

Sporting Diplomacy: Boosting the Size of the Diplomatic Corps

In a world without a clear rival, the foreign policy of the United States has increasingly focused on “rogue states,” or “states of concern,” that flout international norms and remain outside the community of democratic nations. Despite the best efforts of the United States, Fidel Castro and Cuba continue to ignore U.S. unilateral sanctions and celebrate their latest victory—Elian Gonzalez’s return, North Korea vacillates on its commitment to nuclear accords while developing long-range ballistic missiles, and Iran continues to distrust the intentions of the Great Satan. Maybe the best way to encourage these states to come out of their isolation is to increase the size of the diplomatic corps—literally. Sports exchanges between the United States and Cuba, North Korea, or Iran can break down stereotypes, increase understanding, and confine battles to the playing field rather than the battlefield. They are a “safe” way to ease a country out of isolation, acting as a first step of engagement, if not the first step.

On the eve of the first Olympics of the new millennium, it is appropriate to reflect on the role that sports have played in international politics in the past century. More important, in a post–Cold War world largely devoid of ideological conflict, sports offer new promise in advancing global integration and cooperation.

Sport Is Politics through Other Means

Avery Brundage, former president of the International Olympics Committee, once said that “sports is completely free of politics.”¹ Brundage’s apolitical vision is based on a romanticized conception that ignores the larger

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political context in which sports operate. As early as the first Olympic festival in 776 B.C.E., the Greeks viewed sports as a vehicle to unify the civilized world in spite of political differences. Moreover, the Olympic Charter concedes that at the heart of the modern Olympic movement is a desire to contribute “to building a peaceful and better world.”² Governments have recognized the political importance of athletic success as well as the value of promoting the health and well being of its citizenry. Accordingly, sports

have become a diplomatic tool, as governments have used boycotts, sports propagandizing, denial of visas, sports assistance, hosting of Olympics, and sports exchanges to further political aims.³

Not only do sports often have political purposes, but they also are affected by politics. Political conflict has long appeared in sports, whether it is communism vs. capitalism, ama-

teurism vs. professionalism, nationalism vs. internationalism, or integration vs. segregation. One need only remember the image of black U.S. athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith raising their black-gloved clenched fists during the national anthem at the 1968 Olympics to appreciate the inseparability of sports and politics.⁴

During the twentieth century, sports assumed ideological dimensions as countries used athletics to validate political systems and beliefs. During the 1936 Olympics, commonly referred to as the Nazi Games, Adolf Hitler attempted to demonstrate Aryan superiority through the performance of German athletes at the games in Berlin. Although Germany did win the most medals, Jesse Owens of the United States sprinted to five gold medals and helped discredit Hitler’s beliefs, in front of his own people.

Ideology in athletic competition was even more pronounced during the Cold War when communist countries used sports to promote relations with procommunist countries, win support among developing states, and demonstrate the superiority of a socialist model. Castro once commented, “One day, when the Yankees accept peaceful coexistence with our country, we shall beat them at baseball too and then the advantages of revolutionary over capitalist sport will be clear to all.”⁵ Romania even went so far as to pass a law in 1967 that declared physical training and sports in the national interest and a precondition for social progress. Communist sports were oriented on Olympic success, as massive funds and bureaucracies were devoted to the state-controlled sports apparatus. Countries such as the USSR and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) found that sports were the only medium in which they were able to compete with, and beat, economically ad-

vanced nations. Throughout the Cold War, two of the top three nations in the Summer Olympics were communist.⁶

Athletic success did more than legitimize a political system; it also helped legitimize nations. During the 1960 Winter Olympics, the United States refused visas to East German athletes to travel to Squaw Valley where the games were held. The United States and its NATO allies denied visas at least 35 times between 1957 and 1967; continued athletic success by the German Democratic Republic (GDR), however, forced world sports organizations to stop ignoring the country and paved the way for its eventual diplomatic recognition. Investment in sports was a deliberate strategy by the GDR to gain the international prestige necessary to break the blockade.⁷

As sports increasingly served as a locale for Cold War rivalry, it necessarily became a new policy tool in the struggle between communism and capitalism. After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, President Jimmy Carter decided to lead a boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. Only 81 nations participated in the games—as 30 boycotted—and another 33 did not respond to the invitation. Bernie Houlihan observed that the boycott demonstrated “how important sport is as a cipher for the underlying pattern of relations between states.” As expected, it was followed by a USSR-led boycott of the 1984 Olympic Games held in Los Angeles.⁸

The Cold War provides lessons of how sports can represent competition that transcends the playing field. It is a forum to register disapproval as well as to demonstrate and validate practices and beliefs. It is an arena that captures the world’s attention and imagination. A Palestinian terrorist, referring to the 1972 Munich Games at which they took Israeli athletes hostage before they were killed, commented that, “we recognize that sport is the religion of the western world...so we decided to use the Olympics, the most sacred ceremony of this religion, to make the world pay attention to us.”⁹ If the playing field can provide a stage for political grievance and conflict, certainly it can also facilitate cooperation and understanding. Sports are now free from the tensions and limitations of the Cold War, allowing them to play a new, positive role in international politics.

The World’s Common Language

Basketball fans everywhere—including Knicks fans—can appreciate the talents and abilities of Michael Jordan. Awe at his ability to leap, dunk, shoot, and win is universal, regardless of ethnicity or nationality. As John Hoberman noted, “Sport ... exercises a deep hold on the human imagination which is virtually universal and which does not seem to vary from society to society at this level of emotion.”¹⁰ We all can admire top athletes

because we can appreciate and understand what it takes to reach that level of competition. We can also appreciate sportsmanship and fair play, reminding us of our common humanity. How else is one to explain the standing ovations received by U.S. wrestlers in Tehran or by Pakistani cricket players in India in the past year? As a result of its commonality, sports can open up “conversational space.” They can remind us that we are all so very alike, while also providing a dramatic narrative revealing idiosyncrasies and differences. For example, African nations in the 1970s used sports as a vehicle for pride and solidarity. The success of African athletes was contrasted with im-

ages of their failing nations’ economies and political systems, forcing developed nations to take them seriously.¹¹

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Admittedly, sports can provoke nationalistic feelings, sometimes violently manifested in hooliganism. More often, sports encourage a form of moderate patriotism with the desired success of one’s country with little ill will toward athletes and cultures of other countries. The ability to root for “the enemy” may be linked to the fluidity of today’s sporting leagues. Every player is fair game,

whether it is the defection of Orlando “El Duque” Hernandez to the Yankees, Europeans signing with major league soccer teams in the United States, Russians joining the National Hockey League, or Americans competing in the Japanese baseball league. Trades and free agency encourage us to covet thy neighbor’s athletes, prompting us to cheer out of both appreciation and desire. The ability to applaud accomplishments and effort regardless of nationality is what allows sports to act as a channel for goodwill and greater understanding. Sports provide a healthy outlet to nationalism where, even in defeat, another country’s heroes are glorified (rather than its political leaders vilified).

More than being just celebrated, athletes can replace dominant images that tend to demonize and stereotype the other side. “El Duque” becomes the face of Cuba instead of Castro. The public’s view of North Korea shifts from a mysterious image of Kim Jong Il to the celebrated image of Michael Ri. Sports are an alternative discourse to beliefs and misconceptions that perpetuate and prolong hostility.

No doubt there are other efforts to bring the United States closer to “states of concern.” Iranian president Mohammad Khatami called for a “crack in this wall of mistrust” by urging a dialogue among academics, writers, artists, journalists, and tourists. The United States is also pushing for more “people-to-people” contacts with Cuba, such as air links and ex-

changes of scholars and artists. Notwithstanding the value that academic, scientific, artistic, and even military-to-military exchanges have in bringing about cultural understanding among participants, it is sport that receives the mass media coverage and involve the broader public—a precondition to broader policy changes (i.e., engagement) with “states of concern.” Business exchanges may be laden with implications of economic reform, sports are not perceived as a threat to the structure of society itself. The exposure of secrets is not feared as it might be in military exchanges. Sports are a low-risk testing ground for gauging the public’s reaction to another country and, ultimately, for moving toward rapprochement.

The most prominent example of the role that sports can play in breaking down barriers is the visit of the U.S. table tennis team to the PRC in 1971. Ping Pong diplomacy, followed a year later by the visit of a U.S. basketball team, laid the groundwork for President Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 and the eventual normalization of relations. The sports exchanges helped to challenge stereotypes about Americans and Chinese and to open a new dialogue for understanding, such as encouraging further people-to-people contacts. The role that sports played in evolving the U.S. relationship with China suggests that it can also play a role in reaching out to today’s rogue states.

Who’s Next?

Castro has been a thorn in the side of the United States for nearly 40 years, and he does not appear to be going anywhere. The current embargo against Cuba fails to accomplish much beyond pacifying domestic political interests. These political exiles have blocked any meaningful dialogue with Cuba and created an atmosphere of distrust and misunderstanding. The United States and Cuba’s shared pastime of baseball may offer the best hope of improving understanding and cutting through propaganda. In late March 1999, the Baltimore Orioles traveled to Cuba to play an exhibition game against a select team of Cuban players. The presence of and interaction with the U.S. players, albeit largely in front of party loyalists, helped interject a new narrative into an environment traditionally controlled by Castro’s propaganda. At a minimum, the contrast of wealthy U.S. professional ballplayers against similarly talented Cuban professionals earning \$10 a month highlighted the opportunities of capitalism. Also, the U.S. ballplayers returned to the United States with first-hand accounts of the effect of U.S. sanctions and the plight of the Cuban people. Continued sports exchanges with Cuba—such as the planned trip of the University of Washington’s baseball team in the fall—will go a long way to advance the understanding between the two countries.

In Iran, Khatami has made continued progress in opening up his country to the West and advancing democratic principles, reaffirmed by a sweeping victory in the parliamentary elections. Khatami's initial overtures were followed by the visit of five U.S. wrestlers and five sports officials to Tehran to compete in the Takhiti Cup in 1998, the first U.S. sports delegation to visit Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Later that year, Iran and the United States played each other at the World Cup in Lyon, France, with Iran winning 2-1. Instead of animosity and conflict, the game was characterized by sportsmanship, respect, and good feelings. Americans were able to view Iranians as sports fans and human beings rather than terrorists. Earlier this year, Iran and the United States played soccer again, this time at the Rose Bowl in front of a very pro-Iranian crowd. Future sports exchanges, especially a visit of a U.S. soccer team to Tehran, could challenge ingrained stereotypes and historical animosity and help

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shape beliefs before they are formed, as more than 60 percent of Iran's population is less than 20 years old.¹²

Although sports exchanges show initial success with Cuba and Iran, the United States has yet to pursue an “athletic dialogue” with North Korea. The potential of sports in the U.S.-North Korean relationship may rely on the fate of one man. Not Kim Jong Il, the

mysterious leader of North Korea, rather, Ri Myung-hoon, also known as Michael Ri, a 7-foot, 9-inch North Korean itching to get into the National Basketball Association (NBA). Notwithstanding the important role that Ri might play in stopping Los Angeles Lakers center Shaquille O'Neal, he represents a tremendous opportunity to pull North Korea out of its isolation. Ri—who also can make foul shots—has been in Canada since 1997 developing his game and waiting for the NBA to let him play in the league. Although North Korea has been supportive of Ri's efforts, the U.S. State and Treasury Departments have forbidden trade with enemy nations, including North Korea, restricting the NBA from permitting any team to enter into discussion with the North Korean.¹³ To permit this national hero to play alongside his U.S. counterparts would allow him, on his return home, to accurately portray the United States to his country, as well as serve as a spokesperson for his people. It will almost certainly inspire North Koreans—already avid basketball fans—to follow the NBA closely and, with it, U.S. culture.

Independently of Ri's fate, the United States should consider sending a basketball team to North Korea for exhibition matches as a goodwill gesture for cultural understanding and openness. Sports exchanges have been well received by North Korea in the past. In December 1999, North Korea sent a

team to South Korea for a four-game goodwill series. They were the first North Korean athletes to play in the South in nine years and the highest-level delegation since 1992. The North Koreans, in particular Ri, were received with applause and excitement, prompting President Kim Dae Jung to comment that “sports exchanges could become the fastest path to work for reconciliation and mutual understanding between the two Koreas.”¹⁴

Get on the Ball

As the United States continues to impress its democratic goals on remaining holdouts such as Cuba, Iran, and North Korea, it should remember to view sports as an important tool of diplomacy. Rather than a policy of ad hoc permission that relies on the efforts of individuals, such as Peter Angelos for the Orioles trip to Cuba, or think tanks, such as those that arranged the visit of wrestlers to Iran, the U.S. government should actively seek opportunities to encourage sports exchanges. This encouragement should extend beyond U.S. athletes to other countries, whether pressing Iranians to participate in matches with Israeli wrestlers or pushing India and Pakistan to resume cricket and field hockey matches that were suspended after the coup in Pakistan.

Sports are not a cure for animosities and conflicts that have existed for 50 years, but the success of the likes of Michael Jordan, Mark McGwire, Jesse Owens, or Pelé can have positive effects beyond the playing field, onto the political chessboard. As globalization—buoyed by technology, the economy, and democracy—continues to take hold, politics will continue to impact sports. This year’s opening baseball series between the Chicago Cubs and the New York Mets in Japan only foreshadows an inevitable World Cup series in baseball. The World Football League is already operational as American football takes hold in Europe, while soccer enjoys increasing popularity in the United States. Integration in sports can help engender integration on other fronts. Although sports historically have been used to demonstrate the superiority of one system (or people) over another, it can now be an avenue to demonstrate similarities and bring societies (and people) closer together, preparing the way for eventual public policy changes.

Notes

1. Peter C. McIntosh, *Sport in the Sociocultural Process* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1981), 195. Brundage was commenting about a potential boycott of the 1956 Olympic Games.
2. Barrie Houlihan, *Sport and International Politics* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf,

- 1994), 110–111. Coubertin, the founder of the Olympic movement, saw competitive sports as a symbol of the possibility of the progress of mankind.
3. The potential of sport as a tool has not always been recognized. A 1971 Department of State study observed that sports have been largely ignored in U.S. diplomacy.
 4. John Hoberman, *Sports and Political Ideology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 20. See also Jim Riordan and Arnd Krüger, *The International Politics of Sport in the 20th Century* (New York: E&FN Spon, 1999), X, 113.
 5. Riordan and Krüger, *ibid.*, 57.
 6. This is true except for 1984, when most communist countries boycotted the Los Angeles Games. James Riordan, *Sports, Politics, and Communism* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 127. See also Riordan and Krüger, *The International Politics of Sport*.
 7. Riordan and Krüger, *The International Politics of Sport*, 60–61.
 8. Houlihan, *Sport and International Politics*, 115. The Olympic boycotts during the Cold War was hardly the first time the games had been used to register political disapproval. In 420 B.C.E., Sparta, the most powerful Greek state, was barred from religious rites and the athletic games at Olympia for failure to pay a fine after breaking the Olympic truce. See John Hoberman, *The Olympic Crisis: Sports, Politics, and the Moral Order* (New York: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1986), 5.
 9. Houlihan, *Sport and International Politics*, 2.
 10. Hoberman, *Sports and Political Ideology*, 7.
 11. William J. Morgan, “Sports as the Moral Discourse of Nations,” in Torbjörn Tännsjö and Claudio Tambuffini, eds., *Values in Sport* (New York: E&FN Spon, 2000), 65–68.
 12. “Can Soccer Do What Diplomats Can’t for U.S. and Iran?” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 14, 2000.
 13. “Korean Thaw Gives Giant Ri a Chance,” *Gazette* (Montreal), June 2, 2000.
 14. Kwan Weng Kin, “Summit May Bring Breakthroughs,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), June 12, 2000.