

IS COMPETITIVE SPORT STILL APPEALING?

NICOLE HOEVERTSZ

Stakeholder representative • International Olympic Committee



ORIGINAL TEXT IN ENGLISH

It happens all the time, every day, in every corner of the world.

People of every age, social background, and all walks of life are involved, in one way or another, in sport. They are part of a team themselves, active as an athlete, taking part in sports competitions. They may also be avid supporters, television viewers, parents, sponsors, coaches or administrators.

Sports competitions may take place in impressively modern arenas or tiny and simple neighbourhood fields. Whether the participants wear modern uniforms or modest outfits, the discipline and determination is no different and has one common goal: we strive to be the best that we can be.

No matter how different the circumstances, one thing is certain: sport brings great joy to countless numbers of people, and has the ability to change the lives of so many forever and for the better.

I was asked to speak here today about the relevance of sport, to answer the question whether or not competitive sport is still appealing. At first, I must admit, my reaction was one of surprise. "Of course it is," I thought, "Don't we all agree on that?" But the more I thought about it, the more I realised that we do have reason for concern.

While sport nowadays is probably more accessible than ever before, we actually see the number of young people who actively take part in a sports activity decreasing. In my own country, the Caribbean island of Aruba, studies show that only 13% of the population is involved in organised sport activities. For the female population the figure is even lower: only 6.9% of women in Aruba practise a sport on a regular basis. Sadly, I do not believe my country to be an exception in this regard.

Why is it that, with all the opportunities we now have to enjoy the many benefits of sport, people in fact seem to be less involved in sports activities? Why is it that our youth, instead of taking part in organised physical activities, so often prefer to spend time in front of a computer, playing video games, or enjoying an endless menu of TV programmes?

Is it true that competitive sport has become less appealing? And, if this is indeed the case, what has caused people to be less interested in sport and physical activity?

We tend to emphasise the positive aspects of sport, and in fact there are so many. But we must be careful not to shut our eyes to the negative sides, the stories that often get "swept under the rug". Allow me to give you a few examples of situations that make people choose to stay away from competitive sports.

While we encourage people to participate in sport, promoting it as a safe and pleasant environment, the truth is that this is not always the case. Unfortunately, we know of cases where people have become victims of sexual harassment and abuse while they were taking part in sport. Research even shows that sexual harassment and abuse are particularly prevalent in elite sport.

Competitive sport can place incredible pressure on athletes. Team-mates, coaches, family members, journalists, sponsors and fans can have very high expectations of the performance of athletes. Expecting to win at all cost may lead athletes into using drugs and prohibited substances, gambling and cheating, in order to live up to what others are expecting of them.

Competitive sport can sometimes alienate, isolate and push athletes beyond their limits. Instead of allowing athletes to enjoy sport, this pressure can affect them physically and psychologically, for the rest of their lives.

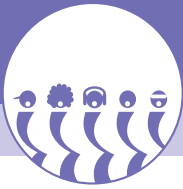
For some people, taking part in competitive sport is simply not affordable. The cost of participating in and meeting the needs of today's competitive sports is for many an obstacle, difficult to overcome.

We may expect athletes to be interested in and dedicated to competitive sports, but our contemporary society and modern lifestyle are placing more importance on pleasure, social contact and health than emphasising the benefits of competing in a sport, of being part of a competitive culture. These opposing expectations, of society and of the sporting world, lead to more people choosing not to participate in competitive sports.

Not turning a blind eye to these aspects, we should not be discouraged and continue motivating young people in particular to engage in sport and to enjoy its many positive aspects.

I cannot imagine how different my life would have been, how different a person I would have been, had it not been for my involvement in competitive sport. For me, the sport of synchronised swimming offered me a protective environment in which I was able to develop from a shy girl from a small island into an athlete who had the honour of representing her country, even at the Olympic Games. It gave me the confidence and opportunity to become the person that I am today, standing here in front of such a distinguished audience. I am very grateful for having had this opportunity through sport, and therefore feel compelled to share this message with others, hoping that they too will be encouraged to take up sport.

We often identify sport with competition, victory, results, but sport is not only about winning medals, about breaking records. Sport is about the joy found in effort. Sport is about conquering what did not seem reachable before. Sport is about fostering understanding, friendship,



team-work, tolerance and peace. Sport is about educating young people, about creating leaders for the future. Sport, when practised well, as part of a well-organised structure, in a safe environment and under equitable circumstances, can very well be a life-changing experience.

I know that I am “preaching to the choir” here, so to speak. No need to convince this audience of the impact of sport on people and on communities.

I strongly believe this Olympic Congress to be a turning point, an important opportunity for us to reevaluate the relevance of sport, and to seek new and creative ways of appealing in particular to young people.

We should listen carefully to the voice of our youth. Listen to what attracts them to sport. Listen to what sports they find appealing. Listen carefully, yet at the same time safeguard our history and the valuable legacy it has left us. We need to instil in our youth the importance of the Olympic values and Olympic education.

We have a unique chance to reach out and share the enormously powerful message of sport. In order for us to accomplish our goal and to have a lasting impact, however, we must ALL get involved and commit ourselves. It will not be an easy task, but working together under the leadership of the Olympic Movement, I am confident that we will be successful.

We owe it to the Olympic Movement, we owe it to our countries, we owe it to our athletes, and we owe it to the youth of the world.