

## **Sport for all: a utopian dream?**

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### **Introduction**

I wish to begin by thanking the organisers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to return to Taiwan – one of my favourite countries. I feel guilty in the circumstances that I am not the bearer of good news about Sport-For-All policy in the United Kingdom (UK) with particular reference to opportunities for employees to be physically active in the workplace.

When the British economy depended to a considerable extent on heavy industry – steel-making, ship-building, coal mining, car manufacturing and so on - businesses often had their own sports clubs, However, deindustrialization has witnessed the decline of traditional industries and, with them, of work-based social activities such as sport. Employees in the financial sector which nowadays is the main driver of the British economy are often provided with gym membership but this scarcely constitutes ‘sport for all’ at a time when, as a result of austerity measures implemented by the last two governments, local authorities are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain swimming baths and leisure centres which could provide physical activity outlets for working-class adults as well as children. Why then is ‘sport for all’ a utopian dream, at least in the context of sport policy in the UK today?

According to one reading of the 2016 Olympic Games medal table, I come from the world's second most successful sporting country. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (normally abbreviated to Team GB) won 67 medals at the Rio Olympics this summer, three fewer than the People's Republic of China but with one more gold medal than the Chinese. In the context of Western Europe, Team GB's haul was 25 medals more than were won by France and Germany, 39 more than Italy, 48 more than the Netherlands and 50 more than Spain. How was this achieved? There are many explanatory factors although massive investment, as we shall see, is perhaps the most persuasive. One thing that is certain is that Team GB's success was not achieved by giving any serious thought to the idea of 'sport for all'.

My aim today is to explain why I do not believe that, in the present circumstances, 'sport for all' is a realistic objective. My examination will focus primarily on the example of the United Kingdom but I will argue that it is relevant to the situation in most, if not all, developed countries. I shall begin by considering some of the key theoretical concepts which are central to any discussion of sport for all. I shall then turn my attention to the factors that have led to the UK's Olympic 'success' from Beijing in 2008 via London in 2012 and onwards to Rio in 2016. This necessarily involves looking not only at official explanations but also at underlying socio-economic and cultural factors. I shall briefly consider where UK sport goes next and, finally, using the example of the UK, conclude with more general observations about the role of sport in society and the need for major social and cultural transformation if 'sport for all' is ever to be more than a utopian dream,

### **Sport for all: a theoretical detour**

Although the word ‘utopia’ is often used today to represent an ideal condition which, by implication, is realisable or capable of approximation, its original meaning is ‘no place’ and it is in that sense that I am using it today. That is to say, I shall be arguing that ‘sport for all’ is utopian for the simple reason that it has never existed and is increasingly unlikely to be achieved given present circumstances in which there is a dominant cultural preference in most societies for winners rather than losers and for success rather than participation as an end in itself.

Let me begin by saying that I am also enough of a libertarian to believe that people should be allowed to make their own choices in life and, if they do not want to be physically active or, more specifically, to take part in sport, that is their prerogative. However, if being active is good for us (and even that is of course questionable when one considers how many long-term health problems are the direct result of playing sport), how can we ensure that as many of us as possible are able to take part in some kind of physical activity? That is the question which, in almost every country in the world, the ‘sport for all’ lobby is obliged to answer.

‘Sport for all’ implies some sense of equality. It certainly refers to all people and arguably, by implication, to all sports rather than simply to sport as a generic term. Equality, however, is a slippery concept. For example, can we speak about more or less equality, as if it can be a relative term, or is equality an absolute goal? Either there is equality or there is inequality. Alternatively, perhaps we would prefer to talk in terms of different types of equality – for example, equality of opportunity and equality of reward. Few in the UK would argue against the former, at least in theory. We like *the idea* of meritocracy despite the fact that we have a hereditary monarchy and an unelected upper chamber in our system of parliamentary government. In practice, however, most of us would recognise that opportunities are never completely free for all. Some activities cost more money than others, are more exclusive than others and some carry with them a degree of cultural capital which those of us who can

access them are unlikely and/or unwilling to give up in the interests of ‘sport for all’. As for equality of reward, forget it! Ours is a capitalist country in which those who *succeed* whether through birth right or their own efforts are deemed to be entitled to the biggest rewards and amongst those who deserve such rewards are our successful Olympic performers.

### **How did Team GB do it?**

So how did Team GB manage to achieve what it did in Rio? One sports journalist has identified eight contributory factors – money, ruthlessness, penury, superstar effect, Olympic obsession, playing the long game, being a team, and ‘fixing the plumbing’ which alludes to the provision of excellent facilities for the team (Herbert, 2016). Of these, by far the most important ingredient was money accompanied by the ruthless way in which it has been distributed. The primary role of UK Sport is to invest National Lottery and government funding to maximise the performance of UK athletes at the Summer Olympic Games, focussed on an eight year performance development model. The aim for Rio was to ensure that the UK would become the first country to deliver more medals at the Games that took place four years after being Olympic host. It worked. But at what cost to under-performing sports and, more importantly, to grassroots sport? Young people who want to play financially accessible, but nationally under-funded, sports are unlikely to find opportunities to do so. Meanwhile a limited number of expensive and, therefore relatively inaccessible sports such as rowing, equestrianism and sailing to which few people can gain access, but are successful in terms of their medal winning potential, would remain out of reach to most young people. In addition, elite performers in more accessible and equally successful sports such as cycling and gymnastics set such high standards that many young people might be frightened to even try them even if facilities and coaches were on hand – which, in most areas

of the country, they are not. Furthermore, despite the best efforts of the UK's national public broadcaster, the British Broadcasting Corporation, fewer young people than in the past are captivated by the Olympics in the way that I was in 1960 and 1964 when the Games took place in Rome and Tokyo respectively. Media outlets have increased exponentially in the years that have elapsed to the extent that the very idea of the entire nation sitting down at the same time to watch the same event on television is simply preposterous. All in all, therefore, is it any surprise that, far from inspiring a generation to be physically active, the UK's medal winning achievements seem destined to be followed by a further decline in participation levels?

As one British journalist asked, 'can we really justify spending £5.5m per Olympic medal at Rio 2016 while the rest of us slump on the sofa?' adding that 'our national success has been at a large financial, and possibly social, cost' (Street-Porter, 2016). Those who believe in the virtuous cycle of sport, whereby elite sport and mass participation sport are seen as mutually reinforcing, will no doubt take comfort from the creation of role models through medal winning achievements. However, as Dennis and Grix (2012: 170) note with specific reference to the glory days of East German sport, 'there appears an inverse relationship between greater elite success and poorer mass sport provision'. Young people may be inspired but obstacles are in place, certainly in the UK, which prevent them from realising their dreams.

### **Who's playing?**

On the day that Team GB's first gold medals of the 2012 London Olympic Games were awarded to two privately-educated female rowers, Lord Moynihan, the chairman of the British Olympic Committee announced that 'It is one of the worst statistics in British sport, and wholly unacceptable, that over 50% of our medalists in Beijing (at the 2008 Olympic

Games) came from independent schools, which means that half our medals came from just 7% of the children in the UK’.

However, according to a defender of the contribution of private schools to British sport, not only are the figures cited by Moynihan exaggerated, they actually serve to disguise the failings of state schools in relation to sporting achievement rather than to provide a critique of private schools or of contemporary British society more generally (Tozer, 2013).

Whatever the rival merits of the two sides in this particular debate, it is apparent that social class exerts a powerful influence on the UK’s recent Olympic performances. The media made more than ever before, for example, of the role played by parents in medal winners’ lives. It was emphasised that they had made considerable sacrifices for their children. Two things sprang to my mind about this particular narrative. First, whether privately educated or not, most of our Olympians had benefitted from having parents who had the money, the material resources and the time to allow them to make these so-called sacrifices. Second, I wondered where duty of care comes into the picture. Driving children to swimming baths in the early hours of the morning may well seem admirable in the eyes of those whose lives are bound up with talent identification and medal targets such as the employees of UK Sport. But what did some of these children miss out on in terms of education and the cultivation of other interests in pursuit of their (or perhaps their parents’) Olympic ambitions? Ironically, if money had been the main goal, the young athletes should probably have been directed towards football, professional boxing and Formula 1 motor racing where most of the UK’s highest paid sportsmen are employed. But money was never the objectives not least because few, if any, of our Olympians, with or without medals, will ever experience poverty unlike over 2 million children in the UK today. The question is, therefore, whether there is any likelihood that there can be a move away from elite performance to mass participation in the foreseeable future.

As argued earlier with reference to opportunities for employees to be physically active, the situation is no better for adults, particularly working-class adults.

## **The Future**

There will be a re-evaluation on the part of UK sport in the wake of the Rio Olympics. But this will focus exclusively on performance indicators. The amount of funding for swimming will increase in preparation for the Tokyo Olympic Games thanks to the achievements of Adam Peaty and a handful of other Team GB medal winners at Rio. According to the Amateur Swimming Association this will lead to increased participation at grass roots level. Perhaps it will although if it does, the experience of swimming will be at odds with that of most other sports. At present, 52% of British young people leave school unable to swim 25 metres unaided and swimming pools continue to close as a direct consequence of government austerity measures.

Boxing might well lose some its funding for failing to meet targets and even track and field may suffer (after all where would we be without Mo Farah?) The already marginalised sports such as basketball and volleyball will continue to receive little or nothing and participation levels will continue to decline. Large-scale investment in facilities for grassroots sport will simply not happen. It is a depressing scenario but one which is arguably also an accurate reflection of the world in which we live.

Whereas I have described the quest for truly meaningful ‘sport for all’ as a utopian dream, the alternative which is seen at its most extreme in the search for Olympic medals offers insights into our increasingly dystopian world. Just as the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic established athletic regimes aimed almost exclusively at Olympic dominance,

contemporary Russia developed a state-sponsored doping programme. Meanwhile, countries such as the UK (and I do not rule out the possibility that performance-enhancing drugs have been involved in the British case as well) divert money from various worthy causes in areas such as health, education and the arts with the very same objective. According to one commentator, ‘we used to ridicule the communists for using sport as a proxy for economic success. Now, with the vast sums of money thrown at Team GB and athletes declared ‘heroes’, we’re copying them’ (Jenkins, 2016). And the UK establishment is by no means alone in identifying success in sport as a form of camouflage that can help to disguise more fundamental problems. Having expressed its delight at securing its best ever Olympic medal haul in Rio, the Japanese Olympic Committee immediately warned that more funding is required if Japan is to perform even better in Tokyo in 2020 (McKirdy, 2016) and you all know that that will mean – less money for grassroots sport amongst other things.

## **Conclusion**

I have used the word ‘dystopian’ to describe this present situation because I believe that, in many societies today, there exists an approach to sport which is well captured with the term ‘celebration capitalism’. The emphasis of the ancient Roman emperors on ‘bread and circuses’ as a means whereby to divert the populace from more pressing issues – for example, in the case of the UK, the decision to leave the European Union - is replicated by a system which celebrates ‘exceptional athletes swaddled in corporate cash’ (Boycoff, 2014: 2). In reality, this system dehumanizes these athletes while simultaneously making much of the rest of the world’s population compliant and also stigmatized because they do not engage in exercise even though they may well be leading blameless, albeit sedentary, lives.

Although both constructs are essentially imaginary, dystopias have tended to be more accurate in predicting future developments than utopias have been. It would be nice to think that the future of sport can challenge this trend. In any case, perhaps the pessimistic views I have expressed here today have been coloured by my recent experience of witnessing the British media enthuse about people being good at what are essentially their hobbies while the UK government ignores the demands of our junior hospital doctors who train for eight years (more if one takes into account the qualifications they require to even study medicine) and subsequently work long hours to save people's lives). Against such a background, any hope that the UK government will invest the necessary funds to secure 'sport for all' is indeed a utopian dream, as, I would suggest, is the concept itself.

There are indications that, in Taiwan, 'sport for all' is being taken more seriously than it is in the UK (Huang and Tan, 2015). Long may this continue! Globally, however, what is almost certainly required is socio-cultural change leading to a world in which people are no longer categorised as 'winners' or 'losers' and the realisation of each individual's potential is what counts. For the time being, however, the UK's sporting agenda will continue to be dominated by the lure of shiny pieces of metal.

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