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Youth Olympic Games: Challenges and considerations in organising the largest multisport competition for young athletes

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Background

It was during the IOC session in Guatemala City in July 2007 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has decided to conceive a new sporting event for young athletes. The idea of organising the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) was proposed to the IOC executive board by Jacques Rogge, president of the IOC himself. (IOC, 2009). The first YOG will be held in Singapore in August 2010.

Over the past ten to fifteen years Child abuse (overuse, injuries, sexual harassment), social psychological aspects (enjoyment, motivation, withdrawal, relationships) and educational perspectives in youth sport have come to our attention by many researchers. Despite a large literature on youth sports there is no framework that describes the impact of a large youth sport event on the different aspects of the young athlete.

Notwithstanding all the good and enviable intentions the IOC has in creating the YOG, there is an incontestable risk that the organisation will have some unintended and undesirable consequences.

Objectives

This paper wants to present a preliminary framework that explains the impact of youth sport event and want to point out some of the challenges the IOC will be faced with in organising the first YOG. This overview indicates that specifying an excellent idea into a real organisation involves dealing with unexpected dilemmas and ethical questions. The case study of the YOG will offer recommendations for organising large youth sport events.

Challenges and considerations

It is completely understandable that some practical restrictions had to be made in order to realize the largest multisport competition for young people in the world. Although some of the decisions made are quite conflicting with the proposed goals of the YOG. The main aims of the YOG is to give the world's talented youngsters the opportunity to vie with their peers from around the world and to gather some international competition experience. As the regulations are now, not every young talented athlete can take part in the YOG. The YOG will be held every four years and by limiting the age groups for each event to maximum two birth years, there will always be two birth years that are completely excluded from participation. For example, in 2010 the age group for rowing is limited to the birth years 1992 and 1993. Supposing these age groups will be preserved in 2014, only the athletes born in the year 1996 and 1997 will be allowed to participate. Thus, all talented rowers born in 1994 and 1995 will never have a chance to take part in the YOG.

Further on the YOG will bring together the most talented youngsters, but only a few will collect a medal. In the classic system of the Olympic Games, most competition schedules include direct elimination. This means that some athletes who have trained for years, who made a lot of sacrifices, and who have travelled thousands of kilometres, are sent home after only one lost match. Although losing is one of the fundamental outcomes of sport and learning to cope with loss is an important aspect of growing up, for young athletes the psychological impact of their elimination may not be ignored. But also the opposite is true, some young athletes who win a medal may feel as if they have already reached their goals. There is a real chance that some winners may lose their dedication towards their sport because they imagine themselves as true stars. So one can ask the question if this adult competition schedule is also the most appropriate for these young athletes.

The third large consideration is the fact that by carrying out a high-level competition for youth between 14 and 18, the YOG contains a serious risk of reinforcing early talent identification and early specialisation. As the efforts and resources invested in these programs have escalated in recent decades the pressure on policymakers, trainers and coaches to 'create' more successful athletes has multiplied. All these stakeholders could interpret the new YOG as an endorsement or approval of early talent identification and early specialisation. Perhaps they will use the YOG to throw any caution to the winds despite the fact that it is proven, that early selection and early specialisation include a lot of risks for the health of the children (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2000; Matos 2007). According to the literature (Micheli et Al, 2000), the highest probability of these problems is seen around puberty accompanied by an intensive training of over 15 hours a week. Many of the athletes participating in the YOG are part of this target group.

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