

Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management

Topical Essay – Sport

The Immense Potential of Sport Diplomacy

Brennan K. Berg, Ph.D.
The University of Memphis

Brennan K. Berg, Ph.D. is an associate professor of Sport Commerce and Distinguished Research Scholar in the Kemmons Wilson School at The University of Memphis. His sport policy research specifically focuses on elite athlete development, the role of sport in public health, policymaking, and the use of sport as a tool for international and intergroup relations. Questions and comments can be directed to bberg@memphis.edu.

Abstract

This topical essay briefly reviews the use of sport as a tool for international relations, or sport diplomacy. The discussion then presents considerations for sport scholars to contribute to this area of diplomacy in need of more empirical study. Sport should be more widely recognized for the significant impact, positive or negative, it can have on international relations.

Keywords: International Relations, Foreign Affairs, Politics, Boycotts, Olympics, Sport Exchanges

Introduction

Sport has the potential to be a viable tool for diplomacy, but it is not inherently positive or always used in a beneficial manner. Throughout history sport has been manipulated to damage relations between countries, which are often called *states* in diplomacy terms. However, there is ample evidence that sport can be used to improve international relations and the lives of a state's citizenry. When official diplomatic relations between states do not exist, sport can often represent one of the few contexts in which any interaction between states occur. Here sport serves as medium for political language to be communicated and can signify critical economic, security, cultural, or other political objectives that remain relevant to a state's government and its people. The interactions between athletes or teams of various states permits opportunities for exchanges that may alter previously held perceptions of another state, such as the classic sport diplomacy case of table tennis (ping pong) serving as the catalyst to forever change the relationship between the United States and China, or Ping Pong Diplomacy (Hong & Sun, 2000)¹. Such exchanges may earn substantial publicity, particularly at high-profile international sport events. Athletes, coaches, and other sport stakeholders involved in these exchanges can play a crucial role in relaying their experiences with another country back to the government and people of their home country. The current topical essay offers a call to recognition and action for how sport can significantly affect international relations and sport researchers may offer more influential input through empirical study.

Background and Literature Review

For the purposes of national identity or pride, many governments allocate significant resources to sport, or at least closely monitor competitive performance (Allison & Leaver, 2008). Governments understand that the perceptions of how strong their state is to the rest of the world and their own citizens are vital sources of political capital. The performance of a nation's elite athletes will often draw a far more passionate response and larger audience than a speech given by a head of state, which is why political leaders often want to be visibly associated with sport success (Kissoudi, 2008). As Cha (2009) explained, "It is no accident that the Americans and the Soviets competed so fiercely through sport during the Cold War era as an

extension of their geopolitical rivalry, and that the Chinese garnered top medal tallies in the Olympics as a reflection of their rising power and status" (p. 1583).

Sport also projects soft power to other states. Unlike hard power applied through military actions or economic trade policies, soft power represents more cultural or intangible influence in the world (Trunkos & Heere, 2017). Soft power through sport projects the state as strong, modern, and possessing a vibrant citizenry that is willing to compete with any other state. For instance, the opening ceremonies at the Olympics are not just a showcase of elaborate entertainment, but a forum for political language to be communicated to the governments and populations of the world (Brownwell, 2013; Grix, 2013). With international attention, such occasions permit opportunities to present how advanced and dynamic a state is through various displays, such as its distinct culture and history, latest technology, and flourishing citizens who take noticeable pride in their country. As a watershed event, the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics awakened the world to how sport could be exploited for propaganda to further promote the Nazi regime's status to the world and consolidate its political power within Germany (Berg et al., 2012). Additionally, sport can serve as a symbol to assert independence. A state can use sport as an opportunity to rebel against another powerful state in which it has strained relations, such as the Irish utilizing sport as an instrument to resist British rule and preserve their cultural identity (Cha, 2009).

Boycotts

Unlike Ping Pong Diplomacy illustrating diplomatic advancement through sport, boycotts demonstrate enduring tensions and disagreements between states. Despite limited evidence of effectiveness, boycotts of major sport events are still viewed as a form of political communication to the global community, particularly adversaries (Berg et al., 2012). National governments electing to boycott a sport event, as Berg et al. found, are often prompted by a complex combination of international and domestic considerations and seek to maximize their national interests with this course of action. The Olympics, along with other prominent sport events, have experienced multiple Games boycotted for various international relations motives. For example, over a dozen states joined the Soviet Union in boycotting the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics as a response to the 1980 U.S.-led boycott of the Moscow Summer Olympics

¹ For a detailed account of how Chinese and U.S. officials took advantage of the unexpected and historic

diplomatic opportunity presented by Ping Pong Diplomacy, please see Hong and Sun's (2000) article.

(Berg et al., 2012).

Sport Envoy and Sport Visitor Exchanges

Sport diplomacy continues to be utilized by states through various methods. For instance, despite ongoing tension and a tightly secured border between South Korea and North Korea, in 2018 both states agreed to symbolic efforts toward unity. These included forming a joint women's ice hockey team, marching together under a unified flag in the opening ceremonies, and allowing a North Korean delegation, featuring hundreds of athletes, officials, cheering fans, and journalists, to cross the heavily fortified border and attend the Winter Olympic Games hosted in Pyeongchang, South Korea (Associated Press, 2018). In the United States, the Department of State's sport diplomacy efforts are conducted through two principal exchange programs: sport envoys and sport visitors (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). For sport envoy exchanges, sport personnel (e.g., prominent athletes, teams, coaches) are sent abroad by the United States to visit with the people of another state. The expectation of envoy exchanges is that members of the U.S. delegation will help improve perceptions of the United States in other states with the attention they will likely receive while teaching and promoting their sport. Sport visitor exchanges permit non-elite athletes, coaches, and administrators to travel to the United States and work with U.S. sport personnel. Examples have included citizens of seven states developing leadership skills and English language capacity while playing soccer, and wheelchair basketball participants visiting from Kazakhstan and Thailand to learn more about disability rights and inclusion (Sports Diplomacy, n.d.). The expectation is that visitors will have an opportunity to gain better insight into U.S. culture and way of life while developing greater skills and knowledge of their sport. One of the central assumptions steering each form of exchange is that such contacts among citizens of different states can reduce hostility, breakdown stereotypes, and establish common relations between the people of each state. If successfully carried out, these advances enable the national governments to follow suit and address more significant geopolitical issues important to both states (Chehabi, 2001).

Need for Research and Call to Action

In 2011, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confirmed the significance of sport diplomacy when she stated "Actually our sport exchanges are the most popular exchanges we do. When I go to other countries around the world and we talk about what kind of

exchanges that people are looking for, very often a leader will say 'How about a sports exchange?' And we want to do more and more of that" (U.S. Department of State). These sport exchanges represent an opportunity for sport researchers to offer compelling findings derived from empirical study, have a significant voice in the application of research, collaborate with experts in other fields, and utilize more diverse theoretical frameworks to enhance sport diplomacy practices, goals that have long been advocated for in sport research (Amis & Silk, 2005; Chalip, 2006; Frisby, 2005). For diplomatic or development achievements to be realized, sport researchers cannot treat sport as a panacea, but must recognize that sport will need to work in conjunction with resources and expertise of stakeholder groups outside sport (Levermore, 2008). Sport diplomacy will remain pertinent as states inevitably interact and new situations or challenges emerge in the global community. Therefore, it is crucial that scholars provide empirical evidence that sport diplomacy programs effectively achieve diplomatic objectives, efficiently use allocated resources, and can continue to adapt to new international relations contexts if sustained or expanded support is warranted. Additionally, researchers should consider longitudinal research to measure the long-term effectiveness of sport diplomacy efforts. Otherwise, the research may be vulnerable to chance observations or measurements from one-time or short-term pre/post data collection. Sport scholars can pursue funding opportunities to earn support for their research and have a greater voice in the interdisciplinary discourse of international relations. As one example, the U.S. Department of State, through its Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, regularly offers research grants to establish and/or assess sport diplomacy efforts.

The abovementioned considerations illustrate the capacity sport has for improving or worsening international relations. Monitoring international affairs and remaining cognizant that sport can trigger profound shifts, positive or negative, in diplomacy will be incumbent for modern sport managers. Believing or wishing sport and politics, domestic or international, will not influence each other is inadequate. Based on numerous cases throughout history, such idealism is not realistic. Rather, sport managers must remain observant and proactive recognizing that international affairs can have an immense impact on their organizations, events, and research once sport is targeted as an essential tool for diplomacy.

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