The Democratization of Athletes:
What if athletes determined who governed their sports?

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“It is difficult to find anything else in the world quite so badly governed as international sport” (Sunder Katwala, 2000)

• Organizational problems:
  – lack of equitable representation and democratized governance in sport organizations;
  – corruption and problems with financial transparency and accountability in sport organizations;

• Consequence (some examples):
  – problems with the integrity of sport (doping, gambling and match fixing)
  – problems with athlete health, safety, and violence control;
  – problems with labour relations, team selection, and other aspects of due process for athletes; and
  – problems of athlete maltreatment and child protection in sport
The problem?

• Athletes who are not able to determine the form and circumstances of their participation (when, where, how often, etc.)

• Why?
  – precarious employment
  – lack of organization
  – control ceded to others through establishment of a culture of control
  – normalization of authoritarian styles of leadership and management
It wasn’t always like that….

• Jan Eisenhardt
• Pro ice hockey players / ‘journeymen’
• *Chariots of Fire* – coach hired by the athlete

• Tennis
• Golf
Toward a culture of control...

- Reserve clause
- Militaristic styles of coaching
- Binding contracts
- Precarious work
- Pro athletes bought, sold, traded, drafted

- Authoritarian style filters down to lowest levels of sport / young athletes enculturated (Eliasson, 2013)
Consequences?

• “Sports... take place in a sort of separate [autonomous] sphere, detached from normal rules and regulations in society” (Hans Bruyninckx, 2011)

• Athletes enjoy fewer human rights than other citizens:
  – pro athletes exempt from rights that protect employees in other settings (e.g., right to choose where you work), including workplace health and safety regulations
  – non-pro athletes (Canadian national team case) have contracts with Sport Canada, COC, and ~sponsors – but Government of Canada denies them status as employees – thus employee rights
National team example:

• In discussion, and viewing contracts, here are a few of the rights identified and **not** enjoyed by one of Canada’s top athletes:

• Right to:
  – free speech and expression
  – privacy
  – health privacy
  – dignity & ownership of representation
  – to make a living
  – clarity of contractual obligations
  – due process when penalized for social media *faux pas*
Social media (freedom of expression?)

The IOC (and COC/USOC) “encourages” accredited athletes to post social media:

– “first person, diary-style format”
– should not take on the role of journalist
– can’t report on competition
– can’t disclose information about people, organizations
– no vulgar words or obscene words/images
Athletes

• some have ‘drunk the kool aid’ -- completely obedient and accepting of the system
  – ‘Stockholm syndrome’

• most have concerns, to a greater or lesser extent, about their status and rights as an elite or professional athlete
"The game belongs to those who play"

*(Globe & Mail editorial, August 2, 2011)*

- NFL 1982 strike: booklet distributed to players by NFLPA:
  - “Q. Why a Percentage of the Gross? [55%]
    A. Because We Are the Game”

[over 30 years later....]

- 2013: Troy Polamalu (NFL: Pittsburgh):
  - “There’s rule changes every year. I do wish, however, that the NFL did have a voice from the players’ side, whether it’s our players’ union president, or team captains, or our executive committee on the players’ side. Because we’re the guys that realize the risk, we’re the guys on the field.”
Representation and democratization

Who represents the participants?
How well are they represented?
Do participants have any say in who represents them?

- Systems of athlete representation have basically served to make it look as if there is participation, while silencing and marginalizing the athlete rep(s) in a minority position (we may let you speak, but we won’t necessarily listen to you)
Due process

• Anemic unions and player associations
• Non-pro athletes (almost) entirely without representation
  – only venues for grievance and representation are ICAS, and (e.g.) SDRCC – but these only come into play if/when an athlete decides to protest unjust treatment
  – only with appropriate policies and guidelines regarding due process; and with appropriate complaint and hearing mechanisms that disqualify sanctions against the complainant, will athletes receive due process

[it’s not a privilege to play if others are making $$$ from your participation]
Thibault, et al. (2010): *JSP&P*

“If IFs aspire to... a deliberative democratic system of governance... then a public arena must be created and sustained where citizens most affected by international sport policy(ies)... would engage in a process of thoughtful interaction and opinion-formation. These deliberations would require IF and IOC officials to provide a rational justification for their decisions to athletes and provide a space for athletes to openly challenge decisions in future deliberations. Ultimately, the IOC and/or IFs’ adhering to a deliberative democratic system of governance would enhance their legitimacy as decisions would reflect [athletes’] values, interests, and viewpoints rather than reflecting the perceived administrative needs and values.”
“...if sporting bodies wanted to take reform seriously, then the best first step would be for them to collaborate on creating an open and transparent multi-stakeholder forum on good sporting governance”....

[reforms] “will have to be inclusive – giving sport’s key stakeholders [athletes] a central role in the reform and decision making processes seeking to reconcile their vital interests on the basis of the values of sport as a whole”
Sport governance

Nobody owns sport!

Sport is a cultural commons...

IFs, MSOs, NSO/NGB executives are the stewards of sports – the trustees: “entrusted by players, their families, and the fans of the sport with the governance of an activity that, it should be noted, anyone may play without reference to them”

In pro sports, “owners” may own a team, a stadium; but they do not own the players (despite what they think) and they do not own the sport.

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Traditional solutions or radical solutions?

• Traditional:
  – government intervention (primarily Europe)
  – “naming and shaming” – through research, good investigative journalism, growing student and athlete awareness that “it doesn’t have to be this way – we can make a difference”
  – involvement of NGOs such as T.I., Play the Game (the Cologne Consensus), One World Trust, etc.
  – introduction of an integrity management framework (from law, business, CSR)

• Radical:
  – what if the players controlled the game?
Two-pronged approach to solutions:

The old solutions are the best, and even better with new technologies:

1) Keep investigating, naming and shaming all violations of due process and mal-governance in order to bring about reforms

2) Collective action by athletes – need to find a way to help athletes to achieve solidarity

Athletes are the precariat of sports:

... it is crucial for athletes (and recently retired athletes) to be involved in determining the form and circumstances of their participation – they are the only experts who really matter
Thank you!

Especially to our athlete informants...

TRY TO IMAGINE WHAT SPORTS WOULD LOOK LIKE IF THE PLAYERS CONTROLLED THE GAME...

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