



Can Sports Save the World? Reflections of a Former Little Leaguer on Sports, Diplomacy, and Globalization

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This weekend, my hometown Los Angeles Kings will play the Devils in New Jersey for the Stanley Cup hockey championship -- a sport which originated in Canada and is played professionally in the U.S. by stars from Finland, Sweden, and Russia, as well as Canada and the U.S. Not much of a hockey fan, I'm more tuned in to the NBA playoffs. I'm rooting for the young upstarts on the Oklahoma Thunder after they defeated my favorite team, the Los Angeles Lakers. My colleague David Axeen is planning his weekend around the European soccer championship, starting today in Poland and Ukraine, which will be televised in real time on ESPN -- a sign of the sport's increasing popularity with Americans. British soccer star David Beckham now plays for the Los Angeles Galaxy. You can see him in hamburger ads or modeling underwear on TV almost any evening.

Other friends are planning their summer trips to London to attend the 2012 Olympics. The sports pages of the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* are filled with stories about the training regimens and back stories of potential medal winners. Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt -- "the fastest man in the world" -- is modeling a line of brightly colored clothes designed by Cedella Marley, daughter of the famous reggae singer. Sponsored by Puma, the Jamaican team jackets will include Bob Marley's face on the shoulder. The success of Bolt and other Jamaican sprinters has been a boost to Jamaica's international image. It's no surprise that Stella McCartney, daughter of Paul, was asked to design the outfits for Team Great Britain.

A love of sports -- playing, watching, arguing, rooting, buying gear -- is one of the great commonalities of being human. Along with religion, music, and, of course, war and trade -- sports is a global activity which crosses borders and has the power to unite as well as divide. Sports diplomacy is increasingly an important tool in the "soft power" arsenal of nations. An invitation from Mao and Chou En Lai to the U.S. ping pong team to visit China paved the way for Nixon's famous visit and the opening of relations between the two countries. During the Clinton administration, the U.S. tried wrestling diplomacy with Iran to make overtures to the revolutionary government, and baseball diplomacy has been attempted with Cuba a number of times.

When I served as U.S. Ambassador to Finland, I regularly greeted visiting U.S. sports teams. I engaged in a free throw contest at a Finnish basketball game, and threw out the ball at the championship game in the Finnish American football league at the Olympic stadium. The U.S. embassy team on which I played point guard defeated the Russian embassy for the diplomatic cup. During a speaking tour of China in the late 90s, I recognized that the most famous American in the country was not President Clinton, but basketball star Michael Jordan. Photos of him airborne in his Nike shoes adorned the walls of cafes and dorm rooms.

Under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the State Department has increased its efforts at sports diplomacy. Hillary recently named NBA great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as a cultural ambassador and sent him to Brazil. The U.S. has sent top women snowboarders Amber Stackhouse and Erin Comstock to Armenia where they visited Yerevan and judged local competitions at a ski resort. Hillary has made it a priority to promote female participation in sports around the world.

Other countries also understand the use of sports as effective public diplomacy. New Zealand has used its love of rugby and the international success of the All Blacks to engage in rugby diplomacy. The success of Serbian tennis players on the international circuit has helped to change attitudes about that country and its checkered past. Nelson Mandela made use of the world rugby tournament to highlight his public support for the Spring Boks -- the favorite team of Afrikaners -- to reach out to white South Africans (a story told by Clint Eastwood in the film *Invictus*).

As a former Little League player and currently an aging point guard who plays basketball twice a week, I understand the appeal of sports from the joy of winning the "big game" and playing well on the field to the excitement of being a fan and watching your local team. As a professor of diplomacy and globalization, I am intrigued with how sports has gone global in the post-Cold War era, and what it might mean for bringing people together across borders and bridging political and social differences.

This term, my friend and colleague at Occidental College emeritus professor of American Studies, David Axeen, and I decided to explore these issues in a new course, Sports and Diplomacy in a Globalized World. The academic study of sports has gone viral. There are academic journals (*Sports and History*, *Sports and Society*, etc.), new experts like sports economists (Andrew Zimbalist at Smith is the star of the field), and sports institutes popping up at major universities. Not being proper academics in the field, we decided to approach the subject more as amateur athletes who happen to be professors. We wanted to cast as wide an intellectual net as possible in constructing a survey course for undergraduates.

We selected as our basic text a new book, *Gaming The World: How Sports Are Reshaping Global Politics and Culture*, by professors Andrei Markovits and Lars Rensman, which addresses many of the issues which seem most relevant to us. In addition, we assigned topic-specific works, including: *Beyond a Boundary*, C.L.R. James' classic memoir of playing cricket in the West Indies; *Soccernomics* by Kuper and Syzmanski, popular sports economists; Robert Whiting's reportage on Americans playing baseball in Japan -- *You Gotta Have Wa*; British journalist John Carlin's book, *Invictus: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation*; and diplomatic historian Walter LaFerber's book, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism*. We also posted current articles from the sports pages of the *New York Times* which continually offers the best in-depth reporting on the global world of sports.

To accompany the reading, we organized a weekly *Sports and Diplomacy* film series, as well as a slate of visiting lecturers. The films included: *Chariots of Fire* and *One Day In September*, both on the Olympics; *Mr. Baseball* starring Tom Selleck as an aging Big Leaguer who goes to play in Japan; *The Two Escobars*, a haunting study of soccer and drugs in Colombia; *Fire In Babylon*, a documentary on the rise of the West Indies cricket team to world champion; *Harlem Globetrotters - The Team That Changed the World*, on the role of the team in integrating the NBA and serving as U.S. sports ambassadors; *Invictus*, of course, on sports and politics in the new South Africa; and *Youngblood*, about a young American playing ice hockey in small town Canada.

We opened the course with off beat presentations by a yoga expert on why competitive yoga should be an Olympic sport and a philosophical discourse by a professor on why curling is the most democratic sport in the world. From there we went international with a short history of the Olympics in which British journalist David Goldblatt romped through every modern Olympics in 90 minutes -- an impressive feat. For those planning to watch the London Olympics, we recommend David's companion book, *How to Watch the Olympics-- Scores and laws, heroes and zeroes: an instant initiation into every sport*. Goldblatt made it clear that the Olympics are more than one thing. They are a global spectacle, a tool for national promotion and economic development, a substitute for war through peaceful competition (a big deal during the Cold War), and a celebration of individual physical prowess, skill and courage -- all played out on the global stage, and now televised to billions.

Author Robert Whiting explained how baseball was adapted to the Japanese cultural setting and how the lure of the Major Leagues is changing aspirations of Japan's best players. The Canadian consul general in Los Angeles, David Franzen, a former amateur hockey player, addressed the question: "If Canadians Are So Polite, Why Is Hockey So Violent?" He also explained the origins of hockey in the neighborhood clubs of Montreal. Professor Nigel Boyle from Pitzer College gave a brilliant lecture on European soccer and how the teams reflect national character (well worth noting for those who plan to watch the European championships this week and see if the Spanish team, La Roja, can repeat).

We called on Oxy's sport coaches to discuss their fields. Long-time Oxy rugby coach Michael Godfree regaled students with stories of international rugby competition. A new book, *Rugby for Dummies*, co-authored by two former Oxy rugby players coached by Godfree is dedicated to him. Oxy basketball coach Brian Newhall talked about his days playing professional basketball in France, and told students how one of his best Oxy players, an Asian American, was recruited to play professional basketball in China and had to pretend to be native Chinese to avoid the limit on foreign players.

Oxy soccer coach Colm McFreely reminisced about playing soccer in Ireland and how the teams reflected religious differences, giving the students a window in to cultural identity and sports. He also talked about his days as a player and coach in Hong Kong. Dean of the college Jorge Gonzalez, a leading Mexican economist, gave a lecture on the joys of being a fan and how he spent a month following the Mexican national team around South Africa during the World Cup. For the session on cricket, we asked two Oxy colleagues, professor Elmer Griffin and campus policeman Joe Cunje, to organize a demonstration match on an Oxy playing field. They divided the class in to sides, sent them out on to the "pitch" and let them try their luck. In his classroom lecture, Professor Griffin, a native of Nevis in the West Indies, deconstructed James' *Beyond a Boundary*, and challenged the students to think about sports which are spread by colonial powers, and then adopted by local peoples. Cricket, spread by the British Empire, is now the national sport of India, as well as the West Indies. Soccer, a more working class sport in England, was spread informally by British economic interests and has become the most popular sport in the world (see David Goldblatt's book, *The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Football*). Invented by James Naismith in Springfield, Massachusetts, basketball was initially made popular abroad by YMCA missionaries, including in China. Later, the NBA and Nike took over the job.

In the second half of the course, we gave students the stage. For team presentations, we selected five themes: Economics and the global business of sports; Nationalism and international sports competition; Race, ethnicity and religion (and the relationship to colonial and imperial history); Gender in sports; Sports Diplomacy and sports as "soft power."

In their oral presentations, the students covered sports like track and field, golf, tennis, and sailing which we had neglected in our lectures and films. They probed the impact of nationalism on sports, especially during the Cold War, analyzing events like the famous U.S.-U.S.S.R. hockey match and "soccer wars" in Central America, and explored the promotion of sports and sports figures by global companies like Nike and Adidas. The role of race and gender in sports and the progress that has been made in both areas were examined, including a presentation by an Oxy athlete who is the only registered female golf caddy in California. Sad to say, racism is not gone from international sports. Many family members of the British national soccer team (one third of whose players are black) have decided to stay home rather than listen to the racial taunts of fans in Ukraine.

The topics of student research papers varied widely, although soccer proved to be the most popular. Brazil's preparations for the World Cup and the Olympics were analyzed, as well as the impact that hosting the World Cup had on South Africa. Two students interviewed the Consul General of New Zealand about the importance of rugby for promoting Kiwi soft power. One student looked at the role of sports in North Korea and how the state uses sports for national interests. Another described the tensions between soccer teams in Israel over the role of Arab players. An interesting paper was written on the history of baseball in Cuba and the impact of the U.S.

embargo. And another described the social and political import of maintaining Irish national sports against the inroads of British games like soccer.

A few papers explored the expansion of NBA recruiting to Africa and its positive and negative effects in countries like Senegal. One paper, by the son of a diplomat, looked at the rise of Asian basketball players in the NBA from Yao Ming to Jeremy Lin. The most outstanding paper was a description and analysis of the rivalry between two Spanish soccer teams -- Real Madrid and Barcelona -- which for decades symbolized and reflected political and regional tensions in Spain. The annual match, El Classico, as it is called, is the title of new documentary by Los Angeles filmmaker Kelly Candaele. The next time that the course is taught we will add the film to our play list.

Professor Axeen and I did not press the students for a conclusion or an answer to the question in the title of this post. Of course, sports can't save the world from the effects of global warming or by themselves solve economic inequality in the world economy. For that, politics is required.

Is sports a global business with all the contradictions that come with it? Certainly, and it's not necessarily a bad thing. It is preferable that young men and women get paid well to compete on the sports field with rules, referees and fans rather than as gladiators for the amusement of the mob or as soldiers on a field of battle.

Do sports build character? Not so much as they reveal character. Character is built by good parenting, strong families, and decent communities. However, sports can represent universal values of hard work, discipline, focus, courage, and teamwork. Organized sports is also a good model of regulated competition and equal opportunity.

Can sports be used more effectively to bring people together across boundaries and religious and ethnic differences? Absolutely. Is sports a good vehicle for spreading a nation's soft power. Yes, there should be more sports diplomacy, not less. We are going to make sports diplomacy one of our ongoing areas of research and action in Occidental's Center on Global Affairs and Politics.

As someone who has always viewed himself as a scholar and an athlete, I believe that sports should be a part of everyone's life -- that we should all play a sport, not simply watch others play. Of course, watching the best players in a sport and rooting for your home team are also part of the human experience. Check your TV menu for some great games this weekend. Play ball, now and forever.