

Into The Olympic Cauldron: Young Athletes' Experiences At The Youth Olympic Games

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Aim of the research project

Since 2010, the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) have been an opportunity for young, pre-elite level athletes to experience a major multi-sport event. This study examined the experiences of the young athletes from the first two winter editions of the YOG (i.e., Innsbruck 2012 and Lillehammer 2016). The YOG acts as an entry point into the Olympic Movement. The objective was to detail how the athletes learn about important aspects of the Olympic Movement such as the Olympic Values. A further objective was to describe how athletes are socialized into an environment that provides educational underpinnings important for the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Theoretical background

One goal of Olympism is the promotion of values, a philosophy of life that exalts movement and education as a foundational component (Loland, 2014). Loland (2014) argued, the YOG is closer to the goals of the Olympic Movement than the 'senior' Games. A key component of the YOG is the IOC's desire to foster learning and personal development in athletes so they become ambassadors of the Olympic Movement.

Recent work regarding younger athletes has denoted the importance of examining the environment in which Games take place (e.g., Krieger, 2013). We argue that understanding the young athletes' first experience in the Olympic system is important given the significance a situated learning experience (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) may hold for their socialization into the Olympic Movement.

This study considers social learning theory and, in particular, the concept of legitimate peripheral participation related to the athlete experience. Legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) describes the progression of a learner within a social learning space, as they move from the periphery of a practice toward the centre of the practice. A context like the YOG may shape athlete learning through the various experiences and participation in arranged activities like the Cultural Education Program (CEP: now the Learn and Share program), the opening ceremony, and other athlete opportunities.

Method

In exchange for access to the athletes granted by the IOC, the research team completed post-Games reports. On-site observation and field notes were collected during the 2012 YOG regarding the CEP functioning, and the general Games environment (e.g., opening ceremony, opportunities). Post-Game interview questions were then created for the purpose of understanding the athlete's perceptions of the Olympic Values, and whether they had learned anything during the Games about being an athlete or ambassador. Thirteen interviews were completed.

On-site observation and field notes were again collected regarding the Learn and Share program and general athlete involvement during the 2016 Games (e.g., cultural fest, ceremonies). A semi-structured interview guide was developed prior to the Games, drawing from the 2012 post-Games report. Interviews were conducted on-site via an intercept approach. Twenty-six interviews (a total of 36 athletes) were completed.

All data were content analyzed using the NVivo software, where inductive codes (e.g., friendship, general YOG experience), as well as deductive codes, the latter being linked to the social theory of learning concepts (i.e., meaning, practice, community, and legitimate peripheral participation) were used.

Results and discussion

The athlete experience and learning centred predominantly around two areas: competitive performance and the social environment. The competitive performance was the primary learning mechanism since athletes were able to test themselves against some of the best international athletes. The social environment enabled athletes to generate and form lasting friendships while also aiding in understanding one of the Olympic Values (i.e., friendship) in particular. The majority of athletes did not know the Olympic Values. Despite not knowing the Values, most of the athletes experienced them indirectly and formed opinions and perceptions of them which closely aligned with the IOC's intention.

Overall, the YOG athletes' were enthusiastic about their interaction within others in the village, sport facilities and during the various pre-planned activities. Beyond the opportunity to develop friendships, there

was a recognition that the face-to-face contact and the social media tools promoted through the YOG allowed the athletes to stay in touch both during and beyond the actual games, helping to grow a sense of community.

This study provides meaningful insight into the mechanisms (i.e., sport, learn and share, social aspects) that help the Games participants as athletes and ambassadors of the Olympic Values. The use of social learning theory for this population extends our understanding of how this theory applies to developing high performance athletes. The presentation will discuss how young athletes are socialized into the Olympic Movement and the various learning aspects they derive from their participation.

References

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