



# **U.S. Sports Diplomacy**

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## **U.S. SPORTS DIPLOMACY**

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## **1. Introduction**

Sport moves billions of dollars, attracts billions of eyeballs, and sparks billions of emotions around the world. It is an area of human activity with such reach and connection that it is clearly a massive part of international relations and diplomacy. Yet it is an underplayed, undervalued, and understudied aspect of public diplomacy. The United States is no exception to this.

Currently, its impact is arguably no more than the sum of its constituent, and often disjointed, parts. The U.S. does not have a coordinated approach that aligns the goals and objectives of the different stakeholders in sports, that systematically incentivizes collaboration, and that harnesses those myriad impacts to create diplomatic impact—for the benefit of all actors and the country as a whole—that is greater than the sum of those parts. In short, the United States has no official sports diplomacy strategy. This is surprising at a time in which countries around the world are formalizing and developing their own. The United States cannot rely on exceptionalism and is struggling to coordinate its sports diplomacy efforts, to be more intentional about the work it does in this realm, or to identify ways to make the most out of the country's sporting riches for the benefit of its people, its sports and the country as a whole.

**This report challenges the United States to correct that gap, with the 2028 Summer Olympic Games as the target before which the United States should design and implement a comprehensive sports diplomacy strategy.**

*What Is Sports Diplomacy? And Why Is It Important for the U.S.?*

So what is sports diplomacy? There are many definitions and much confusion about the term. This is understandable: sports have been a feature of the geopolitical scene for centuries. Sports diplomacy is a subset of public diplomacy, in which individuals and organizations engage in internationally related activities through or in relation to sports that benefit a country, region or city's international relations objectives. These benefits sometimes occur as a byproduct of other activities: for example, a sports team might market itself internationally purely for financial reasons, but in parallel the image of its city may in fact be enhanced. We define this as "**organic**" sports diplomacy. Alternatively, these positive results occur as a result of deliberate action seeking to achieve said results. We define this as "**inorganic**" sports diplomacy.

This report and analyzes the current landscape and situation of U.S. sports diplomacy and outlines the potential scope for a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy. It offers recommendations for all stakeholders, from the U.S. government to sports bodies, leagues, NGOs, athletes and more, for improvements in structures, policies and impact.

This report is not a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy in itself. Instead, it brings together the opinions of many leaders in this space in the U.S. about what such a strategy could look like and shares thoughts and suggestions for how to go about setting it up. In doing so, it seeks to leave behind common but more limited conceptualizations of sports diplomacy, such as "high-level diplomatic events" or "sports for development," and offer an alternative, more comprehensive and fundamental vision, within a U.S. context, of the rationale for and potential of U.S. sports diplomacy.

## Overview

This report consists of four sections. It starts by looking at the infrastructure of American sports diplomacy and the role that different key government actors play in designing and implementing sports diplomacy policy. It then moves on to identify how sports diplomacy can contribute to three key US foreign policy aims and objectives, which in turn can create a virtuous circle in supporting the delivery of the objectives of other stakeholders in American sports. These subsequent sections look at American influence, American prosperity and American security.

In the first section, the report breaks down the U.S. infrastructure of sports, ranging from the Sports Diplomacy Division of the U.S. State Department to embassies on the ground around the world. It also looks beyond these to the role of emerging actors such as cities and states and considers whether there is a need for a federal department of sports.

The second section, *Advancing American Influence: American Leadership and Sports*, looks at the importance of values. It examines values inherent to sports but also those that can be transmitted through sports. Given sports' wide reach and high level of engagement, it is often an excellent means for the U.S. government, and indeed sports leagues and organizations, to talk about and transmit those values internationally. Values also play a key role in sports for development and sports and social responsibility carried out by different stakeholders, using the platform of sports to promote positive changes on the ground. Although it can backfire when the key message relates to an absence of values, or indeed negative values, sports are a powerful tool to promote and advance American influence around the world.



For the third section, American Prosperity: Sports as an Economic Driver, the report focuses on the sports diplomacy opportunities that collaboration between private and public sector offers that can lead to significant and tangible benefits for all involved. The world of sports is one huge business, with many actors ranging from athletes, leagues and media. This economic ecosystem in turn brings an important economic return for the U.S. at a federal and/or city level, whether it be hosting sporting mega events such as the Olympics and Paralympics or smaller events such as a Formula One race.

Finally, to address Protecting the American People: Sports and National Security, the report looks at the inseparable links between sports and geopolitics and how governments very deliberately and visibly deploy sports as a tool to advance foreign policy and national security objectives. Sporting events are often the hub for this expression of foreign policy, from diplomacy summits to full or partial boycotts of events.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations including changes in structures and new policies that would allow the U.S. and all stakeholders involved to actively make the most of America's sporting strengths and bring in greater sports diplomacy benefits for all.

## **2. U.S. Infrastructure of Sports Diplomacy**

One of the big questions for a potential U.S. sports diplomacy strategy is, what should the "sites of sports diplomacy" be? Phrased otherwise, at what level of government, sports, NGOs, etc. should sports diplomacy be carried out?

There are currently many different public actors with some sort of responsibility over sports diplomacy, whether it's around education, trade, tourism or national security. At

a federal level, the bulk of responsibility currently lies with the main department responsible for foreign policy: the State Department. Within the State Department, this work is primarily done through the Sports Diplomacy Division and also on the ground through embassies. There is nonetheless a void in leadership, where there is not a department nor individual responsible for all of these aspects of sports diplomacy. This is why this report also looks at the potential role of a secretary for sport. Alongside these actors, there is one newer area within the infrastructure of U.S. sports diplomacy that represents an exciting opportunity: the role of cities and states.

## **2.1 State Department: Sports Diplomacy Division**

### *Current Function of the State Department's Sports Diplomacy Division*

Unsurprisingly, the State Department—as the main actor responsible for foreign policy—is the most obvious central point for international U.S. sports diplomacy, which currently has as a focal point its Sports Diplomacy Division (SDD).

U.S. foreign policy has four strategic pillars as defined in the Joint Strategic Plan: “Protect the American People, the Homeland, and the American Way of Life; Promote American Prosperity; Preserve Peace Through Strength; and Advance American Influence.” These objectives are then incorporated into more specific strategies: the Public Diplomacy Strategy Plan and Functional Bureau Strategy Plan, through which the SDD delivers on via sports. The Sports Diplomacy Division was founded in 2002 (Bolton, 2020) to reach youth in the Middle East through soccer. Operating as a branch of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), the Sports Diplomacy Division (SDD) uses sport as an instrument to enhance cross-cultural understanding and open new avenues of

dialogue for collaboration between individuals and nations, to support U.S. foreign policy objectives (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Its annual budget was \$5.5 million in 2017 (Alvarez, 2017), a figure which is estimated to have remained at approximately that amount in more recent years. The SDD consists of four primary pillars: Sports Envoys, Sports Visitors, the International Sports Programming Initiative (ISPI) and the Global Sports Mentoring Program (GSMP).

Sports Envoys are athletes and coaches who travel overseas on behalf of the State Department to participate in community outreach activities, lead sports clinics and engage in constructive dialogue with local groups. Sports Visitors are non-elite, young athletes and coaches chosen by U.S. missions abroad to visit the United States for two-week long sports exchange programs. These allow visitors to experience American values and culture, while learning about, for example, nutrition, training, disability, inclusion and team-building approaches that can be applied in participants' home countries. The ISPI is an annual grant competition designed to fund the development of public and private sport projects aimed at reaching underserved youth around the world. The ISPI issued approximately \$2,200,000 (U.S. Department of State, 2020) in cooperative agreement grants in FY2020. The GSMP is an initiative comprising two pillars: Empowering Women through Sports (aimed at expanding Title IX and gender equality) and Sport for Community (focused on empowering people with disabilities). These two mentorship programs connect mentors with individuals in underserved communities through international sport exchanges. The advancement of these policy objectives through developing flexible, responsive exchange programs aligns with the State Department's Functional Bureau Strategy to increase the nation's global competitiveness.

### *Program Successes and Strengths*

The success of these programs is measured by assessing participant satisfaction, increased participant knowledge and skills, participant behavior toward community engagement, and institutional changes related to increased collaboration and partnerships. On that basis there is a lot of evidence for success. The Sports Diplomacy Division has sent over 300 professional athletes as overseas envoys and engaged over 200,000 people in workshops in 180 countries (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The GSMP has successfully connected over 160 sport mentors from 72 countries creating a global leadership and advocate network, with 84% of alumni implementing sports action plans around the world (U.S. Department of State, 2021). The GSMP was named Diplomatic Action of the Year in 2018, winning the international award for using sports to inspire positive social change around the world (GSMP, 2018). ISPI grants have involved over 4,000 foreign and American participants in initiatives to develop leadership skills, achieve academic successes, and promote tolerance for at-risk youth, women, minorities and people with disabilities (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

### *Case Study: Sport Envoys*

One of the people we spoke to for this report, Andrea Woodson-Smith, Professor at North Carolina Central University, took part in the Sports Envoy Program as a Paralympian. The State Department chose her and her colleague Becky Clark to be the first females with disabilities to participate in the program, and they first went to Guangzhou, China. Their first-hand experience in China involved an extensive program focused on bringing about awareness about gender equity in sport, disability and adaptive sport. The program focused on engaging community organizers

and high-profile individuals in administrative positions to help them look at how you can conduct effective fundraising strategies. In Papua New Guinea with Ruthie Bolton they were mostly focused on getting girls involved in sport, looking at the balance of females involved in sport, and speaking to program leaders, coaches and physical education teachers to show them different ways they could include girls in sport, specifically basketball.

### *Limitations*

Collaboration efforts between the Sports Diplomacy Division, athletes, clubs, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and professional organizations have reached and empowered people all around the world. However, the SDD has severe limitations that must be addressed to maximize the potential of the practice.

The first is that its interventions are very specific and occupy quite a narrow range on the spectrum of sports diplomacy opportunities. This could stem from a number of things: limited funding, a lack of central strategy, and a natural divide between sports associations and the State Department (NGOs or private leagues vs. a government entity) all have limited the potential impact of the SDD. Sport remains an untapped 'goldmine' in the United States as policymakers arguably undervalue its capability to influence foreign strategy.<sup>1</sup> The shortage of support has led to a lack of common vision between factions, reducing the overall impact potential of the SDD.

An additional observed limitation, which is quite specific but raises an important broader issue, relates to the time spent in the United States vs. abroad. Danielle de Rosa, when working at UCONN with ECA through the Global Training and Development Institute, told us that she thought more

consideration should be given to the reciprocity angle: "Sometimes the perception is that there are so many more gains from the folks abroad than for the Americans."<sup>2</sup> This highlights the importance of securing and maintaining domestic support for any sports diplomacy strategy and of ensuring that its aims and rationale are fully understood by all those involved. In this case, the State Department's primary aim was developmental/overseas impact, and thus, in terms of the objectives it had set, it was successful. Nonetheless, greater reciprocity is a potential option to explore; the links built through deeper exchange programs and shared learning can end up having a better impact on that value promotion.

Another challenge these SDD initiatives face is the relative shortness of the duration of its programs. Several interviewees mentioned how it was important to ensure the sustainability of the programs: "When you are able to work with the same partner for a longer period of time ... you figure out how each other works and are able to work collaboratively better."<sup>3</sup> That sustainability also depends on the host country, but one interviewee described how one grant they submitted was rejected by the SDD on the grounds that the SDD had already been there. This highlights again the importance of clarity on the objectives of programs and criteria for impact.

## **2.2 State Department: U.S. Embassies**

If the SDD is the hub for U.S. State Department sports diplomacy, U.S. embassies are where most of that sports diplomacy work is carried out. This sports diplomacy process starts off with a bureau review, picking priority countries, identifying athletes and leagues they have worked with, and then offering embassies the opportunity to engage in the programs. The embassies don't usually get to pick the

people taking part; that is up to the SDD. The public affairs office within an embassy varies, but typically consists of three people (more for larger embassies): the head of section, the cultural affairs officer and the press officer. The cultural affairs officer usually deals with the sports diplomacy exchanges. An embassy will choose whether to engage or not based on their Public Diplomacy Implementation Plan (PDIP). This in turn is based on the country's ICS (integrated country strategy), with each country having its own priorities.

While we heard many accounts of successful programs and engaged embassies, we also saw examples of embassies for whom sports diplomacy was not a priority. In the case of the U.S. embassy in the United Kingdom, this was because the UK "have so much sport of their own." The thought process was that U.S. sports diplomacy in the UK doesn't have the same impact as it does in other countries, unless there are big name draws. Sports diplomacy was described as "community groups bringing people together," but ultimately it was something "nice to do"<sup>4</sup> and not a priority. The awareness of American sports in the UK was seen as "saturated", thus reducing the incentives for sports diplomacy.

This perspective illustrates quite a specific, and in our view, overly narrow, interpretation of the concept of sports diplomacy. This narrowness includes a certain lack of interest in learning from others: U.S. embassies could make more of the learning opportunities presented to them through the experience of host countries. One example highlighted in our interviews was the apparent lack of interest at the federal level for learning from UK expertise, or even asking for assistance, on what the UK had done to drive continued economic benefit following the London 2012 Olympic Games, including through sustained public/

private development partnerships for other major sporting events such as the 2019 Pan American Games.

Nonetheless there had still been some activity on the sports diplomacy front, such as a viral comic tweet about the England EURO2022 tournament,<sup>5</sup> and more substantially through the partnership led by the U.S. embassy in London on corporate responsibility and sports involving charities and UK sports clubs such as Arsenal Football Club.<sup>6</sup> This is where the value of the embassy as a convening power is put to positive use.

An additional, ad hoc element affecting the degree to which different embassies engage in sports diplomacy is the personal interest of the ambassador at the time. It is inevitable that the ambassador will shape priorities and methods of public diplomacy based on their preferences. But the very fact that lots of embassy sports diplomacy work done is down to personal interests highlights a systemic weakness and points to a fragility and unpredictability of how sports diplomacy is carried out by the United States on the ground.

### *Partnerships*

Much of the sports diplomacy work in-country is done with the participation and collaboration of sports organizations themselves, although these often operate fairly independently. This work varies country to country. The U.S. embassy in the UK, for example, told us how they have limited resources to add value to powerhouse leagues such as the NBA, NFL, etc. The embassy was kept in the loop, but leagues went about their business, occasionally inviting the ambassador to events.<sup>7</sup> In our conversations with the leagues, this model was confirmed to us, although interestingly it was made clear that the people and the networks at the embassies can still be very valuable. For



example, Travis Murphy of the NBA<sup>8</sup> talked about this additional value that embassies provide in assisting to pull off big events such as a Bucks vs. Hornets game in Paris or the Global Games in Mexico.

The Sports Diplomacy Division also partners with different organizations to deliver its programs. One example is the Center for Sport, Peace, and Society at the University of Tennessee, run by Sarah Hillyer. Hillyer spoke to us about how the WNBA and the NBA have participated in these SDD programs, but they have not been as invested or involved as she might have expected.<sup>9</sup> This was perplexing to her from a business strategy point of view, because GSMP delegates are in all the markets where they want to grow. On the same topic, Murphy, talked to us about how the NBA supports the SDD Sports Envoy program, mentioning how they have a collaborative relationship, in which they sit down with the State Department and align on places and countries to go.<sup>10</sup>

### **2.3 Time of a Secretary for Sport?**

Despite the role of the SDD and the embassies, the U.S. does not have a leadership role that can help consolidate the structures and enhance the impacts of sports diplomacy and provide that focal point for sports within the United States government.

A secretary for sport or similar position could fill this void. The United States stands out from most countries in the world, as it does not have such position. The UK, Russia, China, Spain, Australia and France, to name a few, all have a sports minister or similar. It would not necessarily be straightforward to set up, but for a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy this would be a logical step. This is not a new idea; in 2009, Eli Wolff, Director of the Sport and Development Project at Brown University, and Mary Hums, Professor of

Health and Sports Sciences at the University of Louisville published a paper calling for the creation of this position.<sup>11</sup> It is an idea whose time has come, and this has been reflected through our research and interviews, which consistently showed strong endorsement for the creation of the position.

Such a position would have a symbolic impact as a visible sign of U.S. international leadership and a practical impact in bringing together the currently dispersed activities and discussions about the international role of sports. It would also provide a crucial element for government communication, “allowing the civic world to be more aware of the community, to provide a centralized point to disseminate information and be a point of communication at federal level.”<sup>12</sup>

The arguments made by Wolff and Hums 13 years ago remain valid today.

This is one of the primary recommendations of this report, but it is also one that some in the sports community are concerned about, as interviewees state fearing the ‘dead hand of government’—an over-involvement from U.S. government to the detriment of U.S. sport. This is a particular worry for sports in the U.S. because unlike many other countries, they are mostly privately run. It is important therefore that both in defining the remit of this position and in the communication of its creation, it is not seen as government overstepping its mark or taking away autonomy from sports bodies but rather as a leadership role that can benefit all parties and help communicate and coordinate across U.S. sports.

Other risks that were brought up by interviewees relating to the creation of this position included the potential disruptive impact of politics and changing administrations,

and this new office not having the flexibility to adapt to a movement that is constantly changing. While valid concerns, these relate more to the execution of the role rather than the concept.

Others warned that, while not unworkable, it could well be a case of “too many chefs in the kitchen.” Some other actors simply didn’t see the need for the role. Director Isabel Hill of the National Travel and Tourism Office at the U.S. Department of Commerce pointed out to us that a lot of interagency coordination already happens without such a position. A Secretary for Sports or similar role would have a broader remit than just sports diplomacy, which is why the scope and exact role would therefore need to be carefully defined and justified within the broader governmental setup. On balance, and overwhelmingly from our research, its need in the context of U.S. sports diplomacy is clear and supported by a large proportion of stakeholders.

## **2.4 The Roles of States and Cities**

Public diplomacy though, does not just happen at the federal level, and sports diplomacy is no exception. Over the past few years we have been witnessing a shift in the sites of diplomacy more broadly in the U.S. as states, cities and even individuals become hubs and focal points for U.S. diplomacy (Hachigian, 2019). As they become global actors in their own right, they are looking at how to make sports a part of their repertoire.

Cities have agility compared to the federal level. They can adapt and innovate more rapidly, implementing new programs, testing out new initiatives and creating new positions with greater ease. They can also engage with other “glocal” actors globally, which in the space of sports diplomacy is currently crucial as we have seen that this

engagement from U.S. embassies on the ground is sporadic and less sustained.

Jay Wang and Soheala Amiri of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy describe cities' current approach as function-driven, where the main areas of activity reflect the many different forms of sports diplomacy that they can and sometimes do carry out: economic development, diplomatic representation, global policy representation, community engagement and hosting events (Wang and Amiri, 2019). This report explores what sports diplomacy looks like in these different fields, and many of our recommendations can also be applied at these global levels.

Cities in particular also have strong associations with different sports, the sports teams that they host, the physical infrastructure of stadiums, etc. The international brand of a city is frequently recognized globally because of a sports team. A basketball fan in China might only have heard of Houston because of the Rockets, and this is replicated for sports and cities across the U.S. The association to individual states isn't always as strong, but still many teams, such as the New England Patriots, equally carry that name association. Teams and leagues therefore become brand identifiers for cities, states and countries and this association can be utilized to promote understanding of the strength and ideals of a country, promote business, and attract tourism and investment.

Los Angeles is a city that has sports built into its identity and is firm on its agenda going forward to host the 2028 Summer Olympic Games. Los Angeles will become only the third city to host for a third time, alongside Paris and London. The Games are a source of pride for the city and have led to important legacies such as the LA84 Foundation, set up with the surplus of revenue from the 1984 Summer Olympic

Games. With the upcoming 2028 Games, youth sports and integration are sports diplomacy priorities for the mayor's office, with low- or no-cost sporting activities already being made available. Sports, through the Games, are becoming a guiding force for much of the city's international work.

One of the most innovative cities in integrating sports diplomacy into its organizational structure and its international affairs/city diplomacy work is the city of Atlanta through their Global Sports Initiative (GSI), which "aims to elevate the City of Atlanta as an international sports hub through community engagement, sports exchanges, economic development, and sports diplomacy" (Atlanta International Affairs, 2021).

This is an excellent example of the kind of structures that can be set up at different levels of governance in the U.S. to carry out sports diplomacy. Vanessa Ibarra, Director at the Mayor's Office of International Affairs at the City of Atlanta, told us there was an opportunity in Atlanta for sports "as an economic attraction tool, a tool for emergency preparedness and logistics, a vehicle for peace, youth engagement, diversity equity and inclusion, and an opportunity to connect culturally and learn from each other's countries."<sup>13</sup>

Atlanta, taking into account challenges around bandwidth and budget, created the position of sports representative to incorporate trade, diplomacy, education, community engagement and attraction of international events—reflecting many of the different aspects of sports diplomacy covered in this report. From hosting events such as the International Soccer Festival and their "Coffee with Legends" talks to carrying out sport exchanges to build cultural relations (with a similar model and objectives to that of the State Department's sports diplomacy division), the activities touch on a range of forms of engagement, with

the common thread of sports throughout. An important part of this success is also the collaboration with other local organizations such as the Atlanta Sports Council, local professional sports teams and NGOs such as Soccer Streets. These partnerships increase the reach, impact and scale of the events and objectives in place.

Atlanta's work in this field provides a model for other cities interested in exploiting the opportunities that sports diplomacy has to offer, showing that it is possible to create these roles and positions within the mayor's office and to have a subsequent positive and innovative impact.

Other interesting examples of stakeholders at the city level include the San Diego Diplomacy Council, a nonprofit organization that delivers a range of programs and services around city diplomacy. These include sports diplomacy exchange programs such as ones partnering with the U.S. Embassy in Laos. The San Diego Diplomacy Council has, unusually, a specific and deliberate focus on sports diplomacy, in which the benefits of the exchanges are not only viewed in their own context but also in that of a strategic use of sports within foreign policy objectives (San Diego Diplomacy Council, 2020).

At the state level, competences for sports are often more limited, and as a result they are even less active on the sports diplomacy front. This is an area that this report does not analyze in depth; however, our conversations with practitioners strongly suggest that there is much untapped potential here and a larger scope for greater research. There are existing illustrations of innovative ways for states to be involved in U.S. sports diplomacy. The state of Michigan, for example, is carrying out a groundbreaking initiative to find ways for the state to help women in sports (Michigan.gov, 2022). In section 3, we look into the role that women's

sports can play for U.S. sports diplomacy, and a state that is leading the U.S. on this front has the opportunity to play a large part in that.

### **3. Advancing American Influence: American Leadership and Sport**

A core element of the U.S.' foreign policy strategy is to promote American leadership globally, drawing on a range of underpinnings that give that leadership credibility and substance (Goal 3 of the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Assistance's Joint Strategic Plan) (U.S. Department of State, 2018). In this section, we explore two of these underpinnings: values and development. We assess their value to U.S. foreign policy and how they would fit into U.S. sports diplomacy strategy.

#### **3.1 Values**

American values are clearly viewed in this Joint Strategic Plan as a cornerstone of U.S. influence overseas. The plan is not crystal clear about what these values comprise, but there is a strong focus on human rights and freedom. Sports provide an excellent vehicle for transmitting many of these key values, which we have divided into two categories: those intrinsic to sports and those that can be readily transmitted through sports.

##### *Intrinsic Values of Sports*

These values are a fundamental and structural part of sports; they are built into the fabric of sports. Of these, perhaps the most identifiable one is fair play: adhering to a set of values of fairness, beyond the rules of the sport itself, and often in situations in which these values of fairness

and compassion are placed above winning. Fair play is so intrinsic to sports that we also speak of it as 'sportsmanship' and 'being a good sport.' Professional sports are often set up to create a fair/level-playing field through a draft system, financial fair play, wage caps, anti-doping and other similar measures (Szymanski, 2014).

Other intrinsic values include teamwork and hard work, which are fundamental to success in sports. One example is that of American athlete Abbey D'Agostino and New Zealand's Nikki Hamblin, who in the 2016 Summer Olympic Games helped each other up from a fall during a 5000m heat and continued to support each other across the finish line despite slowing down their personal race times (Olympics, 2016). Such stories often end up being more talked about than the competition results themselves and have impact beyond purely the realm of sports, being shared with the world through many more channels.

Often these values are described as 'humanizing,' which also is of clear interest to U.S. foreign policy as they show a relatable human aspect of America to the world. This is of course not just restricted to a U.S. government agenda, as Gunnar Hagstrom<sup>14</sup> brought up, but is an overlapping agenda with which sporting bodies are also closely aligned as they wish to promote similar values. For example, the NBA sees basketball "as a tool to encourage elements of sports—diversity, inclusion, leadership, conflict resolution, acceptance of others."<sup>15</sup>

### *Values Transmitted through Sports*

Sports have such a wide reach and high level of engagement that this creates a substantial platform from which to promote broader values beyond those intrinsic to



sports. There is often an alignment between the values that sports and the U.S. seek to promote internationally.

Following the death of George Floyd in early 2020, U.S. sports moved to take a stronger position against racism than ever before. The NBA arguably took one of the most notable stances, with many players joining protests all over the country (Deb, 2020), followed by the creation of the NBA Foundation, with \$300 million committed over the next decade to boost economic growth in the Black community. NBA teams such as the Phoenix Suns have themselves carried out initiatives to build ties with Latin American and Hispanic communities (AP, 2010). These domestic initiatives also build an international profile and anti-racist identity for the NBA. Given the important role the NBA plays in how America is viewed internationally, this association helps the U.S. to build a more positive profile on these issues of anti-racism and diversity.

The overlap between sports and disability provides another example of sports diplomacy building on key values of inclusion and overcoming challenges. The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee changed its name to merge the two in 2019 (previously it was just the "United States Olympic Committee," with Paralympics as a sub-division). There are only a handful of countries worldwide that have this merged structure, which is seen as highly symbolic by leading Paralympians and gives substance and credibility to U.S. leadership on disability sports. In the words of four-time Paralympian Oksana Masters: "This change is about more than an organizational name. To me this means that Paralympic athletes are fully included, embraced and celebrated by the USOPC (United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee)" (Team USA, 2019).

Events such as the Paralympics or Special Olympics are equally platforms for sports diplomacy. Woodson-Smith talks about these platforms and how disability sports “help countries to have conversations about what our (U.S.) policies are, and see how they could tweak their own or how we might want to change ours.” These connections link disability services, disabled athletes, policymakers and embassies and can “help the United States show how its own policies could help them in their country.” John Register,<sup>16</sup> a Paralympian silver medalist, points out how “Paralympic sport, and those with disabilities, open up a much larger conversation than the Olympic class athletes.” The Special Olympics, a sports organization for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, creates opportunities for those important international exchanges. Eli Wolff<sup>17</sup> talked about how disability sports boost the participation elements of global sports. Stepping back for a moment to U.S. sports diplomacy more broadly, we can see the double opportunity this presents: both to build *occasions* for carrying out sports diplomacy while also boosting the *participation and reach* of sports.

### *NGOs (Non-governmental Organizations)*

To date, one of the main ways in which the sports industry and U.S. government have looked to work together around values is through NGOs. These can often allow for government participation (through grants or other funding) and remain sufficiently independent for the sports industry to feel comfortable participating without feeling exploited for political ends. NGOs can offer an excellent platform for convening the different stakeholders in U.S. sports diplomacy. In the case of Beyond Sport, this has included sports leagues and teams, other actors such as the State Department, cities such as Los Angeles and New York, as well as sports broadcaster ESPN.

In parallel, government programs such as the Peace Corps provide a similar platform in conjunction with NGOs. Ethan Zohn of Grassroot Soccer (GRS) describes their dynamic partnership for over 10 years with the Peace Corps as “one of their most successful partnerships.”<sup>18</sup> GRS has designed multiple SKILLZ programs (soccer-based health curricula) for the Peace Corps, ranging from HIV awareness to gender empowerment to malaria to financial literacy. These programs have been delivered by Peace Corps volunteers and their host country counterparts in over 50 Peace Corps posts around the world. Most recently, GRS trained select Peace Corps staff to facilitate SKILLZ trainings to Peace Corps volunteers and counterparts within their respective posts. Mary McVeigh Connor,<sup>19</sup> Soccer Without Borders’ co-founder and Executive Director, talked to us about how a lot of Peace Corps volunteers start sports programs and then come to Soccer Without Borders for advice. GRS’ model of partnership was highly lauded by Zohn, and as seen by the Soccer Without Borders example, the Peace Corps is one of the areas ripe for greater sports diplomacy initiatives.

### *Case Study: Women in Sports*

Women’s sports provide a powerful dual opportunity for U.S. sports diplomacy and are worth particular consideration within a future U.S. sports diplomacy strategy. Not only are its female athletes often the best at their respective sports, but also the market for women’s sports is increasingly growing. As Mary McVeigh Connor<sup>20</sup> puts it, “the U.S. has a comparative advantage in gender equality and women in sport.” This combination of winning and growth is fundamental. On the one hand, women’s sport provides an avenue to promote equality around the world, enhanced by on-the-field success (winning clearly is key for profile and visibility). On the other hand, this success to date and future

growth potential makes it financially enticing for investment into the sport.

Some of the challenges of a sports diplomacy strategy for the U.S., such as not having a foothold in key global sports such as soccer, disappear when it comes to women's sports, with the U.S. boasting the best national women's soccer team in the world (Statista, 2021). The women's national team has won four World Cups and four Olympic Golds (Lewis, 2019). Aside from soccer, tennis is arguably the other major women's sport in which one of the best players of all time, Serena Williams, is also American (Garber et al, 2016). Even beyond those sports, some of the most recognizable names in women's sports, from Ronda Rousey and Simone Biles to Lindsey Vonn, are also American. With powerhouse female athletes, the interest in women's sports has been growing remarkably, as illustrated by a 2018 Nielsen report that shows that 84% of general sports fans now have an interest in women's sports (Nielsen, 2018). This popularity extends across the globe, with Nicole Matsuka of Women Win talking about one example in Pakistan, where she witnessed how everyone was "obsessed with Alex Morgan and knew who she was."<sup>21</sup> In 2020, a year in which sports were decimated by COVID, and many male U.S. sports saw viewership numbers decrease, the WNBA finals saw a +15% increase and the NWSL a whopping +493% (Cash, 2020). This growth rate makes women's sport a sensible, even an essential, investment for U.S. sports diplomacy.

This growth in turn supports the promotion of U.S. values, making it easier and more impactful to have conversations around equality through sports. When paired with the inherent values enshrined in women's sports in the U.S, such as through Title IX, the case for integrating women's sports fully into U.S. sports diplomacy could hardly be stronger.

*"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."*

**-Title IX, The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) (1972)**

Title IX provides a legislative structure, which, although imperfect, represents a model from which other countries could learn. This policy structure gives the U.S. an added credibility on the world stage. Associate Professor of Sport and Recreation Studies at George Mason University, Craig Esherick,<sup>22</sup> talked to us about how Title IX puts the thought in people's minds that women "can do more, it exposes them to positive things." This was reinforced by Woodson-Smith, who pointed out to us that "even the ability for women to participate in sports without any sort of judgment is crucial."

Prioritizing women's sports in a sports diplomacy strategy poses its own challenges because women's sport is far from perfect in the United States. The huge inequalities still present at all levels of sport are very much there, and putting the spotlight on the success of women's sports will also put a spotlight on those inequalities. This is not ideal for U.S. foreign policy. One example has been the U.S. women's soccer team lawsuit against U.S. Soccer surrounding issues of equal pay (Peterson and Blum, 2020). On the one hand, the fight for equality and the accompanying progress enhances the U.S.' image. On the other, it draws conversations toward many of the inequalities still present. These examples of women fighting for equality in sports (Mervosh and Caron, 2019) shows that much work remains to be done and highlights the sensitivities involved in adopting a sports diplomacy strategy with a focus on women's sports. Overall

though, the opportunity for the United States in this space remains significant.

### *Risk of Negative Values*

As seen in the example of women in sport, highlighting the role that values play in sport can also backfire. America's image, soft power and credibility as a promoter of key values can be damaged when sporting values are breached, or when sports ends up reflecting other negative aspects of U.S. society. In the words of sports marketing expert Phillip Leopold, "it runs the spectrum - some people think the United States is the model in every way/an example of best practices in business, technical aspects, and nutrition, for example. Others think the United States is the model of everything that's wrong and that American sports are all about winning and not the journey."<sup>23</sup> This means that it is essential that a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy looks not only at boosting positive potential but also at minimizing the risks of incorporating sports more actively in U.S. foreign policy.

Transmitting these values is not easy; as Hillyer told us, "social justice isn't always as 'sexy' in other countries."<sup>24</sup> The pick-up and engagement is not the same around the world, and indeed there is often a backlash when sports become too political. The degree to which the United States seeks to amplify its own messages of value promotion therefore needs careful calibration by the State Department, which should have the country knowledge and the understanding of how best to promote those values. This is a key argument for a more important role for the State Department in leading, engaging with, and advising on international social responsibility through sports.

Athletes, coaches and sports teams are not experts in foreign policy (nor should we expect them to be), yet

they are arguably diplomats in their own right, speaking to international audiences who associate them with the brand and nation that is the United States of America. This concept that “everyone is a diplomat” is appealing in many ways because it suggests the diplomatic reach and impact is huge, but of course the more informed that visiting sportspeople are, the better attuned they can be to cultural sensitivities and thus the greater the positive impact (a point made to us by Craig Esherick). The basic “diplomatic training,” as provided by the State Department for their exchange programs, is a good example of proportionate state support to allow for a better understanding of the values and cultural norms of the countries visited.

There are other areas in which negative values can take the spotlight. Former Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling was banned from the NBA for racist remarks (Phillips, 2020); images of crowds at sports games storming the pitch traveled around the world as an example of the United States’ mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic (Cobb and Sallee, 2020); scenes of riots after big wins and losses at games (Smith, 2018), or indeed high-profile scandals such as the horrendous sex abuse case of Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics are hardly a great advertisement for the United States. In such a context, it is clearly not possible to fully eliminate the association of all negative values from sports, but different stakeholders should continue to mitigate these as much as possible: if properly handled, with the imperfections and need for improvement openly acknowledged, the story can actually be more rather than less engaging for international partners, who rarely welcome outsiders seeking to trumpet and impose models of perfection.

### *Response to Scrutiny by Leagues: Turning a Historic Negative into a Positive*

As a footnote to this section, it is important to note the potential diplomatic value of the relatively recent responses of a range of U.S. leagues, where they have now responded to historical criticisms and are addressing them with new initiatives—thus in some respects now leading the way on social justice issues, particularly within race relations. Despite a controversial past with racist mascots and names, U.S. sports teams, such as the “Cleveland Indians,” have taken the initiative to change their brand into a more respectful representation. The MLB is also making strides in addressing its racist past by recently designating the “Negro Leagues” as having major league status (MLB, 2020). Perhaps most notably, the NBA and NFL have also had major players and teams stand up against racial injustices. These are complex areas in which feelings run strongly and views are very diverse. But the very fact that issues are being confronted is both noticed internationally and a positive development for U.S. standing overseas.

### **Doping**

Sports diplomacy that bases itself on excellence and success of domestic athletes can backfire through doping scandals. Doping is cheating and thus the antithesis of the core value of fair play, undermining the positive impact that might otherwise be achieved through winning.

Athletes who have achieved huge fame while doping, such as Lance Armstrong (Wilson, 2013) and Alex Rodriguez (Marchese, 2019), often find that fame coming back to bite them. The international spotlight on successful U.S. sports stars also draws international attention to cheating—not something they want to highlight as part of their public



diplomacy strategy! That spotlight cannot simply be turned off, and therefore these athletes often become a durable symbol highlighting negative values associated with America. It also undermines trust for future sporting successes and the sport itself (Murray, 2020). In sports such as cycling, even when victories are celebrated today, the cloud of doubt lingers over the sport, leaving a latent negativity.

### *Anti-doping*

If doping is the challenge, then having a powerful anti-doping agency seems like the perfect solution. Yet the ongoing conflict between the U.S. and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) shows that aspiring to high standards does not always translate to positive diplomacy. The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) recently threatened to withdraw funding to WADA (the U.S. is the largest government contributor) in relation to what they deemed as inadequate governance reforms and failures to hold Russia accountable for their doping scandal (Keith, 2020). This criticism of WADA has also been reflected by Travis Tygart, head of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) (Grohmann, 2019).

The significant tensions between these two anti-doping operations represent a challenge for U.S. sports diplomacy strategy because on the one hand they have one of the most formidable anti-doping agencies, but at the same time the clashes between USADA/ONDCP and WADA run the risk of undermining the global fight against doping.

Despite the United States having its own issues, and as one interviewee put it, the risk of “the pot calling the kettle black,” USADA has a case for calling itself the best in the (anti-doping) game. Yet rather than leveraging this position with moderate and persuasive diplomatic engagement on

the world anti-doping stage, it has adopted a stance that some have interpreted as arrogant (Abrahamson, 2019). From the point of view of American sports diplomacy, the U.S. has the opportunity to be an example of best practice, but instead risks alienating other nations that perhaps don't have the same capabilities from which to build similar anti-doping systems. A U.S. sports diplomacy strategy should seek to address these inconsistencies.

### *"American Brashness"*

It is also a sign of how some of the challenges for traditional U.S. diplomacy are reflected in U.S. sports diplomacy. One interviewee spoke about how American sports often do not make the most of the fact that they are world leaders in the sports world. Their international reputation is often tarnished through being bombastic about success rather than diplomatic. "Current American success and expertise is built off a strong base and history, and not all other nations have the same foundation: there are more ways to get people to embrace you. The United States tries to fit in American values and interests and often pushes them too hard. It becomes too evident to an international community when you are asking something of them."<sup>25</sup>

This viewpoint was supported by Brian Suskiewicz, Chief Executive, Coaches Across Continents, who said, "when we fall short, it is often because of our underlying American brashness." He points out that where the United States can succeed in its sports diplomacy is through capacity building rather than telling people what to do.<sup>26</sup>

## **3.2 Sports for Development and Social Responsibility**

A lot of the non-sporting social impact/benefits of sport are often defined as Sport for Development (SFD), and these

should also be considered within a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy. SFD is not itself by definition international, but support to SFD by both government and sports bodies is widely used in the international development space, including to help the U.S. government achieve its international development objectives. In turn, a lot of the international SFD done by sports organizations is done to meet their social responsibility objectives. The other main actors in the SFD sector are NGOs, which are often the ones delivering projects and initiatives on the ground.

The use of sports as an international development tool is widespread across the development community, including by the United States. Indeed, the work of the Sports Diplomacy Division is to a considerable degree focused on the development agenda. This is a very broad and specialist field, and it is not the primary purpose of this report to explore in depth current practice or future opportunities; development practitioners have written extensively on the topic (Thibodeau, 2020). However, it is important to note the relevance of this aspect of sports diplomacy for a future U.S. strategy.

Athletes, professional sport teams, leagues and foreign governments sometimes work together to conduct social responsibility and charitable work on an international level. The benefits of this inorganic sports diplomacy can range from amplifying the impact of the charitable cause to building a global reach and fanbase for teams and leagues to supporting the U.S. government's diplomacy and foreign policy goals and objectives.

There is a business angle to this, though. As stated by Melanie LeGrande, Vice-President of Social Responsibility at the MLB: "your brand reputation, your affinity, your fan engagement, has to do with what you do on the ground in

the community. And what that does is directly proportional with how you do with your revenues” (King, 2020). Therefore, for professional U.S. sports, international social responsibility work often ends up coming up a distant second to their domestic social responsibility work. For example, every year NFL athletes take part in a charitable initiative called “My Cause, My Cleats,” in which they pick a particular charity or initiative they want to support, raise money for and showcase on their matchday cleats. Only 9% of NFL athletes supported an international cause,<sup>27</sup> with the other 42% percent choosing a national charity and 49% percent choosing a local charity.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, it is worth observing that the very degree to which the United States actively and visibly seeks to promote “American” values as such, is in itself an approach that risks alienating the foreign audiences that it is seeking to influence in a positive way. To the extent that they are seen as an imposition, such values are likely to be unwelcome. Thus, in developing the values aspects of the sports diplomacy strategy, there is a strong argument to seek an alternative, internationally accepted values framework, such as elements of the Sustainable Development Goals or the UN Charter on Fundamental Rights, to frame the approach.

#### **4. American Prosperity: Sports as an Economic Driver**

One of the challenges of making the case for public diplomacy is the difficulty in measuring impact and return on investment. However, the observed behavior of a wide range of actors both public and private suggests a clear consensus that sports can bring major and tangible benefits to the United States—in terms of the objectives both of sporting bodies and of government organizations from city to federal.

The biggest and most obvious examples are sporting events, ranging from mega-events such as the Olympics to 'smaller' international fixtures and tournaments. But we also see the role of sports as an economic driver through sports as businesses in their own right, their impact on tourism and higher education, and the all-important function that the athletes themselves play.

This report looks at some success stories in these areas to illustrate the potential for similar future initiatives in a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy, though that success is of course dependent inter alia on effective financial planning, management and execution.

#### 4.1 Sporting Events

The U.S. can extract sports diplomacy value from participating in global events, winning at sports and hosting events. A sporting *event* is so much more than just the sports match itself. This reality was perhaps best brought to light at the outset of the pandemic in 2020, with the absence of audiences and high level of restrictions at these games transforming the nature of events. The financial returns from broadcasting did not vanish with the crowds, but the absence of people and the forced disappearance of the physical economic infrastructure around events (hospitality, ticketing, travel and much more) highlighted the breadth of economic activities associated with sports events.

##### *Major Events*

Hosting major sporting events such as the Olympic Games or soccer's World Cup brings a huge international spotlight on the host country. It is not for nothing that they are viewed as the "biggest platform for state-to-state diplomacy in the sports world."<sup>29</sup>

These events require substantial investment for success. There are factors within the U.S.' control that can contribute to the smooth running and positive impact of an event (construction, transport, visuals, visitor experience, etc.) and others out of its control, such as whether the sporting competition itself is thrilling or mundane. Either way, there is pressure to spend: on sporting success and on hosting.

The real economic impact of major events is hotly debated, with some pointing to the extravagant costs of hosting events such as the Olympics and others highlighting the knock-on economic benefits to the local region, to sporting federations and many more stakeholders. This report does not look to conduct an economic analysis of the cost/benefit equation around hosting such events, but rather to paint a picture of the wide range of sports diplomacy benefits that can stem from them.

For example, these major events represent a serious tourism opportunity, with thousands of visitors traveling to the host country. The 2018 Winter Olympics attracted over 1.5 million tourists to South Korea (Statista, 2021), over 400,000 foreign tourists attended the Rio 2016 Summer Olympics (EFE, 2016), and Sochi has had a major tourism boost since being put on the map by hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics (Olympics, 2015).

The nature of the platform provided by the Olympics also lends itself to more partnerships between different stakeholders who want to use a sporting event to create social impact. One example of this is how NBC, Pepsi and RISE have worked together around the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics to find ways to pursue objectives around inclusive societies and ending racial injustice (RISE, 2020).

### *Case Study: Upcoming Olympics and Soccer World Cup*

With both the 2026 FIFA World Cup and the 2028 Winter Olympics coming to the United States, the country has a tremendous sports diplomacy opportunity. The Rio 2016 Olympics provided a 7.5% boost to GDP to Rio and the surrounding areas in the years building up to the Games (Rocha et al, 2018). Before COVID appeared, Tokyo 2020 was predicted to add 32 trillion yen (\$293 billion USD) to the Japanese economy (Arba, 2021), and Russia was expected to see a \$31 billion USD impact from the 2018 Soccer World Cup by 2023 before its current invasion of Ukraine (AP, 2018). The sheer scale of these events also has a large impact on other stakeholders. Sporting federations have a chance to showcase their sports, athletes have a larger audience than ever, and their successes and failures can shape a whole career.

### *'Smaller' Events*

Often, in sports diplomacy, the focus is on mega-events such as the ones we have described. Yet 'smaller' events that the United States hosts every year deserve significant attention for a potential sports diplomacy strategy too.

From the Kentucky Derby (Oser, 2020) (approximately \$400 million) to the U.S. Open (Rajamani, 2019) (approximately \$750 million), the United States hosts many events that have an international audience and bring in substantial revenue. By being hosted annually the economic models are often honed to efficiency through experience. But there remains a gulf between the acceptance of the Olympics as a major diplomatic opportunity and the relatively under-studied and under-exploited reality around these 'smaller' events, which rarely are considered for their diplomatic potential. Our research strongly suggests that there is a major untapped

sports diplomacy resource here, particularly for the states/cities that host such events.

There are also events that target specific demographics, such as the Special Olympics, Homeless World Cup and World Transplant Games, which help bring people together through sport for very specific causes. These offer obvious—and readily tailored through the very nature of their focus—opportunities for sports diplomacy also.

### *Overseas Events*

One point that repeatedly came up in the interviews and literature is that the United States is not as appreciative as it could be of the value of the Olympic Games. This is in part a reflection of the points made in section 2 around the exceptionalism of American sports, but there are also structural weaknesses. Some sporting leagues or teams take a narrow perspective of the Olympics, viewing and assessing participation as a business transaction, with the athletes as assets. As was pointed out to us, “the magic of the Olympics is often forgotten.”

This can lead to controversy surrounding participation of American athletes. Perhaps the most well-known examples have been the NBA or the NHL “being reluctant” to release American athletes for the Olympics. The NBA will let international players such as Pau Gasol go to the Olympics with Spain but have been known to draw the line when it comes to American players, in part because of the role that Team USA plays in that decision process.

American athletes themselves might also not prioritize the Olympics. For Tokyo 2020, LeBron James, arguably the United States’ best player and undoubtedly its biggest superstar, publicly said he was not going to the Olympics



in order to promote a movie, the latest "Space Jam" (OlympicTalks, 2021). While this was not the only reason (he was also resting his ankle before the next NBA season), it is a pertinent example of how the Olympics are not seen by all Americans as the pinnacle of their sport.

This does not only happen in basketball. In 2018 (Calfas, 2017) and again in 2022 (Olympics, 2021), the NHL did not allow its athletes to participate in the Winter Olympics, in what essentially was a financial/business decision. One interviewee spoke about this kind of prioritization as "short sighted because American success at the Olympics such as *Miracle [on Ice]* (ice hockey) and *Dream Team* (basketball) are hugely influential teams and moments that reflect positively on the United States and U.S. sport."<sup>30</sup> Again, it is difficult to measure the precise impact, but on a global scale it is hard to overstate the importance of these Olympic moments for the sports.

In response to this, the NBA is keen to point out<sup>31</sup> how they came to an agreement around calendar dates in order to accommodate players going to Tokyo 2020. They scheduled the season to start in December and finish the day before the opening ceremonies of the Tokyo Olympics, which is an example of the compromises that can be reached. The WNBA also stopped for the Olympics, which shows signs of a more positive trend, at least in some sports.

Over-focus on success can paradoxically have downsides too in terms of sports diplomacy impact, depending on the value systems of different cultures. Teri Hedgpeth, former Director of Archives at the USOPC, talks about balancing the value of competition with the value of winning, stating that "since the Cold War, the U.S. has been focused on the medal count," which "takes away the human approach."<sup>32</sup> The U.S.

should look to find that balance and that focus beyond just medals.

Attending overseas events and achieving sporting success are crucial elements of sports diplomacy. Decisions not to send your best athletes, or failure to integrate at the sporting events themselves can and do send negative images to the rest of the world. We are seeing some signs of greater compromise, but addressing this should nonetheless remain an important part of a future U.S. sports diplomacy strategy.

## **4.2 Sport as a Business and the World as a Global Market**

Professional sports in the U.S. are businesses and, as such, the primary objectives of any of their international activities and expansion are tied to how these bring value to the business. Ultimately the focus for them will revolve around economic profit. Suskiewicz states: "it's important to remember they're in the business to grow the game, from elite level to grassroots, and they're not necessarily in it primarily for sport for good."<sup>33</sup>

While the focus on growth for U.S. sports is primarily domestic, there are two primary areas in which they look to boost international presence: building an international fan base and scouting talent. Building an international fan base opens up new markets and a panoply of economic opportunities. The most lucrative are often in the form of broadcasting rights, but there are other opportunities such as new potential sponsors, merchandise sales to international fans and more. When it comes to scouting, the development or promotion of any sport overseas can help increase the talent pool from which to recruit. Or if the sport is already present, then there is the possibility of a more light-footed approach through scouting. These commercial objectives

can often align with the U.S.' prosperity agenda, boosting economic ties with strategic markets.

### *Case Study: NBA*

The NBA is one of the most successful leagues in the world in establishing a global presence (programs in over 100 countries), based fundamentally on the pillar of profitability but also providing ample benefits and opportunities for U.S. sports diplomacy. It is therefore the best case study for what successful sports diplomacy action and engagement from private leagues can look like, as well as providing examples of potential pitfalls. The NBA is the embodiment of American soft power, and its players are cultural ambassadors in their own right (Cha, 2019).

The recent creation of the Basketball Africa League is a prime example of this internationalization, but perhaps the most successful venture to date has been the NBA's presence in China. The NBA established itself in China in 2008 after opening a Hong Kong office in 1992 (Novy-Williams, 2019). They were the first U.S. sports league to do so and quickly developed into one of the most popular sports in all of China. In the past three decades, there have been numerous investments, acquisitions and partnerships that have built a close relationship between the NBA and China. Between 2008 and 2019, NBA China's business has grown yearly by double-digit percentages (Novy-Williams, 2019). With a net worth of 5 billion USD (Fainaru and Fainaru-Wade, 2022), NBA China pulls in revenue from a variety of areas.

Chinese internet and tech companies have become the main investors and partners of NBA China. Tencent owns the digital broadcasting rights to NBA games along with other NBA content. This five-year deal is reported to be worth \$1.5 billion USD (Novy-Williams, 2019) and has helped

lead to a 66% increase in the technology and entertainment company's viewership (McNicol, 2017), directly correlating with NBA views. The social media platform Weibo has also partnered to get exclusive licensed content of NBA China. Other partnerships with telecommunications firm Vivo, broadcaster CCTV and sportswear-maker ANTA have boosted the financial ties between the NBA and China. Athletes such as Klay Thompson and Gordon Hayward have partnered with ANTA. Thompson's ANTA shoe deal has potential to amass to over \$80 million USD over 10 years (Wells, 2017). And Lou Williams has a deal with shoe company Peak that is worth more than what he makes playing ball (Zillgitt and Medina, 2019).

Additional NBA ties to China include Jiang Lizhang, who became the league's first Chinese minority owner in 2016 after purchasing part of the Minnesota Timberwolves (Novy-Williams, 2019). More recently, Joseph Tsai, co-founder of the Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba, became a majority owner of the Brooklyn Nets (Novy-Williams, 2019).

There are also ties between the NBA and the Chinese government around certain joint projects such as a partnership with the Chinese Ministry of Education established in 2014 to increase basketball participation in elementary, middle and high schools' after-school programs (NBA, 2014).

## **Challenges**

It has not always been plain sailing for the NBA to build up such sports diplomacy capital. The three training academies came under scrutiny when criticism for human rights abuses were reported within the camp (Fainaru and Fainaru-Wade, 2020). An American coach in NBA China even referred to the academies as "sweat camps," causing league executives to send a letter to a U.S. senator stating that the Xinjiang

basketball academy would close (Dellenger, 2020), which led to NBA deputy commissioner and COO Mark Tatum stating the need for more oversight and a reevaluation of the sports training centers and academies tied to China (Fainaru and Fainaru-Wade, 2020).

This has led to some scrutiny of NBA China from the U.S., with NBA employees questioning that an American league was directly engaging in partnerships with a communist nation (Amico, 2020). Many argue that the NBA should only focus on basketball and cultivating goodwill in China. However, the argument holds that this “sports purism” cannot exist in relationships with China (Cha, 2019). Arguments of “predatory liberalism” state that China uses the economic and business side of groups (in this case the NBA) to exert power to further their political goals (Cha, 2019). This can be seen in the 2019 Houston Rockets incident, which will be covered in more depth in the section on sport and politics in section 5.

The NBA’s success in reaching the Chinese market and building relations is one that a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy should look to emulate. But it is also indicative of the fact that the greater role that private sports leagues/teams have, the greater the need for a strategic engagement with/from U.S. government to both capture the sports diplomacy potential and help navigate the sometimes turbulent waters of international relations.

### *The Business of Broadcasting*

The U.S. cannot access the economic benefits nor use the soft power generated by sports such as the NBA without having a means of connecting sports to viewers and fans around the world. Deep engagement benefits from in-person events, but the role of broadcasters and media is of course

central. 'Media,' to use the term loosely, is not perhaps the most obvious partner for sports diplomacy as such, because after all, why would they be interested in it? Once again though, the motives are fairly similar to those of the sports organizations: it can be both a business opportunity in terms of capturing audiences and a means of promoting the values of the media organizations themselves through their own corporate social responsibility programs. Examples of successful partnerships can be seen in the joint "ESPNW and State Department Global Sports Mentoring Program - GSMP : Empower Women through Sports." Such organizations are thus interesting potential partners for a sports diplomacy strategy (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

### **4.3 Tourism and Higher Education**

Sports have a ripple effect throughout the U.S. economy. By no means are tourism and higher education the only two, but they do represent two clear examples of success stories and areas of interest for a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy.

Tourism is the perfect example of the interconnectedness between sports and foreign policy and one with demonstrable and measurable effect. In 2018, 80 million international tourists came to the U.S. for sporting events, averaging 17.5 nights in the States, visiting 1.4 states per visit: sports are demonstrably crucial for U.S. tourism (USA Travel, 2019).

In much the same line, higher education in the U.S. is its own source of soft power and its own economic driver. Sports also play a big role in the value of U.S. higher education. On the one hand there is the economic benefit that comes from attracting international students through sports, and on the other there is the potential role American student-athletes can play in U.S. sports diplomacy.

Over 200,000 international student athletes enroll and compete in NCAA schools, and many more will in part make their decision to attend an American university because of sporting reputation (NCAA, 2017). Sport is therefore that link that brings them closer to the United States. Even if America's national men's soccer team is not the best, the college system provides a source of attraction for international students. Although Grassroots Soccer is a health organization that uses soccer and not a soccer organization that uses health, Zohn spoke to us about trends beyond GRS and how: "in the back of everyone's mind (young soccer players), there's a dream scenario of getting identified and getting to go to the United States to a prep school, college, and go pro."<sup>34</sup>

Then there are the American student athletes, who may not have the same international pull as professional athletes but still have a lot to offer. Hillyer talked to us about how student athletes are trapped in bubbles: "student athletes want to have a purpose, want to have a purpose that's not just bringing home championships for the university, but they also want to make a difference in the world."<sup>35</sup>

One common recommendation from interviewees was to tap into the possibilities here through exchanges and overseas trips for student athletes. Power Five conferences universities already use such trips as a recruitment tool—and the Ivy League as an educational one—but it can easily be both those things, as well as an opportunity for U.S. sports diplomacy. It helps show athletes that they can have a platform to make a difference, while also taking U.S. sports and athletes overseas. Danielle DeRosa, Clinical Instructor, Sport Management Program at the University of Connecticut, told us: "[Going abroad] could be [a] really powerful experience for student athletes to be able to see how they could use sport and harness sport, outside of playing sport."<sup>36</sup> Esherick in turn segued to a personal story.

In college at Georgetown, he had the opportunity to travel to and play eight games in Taiwan. It was part Georgetown-funded (including donors), part publicly funded, and he believes they were also technically guests of the State Department. There was clearly a diplomatic element, and they traveled all over the country, also stopping in Hawaii and Japan. So while these sectors are benefiting through sports, a sports diplomacy strategy that addresses some of these concerns and opportunities can amplify those benefits even further.

#### **4.4 Athlete Engagement**

Within the different stakeholders in sports diplomacy, athletes are a crucial economic driver. They are the most visible face of sport and the key to unlocking all the aforementioned benefits; they are also often the least engaged actors in sports diplomacy, partly because of time pressures and partly because of their domestic and local focus. This makes them one of the trickiest stakeholders for a sports diplomacy strategy to get on board.

The obstacles athletes face to making a social impact overseas are considerable and very different to those of the teams. Social responsibility work is often tied to and organized by the team. For example, players are required to attend a number of reasonable promotional activities per their Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBA). In the NBA for example, the required number is seven appearances, but the CBA states that this "must ... occur in the home city of the player's Team" (CBA, 2017). Even when athletes are playing for a team in another country overseas, language and cultural barriers can make it harder for them to feel comfortable taking the initiative on local social responsibility work. One former professional athlete interviewed who played overseas said that "the language barriers meant that



all the charitable work was done exclusively through the team.”<sup>37</sup>

A successful sports diplomacy strategy could explore opportunities to work together collaboratively between government, sports organizations and athletes in order to make the most of the fact that athletes, as individuals, can make powerful international connections. There are some constraints to this, such as the International Olympic Committee’s Rule 50, which restricts when athletes can express their views at the Olympics, as well as other restrictions within national federations and leagues. But in many circumstances athletes can be free and empowered to engage, and here the potential is considerable. As Diahann Billings-Burford, CEO of RISE told us, “empowerment in the space of social responsibility can transcend geography.”<sup>38</sup>

There is also a long-term legacy opportunity that stems from the upcoming 2028 Summer Olympic Games for sports to seek more private sector investment in sports diplomacy. Often it is embassies and NGOs working on these issues with limited funds, which in turn makes it harder for athletes to commit their time to it. With this additional funding and sponsorship, the opportunity for athlete engagement will inevitably rise.

On a very practical basis, former Paralympic medalist John Register suggested establishing a communication channel between athletes traveling internationally and embassies in order to plan and carry out sports diplomacy work (community engagement, talks, help to inform embassies on sports diplomacy strategies, etc.). This engagement has great potential but given the restraints on athletes’ time is likely to need the initiative and organization to come from elsewhere. In the upcoming recommendations, we explore a model of cooperation in which this could take place.

One place to look for best practice in capturing this athlete engagement is the USOPC, which works with the State Department to provide sports diplomacy initiatives for traveling Team USA athletes. When organizing their travel, athletes are offered an opt-in option to carry out sports diplomacy with the local embassy. Time constraints might sometimes make it difficult for the athletes to fulfill this additional work, but nonetheless this is a practical example of effective potential integration of sports diplomacy into sporting programs, offering athletes interesting opportunities with low administration overheads. It is a model that leagues and teams could investigate further for their own travel and an example of the kind of initiatives that can help unlock the full potential of athlete engagement.

## **5. Protecting the American People: Sports and National Security**

Sports and national security are at first sight strange bedfellows, given that sports appear to sit at the softest end of the soft power spectrum and national security often associated with hard power. But in fact, as history shows, sports have long been instrumentalized by governments for national security ends. Captain Corey Ray, Associate Professor at the National War College, specializing in Sports Diplomacy and National Security, and formerly of the U.S. Navy, makes a detailed and compelling case:

The history of sports on the field of politics and national security dates back to the earliest organized sporting events...the national security strategist need look no further than the firestorm the General Manager of the Houston Rockets created when tweeting his support for Hong Kong to understand the power sports play in national security. When a

peer competitor forces their values on a U.S. multi-billion dollar company, it may be time for a new foreign policy game plan.<sup>39</sup>

This is pure “inorganic” sports diplomacy, in which sports and geopolitics are inextricably entangled, and governments very deliberately and visibly deploy sports as a tool to advance foreign policy and national security objectives. It does indeed have a long pedigree: the Olympic Truce, an agreement to allow safe passage and participation of athletes at the Games, dates back thousands of years to the first Ancient Olympics. But, as in other aspects of sports diplomacy, actions are frequently opportunistic and do not tend to be systematically integrated as sports diplomacy elements into a considered overall foreign policy strategy.

The next section looks at the instrumentalization of sports as a foreign policy and national security tool, the role of different kinds of boycotts in and through sports, the role of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee, and ends by examining the age-old question of whether sports and politics mix.

#### **4.1 The Instrumentalization of Sports as a Foreign Policy and National Security Tool**

There are a range of ways in which sports have been deployed actively by governments as a diplomatic tool to advance national security interests. For example, sports can be used as a comparatively low risk, non-volatile tool for normalizing relations.

The most famous example of this is perhaps ping-pong diplomacy (Andrews, 2018). More recent examples can be found in the world of cycling. In February 2020, the new “Israel Start-Up Nation” cycling team was invited (and warmly

welcomed by locals) to take part in the UAE Cycling Tour for the first time (TRT World, 2020). It is not only the athletes but the fans of sports that play a role in this 'soft' branch of sports diplomacy. Often, the amicable relations between fans of hostile nations, with the excuse of friendly competition, help highlight the potential for improved relations between those countries. This was one of the first steps toward normalizing a bilateral relationship between the two countries and one that continued to develop through the peace agreement signing at the White House in September 2020. Another recent example was the joint women's ice hockey team established by the Koreas at the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympics (Ein, 2018).

Sports offer opportunities in a wider range of areas than these, however. Another example in which sports can be deployed through a national security lens is in de-radicalization. Indeed, the current Sports Diplomacy division at the State Department was originally established with a de-radicalization focus in response to 9/11. Other international examples of this include the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's initiatives promoting projects around youth sport to prevent violent extremism (UNODC, 2021), and as Zohn of Grassroots Soccer told us, the work GRS does with soccer in Indonesia is to curb radicalization among children.

There are many ways of tapping into the goodwill of sports, its core values such as teamwork and fair play, and using those to build bridges and overcome national security issues through a particularly impactful form of public diplomacy.

## **5.2 Boycotts**

The previous section was all about building alliances, but there is a flipside in which sports are used as a tool for

applying diplomatic pressure, often escalating tensions as a result. This is typically seen in the form of boycotts, in which a team or nation will voluntarily withdraw from a competition in protest or will be banned by their own government from attending an event/entering a country to participate in an event for political reasons. The boycotting of the Olympics by the U.S. and Russia during the Cold War (the U.S. boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in the Soviet Union, a move reciprocated in the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games) is a classic example (Bushnell, 2021).

Boycotts can be effective in raising awareness, in protesting or in making a very clear international statement. But they are not, generally speaking, a constructive method of sports diplomacy because the measures inevitably backfire on the athletes and the sports themselves. For the U.S. to boycott attending an Olympic Games in another country damages the sporting dreams of many American athletes and undermines the integrity of the Games too. One way of viewing it is as a major depletion of accrued soft power (the opportunity loss at the Games and the negative impact on athletes) for national security ends. The reason other forms of sports diplomacy are often more effective in the long term is that they usually build on rather than 'spend' this soft power. In carrying out boycotts, a government wields what can be an effective tool, sports, but to the detriment of that very same tool.

Diplomatic boycotts, or political sporting boycotts, such as the one the U.S., the UK, Australia and other countries announced ahead of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games (Specia, 2021) are a more constructive approach. Though they rarely reduce tension in the short term, this approach strikes a more reasonable balance between the interests of sports and athletes—the preservation of the stock of soft

power and national security interests. Another example of a similar diplomatic boycott was the decision of the British royal family and government not to attend the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia in protest against the Russian Novichok poisoning on British soil (Duncan, 2018).

As a footnote, we observe that a unilateral decision by athletes or sporting organizations, such as that taken by the Women's Tennis Association with regard to China in protest at the disappearance of athlete Peng Shuai after her sexual assault allegations against China's former vice premier, uncompelled by government, fall into a different category (Goh and Pingue, 2021). Another recent example of sports organizations taking such a decision for political reasons is the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) decision to relocate the European soccer Champions League final away from St. Petersburg in Russia and the subsequent domino effect throughout most sports boycotting, even the participation of Russian athletes in protest against Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Though quite often deployed as a diplomatic or national security tool, sports rarely find a prominent place in national security strategies. For example, the UK's 2021 Integrated Review affords only a fleeting mention of sports in the list of soft power assets (Cabinet Office, 2021). This is a striking anomaly and leads us to pose the question as to why that should be the case. From our extensive research, both interviews and the literature, our conclusion is that the national security apparatus is not instinctively inclined to consider sports diplomacy as part of its core business, and this represents an opportunity for the United States. That said, there are examples of interesting practice, such as the course taught by Captain Ray on just this issue at the National War College, that are worth building on.

### **5.3 United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee**

In many countries around the world, the national Olympic and Paralympic Committees are hubs for engagement between sports and government, given the sheer profile of the events, breadth of sports involved and most importantly the strong existing government links through public funding. In the United States however, this isn't the case—the USOPC does not receive a federal grant.

In 1978, the Ted Stevens Act gave the USOPC rights to all intellectual property surrounding the Games (i.e., The Olympic Rings, use of the world Olympic, etc.), providing the USOPC with the full control and freedom to raise money through sponsorship and donors. There are some very specific exceptions in which there has been government funding, such as on the Paralympic side, and funding for the travel of military veterans. This separation from the federal government has some practical disadvantages, in which for example resolving athlete immigration issues can sometimes be trickier, but it is a model that, through retaining this independence, allows for sports to be run by sports.

Despite, and perhaps even because of this, the relationship between the USOPC and the State Department is one that both sides describe in a very positive light. When foreign policy issues appear for the USOPC, or when sports are in the U.S.' foreign policy spotlight, the channels of communication exist and are used successfully. This is done both in moments of international relations, amid tensions such as the political boycott of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, and in the more day-to-day work around the Olympic Games themselves. For example, there is an Olympic coordination office in the U.S. embassy present in the host country, and in recent years the USOPC's government relations team has provided an on-site liaison who has moved to the country and worked

on the ground for several months in the build-up to and duration of the Games.

The USOPC was not historically perceived as one the most internationally engaged National Olympic Committees. Instead, Susan Brownell, Professor of Anthropology, specializing in Chinese Sports and Olympic Games, at the University of Missouri- St Louis, talked to us about an existing perception of the USOPC as “way too profit-oriented.” The “raw pursuit of money and medals” can come at the expense of values and human rights, seen tragically with Larry Nassar and the gymnastics sex abuse scandal in which “little girls were tools for winning medals,” and young athletes were subjected to horrendous abuse.<sup>40</sup> However, a major change in the USOPC administration in 2019 was described to us by several interviewees as something of a turning point on both of these fronts.<sup>41</sup> This organizational, leadership and cultural change is seen by many in the sporting community as a new chapter and an important change given the international role the USOPC plays.

## **5.4 Sports and Politics: When to Mix and When to Separate**

Sports diplomacy does not de facto always involve politics entering the equation. Its stakeholders are many, from sports organizations and NGOs to fans and athletes. To the extent that government (at federal, state and city levels) is also a key stakeholder though, there will inevitably be areas or instances where politics may intrude. This report seeks to explain that much of sports diplomacy involves a subtle working together of these actors in advancement of mutual or overlapping objectives. During this process, many of those within the sporting world (as teams, athletes and fans) can sometimes be reluctant to see their sports become instrumentalized or politicized. If the balance is mishandled, it can affect all of these three major pillars of



sports diplomacy with negative economic consequences from political fallout, the politicization of values and also national security implications.

While sport is often a vehicle for peace and diplomacy, its wide reach means that it can sometimes itself be the spark, vehicle or victim of political conflict. A clear example of this is the 1969 “Football War” between El Salvador and Honduras, triggered by a football match (Luckhurst, 2019). For the U.S, the risks of the overlap between sports and politics were extremely visible in 2019 with the Houston Rockets/China incident (Perper, 2019).

Daryl Morey, the Rocket’s General Manager, tweeted in support of protests in Hong Kong, with a sharp backlash from China. Companies such as Tencent stopping streaming the Rockets’ games, 11 of NBA China’s local partners suspended or ended their relationship with the league (Lucas, 2019), and Chinese smartphone maker Vivo, state-run broadcaster CCTV and sportswear maker ANTA Sports Products Limited all halted cooperation with the NBA (Reuters, 2019). Commissioner Adam Silver defended the Rockets official’s right to freedom of expression and has previously stated it cost the league a “substantial” amount that he described as “probably less than \$400 million”(Dellenger, 2020). To resolve this spat, Brownell told us, some interesting “silent diplomacy” took place behind the scenes, not apparently directed by government. China lifted sanctions on the NBA as they in turn expressed support for a National Day parade (sovereignty) and COVID-19 support (Chinese people’s health care)—two very culturally specific signals.

### *Immigration*

Alongside these challenges lies the issue of immigration, for which government immigration policy can cause

obstacles for U.S. leagues and teams seeking to bring in players, coaches and staff from abroad. The participation of these individuals is of huge importance in order to reach global audiences and to attract global attention to U.S. sports, yet it increasingly appears that the U.S. government's immigration agencies are taking an adversarial position toward professional sports, creating additional roadblocks to otherwise highly qualified applicants for visas, green cards and other immigration processes, including denying visa and green card applications for players and support staff, despite similar cases having been approved in the past. These delays in approval and even in scheduling are increasingly difficult to resolve because of the lack of a clear point of contact between pro sports and U.S. government, whether in the State Department or in the Department of Homeland Security. Solving this is crucial because "all Americans indirectly gain from global stars propelling the NBA (and indeed other American sports) forward" (Lacorte, 2021).

The more globalized both U.S. sports and society become, the more incidents such as these will occur. As one NBC headline on this incident says, "global growth (of the NBA) led to geopolitical risk" (Arking, 2019). In these cases, government and sports need to work together because they are both affected, but in order to be effective they need flexibility and skill to be able to maintain such distance—and independence as the circumstances may require.

## **6. Conclusion**

Sports diplomacy is a surprisingly diverse and powerful tool. Countries and sub-national administrations are increasingly formalizing and professionalizing their sports diplomacy engagement. The U.S. will be at a disadvantage and behind the game if it does not develop its own sports

diplomacy strategy. From pioneers on this front such as Australia to other countries such as the UK, Spain, Japan and the EU, sports diplomacy strategies are emerging around the world. This report has described the theoretical need and applied it to the current U.S. landscape and offers a series of specific recommendations. We hope that it will help spark a deeper, ongoing conversation among the wide range of interested parties involved, whether organically or inorganically (and sometimes whether they like it or not!) in the rich and diverse field that is U.S. sports diplomacy.

Due to the variety of stakeholders involved, these recommendations range from ones that can be directly implemented to more ambitious recommendations that may not be feasible overnight but that we believe would undeniably benefit U.S. sports diplomacy. While there is no single way to categorize the recommendations given their overlapping nature, we have divided ours into two sections. The first group refers to some fundamental structures that could be changed, modified or created in order to enhance and facilitate U.S. sports diplomacy. The second group of recommendations are suggestions for policies and initiatives that could be considered within a U.S. sports diplomacy strategy.

## **Summary of Key Recommendations:**

### *Fundamental Structures*

#### 1. Create a Secretary for Sports

- There is a structural void in the U.S. federal government: it lacks a strong, unifying focal point on sports. In part as a consequence, sports diplomacy has no top-level advocate within the system nor a strong representative

voice externally. **We therefore recommend the creation of the position of Secretary for Sports, or at the very least a politically empowered Under-Secretary of State for Sports, in line with most developed countries, to enable the U.S. to play the leadership role that its underlying sporting assets merit.** Such significant structural shifts in government are not easy and involve much politics, but more than the title of the role itself or its exact position within government, it is the premise and responsibilities of such a position that is necessary if the U.S. is to fully capitalize its sports diplomacy potential.

## 2. Sports Diplomacy Training and Positions at State Department

- An understanding of sports diplomacy is essential for the effective exercise of sports diplomacy around the world. Currently, for administration officials this is all too often patchy and dismissed as just 'fun' rather than the multi-billion-dollar influencer that it can be. **We therefore recommend that the State Department integrate into its processes the structured training of sports diplomacy to its staff, including ambassadors.** At an embassy level, allocating specific responsibility for sports diplomacy can boost wider knowledge, ensure the discipline is systematically considered during the normal course of embassy business and be a multiplier for impact. This training should be extended to the Peace Corps too. We recommend that all U.S. embassies nominate an official to lead on sports diplomacy for the

mission. In larger missions, this should be a full-time position.

### 3. Turbocharge City Sports Diplomacy

- Many U.S. cities have no formal sports diplomacy functions or programs, despite their significant size and often global influence and reputation. **We recommend that all major U.S. cities incorporate a dedicated sports diplomacy function into their international affairs department or similar and develop and implement appropriate strategies.** The city of Atlanta's Global Sports Initiative provides an ideal blueprint for this. Many cities do not even have an international affairs department though, and in those cases the incorporation of sports diplomacy responsibilities and initiatives could be done in parallel with the creation of a city diplomacy function.

### 4. Create a U.S. Sports Diplomacy Hub

- Given that an official sports diplomacy strategy at the city level is very rare and in order to accelerate the development of best practices and establish the United States as a global leader at this level, **we recommend the creation of a formal sports diplomacy hub as well as a city network to share lessons and expertise.**
- This hub could be within the U.S. government (the State Department is the most evident location), but it could also be an arms-length body or a new organization with 50-50 (government/private sector and NGO) representation.

Models to draw on could include the Fulbright Commissions (a public-private partnership approved by Congress but run by a private contractor). Models to be avoided for this hub would be ones that risk being over-politicized such as the Peace Corps.

- At the city level, a similar concept but with a greater focus on information sharing and communication could also be set up. This would have to be done taking into consideration the fact that there is an element of competition between cities around bidding for events.

#### 5. Sports Diplomacy for Sporting Organizations

- As this report argues, when properly managed, governments can be a major multiplier for U.S. sports, yet this is undervalued by the sports themselves. Just as government should pay more attention to the excellent work done at a sports or local level, **we recommend that sports organizations prioritize their relationships with the U.S. government and actively consider alliances/partnerships as an integral part of their own public diplomacy and/or social responsibility programs**, including to help build and strengthen their international brand. At a basic level this involves having reliable communication channels with U.S. government (at the relevant level: state, city, federal, embassy, etc.), as well as exploring more formal partnerships on particular projects and events.

6. Sports Diplomacy and Fulbright

- **We recommend the creation of a sports diplomacy strand of Fulbright** that would make sports diplomacy a specific delineated research track rather than the current approach in which there can be sports diplomacy initiatives, but these are random rather than strategic.

7. State-level Sports Diplomacy

- At the state level, sports diplomacy is an under-developed area. **We therefore recommend that states conduct an assessment of the potential for sports diplomacy to support their objectives and programs and subsequently carry out that further research.** Michigan has elected to focus on women in sports, but the range of possibilities is of course much broader.

8. Voluntary Athlete Sign-up to SDD Programs

- The current methods in place for selecting athlete participation in SDD programs is primarily through requests put to the sports leagues. **We recommend opening up a channel at the SDD through which athletes can directly volunteer to take part, accompanied by a communications campaign to raise awareness of the opportunities and what they involve.** This could facilitate an athlete-led engagement alongside the current method of the leagues as intermediaries.

## Policies

### 1. "One More Day" Initiative

- Time and an absence of strategic organization are the main reasons more sports diplomacy work is not done by traveling U.S. teams and athletes. We recommend creating the **"One More Day" initiative**, through which U.S. teams and athletes can sign up to stay abroad one more day to carry out sports diplomacy/social responsibility initiatives. This voluntary scheme should be championed by the State Department and can be done in collaboration with U.S. sports. By providing a simple framework, it helps teams and athletes understand, justify and then communicate their sports diplomacy initiatives. In essence it would provide time to achieve real impact when U.S. sports travel overseas as well as a neat marketing tool to sell it. The athlete could do community work, contribute to embassy-led sports diplomacy initiatives, give a talk, etc. Options could be for teams that travel internationally to do three or more "one more days" a year. Equally, there could be ways in which a certain number of hours spent on sports diplomacy per trip (spread throughout the duration of the trip) could symbolically add up and count as that "one more day." Others made the point that this is a model that works better in longer, multisport events for which the downtime and the total time in country is larger. Such an initiative could well get the support of teams and leagues. Indeed, Travis Murphy, indicated to us that the NBA would be open to a program such as the "One More Day" initiative.



## 2. Beyond the Play

- One of the things that we often heard from U.S. sports envoys and exchanges was that when they were overseas, they would frequently end up providing a lot of advice on the back-end side of organizations such as fundraising, finance, etc. There is an opportunity to tap into U.S. sports expertise in running sports business and to integrate that alongside the value-sharing piece. **We recommend the State Department consider what we have called the “Beyond the Play” program:** to assess the need for business skills and consider integrating the teaching of these with sports exchange programs.

## 3. Identify and Promote American Values in Sports

- **We recommend, as a core element of this work, that the U.S. identify priority values that are believed to be most exemplified in American sport and focus on those values to build and expand the U.S. value brand overseas.** This could be through existing excellence or through highlighting examples of how the United States is achieving positive change in a particular field. One example could be gender equality in sport, due to both the global success of American female athletes and the current progress in terms of support and promotion of this area. Another example, based on the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, is sports to combat racism.

#### 4. Title IX

- When considering specific values to prioritize, we note that 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of Title IX. **We recommend that the United States seize the opportunity offered by the anniversary of this landmark equality legislation to focus on women's sports across all its sports diplomacy work.**

#### 5. Database of Key International Legal Initiatives on Values and Sports

- There is a marked lack of international data to help underpin policy choices around values-based sports diplomacy. **We recommend that the United States invest in the compilation and dissemination of a database of key legal initiatives in countries around the world on values and sports as a vital mapping tool for future decision-making**, drawing on the example of the Center for Sport, Peace, and Society with their partner countries.

#### 6. Mega-events Expertise

- Off the back of the London 2012 Summer Olympics, the UK has built up a reputation as an expert in hosting major sporting events, marketing itself as such and winning large contracts for other events such as being the main delivery partner for the Lima 2019 Pan-American Games (UK government, 2019). **The U.S. should look to build specific expertise in relation to hosting upcoming mega-events to ensure legacy benefits.**

7. FIFA 2026 Sports Diplomacy with Canada and Mexico

- As the 2026 FIFA World Cup is a jointly hosted event with Canada and Mexico, **we recommend that the U.S. take this opportunity to engage in continental diplomacy with its neighboring countries.** Over the next four years, the United States should ensure sports, in particular soccer, is a part of its diplomatic engagement with these two neighboring countries. There are possibilities for many joint ventures, from events to youth programming, that can be carried out and further build these relationships.

8. United States Bidding Process for Sporting Events

- Several of the people we spoke to talked about a range of flaws in the U.S. bidding process for sporting events, such as the lack of diversity in the bidding teams and the fact that they often only spoke English. **We recommend conducting a further, in-depth review on the U.S. bidding process for sporting events** with the aim of addressing these concerns and making bids more original, engaging, culturally sensitive and ultimately successful.

9. Sports Travel Calendar

- Currently there is little strategic overlap between the U.S. sporting calendar and the U.S. foreign policy calendar. **We recommend the State Department create a live database of international sports competitions in which the United States has a national team traveling** that teams and leagues can plug into when they

are planning foreign travel. This would allow the State Department to share the information with embassies, who can strategically plan different sports diplomacy activities and potentially place events/meetings around their visit. This could be done either centrally or at the embassy level for each country. The key is to put a system in place in which sports can submit that information in a way that allows for strategic rather than ad hoc engagement.



## **Author's Biography**

**Edward Elliott**, director of SportsDiplomacy.org, is an independent sports diplomacy consultant with a background in foreign policy. He previously helped set up and run the London-based think tank "British Foreign Policy Group," where he also worked with UK Sport, the Premier League, England and Wales Cricket Board, Sky Sports and other partners to deliver a UK Sports Diplomacy Strategy. He also focuses on promoting and supporting women's sports through his current global role in women's sports sponsorship at Iberdrola and previous position in the U.S. for the Michigan Taskforce on Women in Sports. He holds a master's in public affairs from the University of Michigan, a bachelor's degree from the University of Durham and a Certificate of Political Studies from Sciences-Po.

## Endnotes

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22. Interview with Craig Esherick, February 2021, online video call.
23. Interview with Philip Leopold, March 2021, online video call.
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25. Interview (interviewee wished to remain anonymous), 2021, online video call.
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37. Interview with former American athlete who wished to remain anonymous, February 2021, online video call
38. Interview with Diahann Billings-Burford, January 2021, online video call.
39. Extract from Captain Corey Ray's syllabus in his "Sports and National Security" class at the National War College, 2021.
40. Interview with Susan Brownell, January 2021, online video call.
41. This point was mentioned by several interviewees.

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## 7.2 Interviews

Aside from the individuals listed, we spoke to several other stakeholders who shared their insights for this work but for professional reasons did not wish to be named in the report. All interviews were conducted between December 2020 and February 2022, primarily over online video calls. The job titles listed here are their titles at the time of interview.

- **Mark Jones**, former VP of Communications and Marketing, USOPC
- **Teri Hedgpeth**, former Archivist, USOPC
- **Former American MLB player** who also played overseas in Japan (anonymous)
- **Stuart Murray**, Associate Professor in International Relations and Diplomacy at Bond University, Australia, and expert in Sports Diplomacy
- **Various State Department officials** (off the record)
- **Gunnar Hagstrom**, Head of Strategic Partnerships/Senior Development Manager, Laureus
- **Eli Wolff**, Director of Power of Sport Lab, Director of the Sport and Development Project at Brown University
- **Andrea Woodson-Smith**, Professor at North Carolina Central University, former athlete, and U.S. Sports Envoy
- **Mary McVeigh Connor**, Executive Director, Soccer Without Borders

- **Craig Esherick**, Associate Professor of Sports Management at George Mason University, former Head Coach of Georgetown's Men's Basketball and former assistant coach for the 1988 U.S. Men's Olympic Basketball Team
- **Lenny Abbey**, Head of NOC Engagement, International Olympic Committee and former leadership member of the LA2024 Olympic Bid Team (in personal capacity)
- **Brian Suskiewicz**, Chief Executive, Coaches Across Continents
- **Diahann Billings-Burford**, Chief Executive, RISE
- **Sarah Axelson**, Senior Director, Advocacy, at the Women's Sport Foundation
- **John Register**, former Paralympian and U.S. Sports Envoy
- **Sarah Hillyer**, Director of Center for Sport, Peace, and Society at the University of Tennessee
- **Kathleen Tullie**, Senior Director of Social Purpose, Reebok
- **Danielle DeRosa**, Clinical Instructor, Sport Management Program, University of Connecticut
- **Howard Brodwin**, Managing Director, Sports and Social Change

- **Susan Brownell**, Professor of Anthropology, specializing in Chinese Sports and Olympic Games, at the University of Missouri- St Louis
- **John Ciorciari**, Associate Professor of Public Policy and Director of the Gerald R. Ford School's Weiser Diplomacy Center at the University of Michigan
- **Ben Freedman**, Development Manager, Beyond Sport
- **Ju'Riese Colon**, CEO, U.S. Center for SafeSport
- **Captain Corey Ray**, Associate Professor at the National War College, specializing in Sports Diplomacy and National Security, former U.S. Navy
- **Travis J. Murphy**, Director of International Government Affairs, NBA
- **Nicole Matsuka**, U.S. Director, Women Win Foundation
- **Philip Leopold**, Head of Partnerships, Sport at the Service of Humanity
- **Craig LaMay**, Professor of Journalism and Media at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research
- **Ryan Plourde**, Senior Programs Officer, FHI 360
- **Ethan Zohn**, Co-founder, Grassroots Soccer
- **Isabel Hill**, Director, National Travel and Tourism Office, U.S. Department of Commerce

- **Trina Bolton**, Program Officer at U.S. Department of State's Sports Diplomacy Division of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs
- **Anne Giles**, Program Manager, Cultural Affairs Office, Embassy of the United States of America, London
- **Sydney Smith**, Cultural Affairs Office, Embassy of the United States of America, London
- **Erin Bromaghim**, Director of Olympic and Paralympic Development in the Office of the Mayor of Los Angeles
- **Vanessa Ibarra**, Director at the Mayor's Office of International Affairs at the City of Atlanta
- **Jay Wang**, Director of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy and an Associate Professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism
- **David Francis**, Senior Director, Government Relations (International), USOPC, (speaking in personal capacity)

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