Olympic Games Competition: Structural Correlates of National Success*

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There are innumerable sports, games, and contests throughout the modern world, but pre-eminently at the international level the games are the Olympic Games; Baron de Coubertin’s turn-of-the-century resurrection of the ancient Greek spectacles. Although supposedly – and as reiterated by International Olympic Committee officials (cf. Brundage, 1956: 35) – but competitions between individuals, the games are in fact, as is inter-nation sport in general (cf. Heinilä, 1966; McIntosh, 1963: 89-93, 188-203; Morton, 1963: esp. 65-103), an arena of intense between-polities contesting. Overall team performances become sources of national pride and shame as countries vie with one another for the prestige associated with high-ranking total performances. If war can be, as it has, likened to a game (Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971: 271-303; Liddell Hart, 1971), the Olympic Games may be likened to a quadrennial war, with medals and team points and international reputations rather than territory as the victor’s spoils. In the following the concern will be with some of the possible social structural correlates, national indicators, of these Olympic Game outcomes.

Perspective

Each Olympics brings with it new reports of heightened international conflicts and disputes (not to mention intranational ones, e.g. Edwards, 1960; Kieran and Daley, 1969: 410, 431, 433-435, 444): accusations of illegal

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subsidies and financial aid, training methods, and the like; solicitations of political asylum; and since 1952, alternative methods for scoring team performances (Kieran and Daley, 1969: 318, 382–383; Chester, 1968: 155) — a practice officially barred by international rules at the insistence of the modern Games' founder, de Coubertin (Morton, 1963: 93) in the 1890's.

The examples of such politically implicated "incidents" are legion. Among the better known:


1956: The Suez invasion and the Hungarian uprising are reflected in the Games (Chester, 1968: 119–121), e.g. some Arab nation teams withdraw in protest of the Suez actions (Kieran and Daley, 1969: 280–281).

These examples could easily be multiplied, including some involving actual physical violence, e.g. the free-for-all between the U.S.S.R. and Hungarian water polo teams in 1956 (Morton, 1963: 87–88; Kieran and Daley, 1969: 316–317), as well as those featuring intricate political maneuvers such as characterized the Tokyo Games in 1964 (pages 375–377); the Games in which the IOC was finally successful in their efforts to ban the tabulation of unofficial, point-based national standings (pages 318, 383–384; Chester, 1968: 155). Albeit unsystematically and without social-scientific rigor, Atkinson's only-somewhat-fictional account of the 1968 Olympics, dramatically captures the essence and spirit of this international conflict in his novel, The Games (1968: esp. 5, 24, 123, 333–334, 342, 380–381, 383–384).

Although the Games are ostensibly competitions between individuals (or teams in particular sports), this is belied by the attention given to the performance of their nationals by governments and quasi-governmental agencies as well as the press and the public (Morton, 1963; McIntosh, 1963; Heinilä, 1966, and the citations therein). Whether financed via public appeal or state subsidy or support, polities are both overtly and covertly concerned with the outcomes of the Olympics — as well as "the game within the games" which surrounds the jockeying for site-selection and support.

Duncan (1962) has proposed a model of social order, originally formulated for communities and societies, which seems equally useful as an interpretive