now been released from the culture of control to continue their demands for fairness, equity, and human and labour rights.

Figure 2: Screenshot of tweet from a Canadian national team track athlete

References

Bradish, Cheri, Rob Kohler and Andrew Bailey. 2019. *Olympic Commercialization and Player Compensation: A review of Olympic financial reports*: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c8a203ac46f6d6629eac1f4/t/5ea0788e6944957714622d5f/1587574929736/2020.04.22+Olympic+Commercialization+and+Player+Compensation+FINAL.pdf

Centre for Sport and Human Rights. 2020. *Putting People First: Guidance for sport on how to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.* May 6: https://www.sporthumanrights.org/uploads/resources/Putting_People_First.pdf

Donnelly, Peter. 1996. "'Prolympism': Sport monoculture as crisis and opportunity." *Quest*, 48(1), 25-42.

Donnelly, Peter. 2015a. What if the players controlled the game: Dealing with the consequences of the crisis of governance in sports. *European Journal of Sport and Society*, 12 (1), 11-31.

Donnelly, Peter. 2015b. We are the Game?: Player democratization and the reform of sport governance. In, Y. Vanden Auweele, E. Cook & J. Parry (eds.), *Ethics and Governance in Sport: The Future in Sport Imagined.* London: Routledge, pp. 102-108.

Donnelly, Peter and Kevin Young (2004). Sport violence and the culture of control. Paper presented at the Olympic Scientific Congress, Thessaloniki, Greece, August 5–10.

Estefanell, Ignacio. 2020. AthletesCAN claims IOC lacking in empathy as Olympic debate heats up.

March 22: https://www.cbc.ca/sports/olympics/athletescan-olympic-empathy-debate-ioc-postpone-1.5505947

Ewing, Lori. 2020. Canadian athletes call IOC statement on Games insensitive and tone deaf. *Globe and Mail*, March 18: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/sports/olympics/article-canadian-athletes-call-ioc-statement-on-games-insensitive-and-tone/

Katwala, Sunder. 2000. *Democratising Global Sport*. London: The Foreign Policy Centre.

Global Athlete. 2020. Global Athlete calls for the IOC & IPC to immediately abolish Olympic Charter Rule 50. June 14: https://www.sportsintegrityinitiative.com/global-athlete-calls-for-the-ioc-ipc-to-immediately-abolish-olympic-charter-rule-50/

Kelly, Cathal. 2020. Canada's decision to pull out of July Olympics led the world. *Globe and Mail*, March 23: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/sports/article-canadas-decision-to-pull-out-of-july-olympics-led-the-world/

Morgan, Liam. 2020. Athletes begin taking IOC to task over Tokyo 2020 stance. *Inside the Games*, March 19: https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1092141/athletes-take-ioc-to-task-coronavirus

Mrkonjic, Michaël. 2013. Sport organisations, autonomy and good governance. https://www.playthegame.org/fileadmin/documents/Good_governance_reports/AGGIS-report_-_13Sports_organisations__autonomy_and_good_governance__p_133-150_.pdf

NFLPA. 1981. *Q. Why a Percentage of the Gross? A. Because We are the Game: A Report to Members of the National Football league Players' Association*. (September).

Pospisil, Vasek. 2019. Tennis needs change if it wants to restore fairness and transparency. *Globe and Mail*. August 2: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/sports/tennis/article-tennis-needs-change-if-it-wants-to-restore-fairness-and-transparency/

Rowbottom, Mike 2020a. Wickenheiser at the frontline as she takes on the IOC and COVID-19.

Inside the Games, April 12:

Rowbottom, Mike. 2020b. Exclusive: Olympian Wickenheiser reveals how she was criticised by IOC over comments calling for Tokyo 2020 postponement. *Inside the Games*, April 12:

Zizek, Slavoj. 2020. *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*. London: O/R Books.