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The Significant Insignificance of International Sport in a Global Crisis

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The inherent socio-political tension of sport — that it simultaneously matters and doesn't matter — is never more apparent than in times of global turmoil such as the current COVID-19 crisis. Since mid-March, football (soccer) stadiums have been shuttered, major tennis and golf tournaments cancelled, auto racing and cycling events postponed, and professional leagues in North America put on hold. One week after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach suggested that an on-schedule Summer Olympics in July 2020 could serve as a source of healing and a symbol of human resilience during the global crisis,¹ Canada's public declaration to refuse participation in the Tokyo Games made headlines around the world.² A day later, with pressure mounting from within and beyond the athletic realm, Abe announced a one-year delay to the Tokyo Olympics.

Non-essential Sports and the Spread of COVID-19

With the rapid proliferation of the coronavirus, it only made sense that such non-essential sporting events — which draw massive interregional, sometimes international, crowds and require close interaction among athletes — be, at the very least, suspended. Yet most sport leagues and competitions, like the Olympics, delayed implementing full measures to restrict the transmission of COVID-19. Italy's top professional football league played on until March 10, when the rapidly rising death tolls in Northern Italy forced its suspension. Pan-European football tournaments (e.g., Champions League) and domestic competitions (e.g., the United Kingdom's Premier League) persisted until Mikel Arteta, manager of London-based Arsenal, tested positive for COVID-19 on March 12. In North America, both the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Hockey League (NHL) continued play in packed arenas, while Major League Baseball (MLB) clubs' pre-season preparations carried on as usual in the sunny retirement and spring-break destinations of Florida and Arizona. When professional basketball player Rudy Gobert tested positive for COVID-19 on March 11, the NBA immediately halted play, with the NHL and MLB quickly following suit.

High-profile sport's role in the early days of COVID-19 reflect, in part, the significance of mere games in broader social terms, for better and worse. A Champions League football match on February 19 between the Italian club Atalanta and Spain's Valencia is now described as "Game Zero" by medical officials. Almost 2,500 Valencia followers joined nearly 40,000 Atalanta supporters in Milan to create the perfect conditions for a "biological bomb."³ The deadly spread of the virus across Northern Italy and into Spain, experts conclude, was significantly accelerated by this interregional mass of people converging simply to watch men kick a ball around a field.⁴

¹ Motoko Rich, Matthew Futterman and Tariq Panja, ["I.O.C. and Japan agree to postpone Tokyo Olympics,"](#) *The New York Times*, March 24, 2020.

² ["Coronavirus: Olympic doubts grow as Canada withdraws athletes,"](#) *BBC News*, March 23, 2020; Justin McCurry, ["Tokyo 2020 Olympics in doubt as Canada becomes first team to pull out over coronavirus,"](#) *The Guardian*, March 23, 2020.

³ Mark Critchley, ["A biological bomb: The story of the Champions League game which sparked Italy's coronavirus crisis,"](#) *Independent*, April 6, 2020.

⁴ Similarly, Madrid's mayor, José Luis Martínez-Almeida, and Liverpool's municipal director of public health, Matthew Ashton, both suggest a significant outbreak may be linked to a Champions League game between Atlético Madrid and Liverpool FC played in the English city on March 11. More than 3,000 supporters from Madrid travelled to Liverpool, despite the Spanish capital's partial lockdown measures already in effect. See Kate Proctor, ["Liverpool v Atlético virus links 'interesting hypothesis', says government scientist,"](#) *The Guardian*, April 20, 2020.

Conversely, the cultural appeal of sport has been heralded in North America for awakening the general population to the threat of COVID-19. Some argue that Gobert's positive test, and subsequent postponement of all sporting competitions in North America, mobilized "flattening the curve" protocols by forcing Canadians and Americans to accept that what had been perceived as a Euro-Asian crisis was really a global pandemic capable of penetrating even the bubble of the NBA, NHL and MLB.⁵

The Near Essentialness of Non-essential Sport?

Playing or watching games is not worth perpetuating a deadly and indiscriminating viral pandemic. But in some ways, sports — despite their insignificance — have been treated as pseudo-essential services,⁶ or at least one small step away from "essentialness." Virtually all major sporting leagues and competitions around the world continue, at the behest of national governments, to aggressively strategize their return to play protocols. US President Donald Trump regularly consults with key executives of major North American sporting leagues, insisting in national press briefings that he expects sports to return "sooner rather than later."⁷ Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko goes further, refusing to shut down his country, insisting sport competitions continue.⁸ After playing in an amateur ice hockey game himself, Lukashenko defiantly swept aside questions about the prudence of continuing sporting events during a global pandemic, stating, "It's better to die standing than to live on your knees.... There are no viruses here [at the rink].... I don't see them."⁹

There is a sense, perpetuated by Trump and other high-ranking officials around the world, that sports need to return as soon as possible. Part of the need is certainly grounded in fiscal realities, with financial losses potentially devastating for all but the largest sports clubs in the world. But the rush for sports to return also seems to entail a desire for normalcy, for connection, for entertainment, and to distract us from the devastation enveloping the world around us. As Trump pronounced, "I want fans back in the arenas.... And the fans want to be back, too.... They want to see their sports."¹⁰

Sport as an Opiate of the Masses?

This supposed need for sport, social critic Noam Chomsky argues, parallels Karl Marx's famous (and infamous) description of religion as an "opiate of the masses." Feeling helpless to cognize and influence political affairs,

⁵ Bruce Arthur, "[Accidental hero Rudy Gobert makes North America sit up and take notice of the coronavirus.](#)" *Toronto Star*, March 12, 2020.

⁶ Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, in fact, has declared professional sport businesses (including media partners) as "essential services," provided facilities remain closed to the public. This order includes the Orlando-based World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) — which gives professional (fake) wrestling's most visible entity the green light to continue production. See Yelena Dzhanova, "[Pro wrestling company WWE is an essential business during the coronavirus pandemic, Florida Gov. DeSantis says.](#)" *CNBC.com*, April 14, 2020.

⁷ Alex Reimer, "[Donald Trump saying he wants sports to return soon is short-sighted and causing an uproar.](#)" *Forbes*, April 6, 2020.

⁸ Yuras Karmanau, "[Belarus defiantly keeps playing while the rest of the sports world goes on hiatus.](#)" *The Globe and Mail*, March 30, 2020.

⁹ Reuters, "[Last league standing: Belarusian football basks in new-found popularity.](#)" *The Guardian*, March 29, 2020.

¹⁰ Adam Schefter and Adrian Wojnarowski, "[Sources: President Donald Trump says NFL season should start on time.](#)" *ESPN.com*, April 4, 2020.

Chomsky writes, individuals “might as well live in a fantasy world...using their common sense and intellectual skills, but in an area which has no meaning and probably thrives because it has no meaning, as a displacement from the serious problems which one cannot influence and affect because the power happens to lie elsewhere.”¹¹ Chomsky concludes that “one of the functions that things like professional sports play in our society and others is to offer an area to deflect people’s attention from things that matter, so that the people in power can do what matters without public interference.”¹²

Chomsky is partially right. Sports, even the most serious formulations, are merely games — insignificant and superficial forms of diversionary entertainment, the bread and circuses of the Roman Empire. But this depiction of sport also gives it licence to serve as a safe space for a full range of socio-political uses.

Sport and Socio-political Rehabilitation

From a post-crisis perspective, sport’s high-profile innocuousness provides opportunities to play an important reconstructive role. In 2005, with much of New Orleans’ infrastructure in ruins, thousands displaced from their homes and the region in economic disrepair following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, city officials prioritized the refurbishment of the Superdome — home to the National Football League’s (NFL’s) New Orleans Saints franchise and temporary shelter for thousands of citizens during the storm. Just over a year after the levees broke and the city flooded, the beloved Saints returned to the Superdome, igniting what some argue was the “spark” that led to the city’s revival.¹³ “The rebirth of the city and stadium,” Les Carpenter wrote in a 10-year Katrina retrospective in *The Guardian*, “are synonymous.”¹⁴

Two Olympic Games in the years following World War II also serve as examples of the powerful role “safe sport” played in the socio-political rehabilitation of stumbling world powers. In 1948, with the United Kingdom still in dire physical and financial straits, a scarred London hosted the first Olympics since Hitler’s propaganda-laden 1936 Berlin Games. Referred to as the “Austerity Games” for the relatively crude and threadbare facilities pressed into service, the London Olympics represented not just the resilience of the Olympic Movement, but also the re-emergence of Britain from the long shadow of war.¹⁵ The *Sunday Times* gushed that “once again London is a focus of hope for the world,” with the “extra-sporting” value of the Games providing a “lesson to the world that there is still in war-strained Britain the heart and will for great achievements.”¹⁶

Sixteen years later, the Olympic flame was lit inside Tokyo’s National Stadium by Yoshinori Sakai — born in Hiroshima minutes after the United States dropped an atomic bomb on his new world. Restricted from participation in most multilateral institutions following World War II, Japan looked for opportunities to show the world its post-imperialist identity. In 1952, four years before Japan was granted membership in the United Nations, Tokyo made its first bid to host the Olympics. Awarded the 1964 Games, the Olympics’ “apolitical myth” usefully

¹¹ Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), 33.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36.

¹³ John Fanta, “[Saints came marching in: How football helped Katrina revival](#),” *CNBC.com*, August 29, 2015.

¹⁴ Les Carpenter, “[The New Orleans Superdome: A great American comeback story](#),” *The Guardian*, August 21, 2015.

¹⁵ Peter J Beck, “[The British Government and the Olympic Movement: The 1948 London Olympics](#),” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25(5) (2008): 615–47, 617.

¹⁶ Cited in Beck, 630.

served to provide the Japanese with an opportunity to reveal “New Japan” globally.¹⁷ The Olympics also offered the Japanese a safe space to benignly express national pride, without fuelling memories of ultra-nationalism. “Because sports were ‘pure,’” Jessamyn Abel writes, “Japanese fans could feel free to cheer for their athletes” and display other overt expressions of nationalism “without repercussions.”¹⁸ Reflecting on the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, Victor Cha concludes, “There was arguably no single event in [the] post-World War II era that played a bigger role in shaping [Japan’s] narrative of where it had come from and what it aspired to be in the future.”¹⁹

Sport, Tribalism and Macho Propaganda

The same perception that sport’s frivolity creates safe spaces for socio-political rehabilitation also gives licence to crude expressions of tribalism and jingoistic propaganda. As recently as 2019, racist chanting in football stadiums across Europe was openly defended by some club supporters as merely “helping their team”; it is neither regarded as racist nor subject to censure.²⁰ Not surprisingly, Trump’s call for sports to return amid the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes the NFL’s scheduled September kickoff.²¹ The president regularly invokes gridiron (tackle) football as part of his vision of a strong, powerful and “great again” America. On the campaign trail in 2016, Trump lamented rule changes to the NFL — intended, in particular, to reduce concussion rates — as making the game “soft like our country has become soft.”²²

Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro similarly espouses a macho nationalism expressed through sport to overcome the COVID-19 crisis. Citing his background as an “athlete,” Bolsonaro suggested he was protected against coronavirus symptoms.²³ This sense of athleticism as power — both literally and symbolically — has emboldened Brazil’s leader to challenge the advice of medical experts, fire his minister of Health, and mock other officials for trying to keep the country in lockdown: “When you ban football and other things, you fall into hysteria.”²⁴ This idea of sport and athleticism as a reflection of tribal virility, in a nationalist context in particular, led George Orwell to describe “serious sport” as “war minus the shooting.”²⁵

¹⁷ Jessamyn R. Abel, [“Japan’s sporting diplomacy: The 1964 Tokyo Olympiad,”](#) *The International History Review*, 34(2) (2012): 203–20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹⁹ Victor Cha, [“Role of Sport in International Relations: National Rebirth and Renewal,”](#) *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 11(1) (2016): 139–55, 146–47.

²⁰ Nicky Bandini, [“Inter’s Romelu Lukaku is the latest victim of ultras’ warped loyalty,”](#) *The Guardian*, September 8, 2019.

²¹ Schefter and Wojnarowski.

²² Cindy Boren, [“Donald Trump: NFL ‘football has become soft like our country has become soft,’”](#) *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2016. See also Justin Gus Foote, Michael L. Butterworth, and Jimmy Sanderson, [“Adrian Peterson and the ‘Wussification of America’: Football and Myths of Masculinity,”](#) *Communication Quarterly*, 65(3) (2017): 268–84.

²³ Euan Marshall, [“Brazil’s Bolsonaro says athletic past would protect him from coronavirus symptoms,”](#) *The Telegraph*, March 25, 2020.

²⁴ Shasta Darlington, [“Brazil’s Bolsonaro calls preventative coronavirus measures ‘hysteria,’”](#) *CNN.com*, March 17, 2020.

²⁵ George Orwell, “The Sporting Spirit,” *Tribune* 468, December 14, 1945, 10–11; cited in Beck, 24.

International Sport and the Post-COVID-19 World: The 2021 Tokyo Olympics

Challenges to the relevance of sport as the world faces such a complex collective crisis are more than fair. Perhaps when times are most serious or dire, talking about games from an international affairs perspective seems purely superficial and renders Chomsky's criticisms most relevant. Sports are insignificant in the grand scheme — men and women running around, throwing and catching and kicking things (and sometimes each other!). The most we might ask from sport is to leverage its popularity to promote adherence to isolation protocols and to avoid creating more Game Zeroes.

But I'd like to make the case that sports, especially globally revered sports, are significant from an international affairs perspective. Sports are complex, and, I've argued previously, one of humanity's most powerful cultural creations.²⁶ At once sports distract and engage; they are mirrors and lenses, microcosms and ecosystems; sports are tools to build and tools to destroy; they rehabilitate and harm, reaffirm the status quo and challenge orthodoxy, and exert both soft and hard power. It is the full complexity and influence of the many faces and uses of sport that make it such a powerful ethical and political force. In times of turmoil, all of these aspects of sport come to the fore — and this will best be represented by the (now) 2021 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

Soft Power and COVID-19 "Leadership"

As noted earlier, Canada is credited with setting in motion the postponement of the 2020 Summer Olympics. More accurately, it was a decision taken by a national sporting organization — the Canadian Olympic Committee — and not the Government of Canada. But in the landscape of international sport, this effectively was withdrawal from the Olympics by a country — not merely a group of sportspersons weighing the pros and cons of playing games in front of large crowds while the world tries to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. The Canadian Olympic Committee's decision speaks to the power of international sport in the global landscape. This was an opportunity for Canada, through sport, to take a highly symbolic lead role in the international response to a global crisis.

Tri-Sector Impact

The decision to postpone the Olympics involved and impacted virtually all nations (206 participated in 2016), highly recognizable non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (including the World Health Organization, the IOC and the United Nations), and some of the world's most powerful corporations (such as The Olympic Partner (TOP) sponsors, including Coca-Cola, Alibaba Group, Samsung and Toyota). These three sectors converge in significant ways, in different formulations, most regularly at mega sporting events. National identities are projected, NGO agendas activated, and corporations invest (and recoup) billions of dollars. How these three sectors function independently and collectively will be on full display next July in Japan.

Japan's Global Re-assertion

For Japan, the opportunity to once again "use" the Olympics has been circumvented — at least for a year. Economically and politically pushed to the background by China in the twenty-first century, and only three years after the deadly earthquake and tsunami that produced the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Japan sees its winning bid for the Olympics, in Abe's words, as a "major catalyst through which Japan will be born anew."²⁷ Labelling the

²⁶ Tim L. Elcombe, "[Sport, aesthetic experience, and art as the ideal embodied metaphor](#)," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 39(2) (2012): 201–14, DOI: 10.1080/00948705.2012.725901, 214.

²⁷ Cited in Cha, 139.

Games the “Reconstruction Olympics,”²⁸ the Japanese government planned to partially lift a restriction order in the village of Futaba, four kilometres from the reactor, in time for the torch relay to pass through in late March.²⁹ Still-displaced residents were displeased with the use of Futaba as a symbol of Japan’s reconstruction, criticizing the government for leveraging the region as bait to win the Olympic bid. To add to insult, local community leaders contend Olympic construction demands led to surges in prices that continue to hinder clean-up and redevelopment efforts.³⁰ But despite resistance, Japan’s government vows to show the world through the Olympics the country’s recovery and readiness to re-establish itself among the global elite.

A “Celebration” of Humanity

Assuming that the combination of social controls, technology and human resistance will succeed in neutering the worst of COVID-19’s effects, sports will return. And when an international collection of the world’s finest athletes enters Tokyo’s Olympic Stadium for the opening ceremonies of the Olympics in July 2021, it will not only be promoted as a commemoration of Japan’s Reconstruction 2.0, but also a “celebration of humanity” (the IOC’s first global marketing campaign slogan)³¹ of our collective endurance. The Summer Olympic Games will be a truly international event, where participants and spectators from around the world, and influential representatives of all three sectors of global governance, will come together in the post-COVID-19 world.

Those with critical eyes will jeer; those with sentimental hearts will cheer. For most, both attitudes will take root. We will support athletes representing “us,” marvel at the athletic exploits of our fellow humans, and revel in the pageantry of the global festival that the coronavirus tried, but failed, to take away. At the same time, we will bristle at the corporate greed filtered through the corruption-riddled IOC, the jingoistic nationalism perpetuated through inter-national competition, and the return to some form of politically disengaged status quo that sport offers. The significance of insignificant sport will come to the fore in the post-COVID-19 world.

²⁸ Mari Saito and Kiyoshi Takenaka, [“Olympic torch relay faces cool welcome from nuclear evacuees in Fukushima No. 1 town,”](#) *The Japan Times*, March 9, 2020.

²⁹ Ibid.; Justin McCurry, [“Japan lifts evacuation order for town hit by Fukushima disaster,”](#) *The Guardian*, March 4, 2020.

³⁰ Saito and Takenaka.



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