Use sport as a political instrument for CHANGE IN SOCIETY

The President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, made the official opening speech at Play the Game 2007

by Maria Suurballe

“There is a close connection between sport and society, and reduced to its absolute essentials it is all about good governance. We should therefore make use of international sport movements as a strong political instrument for changes in our societies.”

Opening Play the Game 2007, the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grimsson, used his speech to put forward some personal considerations about how we can use sport as an instrument for social improvement, democracy and international understanding.

Illustrating his viewpoints, the President mentioned the Special Olympics, an international world event with seven thousand athletes from more than 140 countries, all of them intellectually disabled. As an International Board member of the Special Olympics Movement, the President visited the Games in China in October 2007.

Hope for China
It is known, that China suffers on an enormous scale from corruption and bad governance. With respect to human rights, hosting the Special Olympics was one of the strongest signals that China has sent.

“It made us in the Special Olympic Board conclude that we were responsible not just for an international remarkable sporting event, but also for helping China to get out of the old system, to find a new framework, to face up to human rights and human responsibilities in a new way,” Mr. Grímsson said.

The President of China, Hu Jintao, took two days out of his programme to visit the games, talked to the people and thereby he sent a very strong human message that according to Grímsson gives hope for the future of human rights in China. Sport cannot be isolated from the rest of society in such a way that sport somehow becomes different from other social or business activity.

“To us it is a fundamental question not about sport but about our society, about who we are as a democracy and as a civil society. And it is a fundamental question when we are talking about governance or corruption within sport in different parts of the world,” the Icelandic President stated in his speech.

“So the struggle of the campaign against corruption in sport is fundamentally a campaign for good governance in our societies and in the rest of the world,” Mr. Grímsson concluded.

The Icelandic example
According to the Icelandic President, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, sport is an excellent tool to make changes in our societies.

According to President Grímsson, there are many obvious reasons for coming to Iceland and participate in a conference on ethical values and good governance in sports: Iceland is at the top of the global list of corruption free sports nations in the world, and the Icelanders work hard to encourage positive values in sport.

“Since the era of the Vikings, sport has always been an integral part of how the Icelanders see themselves and how they define their role, not just as a society, but also as members of the international community,” Grímsson said.

National Icelandic drug campaign
As for the Icelanders, there is no real difference between good governance in sport and the campaign for good governance in their society.

As an example of Iceland’s intentions on this issue, the President mentioned the 2006 national campaign against drugs. It was carried out as a drug prevention day at the national level with sports movements and youth movements working together in a united campaign.

Scientific evidence from Icelandic research shows that there are three elements that carry the strongest messages in the campaign against drugs, and one of them is participation in sport. The other two are spending at least an hour a day with your families, and the third one is waiting until seventeen or eighteen to drink alcohol or smoke tobacco.

“If these three things go together, there is less than one percent chance that the youth will suffer from drug abuse later in his or her life,” Mr. Grímsson said.

“I fundamentally believe that the connection between society and sport is so integrated that you can’t really reform the sports movements without having a positive impact or even reforming the societies to some extent.”

“I believe the President of Iceland was just superb, and I wish that the Prime Minister of Canada was half as eloquent and committed to young people, to sport and to their health as he is”.

Laura Robinson, Sports Journalist, Canada.
In 2007, the Icelandic Youth Association (UMFI) could celebrate its 100 anniversary. As part of the centenary celebrations, UMFI invited Play the Game to Iceland, and the country made many contributions to the conference experience.

**Facts about UMFI**

- UMFI was founded in 1907 as a national association for local youth associations in Iceland.
- UMFI’s objective is to cultivate the people and the country. In addition to cultivating the best in every individual, the organisation aims to promote Icelandic language and culture and protect the country’s natural environment.
- UMFI’s slogan is “Everything for Iceland”, and historically the organisations’ members have cultivated forests, built swimming pools and meeting halls, constructed sports facilities and secondary schools and built a culture of public debate.
- UMFI covers a total of 263 associations with approximately 81,000 members.
- Today, member associations include sports clubs, amateur theatre clubs, environmental programmes and youth associations.
- From 1992 UMFI has organised National Youth Sports Meetings that are now held every year.

“*And I did get the chance to walk on ice, under falling snow and howling wind and get thoroughly wet in a way only a Viking could understand*.”

Charles Nyende, Journalist at Nation Media Group, Kenya.
The geyser Strokkur erupts very reliably every 5-10 minutes, hurling boiling water to heights of up to 20 metres (70ft).

The Gulfoss waterfall is one of Iceland’s biggest attractions. Photo: Maria Suurballe

Delegates visit Alpingi at Thingvellir where the Icelanders founded a parliamentary institution in the year 930.

Impression from down-town Reykjavik

Smiles at the opening session

**Icelanders wrestle in their own way**

by Kirsten Sparre

The only true Icelandic national sport, Glima, has now become a competitive sport with official tournaments. Courtesy of the Icelandic Glima Association

**The one truly Icelandic national sport is a type of wrestling known as glima. After decades of neglect, glima has been enjoying a major revival in popularity, and on the opening day of the conference, Play the Game delegates were given an introduction to the fascinating sport.**

Glima wrestlers keep a firm grasp on a harness which is fastened around each contestant’s waist and thighs. No other grips are permitted. Tricks are then applied with the body and feet and together with bends, jerks and swings, the aim is to upset the opponent’s balance and knock him to the ground. A fall is the end of the contest.

There are eight basic tricks in Glima which can be executed in many different ways. Considerable skill is also required. It is not enough to be big and strong and it is not uncommon to see small but skilful wrestlers throwing much heavier adversaries by the use of cleverly performed tricks.

During the last few centuries, glima was practised in schools, at fishing camps and as recreation on festive occasions such as wedding parties. People also used to enjoy a match or two after church.

In the beginning of the 20th century, glima changed from being a popular pastime to becoming a competitive sport with regulations and official tournaments. The first Icelandic glima championship was held in 1906.

In 1990’s, the age of glima contestants was lowered and women were permitted to take part. Teenagers were allowed to wrestle but had to do it on mattresses to avoid injury.

During the same period, the Glima Association re-introduced glima to elementary schools all over the country. The campaign was a success and led to more contestants in wrestling competitions, especially amongst young people.

Source: Jon M. Ivarsson: Traditional Icelanding wrestling enjoys a revival in popularity, Icelandic Review

“It was an honour to be there and a pleasure to meet so many interesting and pleasant people.”

George Springborg, Streetfootball World, Germany.
The benefits of sport extend past the exercise

A sociology professor from Iceland sees clear links between participation in sport and the prevention of substance abuse

by Michael Herborn

Children can benefit enormously from sport, argues Icelandic sociology professor, Thorulfur Thorlindsson. The physical and mental benefits of sport extend past the exercise and can help prevent doping and reduce smoking amongst young people.

Thorlindsson, a professor of Sociology at the University of Iceland, has spent decades researching the impact of sport on Icelandic society, and has found the physical and mental benefits of sport to be far stronger than just exercise.

His research has shown that playing sport on a regular basis is one of the three key factors in stopping children from becoming involved in doping. The other two are quality time with one's family and abstaining from alcohol until the late teenage years.

Sport prevents substance abuse

While the problem of doping in sport has received much attention in the press, doping outside of sport is in fact a more widespread problem in Iceland, says Thorlindsson.

“For adolescents, the use of steroids is slightly more common among those who do not take part in organised sport in Iceland. Steroids are a bigger problem outside sport than inside sport.”

One of the reasons for this is that while sports coaches teach children about the dangers of doping, very little education or awareness of the problem exists outside of this context. This makes it much harder to deal with steroid abuse outside of sport, accounting for the difference between user levels.

The benefits are not limited to persuading children not to use steroids. Research carried out by Thorlindsson showed a negative correlation between sport and the use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs.

“Sport participation among young people played a key role in reducing smoking in Iceland,” believes Thorlindsson, who has also found a linear relation between smoking and sports participation among adults, with more sport meaning less smoking.

No character building

However, contrary to received wisdom, Thorlindsson’s research has not shown that sport builds character.

“Several research projects I have done over time have never supported this. Sport reveals character in many ways and sport produces characters in many ways with the help of media.”

“This is what makes sport a special institution. Sport is about values, it is about norms. That is what defines the system of sport.”

Implicit in that description of sport is the role sport plays in society in general, offering a medium for communities to come together.

“Sport is a wonderful thing to break the isolation of the self,” says Thorlindsson. “Sport provides people with a shared focus and a shared world.”

Sport in the right context

However, it must be the right kind of sport. When sport is something children are forced to do by adults, the element of play is missing, which is essential for keeping people interested in sport.

“We must guard against complacency and assume that sport in all contexts is good.”

“We have taken competition to an extreme level when it comes to sport,” warns Thorlindsson. “The culture, the value, the society that they live in, has undermined some of the athletes.”

Nonetheless, sport played for enjoyment by children has proved to be an important weapon in the fight against doping in Iceland, as well reinforcing positive norms and values in society as a whole.
LazyTown teaches kids to pick
FRUIT OVER CHOCOLATE

by Maria Suurballe

The Icelandic fitness champion, filmmaker and creator of LazyTown, Magnús Scheving, has convinced children around the world to pick fruit and water instead of chocolate and soda water. The recipe is the idea of LazyTown, the ingredients are a combination of play and positive stimulus.

For more than ten years, Magnús Scheving has literally jumped and hopped around in Icelandic schools, and he has made handstands and back handsprings in all the kindergartens of the saga island. All in order to teach Icelandic kids and their families a more healthy and active lifestyle.

Children run, they jump, they bend, and they move without thinking about it. “It is not necessary to ask children to move, because they do it anyway. But I wanted to do something about the fact that there were no role models for children between 4 and 7 years of age”, Scheving told delegates at Play the Game 2007.

Magnús Scheving created Lazy Town in response to his experiences from travelling around the world meeting kids and parents and answering the same questions about exercise and nutrition for children wherever he was. LazyTown was to become a tool that parents could use to raise healthy kids and that would also inspire the kids themselves to make healthy choices. Founded in 1995 in Reykjavik, it started with a book, later on came a cooking book, a musical and a TV series. Today LazyTown also runs a radio station, and toys, accessories, music and DVD’s are produced in its name and sold all over the world.

The Energy Campaign Project

Obesity amongst children is an increasing health problem in the Nordic countries, and LazyTown uses entertainment as a method to encourage children in their everyday lives.

In 2003, Lazy Town launched the national Energy Campaign Project that was a forerunner for the first television episodes of Lazy Town. As a basis for the campaign, every child aged 4-7 in Iceland received a free book in which they could register activities, food and drink with the help of stickers.

The parents were invited to offer a contract to their kids and reward healthy choices of food and drinks throughout one month. In the account book, sweets and soda water were given minus points while fruit and vegetables, the so-called “SportCandies”, gave plus in the account.

The results were amazing. Families changed their food habits and sales of fruits and vegetables rose by 22 per cent. The sale of soda water on the other hand decreased by 16 per cent throughout the country. Participation rates were unbelievable, as almost a hundred per cent of the kids aged 4-7 took part in the campaign.

Children in more than 100 countries worldwide love Sportacus from Iceland

The TV series can be seen in more than 100 countries worldwide.

The series is produced in one of the most advanced High Definition Virtual Cinematography studios in the world, and the studio is based in Gardabaer, Iceland.

In LazyTown television can actually be turned into a part of the solution to children’s obesity and lack of physical activity, and the show has won BAFTA awards and been nominated for an EMMY.

Magnús Scheving founder and creator of Lazy Town, received the Nordic Public Health Prize in 2004 for his innovative work on motivating children to lead a healthy lifestyle.

Lazy Town homepage: www.lazytown.com

Photo: LazyTown

by Maria Suurballe