



Politics and Sport

Sport and politics have often become inextricably linked. There are numerous high profile historical examples of this ranging from South African sport being boycotted during the apartheid era, Jesse Owens winning in front of Adolf Hitler and Mohammed Ali being banned from boxing due to his refusal to join the US Army. Political issues around sport most often come to light in World Cup and Olympic years, where questions are often raised about the funding of events and whether they are a priority for the nations hosting versus broader pressures on public services.

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In the UK, politicians have often sought to use sport to their own advantage. Tony Blair famously kicked a ball about in a Newcastle shirt in the garden, David Cameron tried to use his allegiance to Aston Villa to demonstrate he was a man of the people (until he accidentally claimed to follow West Ham) and sometimes their jobs can even overlap; David Miliband having been the Vice Chairman of Sunderland FC while also a sitting MP. On the flip side, sport has also been a problem for many UK politicians. The former Conservative Government's poor handling of the Hillsborough Inquiry during the Thatcher era has now been exposed and of course the 2012 Olympics raised a number of political issues, from ministers interfering in Danny Boyle's Opening Ceremony through to the Chancellor George Osborne being booed in the stadium.

Other areas of overlap in the modern era have included controversy over Tony Blair's donation from Bernie Ecclestone/ Formula 1, the government intervention and ultimately blocking of Rupert Murdoch's attempted takeover of Manchester United in 1998/99 and David Cameron's comments about accused rapist Ched Evans.

Geopolitical tensions

In the current environment, the main political issues in sport appear to be geopolitical rather than focused around UK domestic policy. Our domestic sport debates are very much focused on sport in isolation – funding for governing bodies, the legacy of the 2012 Olympic Games, failure to achieve the right physical activity levels among school children, whether politicians should interfere in the pricing of football tickets, England fans being involved in riots during 2016 and why football fans cannot stand but rugby fans can. This is not to say those matters are not important but politicians know that ultimately, with economic uncertainty and bigger issues facing the nation, they are not the issues which will win and lose too many votes.

On the international stage, there is of course a widespread consensus that FIFA, football's global governing body, has played with international geopolitics. FIFA's financial muscle is immense – between 2011 and 2014 its revenues were \$5.72bn – and many governments have relied on its funding so backed former President, Sepp Blatter, at all costs. The organisation, now plunged into total crisis following detailed and startling investigations by the FBI, has been shown to have consistently allowed a culture of corruption when awarding World Cups. As well as serious allegations about the awarding of past tournaments and the corruption which influenced the final decisions, analysis has also focused on the upcoming tournament in Russia in 2018 and Qatar in 2022. Questions over gay rights in Russia and the lack of worker protection in Qatar have made these tournaments overtly political. This follows the riots and demonstrations in Brazil ahead of the 2014 World Cup where protestors used the presence of global media in the country to highlight their concerns about public services. These same issues have not gone away in Brazil where the upcoming Olympics will see more demonstrations and, in some cases, perhaps riots about the use of state funds for the Olympics over key public services.

Of course the biggest issue in sport right now is the ongoing question about how doping can best be addressed. The discovery of a state sponsored doping programme by Russia have sent shockwaves through the

Olympic and athletics community where doping was previously seen as a problem with individual sports and indeed individual athletes, rather than governments. The story shifting from, for example Lance Armstrong and other cyclists, to a global super power operating illegal practices on an industrial scale had seemed impossible in the modern era. The recent report by Canadian law professor Richard McLaren stated Russia's "Ministry of Sport directed, controlled and oversaw the manipulation of athlete's analytical results or sample swapping, with the active participation and assistance of the FSB, CSP, and both Moscow and Sochi Laboratories." This directly implicated the government, the FSB (federal security services) and CSP (organisation which trains athletes). With Western-Russian relations already tense following Russia's incursion of the Ukraine, this issue has further isolated Russia on the world stage – though the country continues to assert that the allegations are purely political and part of a witch hunt/ smear campaign.

Positive Change

That is not to say sport becoming political has always been a negative. The joyous scenes in South Africa following the home country's victory in the 1995 Rugby World Cup were symbolic of a nation which had finally overcome the apartheid era. The celebrations in townships across the country showed, amongst many other things, that Nelson Mandela had unified the country and reversed a previous trend where many (or even most) Black South Africans saw the Springbok rugby team as a symbol of white South Africa and did not support them.

Similarly, with racial tensions simmering in France ahead of the 1998 World Cup, the home team's victory against Brazil in the final put the largely immigrant background home players (notably the new national hero Zinedine Zidane) as the source of national pride rather than a source of national shame.

In the UK, the incredible scenes both during Euro '96 and the London Olympics also showed the power of sport to bring people and indeed nations together. The pure joy that the town of Leicester – not just its football fans – had following their unexpected Premier League win last season was also a demonstration of the power of sport for good.

Brexit

In the UK, questions have already been asked about the impact of Brexit. If the UK doesn't continue to abide by the principle of freedom of movement, then the issue of work permits could impact professional football significantly. While rugby and cricket will not be impacted significantly by visa and migration issues, boxing is especially concerned given the number of EU fighters who often are put on undercards at late notice. Formula 1 claims to not be impacted – and Bernie Ecclestone backed the Leave campaign – yet horseracing is worried about immigration complications over stable staff while cycling has some potential issues such as team Sky being based in Nice.

Olympic Funding

The upcoming Rio Olympics will inevitably end in a period of analysis which will compare the extent of Team GB's success versus the costs of achieving it. Elite funding versus mass participation sport has been a political hot potato for many years, with ministers torn between tackling obesity and diverting budget into every day activity for as many people as possible versus a public desire to see success on the international stage. There is no evidence that elite athletes being successful inspires more people to be active, and analysis shows that stories of tennis racquet sales increasing after an Andy Murray Wimbledon victory are purely anecdotal. With the funds that are spent on Team GB and working towards elite success, there is an ongoing debate as to whether money does lead to more success. Tennis is often cited as the sport where disproportionate funds have been spent but underachievement – beyond Andy Murray – has been clear.

Conclusion

However much sport and politics should in theory be separate, they are hard to separate. International tournaments, domestic events and the commercial power of sport mean that many issues become intrinsically political. Fortunately, most sport does take place away from political interference and major events such as the upcoming Olympic Games in Rio will almost always be remembered for what sporting icons achieve rather than

the political debates that took place before and during the tournaments. When we think of London 2012 we think of Usain Bolt and Mo Farah more than the cost of the stadium or concerns the tube would be too busy. When we think of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil we think of the home team losing to Germany 7-1 rather than the protests which took place in the weeks running up to the opening game. The power of the sport itself ultimately almost always eclipses the controversy around it.

[Oli Winton](#) is a Senior Director at FTI Consulting

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For more information about FTI Consulting's public affairs team please contact Alex Deane, Managing Director and Head of UK Public Affairs on +44 (0)20 3727 1167 or Alex.Deane@fticonsulting.com



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