

Racing With Racism in the Olympic Games, an International Relations Perspective

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Abstract: *The Olympic Games are the largest multi-sporting event of the world held every four years. The fame and fortune of the Olympic Games need no further explanations. However, these Games have been met with numerous issues including those of racism. These issues of race have cast a dark cloud on the Olympic Movement. In spite of all this, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and National Olympic Committees (NOCs) have attempted to maintain relations with and among themselves by facing the challenges racism poses head-on. This paper describes some incidences that hinged on racism and how they were handled by the Olympic Movement.*

Keywords: *International relations, Olympic Games, Olympic Movement, Racism*

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I. Introduction

The Olympic Games are the largest multi-sport event held every four years [1]. They gather athletes from all over the world to live together and compete in the spirit of excellence, friendship and respect [2]. What makes the Olympics stand apart from other mega sporting events is that other than competition and winning of medals, the Games purport to transmit values that will assist in creating a better world through promotion of understanding among the various peoples of the world [3]. This, together with the sporting spectacle, creates appeal and perpetuates the uniqueness and fame of these prestigious Games. However, the attractiveness of the Olympics has also drawn to itself other issues, some of them negative. Racism is one such issue that has most often caused a stir. This paper will attempt to cite a number of incidences that have brought out the existence of racism in the Olympic Games and how the various stakeholders in the Olympic Movement have dealt with them.

II. The Fame Of The Olympic Games

The Olympics are by far the greatest sporting festival of all time. They have grown from ancient religious ritual games in Greece to world famous mega sporting events that attract athletes and spectators alike from all over the world. Dupreelle and Christoforides (2013, p.1) [4] explain the size and scale of the Olympics:

The Olympics is the biggest international stage for sports and entertainment and is the most Ideal-driven organization in the category. The games have grown from just 14 nations competing at the inception of the modern Olympic Games in 1896 to over 207 nations represented in Rio de Janeiro in 2016 with 11, 237 athletes competing in 306 events and an audience of an estimated 3.5 billion watching from all around the globe (Bayliss et al, 2004 [5]; <https://www.olympic.org/rio-2016> [6]).

There is no doubt that the Olympic Games are unequalled as far as any mega sports event in the world is concerned. This appeal that has brought the Olympics so much fame and prestige has not come on a silver platter but has a tag of a cost. The value of the cost is the constant scrutiny that the Olympic Movement has had to live with as well as the criticism it has had to bear.

III. Racism

The term racism stems from the word race. The etymology of the word race is an intriguing one. There are some accounts of how the two words came into usage. First, Clair & Denis (2015, p. 857) [7] explain this interesting background of the word:

The term race was first used to describe peoples and societies in the way we now understand ethnicity or national identity. Later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Europeans encountered non-European civilizations, Enlightenment scientists and philosophers gave race a biological meaning... As such, race became understood as a biological, or natural, categorization system of the human species. As Western colonialism and slavery expanded, the concept was used to justify and prescribe exploitation, domination, and violence against peoples racialized as non-white.

It appears that the term race evolved itself into racism guided by human action. What was a harmless classification culminated into oppression of some groups of people by another. Another account is given by Frederickson (2002) cited by Hoyt (2012, p.227) [8]:

[Racism] came into common usage in the 1930s when a new word was required to describe the theories on which the Nazis based their persecution of the Jews.

Many scholars who have attempted to define racism have disagreed often times and sometimes based on their own race (Hoyt, 2012) [9]. According to Hoyt (2012, p.225) [10] the original definition of racism is:

...the belief that all members of a purported race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or other races.

However, this definition as many of the scholars that argue against it say is only theoretical. It does not define the actions that constitute racism. It is at best only a cognitive term with no practical application. It would be difficult using this definition to describe who a racist is as it is based on belief by the person feeling inferior or superior. Therefore, it is not enough to hold beliefs of inferiority or superiority, or to be prejudiced towards another or oppress another or even to exercise power on another but to exact all these actions based on race. Based on this definition, is it possible that there have been incidences in the Olympic Games that can be identified as those hinging on racism? The answer to this question is an emphatic yes.

IV. Racism In The Olympic Games

There have been a number of cases of racism that have strained relations between and among states as well as between the IOC and states or even between the IOC and National Olympic Committees. These cases shall form the basis of this essay's discussion and shall be looked at individually. The first of the cases involving racism is no doubt the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936, referred to as the 'Nazi Games', Hitler's regime tried to use these games as a platform for showcasing Aryan race superiority. According to a website explaining the Nazi Olympics:

For two weeks in August 1936, Adolf Hitler's Nazi dictatorship camouflaged its racist, militaristic character while hosting the Summer Olympics. Soft-peddalling its anti-Semitic agenda and plans for territorial expansion, the regime exploited the Games to bedazzle many foreign spectators and journalists with an image of a peaceful, tolerant Germany (US Holocaust Memorial Museum) [11].

The IOC awarded the hosting of the 1936 games to Germany on 13th May, 1931. Two years later the Nazi party leader Adolf Hitler took control and promptly turned the country into a one party dictatorship. The regime also put in place racial policies that aimed at purifying and promoting the superiority of the Aryan Germanic race. Jews were mistreated and excluded from German normal life (ibid) [12]. The German government went on to plan the Olympic Games to further propagate the superiority of the Germans to the world. After convincing Hitler to use the games as propaganda, systematic plans were made to that effect. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum further quotes the Minister of Propaganda as saying:

German sport has only one task: to strengthen the character of the German people, imbuing it with the fighting spirit and steadfast camaraderie necessary in the struggle for its existence; Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda, April 23, 1933 (ibid) [13].

Despite many concerns raised to the effect that Jews and other non-Germans (especially black people) were to be either discriminated against or even excluded during the games, none of these concerns were heeded. The IOC was assured by the Nazi regime that there would be no such thing and this caused the world governing body for the Olympics to reiterate that the games would be held in Germany. According to Kass (1976, p. 226) [14] the New York Times reported that:

The German authorities have given a pledge that there shall be no race discrimination in the selection of these candidates. Accordingly, one of the camps, that at Ettlinger, devoted its last three weeks to training Jewish candidates from the Maccabean League and the League of German Jewish War Veterans. This period matched the ratio borne by the number of Jews in Germany to the total German population. It was in strict accord with the letter of the German agreement with the International Olympic Committee.

This, however, was not the case as the majority of top Jewish athletes were excluded from the games. Despite all efforts, the propaganda tool failed miserably as Jews and blacks from other countries excelled in various races winning medals. Although relations between the IOC and the German government were good due to the latter's trickery, some countries refused to attend the Games owing to Hitler's racist policies. Efforts to move the games from Germany were thwarted. This has led many to theorise that the inability of many nations to boycott the Berlin games further encouraged German feelings of superiority and this encouraged further expansionist policies that led to World War II. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum reaffirms this view:

With the conclusion of the Games, Germany's expansionist policies and the persecution of Jews and other "enemies of the state" accelerated, culminating in the World War II and the Holocaust [15].

After the war Germany's reputation on the international scene was severely damaged as she and her allies were excluded from the Games on two consecutive Olympiads (1948 and 1952). The relations of the German Olympic Committee and the IOC as well as those of other countries that did not sympathise with Germany were severely affected. All this was caused by the deep rooted racial policies.

In 1964, South Africa was banned from the Olympic Games due to its apartheid policies. Apartheid enforced rules that white and black people must not work or play sports together. Jarvie and Reid (1999) explain apartheid in South Africa:

The general laws of apartheid rule rendered multiracial sport impossible in that it was just as illegal for black and white athletes to mix openly in competition as it was in society (p.238) [16].

This state of affairs in South Africa began as early as 1948. Some African countries began to raise awareness about the racial disparities that existed and began making appeals to the IOC to expel South Africa from the Olympic Movement. The IOC investigated the matter but the South African National Olympic Committee (SANOC) attempted to cover up their ills by convincing the visiting IOC members that all was well. However, when the IOC later called upon the African countries that were advocating the expulsion of SANOC from the Olympics as well as the SANOC to make representations as regards their positions, the African countries exposed the SANOC and stated categorically that they were going to boycott any sports activities that entertained South Africa. The ill prepared SANOC made bad presentations and showed clearly that they were not about to let go of their apartheid policies and even went to the extent of advising the IOC to stay away from South Africa's internal matters (Low, 2006). This resulted in the expulsion of South Africa from the Olympics from 1964 to 1992. This ban kept South Africa away from international sports for over 30 years. Despite this, South Africa did not relent in its efforts at international sport. The New Zealand rugby team was invited to South Africa to play against the all white South African rugby team in 1976. As a consequence, Tanzania led a protest of twenty-two African nations against New Zealand for touring South Africa. These countries implored the IOC to bar New Zealand for involvement with South Africa. However, the IOC rejected the proposal to bar New Zealand stating that rugby was not an Olympic sport at the time and therefore had no jurisdiction over it. As a result, the protesting nations boycotted the Montreal Games (Wikipedia) [17].

One other incident worth mentioning, which involved racism, took place in the 1968 Mexico Summer Olympic Games. After winning medals, US sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in the famous Black Salute at the medal awarding ceremony during the time the US national anthem was being played. This act was construed as a domestic political statement that was unacceptable at an international scene such as the Olympics. The two athletes were expelled amid threats from the former US Olympic Committee (USOC) president Avery Brundage who was at the time IOC president, that the entire US team would be expelled if they did not expel the athletes. According to Wikipedia what they did represented a number of things:

The two US athletes received their medals shoeless, but wearing black socks, to represent black poverty. Smith wore a black scarf around his neck to represent black pride, Carlos had his tracksuit top unzipped to show solidarity with all blue collar workers in the US and wore a necklace of beads which he described 'were for those individuals that were lynched, or killed and that no-one said a prayer for, that were hung and tarred. It was for those thrown off the side of the boats in the middle passage.' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968_Olympics_Black_Power_salute) [18].

According to the same website the IOC in 2013 on its website later made a statement about the actions of Smith and Carlos:

Over and above winning medals, the black American athletes made names for themselves by an act of racial protest (Wikipedia) [19].

It is clear in both the IOC's and the athletes' statements that their acts were connected to racial segregation though not at the Olympics themselves but in the athletes' home country. The two athletes chose to let the world know through the Olympic Games.

Rhodesia, also, was at the centre of racism in the Olympics when African countries once again let the world know that the Rhodesian Olympic Committee excluded the majority of the athletes on basis of their race, especially the black Rhodesian nationals. Novak (2006) explains:

Although there were questions of racial discrimination in Rhodesia as early as 1959 when the NOC was admitted, it was not until the IOC Congress in Dubrovnik, Croatia, in 1969 that the African NOCs first explicitly demanded an investigation into Rhodesia's status (p. 1378) [20].

Despite the Rhodesian NOC attempts to conceal the racial discrimination that existed in the territory, it was apparent from their team selections which were all white that there was widespread segregation. In the end, the IOC put the decision to withdraw Rhodesia's invitation to a vote. For the decision were 36 and 31 were against, Rhodesia was not invited for the 1972 Games (ibid) [21]. Later in 1974 when the IOC commission members investigating the issue visited Rhodesia, contradictory findings were discovered. During the IOC congress in Lausanne the issue again came up and this time the ballot ruled:

After 67 ballot papers were distributed, the IOC voted on whether Rhodesia conformed to the Olympic rules and regulations, based on the commission's evidence. By a vote of 26 to 41, the IOC permanently expelled Rhodesia from the Olympic Movement (Novak 2006, p. 1383) [22].

Thus Rhodesia was expelled and it was not until 1980 that the country of Zimbabwe was born that a team was sent to the Olympics.

Other minor incidents involving racism concerned the exclusion of Paraskevi Papachritou, a long jumper, by the Greek Olympic Committee before the London 2012 Games after she made 'racially insensitive comments on social media' (Twitter) according to Wikipedia [23]. Michel Morganello a soccer player was also expelled from the Swiss team for posting comments on Twitter calling the South Korean team a 'bunch of Mongoloids' after his team was beaten by South Korea (Nittle, 2013) [24]. The actions of both the Greek and Swiss Olympic Committees were no doubt to protect their relations with other nations as well as to be in tune with the Olympic Charter that forbids any form of discrimination.

V. Conclusion

As has been seen from the various cases presented, racism motivated the actions of countries, NOCs and individuals to perform whatever actions they were involved in. These actions if left unchecked would have severely damaged relations between countries and the IOC thus affecting the Olympic Movement whose pledge is to protect the dignity of every human being regardless of any differences that exist among the peoples of the world. The IOC acted in the cases of Germany, South Africa, New Zealand and Rhodesia and the actions helped improve relations among nations and peoples of the countries as well as bolster respect for human rights eventually. It was also seen that NOCs such as the US, Greek and Swiss acted to protect relations among its peoples, with other nations as well as with the IOC.

It can be concluded, therefore, that although there have been incidences of racism in the Olympics, the Olympic Movement has been able to contain them and in so doing uphold the Olympic Charter. Perhaps this is one of the factors that have contributed to the participation of many nations in the Games and also to the continued existence of the Olympic Movement.

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