

An Olympics Without Politics? Not In Our Lifetime

(And How The Dilemma Of Athlete's Speaking Out May Be Similar To People In Our Business)

Arthur Solomon

The 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing will be played from February 4 – 20, and Olympic politics, which already have made headlines this year, are sure to be an on-going concern for sports marketers and PR people as the games draw closer. The marketers, like those in none Olympic sports competitions, are helpless to remain above the controversy as athletes refuse to be silenced by sports organizations and sponsors and speak out about societal, political and other issues important to them.

In addition to not being able to control athlete's political comments, sports marketers now have to contend with being accused of helping promote a totalitarian regime in China, and unlike the president of the U.S., who declared a diplomatic boycott of the games because of China's human rights abuses, and care more about their bottom lines than freedom or genocide.

But with all the tumult about football teams fighting for playoff positions and the controversies about holding the Winter Olympic Games in a totalitarian country, many people might have not noticed that the Olympics' political season commenced many months ago with warning shots fired at athletes who refuse to comply with the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) rules regarding political statements. Also, it's only a matter of time before sports marketers and their public relations people will be hearing from the media and probably have to fend off negative media coverage by using the stale argument they always do – "We just support the athletes."



I've always thought that the Olympic Games are the world's most important athletic event. (Full disclosure: I've been a featured speaker at an IOC sports media seminar and have managed or played key roles in Olympic programs, both on the sponsorship side and with organizing committees.)

For years, the IOC has claimed that its games are free of politics. As a PR practitioner, whose first job was with a political PR firm and who has also played key roles in Olympics since 1984, I have always found the claim to be disingenuous. Politics has always played an important role in the Olympics, in fact in all sports.

The truth is that politics and the Olympics have identical DNA. Politics and the Olympics are the same as

monozygotic twins. Thus an Olympics without politics? Not in our lifetime. So even though I think the Olympics is the most important sports event crafted by humans, I'm not blind to what I consider a serious defect in its genetic makeup – awarding its propaganda-rich games to totalitarian countries devoid of human rights.

Months before the recently completed 2020 Olympics Games in Tokyo, the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) put fencer Race Imboden and hammer thrower Gwen Berry on a 12-month long probation watch for their actions protesting the National Anthem on the podium during medal ceremonies at the Pan American Games in 2019 in Lima, Peru. (The athletes, protested gun violence, racial injustice and the actions of President Donald Trump by kneeling or raising a fist during the U.S. national anthem, according to news sources.)

A letter was sent to the hammer thrower Berry, who raised her fist, and fencer Imboden, who knelt. One part of the letter could be interpreted as being a warning to all American athletes who wanted to compete in the Olympic Games.

Of course, this wasn't the only time American athletes protested on a podium. The most famous incident occurred during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, when Tommie Smith and John Carlos were sent home for protesting against racial inequality on the medal stand.

Since then many athletes in all sports have spoken out or went on strike to make their political positions known, upsetting both the moguls who control the business of sports and sports marketers.

Older consumers, some say, (who are often more conservative than younger ones), might show their displeasure of athletes who protest on the playing field by switching to another brand. (Highly unlikely, in my opinion. Change becomes more difficult as one ages).

But what about the athletes? Should they stay mum even if they feel troubled by the increasing incidents of mass shootings, racial or other social ills? Will those who speak out against racism lose their endorsements? During football's kneeling era, some athletes did lose endorsements, but some endorsements were replaced by others.

Will athletes who speak out against what they consider injustices become heroes to be applauded or shunned by consumers? Only time will tell. Nike said sales increased when they made Colin Kaepernick, the best known kneeler, the face of its campaign.

I always advised clients not to be fearful about speaking out on subjects that went against the norm. It's a good way to stand out from the pack and gain major publicity.

While I wouldn't advise a novice athlete to take a political stand, an established star athlete will probably not be harmed from speaking out and I would advise persons to do what makes them feel comfortable. If they lose a sponsor or two, chances are they will be replaced.

My advice to clients is that times are changing. Don't just consider your companies next quarterly report when deciding whether to have an athlete who protests endorse your product. Take a longer view. Company graveyards are filled with businesses who didn't keep up with what younger consumers wanted. (They might not vote; but they buy.)

Chances are that between now and the Beijing Olympics there will be other instances of athlete endorsers speaking out against U.S. and Chinese government policies, on and off the athletic fields. And brands will also have to take a stand. My advice: Think long term because on matters political like the environment, background checks for gun purchases and issues affecting race and sexual matters, younger people have different viewpoints than their older relatives.

It was not too long ago that having mixed couples appear as a family in television sit-coms or ads was unthinkable. Now it's quite common. Change is not only in the future. It's here now. Brands should realize that the next time one of their athlete endorsers makes a political statement.

People in our business often have the same dilemma that many athletes have. To speak out or to keep quiet. In our case, it's being assigned to accounts whose policies they find repugnant. I've refused to work on certain accounts. And the world didn't end, at least not for me. To those who have asked for my advice regarding accounts that they found distasteful, my advice is "do what you think is best for you; not for the agency." Refusing to work on an account is a good way to learn what the agency thinks of you. If you are highly thought of the agency will usually not insist that you work on the account. If they insist you do, take it as a sign that it's time to start a new job search.



About the Author: Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and was on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at arthursolomon4pr@juno.com.