

2009 Speech-Sport's Institutions: Corrupting the meaning of sport

As a two-time Olympic swimmer I know sport can work for peace and human rights. Unfortunately, the reality is that leaders and institutions in elite sport are corrupting its true power. For 20 years I have experienced sport's ability to positively change lives, but it is a continuous battle to preserve its true meaning. Whether it's the fight against doping, the struggle for athlete's rights, or upholding the Olympic values, I believe that preserving the benefits of sport will not only serve humankind, but the integrity and meaning of sport itself.

Before I start however, I think I need to describe what I believe is the meaning of sport for I think it encompasses many things. This week we will learn about and discuss many of the positive values of sport. From its foundations of fair play, including anti-doping, to its teachings of good sportsmanship and conflict resolution, to its benefits of improved health, fitness and psycho-social development to its promises of upholding human rights and promoting peace. This is what I believe are the true values or meaning of sport.

Today, I am here to share my experience as an Olympic athlete turned human rights lawyer who has made it my mission to hold accountable the men and women who have taken our sports hostage. I have dedicated my life to promoting the benefits of swimming and sport to children in developing countries having worked in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Kenya as well as Canada, Australia and the US. Yet I fear that my work, and the work of many athletes around the world, is being undermined by those in sports elite corridors of power.

In some areas our Sport's Institutions do support some of the good benefits of sport. Some governments and federations work to promote fitness, fund elite sport, and support sport and play in developing countries. However, more often than not, they fail us, especially at the top. Made up of bureaucrats living off the work and success of athletes,

there is no incentive to change the current path we are on: the financial growth of sports at ANY COST. The result is that these institutions continually, turn a blind eye to things like doping and match fixing, and undermine the core values that sport could be promoting.

Let me give you a current example of what I mean. In March of this year, South Africa denied the Dalai Lama a visa to attend a peace conference linked to the 2010 Football World Cup, which the country is hosting. The conference was intended to discuss football's role in fighting racism and xenophobia, but after the Dalai Lama was denied a visa, Desmond Tutu and other peace activists pulled out. However, we all know why his visa was denied. China is one of South Africa's major trading partners. Archbishop Tutu stated with dismay, "We are shamelessly succumbing to Chinese pressure. I feel deeply distressed and ashamed."

This was an opportunity for football to help fight racism and xenophobia, lost because our sports and political leaders succumbed to pressure from the Chinese government. Last summer, I was similarly involved with another fight to utilize the power of sport to promote peace and human rights heading into the Beijing Olympic Games through an organization called Team Darfur. Through my work with Team Darfur, I used sport as a platform for action. Our goal was to hold the IOC and the Chinese government accountable for the global promises they made when they were awarded they OG, to uphold the Olympic values of peace and human dignity.

The other distinct way that I have utilized sport to promote human rights is by addressing the actual human rights within sports such as gender equality or access to sports for youth or people with disabilities. This I do through sport for development initiatives like Right To Play. I will go into more detail in a moment about these organizations and my

roles, and while both are very different approaches, both organizations use the power of sport to positively change lives, promote development and encourage peace.

I will start with Team Darfur. Last year I became an athlete ambassador and then a board member for the organization. I was on the front lines last year of a campaign leading up to the Olympics in Beijing whereby Team Darfur aimed to educate the global public about the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. Through the voice of elite athletes, Team Darfur put international pressure on Sudan, the Chinese Government, and the IOC to uphold the Olympic values of peace and human dignity.

As an athlete ambassador, I took my role very seriously. Along with co-founder and Olympic speed skating champion Joey Cheek, I met with UN officials and government representatives to advocate for our position. While many supported our efforts they felt they could do little to hold the Chinese government to task. Despite the fact that the tools in our arsenal were their very own documents: The Olympic Charter and the Olympic Truce, we were dismissed by the IOC and the Chinese government.

So what do I mean by their own documents? Well the Olympic values are laid out in the Olympic Charter, which states that the goal of Olympism is to place, "sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity." But the Charter is not the only place where such lofty goals are noted. Of the listed objectives of FIFA one is "to improve the game of football constantly and promote it globally in the light of its unifying, educational, cultural and humanitarian values, particularly through youth and development programmes; and to promote friendly relations in society for humanitarian objectives."

The Olympic truce is equally as commanding and one Olympic Truce Factsheet states, "In this third millennium, the IOC is more convinced than ever of the positive role that sport can, and must, play as a catalyst in our society. It unites and teaches about respect and tolerance, two values that are essential in today's world." At the United Nations level, the Chinese government introduced a resolution to the General assembly in October 2007 entitled, Building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal. Still, no one but a handful of athletes and human rights activists did anything to make those initiatives come alive. Whether they pertained to Darfur or to human rights abuses in China. The IOC and the world's governments backed down from their claimed values of peace and human rights in the face political and financial pressures from the Chinese government.

Despite the fact that we athletes were merely protecting the EXACT Olympic values that the IOC uses to SELL the Olympic Games to corporate sponsors-we were told "to shut up or go home". These sports institutions are not accountable to anyone, least of all the athletes who make their existence possible. When we urged accountability we were met with silence and fear.

This room is filled with some of the greatest critics of the OG and the IOC. I was 17 when Andrew Jennings' first book came out about the IOC. I was about to compete in my first Olympics in Barcelona and I admit, I did not read the book. In fact, it wasn't until I retired from swimming in 2000 that I finally had the courage to read his books. I didn't want anything to sway my dreams of Olympic glory. 17 years later and I am now at the doorstep of changing what my Olympic dreams really mean.

While there are great writers and activists who have laid out the need to reframe the Olympic Games, I am not quite ready to give up the fight to reform the Olympics. I believe we can use the Olympic ideals and framework to prosecute sports leaders in the court of

public opinion and force reform. Right now there are athletes who have chosen to stand up against very powerful Sport's Institutions and their leaders in the face of threats and coercion. But I believe the day for reform and change has come, for if it doesn't the value, both emotional and financial, of the Olympic Games will cease to exist. We as athletes, must fight to protect its core FOUNDING VALUES. I believe that the athletes and our national level institutions have the power to truly turn the tide, especially with the support of the media.

And there is precedent for this type of leadership. One area where athlete leadership is flourishing is through sport for development programs such as Right To Play. RTP was founded by an Olympic athlete, speed skater, Johan Olav Koss. It is an athlete driven organization without which, the ability to exist would be lessened substantially. For 6 years I have advocated for Right To Play an international humanitarian organization that uses sport and play programs to improve health, develop life skills, and foster peace for children and communities in disadvantaged areas of the world.

In 2005 I funded my own trip to Peshawar Pakistan. I met with coaches, teachers and students who were all benefiting from Right To Play sponsored sport and play programs, but the road to get to this type of success was not easy. When the sport programs first started in one Afghan refugee school all the parents pulled their children out of school. But one coach who was a teacher in the school persevered. She went door to door talking to parents, explaining why these programs were not an affront to their religion and how they would encourage conflict resolution and social development for their children. She won. The school tripled in enrollment and now parents from areas far from the school are clamoring to have their children enrolled. One 8 year old student told me that his life is better now. He no longer fights with his siblings and he listens to his teachers since he now plays sports.

Teachers say the students concentrate better and there is actual real laughter and joy from refugee children who have spent their lives living in refugee camps and fleeing war. While many of these benefits are hard to quantify, this community is seeing positive changes to the lives of its children since the introduction of sport. This is the power we need to harness, this and the power of athletes to lead the change.

In preparation for this conference I read Chris Shaw's book "Five Ring Circus". I loved it, but it made me very sad as I grapple with how to effect change and justify my life, which is so wholly encompassed by the Olympics and the Olympic values. Several years ago I was very involved as a volunteer with New York City's bid for the 2012 Olympic Games. I was quite hesitant to get involved knowing what I knew about the bid processes, however I felt that my involvement was positive. I spoke to over 300 New York City school kids about the role of sport in resolving conflict and promoting peace. However, I there is something that Mr. Shaw wrote that rings true. He writes, "In addition to the mainstream media, the very athletes themselves and all the special interest groups feeding on the Games are too locked on to the feeding from the Olympic trough to even contemplate changing the structure."

I was 17 when I became an Olympian. That was 17 years ago and everything in between, everything I am and have experienced I must put in the context of the Olympics. Sport, and the Olympics in particular, has enormous power to transform lives. Being an Olympian gives me a certain prestige that is hard to quantify. I worked very hard to be a great athlete, but in turn, I have benefited greatly. Everyday my life gets better; it is filled with exciting travel, adventure, and the chance to meet, influence and listen to people from all over the world. Because of my Olympic feats, I have become an ambassador for my country, my sport and the values of the Olympic Games.

Being an Olympian is an honour bestowed on very few people and one I have learned to appreciate far past my disappointment at finishing sixth in Barcelona or 14th in Atlanta. If I were not an Olympian, many of my greatest accomplishments outside the pool would never have been realized. Were I not an Olympian, I would not be speaking to you today. My ability to represent Team Darfur would be minimized. It is at conferences like this, on television and radio shows and in newspapers around the world that I am able to discuss how, we as a sporting collective, must hold sports institutions accountable for failing on their global promises to uphold the Olympic values of peace and human dignity.

While there are a great many athletes working for change, as Mr. Shaw has written, there still exists a "what's in it for me" attitude but I like to believe that that is changing. While each athlete has a choice to do with their status as they chose, many give back because of what they have gotten from sport, while others see the economic advantage of sports entrepreneurship. From Athletes for HOPE to charity organizations, athletes are realizing the benefits not just in terms of feeling good but for their careers out of the pool and off the field.

Still, we athletes must also do a better job of promoting the benefits that accrue to a country or society as a whole when an athlete wins gold or better still, when an athlete competes. For almost 10 years I received funding from the Canadian Government to pursue my career as an elite swimmer. I never won Olympic gold, but I like to think that Canada benefited from their investment. As a comparison, I also received a stipend from the Canadian Government for my career in international development. Through a program called the Youth Employment Strategy I was employed for a year abroad as a way for Canada to promote its Canada's foreign policy goals. Through both these programs, I benefited because I pursued both my dreams of being an Olympian and a human rights

lawyer, but I also like to think that Canada benefited. I have emerged from these opportunities as an ambassador for the values of our country. I am a hard working, high achieving person who seeks to promote human rights and peace. Would I have done that without Canada's support? I don't know.

Sport has the power to change lives, I have seen it first hand in my own life as well as around the developing world. Unfortunately, its power hangs in the balance with rulers who are corrupting its purity. I believe we are at the precipice. Beijing was not the final stand and the pressure for change from outside groups will continue to mount in Vancouver and London. Sport is an asset for the common good, but it will take athlete's demands for change to preserve its benefits for humankind.

One final word on what I think the future holds if we reclaim the good in sport in lieu for its gargantuan growth. If no one but the swimmers had been in the Water Cube in Beijing to see Michael Phelps swim last summer, it still would have been the greatest Olympic feat in history. It still would have been awe-inspiring and started the dreams of new young swimmers all over the world to take to the pool. The athletes will still compete and dream of Olympic glory even if the intense media coverage leaves, if the fancy Olympic villages are scaled back, if the free gear is taken away. Because that is not why we dream of competing in the Olympic Games. We dream because we want to be measured as the best in the world at something, to be our very best, and to improve ourselves and our lives through sport. And despite trying to destroy this, the good news is that no sports institution can take that away from us.