The Meaning of Medals: A Study on Social Costs and Benefits of National Success in Olympic Sports

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Perils of Olympic Sport

- “If fair play is on the ropes, it is representational sport, not money, which landed the hardest punch” (Guttmann, 1986)

- Medal struggle (“Cold War in sports”) involving:
  - Strong achievement orientation, more serious competition (Dunning, 1979)
  - Totalization: Upgrading of demands in international sport → systems mobilize and utilize more resources → over-valuation of success → higher dependence of athletes (coaches etc.) to system → incentives for illegal practices → upgrading of demands… (Heinilä, 1982)
  - Olympism & Nationalism (Hargreaves, 1986, 1992)

- Despite end of Cold War: continuing / increasing state intervention → “sporting étatisme”, “convergence of systems”, “sporting global arms race” (Allison & Monington, 2002; Beamish & Ritchie, 2006; de Bosscher et al., 2008)
Current issues in (German) Olympic sport:
- Doping history in Western Germany (Spitzer, 2013)
- Youth / children’s sport (“Elite Schools”; Emrich & Prohl, 2009)
- Funding system: amount, transparency, criteria (focus on medal index)

Questions
- How important is the Olympic medal index for the population?
- Which means are accepted for international success?
- Does that reveal attitudes such as nationalism, authoritarianism? (Prohl, 2012)

Legitimization: expected benefits (Grix & Carmichael, 2012):
- international representation and prestige
- national identity, ‘feel-good factor’
- role-models, inspiring participation

Are these benefits realized through medal success? (Breuer & Hallmann, 2011; Denham, 2010; Dóczi, 2012; Elling et al., 2012; van Hilvoorde et al., 2010)
Research design

- Questionnaire:
  - Importance and interpretation of medal index
  - Expectations concerning athletes’ success, fairness etc.
  - Attitudes towards public funding and role of the state
  - Identification, representation, role-model function
  - Political attitudes: national pride, nationalism, authoritarianism

- Survey: online and in written form (self-administered); May to December 2012; N=899

- Sample: younger age groups and high educational levels slightly over-represented, high sports participation
51.3% consider it as important or very important that Germany wins as many Olympic medals as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It is (“very” or “rather”) important that athletes...</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...win medals.</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...are a good example for younger athletes.</td>
<td>96.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...stick to the principles of fair play.</td>
<td>97.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...achieve there results without doping.</td>
<td>97.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athletes should...</th>
<th>Std. dev.</th>
<th>Mean (1=disagree, 5=agree)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...have fun in competitions and training.</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...not neglect school and vocational education.</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...take their time for family and friends.</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...concentrate on sports only.</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...subject everything to success.</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>2.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results:
What affects the desire for medals?

- Medals more important with lower education; low and high age groups

### Importance of German Medals

(1=completely unimportant, 5=very important)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Level</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>&lt;26 years</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>26 to 65 years</td>
<td>~3.2</td>
<td>~1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>&gt;65 years</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Importance of medals goes along with believe in positive image

### A country in a high rank of the medal index...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Std. dev.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Corr. with Medals Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>...is likeable.</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>.264*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...is highly regarded in the whole world.</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>.240*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...is neither better nor worse than others.</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>-.183*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...is not necessarily better off economically.</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>-.144*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: Which attitudes correlate with desire for medals?

- Moderate, but systematic correlations between desire for medals and
  - limited understanding of fair play, instrumentalizing athletes for success, ignoring current problems in sport
  - nationalistic and authoritarian attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes on elite-sport and socio-political attitudes</th>
<th>Correlation with Importance of German Medals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unfairness (e.g. “In elite sport, you may commit minor infringements the referee doesn’t see.”)</td>
<td>.285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentalization (e.g. “I expect from athletes that they subject anything to success.”)</td>
<td>.355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of Problems (Considering doping, corruption etc. as current threats to sport)</td>
<td>-.252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarianism (e.g. “The most important personal quality is obedience to authorities.”)</td>
<td>.293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism (e.g. “If only one country should rule the world, Germany would do better than any other.”)</td>
<td>.334</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results: Benefits?

- National Identity:
  - People do identify with the country‘s athletes
  - Medal success does increase national pride - but only among those who felt proud before (see also van Hilvoorde et al., 2010; Elling et al., 2012)

- Role Models:
  - High expectations concerning achievement and values
  - Fulfilled for achievement only, but not concerning fair-play, doping etc

- Representation:
  - Success does not necessarily lead to admiration, but also raises suspicion
  - Other aspects (hosting, fairness etc.) are equally (or even more?) important for people‘s judgements
4. Summary & Discussion

− Medals are important for many, sporting values are important for (almost) all.
− Sporting values - desire for “ideal” Olympic sport?
− Attitudes corresponding with medal index orientation:
  • Weak, but significant tendencies to limited (formal) understanding of fair play, ignoring problems of sport, nationalism / authoritarianism
  • But mostly banal or “empty” nationalism (Reicher, 2013): illegal and unfair practices are condemned – but the competition itself is not perceived critically!

− Further research: socio-political effects?
  • Role models?
  • Representation? (from an international perspective)
Thank you for your attention!


References


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