

## **The Youth Olympic Games – A Serious Business or Just for Fun?**

**Helmut Altenberger/Jürgen Hofmann**  
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### **1. Modern sport became more international**

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in addition to high-level continental athletic competitions, such as the Asian Games, there were early ambitions to bring together people from every nation to high-level international contests.

The Olympic Games has acquired a position of eminence in organized sports. From the outset, the Games were characterized by the so-called “Olympic Idea” of the founder Baron Pierre de Coubertin (1863–1937), as he aimed to bring together the youth of the world in peaceful competition through sports. Sport should be an effective model of rule-based, athletic competition that can be achieved by fair contest between adolescent competitors. The amicable meeting of young people in peaceful competition should be provided with a platform via the modern Olympic Games, allowing the people of the world to unite regardless of race, skin color, gender or nationality. Within the one hundred year old history of the Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has built a stable infrastructure with the help of the National Olympic Committees (NOC) and has grown to 206 NOCs today.

Coubertin could not have predicted the current shape of the Olympic Games. Initially classified as a life philosophy by Pierre de Coubertin, the spiritual component has become an ideal. He saw all the necessary qualities brought together in educationally-based sports and which were important for an ethically demanding lifestyle and therefore for a successful life:

- The consistent striving for perfection and improvement in sporting performance of competitors from all over the world.
- The principle of fairness in sporting competition, through the strict adherence to the rules of sport which are based on international agreements.
- The opportunity for peace and international understanding through world-wide participation by the best sportsmen from all nations and continents.

- Recognition and appreciation of all participants in Olympic competitions, regardless of their religion, language or political or ethnic origin.

This multi-cultural orientation and the international coverage were of such importance for Coubertin that he brought together these provisions into the so-called “Olympic Charter”. Because of this he expected adherence to them, not only by sports officials and sports journalists, but above all, by the Olympic athletes themselves. A special role was attributed to these athletes, that of role model for society. Therefore, a complete knowledge of the regulations and rules of conduct is expected of them. Several rites, celebrations and symbols were established to underline their importance, each of which was attributed a specific meaning: Olympic Rings, Olympic Fire, Olympic Torch, Olympic Village, Olympic Hymns and the Olympic Motto.

Discover for yourself the meaning of these rites and symbols!



## 2. Criticism of the “big” Olympic Games

Critical voices levelled at the Olympic Games have become more persistent during recent years. Justifiable criticism of the Games often arises because the original concept behind the Games is seen as being neglected.

What are these concrete points of criticism that have led to strong hostility towards the modern Olympic Games?

It should be noted at the outset, that much of this criticism should be seen as closely relating to the economic system and its negative impacts, some of which creating exploitative situations and social disparity. Currently, one can state that high-level sports – such as the Olympic sports – reflect the latest developments in today’s society. Three examples illustrating this are:

- Commercialization

The Olympic Games have become an enormous business in recent decades. The broadcasting rights revenue for the IOC alone has become unfeasibly large. The marketing of the Olympic Games and the athletes has been pushed so far to the forefront that as a result, the original Olympic Ideals lag far behind. Nowadays, the general public is far less impressed or fascinated by an Olympic victory and is instead distracted by the magnitude of the financial rewards involved. This impression is often reinforced by the athletes' own attitudes to an Olympic victory, whereby the victory itself is no longer seen as having any intrinsic value but rather being of financial value only. The expectations of the hosting country that the Olympic Games will stimulate economy and tourism are discussed contradictorily. It is fair to ask the question why no African nation has ever hosted the Olympic Games. Another criticism is that, when hosting the Olympic Games, the political image of the country is first and foremost the principal focus.

- Economy and ecology

In recent years, critics of today's society have become more vociferous denouncing the gigantic scale of the Games and casting doubts as to the ecological sustainability. Many cases are known where recently-built sports facilities are now run down and were not, as promised, made available to the public following the Games.

- Doping and drug abuse

The problem of doping has been very high profile in relation to the Olympic Games. Cases of doping have repeatedly been revealed or rumors spread, all damaging the Olympic Ideal of the fair pursuit of excellence. In addition to dramatic health risks, doping gives critics a platform on which to challenge the sense and integrity of high-level sports. Critics maintain that it is no longer possible to sustain "doping free" high-performance sport. The public is often sceptical about record-breaking performances culminating in the common view that the entire top-tier of sport is "contaminated by doping". Many successful world-class athletes are criticised for failing to publicly condemn drug abuse or to highlight the dangers to physical and mental health.

A future priority will be to make young athletes aware of the dangers of doping. Education makes it possible to stave off undesirable developments at an early stage. The future of the Olympic Ideal will only endure if not only a few idealists, but also the Olympic athletes themselves become involved. It would therefore be necessary to systematically educate these younger athletes about the Olympic idea,

thus allowing current and former high-level athletes to take collective responsibility for the Olympic sport.

### **3. The idea of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG)**

In 2007, the IOC decided to hold the Youth Olympic Games. Like the Olympic Games, there are to be Summer and Winter Olympics every four years. The first Youth Olympic Games were staged in 2010 in Singapore; the Winter Games are set to take place in 2012 in Innsbruck, Austria. The Youth Olympic Games differ in several fundamental ways from the adult Olympic Games:

The participants are adolescents between the ages of 14 to 18. The program of the YOG is focused around two themes. The first is that the YOG should not just be about top class competition, but also about the participation by the athletes in a cultural education program, which is a new feature of the YOG. The young competitors are selected according to criteria set out by international federations. These provide that performance levels are the main criteria for selection. In the attractive cultural education program, participants are actively learning about the characteristics of other cultures, their history, religion etc. and they become acquainted with geographic and political features. Fascinating team training should promote social ties and allow the participants to experience the diversity of cultures in the Olympic community. The participants from diverse cultures are taught at various associated schools in close proximity to the venue. This is important for a complete educational overview, allowing the dissemination of information to a wide cross-section of cultures.

A special feature of the sporting competitions is that they are geared towards young people. For example, streetball instead of basketball or mixing teams from different nations and continents. This alternative approach, caters for the particular needs of 14 to 18 year-olds. The participants are expected to be on-site for the entire duration of the Youth Olympic Games and to stay in the Olympic Village. Many other symbols and rites are borrowed from the Olympic Games (Olympic Fire, Opening and Closing Ceremony, Victory Ceremonies, Flags).



From past experience, especially of the Summer Olympics in Singapore – we have seen, the potential for providing young people with a meaningful educational experience that can be refined in the future. As a direct result, many new ideas may be taken up, facilitating the organization of an Olympic movement that is appropriate for young people.

#### **4. A Mail from Singapore 2010**

*E-Mail from a German Athlete after the first Youth Olympic Games in Singapore to a friend, a participant from South Africa.*

Dear John!

I hope you got home well. My head is still buzzing from all those impressions in Singapore and I am happy that I captured everything with the many pictures in my blog.

Unfortunately we didn't meet at the Closing Ceremony. It certainly became rather chaotic so even our group had problems staying together. Some made their own way back to the Olympic Village and it was a bit of luck that we knew which metro to take to get there from the contests.

What is your overall assessment of the first Youth Olympic Games? My impressions are ambivalent, due to the fact that I couldn't fulfill my high aspirations in the sports events and, as you know, was knocked out in the preliminaries. I only took part, after all, to achieve my personal best and to come within the top three— and then I went and made such a careless mistake!

On the other hand, I had never experienced such an atmosphere before. But I really enjoyed simply being with all the other athletes and being able to participate in the other activities afterwards. At first, I wasn't entirely clear just how many were taking part or how many countries were involved. And I didn't realise either quite how diverse the Culture- and Education Program was. I made many new friends from all over the world, just by visiting the many stands in the Olympic Village and by participating in the Island Adventure. Do you remember how we first met at the Chat with the Champions with Veronica Campbell-Brown? Just like me, you wanted to know, how it would feel to be an Olympic Champion.

Did you also feel like a representative of your country in Singapore? Other participants kept on asking me about "Bayern Munich" and the Oktoberfest, but also about Berlin and supposedly typical German habits. Also, Germany seems to be known mostly for the number of cars that are produced here. I wasn't aware of that and I think that this could be a topic for discussion at a future preparatory meeting. On the other hand, there seem to be many prejudices: We, Germans, are apparently incapable of being happy, we cannot celebrate and we are always distant and impersonal. I hope you agree that I managed to prove the opposite! Additionally, thanks to you, I came to learn a lot about South Africa that was unfamiliar to me. It was all very interesting and I think it is great that I've now got a new South African friend. I hope we will stay in contact - maybe you'd like to come to Germany sometime. You are welcome anytime!

Oh, I've got to go to training now, so I'm sending you my best wishes

Frank

## 5. The first YOG in winter in Innsbruck 2012

The winter Youth Olympic Games will be held for the first time in Innsbruck and about 1,000 athletes, aged between 15 and 19, are ex-



pected to arrive from all over the world to compete against one another in 63 different competitions. But what is the difference between the YOG and other competitions?

A decisive point is that adolescents from different nationalities and backgrounds come together at a mega sporting event. Moreover, this event reinforces the goal of spreading the Olympic Ideal amongst our youth. This goes beyond just focusing on competition and performance. The hosts of Innsbruck have organized a diverse youth program. The program is a revised and advanced version of the first Culture – and Education Program in Singapore 2010 (online: [http://www.innsbruck2012.com/en/culture\\_education](http://www.innsbruck2012.com/en/culture_education)).

Beside the *Youth Olympic Games World Mile* – a platform for dialogue amongst nations – five further projects are presented, which deal with special issues of athletes such as doping, education and career planning (*Youth Olympic Games Competence Project*), as well as with general issues such as environmental protection and sustainability (*Youth Olympic Games Sustainability Project*).

The hosts attach great importance to the involvement of the population from Innsbruck and its vicinity, in the attempt to promote the coming together of young people from all over the world.

The intercultural exchange is part of a continuing process to help athletes more effectively communicate and better apprehend the Olympic Peace Ideal.

Furthermore, the competitions are structured differently from those of the adults. For example, it is envisaged that many disciplines will allow for mixed team-competitions. The form of the competitions is to be modified to organize Games more appropriate for young people.

As the very first winter Youth Olympic Games come to fruition, it is possible that there may be a few glitches. But rest assured that Innsbruck has done everything to organize a great event. If you find anything to be unsatisfactory, just inform your Youth Ambassador. The next Games can only benefit from these experiences!

## **6. How to prepare for the YOG?**

What can be done to best prepare for the YOG in Innsbruck? For starters, the athletic competition is important for every participant and requires the right preparatory training. Many athletes will be confronted with a competition of this standing for the first time, whereas others have already participated in national and higher level competitions.

The YOG give many athletes from various nations the chance to participate, even though their chances of winning may be low.

Despite everything, the YOG is more to do with the hard training involved rather than simply about the winning.

Additionally, in the context of intercultural relations, the Youth Olympic Games provides the unique opportunity to meet sport enthusiasts from all over the world.

The YOG last two weeks for the participants, thus each athlete should have enough time for the Culture and Education Program (CEP) in addition to the competitions. The CEP focuses on the following themes:

- **Olympism:** Participants will learn to understand, embrace and express the three Olympic values of Excellence, Respect and Friendship
- **Well-Being & Healthy Lifestyle:** Nutrition, anti-doping, over-training and the balance of body and mind
- **Social Responsibility:** Young athletes will learn about (personal) sporting success and the responsibility as role models which this brings. Other themes will include environmental issues and sustainability.
- **Expression:** Using digital media, the athletes will learn how to share their experiences and impressions of the Winter Youth Olympic Games with a worldwide community.
- **Skills Development:** The various facets of a professional athlete's career will be discussed, including how to co-operate with sponsors and media and the options when it comes to combining a sporting career with a professional education.

You probably dealt with some issues and problems in preparation for the YOG, but certain other issues could be new. Perhaps you will encounter some difficulties, other opinions or language issues. Food is likely to be different from food at home. Try and stay open-minded towards opinions of others. Sometimes even the food is not as bad as expected – you could just try it!

Furthermore, every participant is expected to be an ambassador for his or her own country. Therefore, it is important to be familiar with the culture of your nation and the fundamental historical information. If you know something about the cultural tradition in your country, you will be able to inform other young people from other countries about your culture. The Youth Games are more than simply about competition. They also afford competitors the opportunity to meet different participants from all over the world who are all sport enthusi-



asts. Knowing who you are and where you are from allows you to tell others about yourself and your country!

### **7. As a young athlete, how do I fulfill my role as an ambassador of the Olympic movement?**

Each young high-level athlete needs to be aware of his or her role model function vis a vis other participants of the YOG.

This is the case as individuals from many different cultures come together and are required to respect the Olympic values. These mainly concern the requirement for fairness, without which the Olympic competition could not function. Even though the participant's main objective may be to win, this should not justify the taking of performance-enhancing drugs or a violation of the competition's rules. Fair competition cannot exist unless the rules of competition are adhered to. Also, mutual understanding of one another is an essential requirement if participants are to treat each other with equal respect, regardless of different cultural backgrounds.

The above mentioned rules are applicable both before and after the Games, distinguish you as a true participant of the Olympic movement. Your attitude towards the Olympic Peace Ideal should be put into practice for everyone to see. You should also be aware of the fact that as a high-level athlete you are a role model for other athletes.

Last year we carried out a survey of the German participants and asked them to identify the qualities of other participants that in their view were exemplary. Many of them mentioned ambition, determination and discipline, while others identified helpfulness, frankness and good social skills. These are all important characteristics, which ultimately go towards establishing the Olympic Idea. With your personality you will certainly be sure to succeed – just remind yourself from time to time to make sure that you do not stray from these values due to numerous obligations or cash incentives!

### **8. How can the development of the YOG be continued?**

The Youth Olympic Games are by far the most recent component of the Olympic movement. They do not have a long history and were originally conceived for the purpose of instilling the Olympic values into the young high-level athletes, to a greater extent than could otherwise be achieved by the Olympic Games. Should cases of cheating, e. g. through drug-taking, become more frequent, as was already found

to occur in several Olympic Games, it would be clear that the original concept of these Games had become distorted. As a result, the continuation of the Games in this form should not be continued. Even becoming fixated with the concept of winning medals in high-level sport or with excessive commercialisation would run counter to the founding principle of the Youth Olympic Games.

The recent start-up of the Youth Olympic Games will hopefully prove to be very productive. It is essential that the endorsement of an athlete's single-minded ambition to succeed gives way to the nurturing of a more broad minded approach and that the exchange of values between all of the athletes is encouraged. The first Games in Singapore was a good start, as it included a varied and interesting Culture and Education Program. After facing initial criticism, the YOG in Singapore have afforded Winter Games in Innsbruck with a greater chance of success.

It is up to the on-site hosts to ensure that success is realized. The Singapore Games were a great beginning. Now the Games in Innsbruck need to be refined – notwithstanding that this is the very first Youth Winter Games. A first overall evaluation is likely to take place at the Games in Nanjing (China), from August 16<sup>th</sup>–28<sup>th</sup> 2014. This will provide an indication of what to expect for the future of the Youth Olympic Games.