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Sport As Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Sport is a gigantic and powerful medium for the international spread of information, reputations and relationships that are the essence of public diplomacy. The money spent world-wide on sport dwarfs what any government spends on public diplomacy. The size of the global audiences for sport and the audience's level of interest exceed those of any other subject matter, including political news and the movies. The nature of sport—in its human striving for excellence and in its competition, its winners and losers—carries its own messages. Sports are also a vehicle on which many other messages hitch a ride. A well-conceived public diplomacy strategy could capitalize on the opportunities that sport presents.

The most obvious and well advertised application of sport to international affairs is not its most effective. Throughout its ancient and modern history, the Olympic Movement has trumpeted its virtue as a force for world peace. The modern Olympic Movement under Pierre Frédy, Baron de Coubertin, was a branch of the European peace movement. Ever since the ancient Greeks, Olympic competition has been seen as a method to avoid international strife. In a tradition that lasted for almost 1,000 years, an Olympic Truce was called every four years for the weeks of the Games. It allowed athletes to get to the Games under a flag of truce, and embodied the idea that sport competition was a proxy battle for inter-city hostilities which could be harmlessly resolved in foot races and javelin throws.

This theory dominated the thinking about the modern Olympic Games in the era of the Cold

War. The Soviet Union, East Germany, Rumania and other Eastern Bloc countries built sports machines to use the Olympic Games as a demonstration of the virtues of their system and as a way to bring the “joy of victory” to the home audiences and the “agony of defeat” to their political adversaries—without firing a shot. The United States picked up the challenge. There was hardly an American anywhere so unpatriotic as to not be thrilled with the American ice hockey victory over the dominant Soviet Union in the Winter Games at Lake Placid in 1980.

“Miracle on Ice” hockey match between U.S. and Russia, 1980 Winter Olympics

Nice as the theory sounds, is there any evidence that these non-lethal contests take the place of, or lessen the chances of actual international conflict? Does listening to another section of the audience shouting “We’re number one!” really add to cross-border understanding? More likely it builds resentment. The fifteen years of Olympic competition from the fall of the Soviet Union to the rise of the Chinese team during which the United States dominated the medal count did not win any friends for the Americans. In the times of World Wars I and II there was no Olympic truce; instead, there were no Olympics. In these cases, a country’s foreign policy trumped its sporting prowess; politics outweighed athletic tradition. And if relations are already tense, competing on the field of play can magnify hostility, especially if the competition is perceived as violating the ethics of the games. The accusations of drug-use have tainted the reputations of nations that tolerated or encouraged it. The Iranian refusal to participate in games against Israeli athletes in judo, swimming, and wrestling at world championships and the Olympic Games since 2004 cannot be an enhancement of Iran’s reputation, except among hard-line Islamists, who are already in its camp.

In sum, a well-played game might win some respect from foreign publics for the skills of a nation. A show of noble sportsmanship might chip away at antagonisms borne in the minds of foreigners. But otherwise, performance on the field does not seem to move opinion in any important way abroad. Further, why assume all games will showcase sportsmanship? Was China’s image enhanced by the “China-U.S. Basketball Friendship Match” in Beijing in August 2011 in which the Chinese professional team with the bellicose name of Bayi Military Rockets set upon the visiting Georgetown University Hoyas with thrown chairs and fists? Apparently not, as the Chinese government expunged the event from the Web. Rather it is the surrounding aspects of sport competition that play a significant role in public diplomacy. It is the worldliness of the athletes and officials, the appearance and performance of host cities and countries, and the window on the opportunities to play at the highest levels that send valuable messages abroad.

The volume of international sports travel by the participants makes it the largest multilateral global exchange program apart from general tourism. For many youngsters, their first international travel is on a team. They wash cars and sell cookies to finance the trip. They often do home stays to reduce cost. Such travel is an effective step toward international understanding and lasting cross-border friendships at an impressionable age. For elite athletes, world travel is at the heart of the experience. All their efforts point to the world championships, wherever they may be. In most sports, the elite athletes from the various countries form an informal community that travels and competes together constantly. In effect, they are part of a single endeavor with feet in dozens of nations. The athletes become part of one of the world’s transnational societies—a sporting version of the Davos elite.

For the organizers of sport, the sport federations—like FIFA and FINA, for example—their entire activity is an exercise in international travel and politics. Their associations are yet

another arena of interaction among cross-border elites. They form a society that transcends nationality at the same time that they dicker and maneuver for national advantage. Among their most contentious issues is the perennial need to locate a city to host the world championships of the sport. The placement of the Olympic Games is the most sought such designation and is arguably the most contested and fascinating competition in the Olympics. FIFA's World Cup is a close second. However, every sport from Tae Kwan Do to Equestrian needs to find a home for its finals. The host cities and their nations see these events as prime opportunities to reach international audiences to polish their brands. In 1936, Germany effectively used the Olympic Games in Berlin to assuage criticism and mislead a global public about the nature of its regime. The impact on Barcelona's reputation as a beautiful city from its successful staging of the 1992 Olympic Games was significant and lasting. In 2008, China spent \$40 billion in pursuit of a new image as a first world power. The International Olympic Committee is not shy in enticing cities to bid on hosting the Games in order to enhance their brands both by rebuilding portions of the city to prepare for the Games and by capturing the extraordinary television coverage that the Games offer. The FIFA World Cup has assumed a similar role. Other than a natural disaster or war, there is no greater opportunity to have the whole world focus relentlessly on a country on television, in print journalism, and online for a period of at least three weeks.

Not all cities and countries get a branding boost by hosting major events. The event has to be seen to have gone well. Munich's reputation has yet to recover from the debacle of the 1972 Olympic Games in which the Israeli athletes were massacred. Athens sent a message of economic distress, political infighting, and lack of preparation in its 2004 performance of the Games. The subsequent economic problems of Greece have only added to that impression. Still, as with China, South Africa, Brazil for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games and Qatar for the 2018 World Cup, the major sporting events have become the key validation that a country has entered the league of major, advanced nations.

For the United States, there is no need to use sport or anything else to brand the country as an advanced nation. Sport plays a different role in America's outreach: it conveys and confirms the United States' central image that it is a land of opportunity; a meritocracy in which any individual through talent and hard work can excel and be rewarded. In this the major role is played by the United States' robust professional sports industry stays true to this value. In 1947, seven years before Brown v. Board of Education mandated the desegregation of American schools, Jackie Robinson broke the color line in major league baseball. Since then, American professional sports have had little room for favoritism in selecting players. It is not a field for discrimination or reverse discrimination. Teams and their fans want to win. Major American sports such as baseball and basketball hire from a world-wide pool of talent. The demigods of the widely televised American leagues are admired in the United States and elsewhere without regard to race or national origin. In Beijing in 2008, the most admired and pursued athletes were Kobe Bryant, LeBron James and Yao Ming, in that order. The endorsement that Yao Ming's enormous talent received by his playing in the NBA built his reputation everywhere, including in China. The same is true for Pau Gasol, the Lakers' center from Spain, and Dirk Nowitzki, the Mavericks' forward from Germany. Even David Beckham, at the top of his football career, felt the pull of American professional sports when he signed with the Los Angeles Galaxy of American Major League Soccer in 2007. The acclaim American celebrities receive from abroad, both in the United States and elsewhere, testifies to the openness of American society and the opportunities to succeed.

National anthems are performed before a 2009 NFL Game in England's Wembley stadium.

American professional teams know of the following they have abroad. The NFL plays exhibition games in England; the NBA in England, France, and Spain. In 2012, major league baseball will begin its preseason with an International Series in six countries outside the United States. This is an amount of travel and financial investment that is far above the expenditures the United States government has ever made over years of sponsoring cultural exchanges. Sending Louis Armstrong or a film series to Europe, or participating in sending the New York Philharmonic to North Korea are small, episodic efforts compared to the size, impact, and continuity of these forays by major sport organizations. The star power of their top players guarantees a level of attention that other cultural exchanges will never achieve. The interest they arouse abroad reaches far beyond the intelligentsia and political classes to the vast majority of people. Further, athletes are seen as apolitical. As with the ping-pong team the United States sent to China in 1971 as a precursor to political rapprochement, visits by sports teams both large and small present a face of human endeavor unconnected to strategic and political considerations. The appeal of sport is universal. With its professional teams, the United States has a public diplomacy horse it can ride without effort or expense to show the world American celebrity, openness and opportunity.

As in the theater, sport is a stage where life is played out vicariously. Its passions, dreams and prejudices are all laid bare under a canopy of objectivity. It offers a ready and cost-free opportunity for the projection of national traits and ambitions. No nation should ignore its possibilities.
