

Field : Sports Management

Type : Review Article

Received: 10.09.2016 - Accepted: 17.11.2016

Sport as a Facilitator of Positive International Relations

Robert C. SCHNEIDER

The College at Brockport, State University of New York, USA

Email: rschneid@brockport.edu

Abstract

Through improved international relations, sport can facilitate the positive resolution of contemporary global problems (Valeryevich, 2015). Not being deterred by negatives associated with sport such as anti-social behaviors (Marasescu, 2013), government's promotion of harmful agendas through propaganda (Clark, 2005; Bairner, 2009), and persistence in the interest of promoting good through sport is especially important. A convenient facilitator of positive relations, sport resonates across peoples and governments regardless of the present state of relationships. Whether it be a dire economy, racial division, or even war, sport may suffer interruption but eventually it continues (Tope, 2008). As a shared international activity, sport can promote goodwill between nations through interactions (Tomlinson & Young, 2011) that form friendships, loyalties, and bonds (Darnell, 2010; Darnell & Black, 2011) that are developed among persons representing different nations. A mutually beneficial sharing and understanding of culture between international sporting event host nations and guests, results from interactions (Canavan, 2016), which can reinforce national identity (Field, 2014; Gorokhov, 2015; Lenger & Schumacher, 2015), yet also create positive impressions between persons across nations. If global citizens maintain an open mind and optimism, sport, as a facilitator can, in fact, enhance international relations.

Keywords: Athletes, nationalism, politics, globalization, sporting community

Introduction

Whether or not sport can actually facilitate a positive effect on international relations is debatable. Arguments could be presented supporting sports use by nations to promote negative agendas. However, on balance, sports overall role as a facilitator of positive international relations is a constructive one even if the positive effects may not be visibly and clearly impacting.

Sport, under the ambitious suggestion by Valeryevich (2015), can be used to help resolve the following contemporary global problems: poverty, peace and security, disarmament, human rights, democracy, demography, ecology, energy, and medical care. Nations, over the course of time, have often used sport, as a shared international activity to help promote goodwill between nations (Tomlinson & Young, 2011). Three of the most common examples of major international sporting events that bring people from different nations across the globe together are the World Cup, Tour de France, and Olympics.

To what degree any favorable outcomes of international sporting experiences extend beyond the sporting arena into circles such as governments, and society is also debatable. Positive interactions resulting between those directly affiliated with an international sporting event may take place but the question remains as to how those positive interactions are transmitted to international relations beyond sport. Any suggestion that sporting events, on their own, could significantly influence international relations between countries is naïve. Countries that have been immersed in deep seated generations of serious conflict are unlikely to experience a major reversal of political positions as a result of sport or an international sporting event. However positive progress, even if only minimal, can take place through sport.

Realities of Sport's Negative Side

Not to be ignored, and worthy of review, are arguments *against* sport serving as a facilitator to positive relations between nations. Sport's inherent competitive nature and resultant anti-social behaviors pointed out by Marasescu (2013), can hamper friendly relationships. Sporting competitions that assume a win-at-all-cost mentality, can fail to support the development of friendly relationships across competing nations. When teams ruthlessly compete and sometimes are even coached to "hate" the opponent, there are bound to be animosities among those directly affiliated with the competitions. There are many examples related to international competitions where competing teams crossed the line of respectfulness and in more extreme cases civility (Zivkovic, Stamenkovic, & Makovic, 2013). Furthermore, it is not unusual for on-field conflicts to extend beyond the playing field (Goodwill, 2014).

More serious than the reality that sport can cause ill feeling between participants and fans is the argument that sport can incite poor relationships between nations. Equally disturbing is the notion that sporting venues may be used as mediums to promote negative agendas (Kessler, 2011).

In extreme cases, antagonistic nations, whose governments or political factions within nations, are less than friendly toward one another have used sporting events as venues for terroristic activities against one another (Clark, 2004). It must be noted, however, that sporting contests are one of just several platforms from which terroristic groups may choose to carry out their destructive agendas. In addition, the overall risk posed by terrorism is negligible in comparison to other risks, e.g., health conditions and automobile accidents

(Shaver, 2015). Sport is not a cause of nor does it, in anyway, perpetuate terrorism; it is simply one of many potential stages used by terroristic groups. Eliminating sport, therefore, will not eliminate terrorism, as sport is simply a platform that can be replaced by numerous other platforms that terroristic groups may choose to use.

The potential for negatives from international sport, ranging from ill feelings between participants to major acts of terrorism at the sporting venue cannot be ignored. However, the good from sport appears to take place frequently and if featured effectively can diminish the negatives. Those affiliated with sport hold the responsibility to exploit opportunities presented through sport and realize its many potentially positive outcomes that can improve nations. One's interest in improving international relationships cannot be deterred by the many divisive elements that seem to often occur between some nations. The focus, from a sport standpoint must be to spread goodwill across nations regardless of the possible past harboring of ill-feelings, dislike, and outright hate that may exist between governments.

Important to note is that international sporting events will not dramatically change long-standing perspectives between countries, nor should it be the goal. The more realistic goal is to consistently and persistently create accurate and favorable portrayals of nations, one athlete, coach, official, organizer, or fan at a time. An optimistically proactive approach that takes advantage of opportunities, such as sporting events, to promote goodwill is the approach that will give continued positive interactions between nations a chance.

Resilience of Sport amidst International Differences

Sport is perseverant throughout the best and the worst of times. Its long-term staying power, despite the many negative forces influencing nations is impressive. No matter a countries plight, whether it be a dire economy, racial division, or even war, sport may suffer interruption but eventually it continues (Tope, 2008). In spite of differences that exist between nations, they share the common interest of participating in sport. People, regardless of their nationality, are drawn to sport (Iorwerth, Hardman, & Jones, 2014), and continue to participate in sport despite national problems.

In cases where formal sport structures are not possible, persons, in particular children, can be found improvising in the interest of creating sport participation opportunities. A summer walk through most any neighborhood in the world, will provide frequent sightings of sporting games being played by children, improvised or supervised. Individually, and with friends, people discover ways to create competitions through sport for the sole purpose of their natural desire to compete in sport. Regardless of differences in areas including but not limited to race, religion, and culture that can place nations at odds with one another, people desire to compete in sport. Sport remains a constant despite nations' often wide range of differences.

Friendships, Bonds, and Loyalties through Shared Sporting Experiences

International sporting experiences are opportunities for those representing their nations to develop or reinforce friendships, loyalties, and bonds (Darnell, 2010; Darnell & Black, 2011). Loyalty, as described by Fletcher (1993), is a bond shared by "insiders." Shared insider experiences for those affiliated with the sport experience, in particular athletes, are many. Insiders can be those who share the same family, circle of friends, and, more broadly, the

same nation. The insider experiences that are shared by those affiliated with international sporting events also creates a loyalty between athletes, coaches, trainers, and others who are part of the international sporting experiences. Athletes across nations can also form loyalties, as they share their own set of common experiences that create their own 'insider' group. The development of positive bonds and loyalties between nations that can take place among those affiliated with sporting events can, in fact, support goodwill and peace.

Some loyalties are stronger than others, e.g., bonds with family members and childhood friends are often the strongest, while bonds with friendships formed later in life and co-workers are strong but not as strong as the aforementioned. Somewhere on the list of those with whom a sense of loyalty is felt, are sports teammates, competitors, administrators of the games, and maybe even fans of teams. Regarding international athletes, there can be a shared type of bond described as friendship grounded in respect and/or a loyalty based on a shared understanding of what it means to compete at the international level. Only elite athletes who have experienced international competition can relate to one another on an elite international stage, which places them in a type of fraternity. The loyalties toward those with whom an international sporting event affiliation is shared can fall anywhere on the low, middle, or high end of a loyalty continuum. Teammates are usually on the upper end of the loyalty continuum, whereas athletes from other nations competing against one another are likely to be on the lower end of the loyalty continuum, if on the continuum at all.

Regardless of whether or not international athletes feel a sense of loyalty toward one another across nations, they do share a bond. As a case in point, most Olympians, likely, share a type of bond without ever having met, for it is they and only they who can truly understand what it means to be an Olympic competitor. From the training required, to the pressures to meet the expectations of each and every competitive occasion, it is a unique experience shared by all Olympic athletes. This shared type of bond among international athletes also exists across all members of the international sporting community. Teammates, coaches, administrators, fans, and family members of those directly involved in the sporting event can all form healthy relationships with others who are affiliated with the sporting event, which can transition to goodwill between nations.

Sport and Goodwill between Nations

International goodwill, however, is no more a guarantee than is peace between nations. Nations, with long-standing differences between one another, face what often appear to be insurmountable challenges for good relations. Sport, at its best, can only hope to serve as a means to offering a chance for a conversation that might move in the direction to support good relations between nations. Displays of goodwill can help ease negative relations between governments at odds with one another and can serve as a starting point for a positive conversation. Nations who have a long-standing history of conflict between one another, need to create, identify, or be placed in as many mutually positive experiences as possible. Exploiting nations' common interest in sport through international sporting competitions, allows for the potential of the beginning of productive conversations.

One sporting event, or even sport overall, cannot fully repair antagonistic relationships between nations. However, sport can spread goodwill and can begin to help mend strained relationships between nations who are normally friendly toward one another and support overall progress relative to societal problems (Burnett, 2015). It is important to host nations to

welcome and treat those affiliated with opposing teams, openly and warmly. Putting aside any governmental differences, during competitions during the event is necessary to give positive relations a chance.

Government Influence over Sport

If sport is to offer its purest influence on international relations, the role of government in the production of sport should be minimized. However, it seems that the tendency of government, regardless of type, is to influence and often fully control the processes necessary for their nation's international sporting competition. Inevitably, government is prone to use sport as a self-serving political promotional tool, which often supports the previously existing conditions in terms of international relations. The notion that governments will relinquish control of international competitions is improbable, if not naïve. If governments are the sole directors of international sporting contests, presumably, the current national conditions, for better or for worse, will remain.

Opportunities for healthy interactions between the involved nations can be improved by reducing the role of government in national sport teams. If international competitions are perceived by those surrounding the competitions to be endeavors of sport (instead of government endeavors) there is a better chance that positive relationships will develop among those affiliated with the competitions. The pre-conceived political assumptions toward competing nations is pushed to the side, if only temporarily, when the responsibility of organizing and administrating is assigned to respective countries' national sport's teams. Positive interactions among those affiliated with the competitions can take place between differing nations' sporting communities, which were described by Schneider (2010) as including but not limited to players, friends and family of players, coaches, fans, and athletic administrators.

Governments, though, might be inclined to relinquish some controls to sporting event experts, for the purpose of creating the highest quality sporting experience possible. In the case of governments assigning sport responsibilities to sporting experts, a greater positive relationships between nations can be realized.

Nationalism and Globalization

From a strict standpoint of globalization, one might argue that there is little need to use sport to facilitate positive relationships among nations, as it would be assumed that globalization would seamlessly meld all nations into one. However, in reality the world still consists of nations who proudly embrace and passionately defend their independence.

Sport is used by nations to establish and reinforce national identity (Field, 2014; Gorokhov, 2015; Lenger & Schumacher, 2015). Regardless of a country's agenda to promote nationalism through sport, good can come from national participation in international sporting events. Even though the purpose of a nation's participation in international sporting events might be to reinforce its identity and perpetuate a government agenda, the interactions of those affiliated with the sporting event, i.e., the sporting community, can create positive sentiments between those from different countries.

Interacting with persons from different nations can strengthen or weaken prevailing stereotypes of nations and their people. Nations have always entered into mutually beneficial relationships with other nations for the purpose of strengthening their own nations. Normally a nation will not interact with another, at least at the governmental level, unless there is something to gain from doing so.

Sport as a Path to Positive Dialogue between Nations

Amidst nations' self-serving agendas, sport can fulfill a positive role. In terms of improving or serving as a facilitator of positive international relationships, the role of sport is often subtle, yet effective. Whereas, large scale improvements between nations are unlikely to occur as a result of international sporting events, a beginning to positive dialogue between participating nations is possible.

Positive dialogue from international sporting events can take place in a manner similar to international teaching exchanges, international study exchanges, and international or interregional congresses. It may be less the actual sporting event that serves as the facilitator of positive relationships between nations and more the positive relationships developed from the people, from different nations, affiliated with the event. Whether it be a one-day event, like the International Cricket Council (ICC) Cricket World Cup or an event that spans across several days, like the Olympic Games, relationships between national sporting communities can be developed.

A prerequisite to positive dialogue is an open mind. Opening one's mind to the chance for mending, improving, or reinforcing relationships between nations can be a beginning toward consistent goodwill between those nations. With an open mind, progress toward such things as the removal of learned prejudices can take place through in-person interactions characteristic of sporting events (Allport, 1954). Stereotypes describing persons from respective nations are normal and to be expected. Some depictions of stereotypes are positive, others negative, and all are open to interpretation and all can be minimized with an open mind and good intentions.

Positive progress between nations is possible when their citizens approach interactions with an open mind, respect, kindness, and generosity with those from other nations, as these behaviors shape perceptions. Substantive positive outcomes between nations is possible with good intentions and an open mind.

Persistence in the Interest of Good

When those in control of standing governments are benefitting from current policies that are perpetuating conflict between countries, they may prefer the status quo over change. If the overall status quo is not supportive of good international relations, interactions involving persons from nations at odds with one another are necessary if change for the greater good is to take place. Interactions can also serve to reinforce already existing good relationships between countries. Sport can serve as an agent that allows for interactions between government officials through grassroots citizens. Nations must not be deterred by those benefiting from the status quo who fervently attempt to impede any efforts that support goodwill resulting in the disruption of the status quo.

Given that host nations frequently use major sporting events to promote their country through propaganda (Bairner, 2009), persistence in the interest of promoting good is especially important. Media outlets, government based or otherwise, are influential in promoting their preferred image, supported or not by facts, of respective countries. When large scale nation based marketing efforts are grounded in misinformation, they are difficult to overcome with grass-roots person-to-person interactions between individuals from different nations. Nevertheless, sporting events do offer many opportunities for genuine exchanges that portray one's country accurately, and hopefully favorably.

Hosting and Goodwill

International sporting competitions offer several opportunities to express goodwill beyond the sporting arena. Outside of the competition, the *home* country can use the scheduling of a sporting contest as an opportunity to host the visiting country's teams in a multi-dimensional manner focusing on hospitality. If a nation is serving as a host to international sporting competitions, it can and should feature attractions that will portray its country in a positive light.

Each and every nation throughout the world can offer a unique culture that is interesting, intriguing, and inspiring to other nations. The prospects for host nations to accommodate visiting nations by featuring attractions unique to their cultures are many and may include food, customs, history, recreational activities, and wonders of nature. Attractions exclusive to a host country allow for the all-important interactions between persons of host nations that can lead to goodwill. A mutually beneficial understanding of culture between the host and guest, results from interactions (Canavan, 2016).

Within the sporting arena, it should be a simple matter of choosing to present oneself with an unassuming kindness, as a host nation, to persons from other nations who are sharing the same sporting experience. Notwithstanding such occurrences as overly passionate fan behaviors, sometimes referred to as hooliganism, international sporting events normally offer a safe and secure environment. Sometimes expressions of kindness take place, while other times, person's attitudes and actions toward those from nations other than their own are based on pre-conceived attitudes shaped by sources that may or may not be credible. These "competitive" type behaviors can be overcome with "on the ground" interactions between common people from other countries allowing them to get to know one another. If both residents and governments of host countries are committed to the type of hospitality that guarantees a favorable impression by visiting teams, administrative officials, and fans that leaves them "wanting more," it is a first step toward a positive dialogue between nations.

Furthermore, the hosting of international sporting events presents ample opportunities to bring nations together in an environment that is not centered in politics. Large scale international sporting events offer convenient opportunities for government officials, including heads of state, to informally meet, in a non-political neutral environment (Brownell, 2014). Social gatherings and tourism arranged in conjunction with the host nation of the sporting competition, support goodwill interactions between fans and others affiliated with the competition. If not at the event itself, social gatherings, complementary touristic activities, and even privately arranged meetings offer convenient occasions for fans, citizens, and even government officials including heads of state to interact in environments of neutrality.

Summary Statement

Nations must take advantage of any opportunities where sport can be used to support goodwill across peoples, regardless of nation. International sporting competitions have been and can continue to be an effective agent to reinforce goodwill across nations. To that end, sporting events can help facilitate positive progress between nations whose governments and/or peoples may merely hold different perspectives on issues or who may be in serious conflict with one another. With an open mind and optimism, sport, as a facilitator can, in fact, enhance international relations.

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