The risks of the Youth Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT

The decision to create a Youth Olympic Games, with the first edition to be held in Singapore in 2010, creates opportunities for the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the international sport federations to promote positive values in a sustainable way. However, the organisation and staging of the Games entails serious risks of creating unintended and undesirable side effects that could threaten the success of the event or even lead to the self-destruction of the current sports system. Among those examined are 1) the practical implications of trying to integrate value educational activities with high-performance sport competition, 2) the exacerbation of negative trends in international sport such as doping and over-commercialisation, 3) the difficulties of designing the competition programme of the Games and limiting the number of participants, 4) issues related to the mass media and hosting cities, and 5) the long-term effects on the senior Olympic Games and international sports. Accepting that the Games will take place, the author recommends that the organisers find creative concepts to address the issues raised and that research be conducted so that lessons for preparation of future editions can be learned.

A good idea raises difficult questions

An international initiative to introduce children and youths to sport and the values of fair competition is basically an idea worth supporting, especially if it is aimed at sustainability. There are various reasons that suggest a special effort to promote sustainable ties of young people to sport and its basic organisations. These include social change, changing attitudes and values, new consumer habits, changes in the world of leisure time, and, not least, a profound demographic change in the world’s population.

There are several possibilities for the realisation of this aim. The plan to create an Youth Olympic Games, with the first edition to be held in Singapore in 2010, is a clear decision in favour of a global measure. However, it appears to have been taken without considering the alternatives of establishing continental measures or strengthening national structures. This decision presents a number of serious risks for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Olympic Movement and the sports it comprises.

An essential element and aim of the planned Youth Olympic Games is the idea of
an Olympic education, which is mainly about the teaching of values. If this is the case, then the first question to be answered is: what relationship will there be between the activities related to this value education and the sports competition?

The intended success of the project seems rather unlikely because of the difficulties of finding satisfactory solutions to the issues this question raises. These start with the fact that the teaching of values must not only take into account people and mentalities, but it must also focus on existing structures or structures to be changed.

Then there are the practical issues. It is intended that the Youth Olympic Games will be organised in partnership with the media and commercial sponsors. These, however, will hardly be enthusiastic about an education of values. The interest of the audience for top sports, and hence the interest of the paying partners, is primarily on the aspects of the competition: the performances of the athletes, excitement and entertainment. Then there is the problem of timing, as the participants in these Games will primarily be students integrated into the public school system. If you really want the dual career of study and serious sport to be successful, you have to coordinate the date of the Games with all the holiday calendars worldwide. For a start, this seems hardly possible. But even if you could make it so the Games take place in the summer holidays of most of the athletes, the appeal to the youth audience, the target of these Games, will be limited due to the fact that the majority of them would also be on holiday themselves. With that said, we have to consider whether the new Games are really going to be attractive to the mass media and commercial partners.

Unintended consequences

But the issues are even wider than the financial success of the Games and, despite the IOC’s good intentions at the root of project, it is very likely that unintended consequences and uncontrollable side effects will occur. For example, we must take a very close look at the international sports calendar and consider how the addition of a new major event like the Games will create burdens or threaten various stakeholders and their interests. Moreover, we have to consider that for quite some time there have been aspects and processes in international high-performance sport that represent existential dangers to sport and its organisations. These include the problem of doping, excessive commercialisation, the permanent threat to the resources required by athletes, the increase of fraud and violence. All could be exacerbated by major changes in the structure of the sport system. In the process of planning the future Olympic Youth Games, the IOC has to consider the question: what is the potential damage to the reputation of the whole Olympic movement when the first cases of doping or of “sports cripples” occur in the context of these Games?

The question of quality will be decisive

The most important question in respect to the introduction of Youth Olympic Games will be related to the quality that distinguishes the event. Again, one has to differentiate between contents related to sport and contents not related to it and then answer the question of the nature of the relationship between the two.

If social meetings, conversations and intercultural understanding are to be the focus and the sports competitions are to be only the frame for these to take place, then the Games could be a desirable addition. But considering the interests of young people between 14 and 18 years old, this seems highly unlikely. Those taking part will by definition be highly motivated by performance. They will have already had to prove themselves successful in competitions at local, regional and national level, and they will have certainly set demanding goals for themselves in their sport. Will they be inclined to
put that to a position of secondary importance once they arrive in Singapore?

If, on the other hand, sport is to have priority within the Games, the question of the contents of the sport comes up. In this case there are two possibilities. Either one intentionally offers those disciplines that have so far not been part of the Olympic programme or one offers the same sports disciplines currently offered to the senior competitors in the Olympic Games.

If the first possibility is chosen, the so-called youth trend sports will dominate and this situation will naturally lead to resistance from the international federations, as they would be endangering their own future by their support for the Games. If the second possibility is chosen, the Games will inevitably become a copy of the adult Games and hence hardly an innovation. This could be moderated if the international federations selected disciplines not currently part of the adult Games - in the case of athletics, for example, the 300m instead of the 400m, mixed relays, etc. - but the innovative value would still be extremely low.

If non-Olympic sports become the central contents there will be the danger that the Games will become a merely a market forum for new sports activities and new sports equipment. One has to work on the assumption that spectacular innovations will be invented from Olympiad to Olympiad and then displayed at the Games. In this way, the Olympic movement itself would be subject to the laws of fashion and characterised by quick change. Such a development would inevitably have the considerable negative effect of lessening the focus on the ideals of outstanding human performances and fair play.

**Idealistic limitation can have a boomerang effect**

The general conditions for the Youth Olympic Games revealed to date show that the IOC would like to set limitations in order to prevent developments that could be detrimental to future editions of the Games. The number of participants will be limited to 3,500, the commercialisation will be directed towards existing IOC partners and the multiplication of the mass media will be limited and controlled. These objectives are understandable, but with regard to the processes that usually take place in such complex systems, one has to point out that these intentions are barely realistic and therefore urgently need to be reconsidered.

If one follows the existing concept, then the international federations will have to decide how many age groups within the 14 to 18 year old range will be invited. Within the current guidelines, the federations will swiftly run into profound limitation problems. It could well be that in one sport 16-year-olds are invited, another sport will define the participants as the whole under 18 age group, and a third sport will welcome only 14-year-old pubescent youths. In each sport, all those age groups not invited will ask the question why they can take part in other international events but are not allowed to participate in the Youth Olympic Games. This pressure to legitimise the concept will make an adaptation necessary in the medium- and long-term if justice is to rule.

If one tries to solve the problem by allocating each sport the same number of athletes it would very quickly result in unfair conditions given the different nature of sports – especially team sports and individual sports. This would not only evoke the criticism of the international federations, it would also give each federation a considerable selection problem.

The question of justice also arises with regard to the disciplines that the respective federations select for their sports. If, for example, the IAAF were to decide, for whatever reasons, to have the long jump but not the high jump it would be extremely unfair
from the point of view of the athletes. Every track and field athlete would like to take part in the Youth Olympic Games, no matter which discipline he/she is active in. Consequently there will certainly have to be adaptations also in this respect in the medium- and long-term. The competition disciplines of youths and adults are already standardised, as both can practice the same disciplines in most countries on a regular basis. The only exceptions being if there are medical reasons or developmental-psychological reasons that generally prohibit such disciplines.

Supposing the international federations selected only those disciplines that have so far not taken place at the adult Games. These would take on an experimental character and the Games would become a laboratory for trying out new possibilities for the respective sports. But even in this case selection problems would come up. The question of which athletes could qualify for such Games with which performances would remain extremely difficult to answer. Correspondingly, there would be the danger that the respective disciplines would need to be introduced on a national and continental level so that athletes could experience them in top-level competition. But in this way youth athletics, for example, would be at risk of drifting apart from adult athletics and not acting as the desirable bridge towards the adult sport. If, however, the World Youth Athletics Championships were always held one year prior to Youth Olympic Games and became the place of selection for the Games, this would necessarily result in an elitism of Youth Olympic Games. Medals won at these Games would quickly obtain a similar importance as the medals strived for at the adult Games.

**The Youth Olympic Games will become a big event of the mass media**

The remarks concerning the limitation of the participants indicate that the Youth Olympic Games will be a big event in world sport. In the medium and long term they will have to span a period of two to three weeks if the foreseeable organisational problems are to be adequately solved. The number of participants could increase extremely dynamically if the age groups are separated from each other to allow fair competition. In some sports this would mean that for each age group there would have to be individual competition regulations and arrangements. The number of judges and coaching staff would have to be taken into account on the same scale as is usually the case for the adult Games, particularly as young athletes need very much more coaching, attention and care than is the case with adults. This is even more true if the pedagogically and social-politically important aim of meeting and building understanding is to be at the centre of the Games.

These remarks make it quite clear that Youth Olympic Games on this scale can probably only be hosted by cities that have applied for the adult Olympic Games or have already hosted global sport events. Infrastructure on a comparable scale would be needed, which is why the economic costs and risks for the hosting cities will be similar for both the youth and adult Games. Renouncing new construction while at same time maintaining certain standards for competition and accommodation venues will result in many countries and cities being excluded as hosts. This situation, however, is hardly compatible with the ideals of the Olympic movement.

It is also clear that the Youth Olympic Games will prove to be extremely important events from a national perspective, and they will necessarily be accompanied by the mass media. In the mid-term these Games will evoke interest with the audience, unless one defines these Games as something special by having them take place behind closed doors, i.e. no tickets are distributed. But this is highly improbable and cannot be justified to the public considering the importance and the outstanding sport performances that can be expected and the public investment that
will be required. Furthermore, the young athletes themselves will want to present their performances to the public. Hence, such Games will inevitably be broadcast live on television and will at least receive a continental media response. This leads to the situation that this event will obtain a medium to high acknowledgement in terms of marketing and will count among the world’s biggest sport events from an economic point of view. This could be desirable from the IOC viewpoint. But the IOC has to be aware of the danger that it is creating its own rival event, which might ultimately limit the significance of the adult Olympic Games rather than support it.

**There is no growth without undesired side-effects**

The question of market saturation in the entertainment industry must be considered. Some tendencies indicate that worldwide saturation limits in the field of leisure time and entertainment have already been reached. Therefore the question arises as to whether major sport events are also affected. This primarily depends on the relationship of sport to other cultural areas in our society. The question if a further expansion of sport is desirable, can be answered differently from society to society. Already today the effects on the international federations due to a public success of the Youth Olympic Games can, however, be described in a more detailed way. Each strengthening of a big global sport event like the Games inevitably leads to a reduction of interest in the individual sports they comprise. For some time already it has been possible to see that the existence of some Olympic sports is dependent on the financial aid coming from the IOC. This problematic development would be accelerated by the introduction of the Youth Olympic Games.

For many sports, the Youth Olympic Games can not, or can only to a very limited extent, be justified on the basis of training theory, medical and developmental-psychological reasons. An Olympic competition inescapably leads to athletes preparing for such Games with enormous amounts of intense training. This will lead to an earlier age of high performance in most of the Olympic sports, which, contradicts the scientific consensus on the ideal for long-term development. According to this consensus, early specialisation should be avoided in almost all Olympic sports. In view of the doping problem, which affects most of the sports intensively, a trend towards top performances at an earlier age would be fatal. In some sports there is even the danger that performances achieved by youths would be better than those of adults. The effect would be a depreciation of the adult Olympic medals, which cannot be in the interest of the IOC.

**What can be done**

The introduction of the Youth Olympic Games clearly creates opportunities and values worth mentioning. The Games could become a meeting place for the youth of the world. Timeless Olympic ideals could be at their centre and the acknowledgement of these ideals by the young people could and should be promoted. Moreover, the Games could stimulate young people to become engaged in the world of sport and they could offer young people demanding goals to aspire to and strive for.

But the initiative also creates great risks. Already existing processes of self-destruction in the system of sport could be accelerated and intended positive effects might be lost among many unintended side-effects. The growth spiral of sport, which is hardly controllable, might be accelerated, and the event could become unmanageable from an organisational point of view.

It has been decided that the first Youth Olympic Games will take place in Singapore in the year 2010. These Games will probably be rather small, but the first signs indicating differentiation and enlargement will be present. Therefore, one can recommend to the
IOC that it deal with the organisational aspects of these Games very thoroughly and as professionally as possible. Even if the IOC’s list of priorities were to be accepted by the young participants in favour of international understanding, holding Games with this kind of objective will still be an extremely demanding organisational challenge.

Creative organisational concepts are necessary, particularly for solving the problem of verbal communication, if a deterioration of such Games to tokenism is to be prevented. Otherwise the number of participants will inevitably have to be limited, which would again result in another selection problem. Should such a focus be desirable, it is advisable to put out a competitive tender among the best universities of the world, to be able to correspond to the given objectives as closely as possible.

Furthermore, it would be sensible to commission a research project examining the preparation and realisation of the first edition of the Games. This way one will receive feedback that leads to more demanding control mechanisms by which the development of the Games can be mastered responsibly in the future.

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