When sport becomes a political tool

Is sport a means of establishing minority rights, or just a tool used by politicians?

By Karen Balling Radmer

We have all seen them – the images of top politicians decked out in expensive sports gear. Just as we have heard politicians speak about the need for their country to win more medals. Olympic success is, of course, a great thing for any nation – the fact that it does nothing practical to help society is deemed irrelevant.

Professor John Hoberman of Texas University has taken a closer look at the reasons why politicians use sport to deliver political messages and create feelings of national pride and success amongst citizens. He provides a number of examples to Play the game.

Top athletes symbolise strong will, he says. Both the American and Russian presidents like to be portrayed in sports gear on TV and in pictures. This sends out signals about strength of character and good health.

He cites the example of Norway, where politicians have predicted that ‘when we can beat the big countries in the winter games, we will also be able to hold our own in the European Union’, and Portugal, where politicians have announced that 400 million Euros is to be spent on the construction of ten stadiums to host football’s Euro 2004 and other events. This despite the fact that the nation is currently unable to meet EU economic targets, and is being forced to make major cutbacks in its public services.

John Hoberman points to what he sees as a lack of common sense amongst political leaders, many of whom appear unaware that sport has its limitations. Australia, for example, was so eager in its desire to see results that it came close to employing a former East German child-doper, Ekkart Arbeit, as a coach. The reason the idea was finally dropped was not his doping background, but revelations that he had been a spy for the East German secret police, the STASI.

According to John Hoberman politicians and journalists are not doing enough to shift the focus to areas where sport can make a real difference – namely, health and quality of life. False message of hope

When focus is finally placed on areas of sport other than results, misunderstandings can occur. After the Sydney Olympics, for example, native Australian Cathy Freeman became viewed as an icon by the international sports world – living proof that sport could be used as a means of political expression for oppressed peoples.

‘However, she is just a human being who has been used and misused as a symbol of a new era,’ says Colin Tatz, professor at the Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, University of New South Wales, Australia.

‘No one should think that her performance will lead to 150,000 little aboriginal girls getting up and taking up sport. The area where Kathy Freeman comes from still has no electricity, no sewage system, and suffers from huge health problems. The average lifespan for women is 55 years, for men it is 50. Kathy Freeman did not make a difference.’

After a grim narrative detailing how aboriginals have been subjected to every imaginable form of degradation by whites, how children have been forcibly removed to be ‘de-aboriginalised’ and how an entire people were nearly eradicated, Colin Tatz gives a number of examples of aboriginal athletes being afforded star status in his nation. Each time, he says, it has meant nothing for the rights of native people in society. They are still regarded as ‘slaves’ who are permitted to become stars for a period of time. If male athletes became too popular amongst white women, or if they in any way ‘stepped out of line’, he says, they were simply forced back into the wilderness.

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