

CHALLENGES FOR THE YOUTH OLYMPIC GAMES, SUMMER AND WINTER

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Abstract

This paper looks at the development of the Youth Olympic Games, first held in Singapore in August 2010, from the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF), first held in Brussels in 1991. With about 3500 athletes between 14 and 18 years of age from all 205 National Olympic Committees, a full Olympic sports programme, a Youth Olympic Village, and a Culture and Education Programme (CEP), the YOG is a very significant development, requiring investigation and consideration.

We shall look at the Sports Programme, some new sports forms, disciplines and events (such as FIBA33, moon-lit diving, mixed events for gender and nation), innovative equipment (such as laser pistols), problems of participation and equal opportunity, age and fairness, immaturity and harm, talent identification, early specialisation, and possible exploitation. We shall also briefly examine the innovative CEP, noting its very existence as remarkable, and entering some caveats.

Finally, we present a brief description of the up-coming Innsbruck Winter YOG, and of the hopes and aspirations for future editions of the YOG.

Introduction

In 1990, the President of the European Association of National Olympic Committees, Jacques Rogge, inaugurated the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF), held for the first time in Brussels in 1991. The athletes were between 15 and 18 years, from 33 different countries, and competed in 10 summer sports. Two years later the first EYOF for winter sports was held in Aosta (Italy), and since then the event has taken place both in summer and winter every two years.

During the IOC session in Guatemala City in July 2007 the IOC, now with Jacques Rogge as President, decided to introduce a new sporting event for young athletes – the Youth Olympic Games – first held in Singapore, 14-26 August 2010, with about 3500 athletes between 14 and 18 years of age (birth years 1992-1995) from all 205 National Olympic Committees. The sports program encompasses all 26 sports on the program of the London 2012 Summer Games, albeit with a limited number of disciplines. Innsbruck is the venue for the first Winter YOG in 2012, and future editions of the YOG will follow the traditional cycle of four years, with Summer YOG in the year of the senior Winter Olympic Games and Winter YOG in the year of the senior Summer Olympic Games.

The vision of the YOG is to educate, engage and inspire young people around the world to participate in sports and adopt the Olympic Values. Obviously, the aim will be to bring together the most talented athletes from around the world to participate in high-level competitions, perhaps as a stepping-stone to the Olympic Games. But the idea is also that the sporting competitions should be held in an educational and cultural environment, so the athletes stay at the Youth Olympic Village, by analogy with the Olympic Games, and there is an educational and cultural programme to provide experiences and to support learning.

Notwithstanding the good intentions the IOC has in creating the YOG, it would be surprising if there were no problems to iron out, or no unintended and undesirable consequences. Let us consider a few possibilities.

1 The Sports Programme

1.1 Participation and equality of opportunity

One of the main aims of the YOG is to give the world's talented youngsters the opportunity to compete against their peers from around the world and gain international competitive experience. It looks as though everyone in the world could (theoretically) aim to participate, since the cohort is of 4 age years (14-18), and an Olympiad is a period of 4 years. But, as the regulations stand now, not every young talented athlete can take part in the YOG..

For a start, there were no age groups including 14-year-olds. Secondly, the YOG will be held every four years, and by limiting the age groups for each event to maximum two birth years, there will always be two birth years that are excluded from participation. For example, in 2010 the age group for rowing was limited to the birth years 1992 and 1993. Supposing these age groups to be kept in 2014, only athletes born in the years 1996 and 1997 will be allowed to participate. Thus, all talented rowers born in 1994 and 1995 will never have a chance to take part in the YOG. For football this restriction was even tighter, since only players born in 1995 were allowed in the teams in Singapore. Almost certainly, the IOC has chosen these restrictions to limit the number of participants. However there were other possibilities. For instance the IOC could have decided to limit the number of sports.

1.2 Selection of sports for the programme

There are some sports that could have been omitted because of their unsuitability for youthful participants. It may be said that boxing is still a violent sport, that weightlifting and triathlon are extreme physically exacting sports, that shooting has ethical objections and that modern pentathlon needs excellence in five very different sports, which one cannot expect from a young athlete.

1.3 Age and Fairness

Another possible reason for limiting the age groups (to two birth-years) may be to ensure that age differences will have less effect on the outcomes of the competitions. If all the YOG events were accessible for 14-18 years, it is obvious that the older would have an advantage. The narrower the age groups are, the more likely we are to have fair and equivalent competitions. However, we are still left with the problems of early-year births and early maturers. It is frequently observed that teenagers born in the first months of the calendar year are over-represented in most youth sport competitions; and early maturers have an advantage in age-limited contests. Consequently there is a high probability that during the YOG the chronologically older and/or the early maturers will be over-represented and go home with the medals.

1.4 Immaturity and Harm

On the other hand there are some sports where late maturers are favoured. This is especially the case in gymnastics. In the 80's and 90's virtually all female gymnasts competing at an international (adult) level were between 14 and 18 years of age. In order to compete at this level, gymnasts had to start serious training for 20 to 35 hours a week by about 6 years of age. As a result, most gymnasts retired by the age of 19 because they had trained for too many hours at too young an age, which made them worn out, plagued by injuries and psychologically exhausted. Thanks to the efforts of federations and the IOC, currently gymnasts must be at least 16 years of age to compete in senior-level events, and many international gymnasts are now competing through to their late twenties with success. By creating the YOG there is a real risk that some nations, national federations, clubs, coaches, and even parents could take gymnastics back to the eighties.

2 Sport Forms (disciplines and events)

Many values are expressed through sport forms, and YOG organisers strove to come up with some striking innovations. There follow just a few examples.

2.1 FIBA33

This is a 3-on-3 form of basketball played on a half-court with one basket and five-minute play periods. With non-stop music, fast-paced action and a game lasting less than 15 minutes, this was a game form designed to appeal to youth, and was one of the most popular sports of the YOG. Reports claim that there are plans to include 3-on-3 basketball on Copacabana Beach at the Rio 2016 Olympics.

2.2 First Moonlit Dive

It has usually been thought that diving at night in an outdoor pool was impossible, or at least undesirable. In Singapore, it was shown to be not only possible, but also desirable, and this could change the sport. Observers commented on the sheer beauty of the event, but there is more to it than that. There were worries that swimmers would have trouble judging the pool's surface under artificial light, but that problem was solved with the use of sprays to agitate the water. Instead, diving at night added a technical benefit. A bright day can spell trouble for divers who can mistake the blue of the sky for the colour of the water. But, under the stars, there was better contrast between the sky and the pool, which helped the divers.

2.3 Gymnastics

The FIG planned certain differences between the YOG and the Olympic Games, citing safety grounds. The competition rules and difficulty level of the routines to be performed by the male and female gymnasts at the Youth Olympic Games have been modified in order to safeguard the health and proper development of the athletes. In particular, the required difficulty elements were reduced in number, and difficulty value restrictions were imposed. This means that the young athletes were only allowed to perform easier and safer vaults, but it also had the 'child protection' consequence that their trainers would have no gain in forcing enhancement of the difficulty level, although they would still be able to focus on improving performance.

2.4 First Horse Draw

For the first time in Olympic history, a horse draw was conducted for the riders at the Singapore Turf Club Riding Centre. The assigned horse/rider combinations were to apply throughout the competition for the individual and team events. Of course, there are objections to such a procedure. Adjusting to an unfamiliar horse is a novel challenge for many of the riders, and might raise safety concerns – but at least it is the same challenge for all. Also, drawing horses by lot might seem to make a lottery of the outcome, if you think that a good horse is what makes a winner – but at least it rules out the possibility that one might be able to buy success, simply by buying the best horse.

The horse draw seems to me to make it more likely that the best *rider* will win, and this is what we should be looking for. It's about both the rider and the horse, of course – but it should be *primarily* about the rider, if it is to be an Olympic sport. This is one case of the more general point: each sport should find ways of testing the athlete, not his equipment. The javelin is a contest to find out who is the best thrower, not who has the best javelin.

2.5 Pistol Shooting

New laser technology was used for the first time in the sport's history at the YOG, replacing the standard pellet-firing air pistols. The issues here are cost, safety and gender. The cost of shooting is cut by two-thirds, since laser guns are lighter and require no pellets (ammunition being the major item of expenditure in the sport), and so more people and more countries will be able to compete. Since safety issues will no longer be a major concern, competitions can be held in parks, gardens and even shopping malls, thus increasing the visibility and popularity of the sport. And lighter guns means that there should be no reason why shooting should not become a mixed gender sport. So successful was this experiment at the YOG that it has been announced that laser guns will be used in the modern pentathlon competition at the London 2012 Olympics.

2.6 Mixed Teams (gender and nationality)

Many argue that the focus of the Olympic Games should be competitions between individuals, not countries, and that the problems of chauvinism and excessive nationalist influence would be reduced if it weren't for the medals tables and inter-national rivalry. But another way of countering the effects of nationalism is by organising mixed team events. After the individual events, doubles events or continental team events took place in fencing (where the final was between Bangladesh/Spain and Turkey/Singapore), tennis and table tennis, athletics, triathlon and swimming. Fencing and archery, amongst others, held mixed gender events, too, thus again raising the general issue of open competitions.

3 Problems With Young Athletes

3.1 Talent ID and Early Specialisation.

By introducing a high-level competition for youth aged 14-18, the YOG present a serious risk of reinforcing the practice of early talent identification and early specialisation. Most countries worldwide attempt to develop structures to identify exceptionally gifted athletes at an early age in order to focus their resources on these particularly promising individuals. As the efforts and resources invested in these programs have escalated in recent decades, the pressure on policymakers, trainers and coaches to 'create' more successful athletes has

multiplied. All these stakeholders could interpret the new YOG as an endorsement or approval of early talent identification and early specialisation, despite the fact that early selection and early specialisation carry risks for the health of the children: overuse trauma, growth repercussions, diverse nutritional deficiencies and psychological problems.

3.2 Exploitation of Young Athletes

The responsibility for these young athletes is largely in hands of their national delegation, their trainers and their parents. It is likely that at least some nations will seek to excel at the YOG in order to advance their own status, glory and national pride. It is likely, too, that we shall also see the ‘achievement-by-proxy’ syndrome – parents and coaches who project their own ambitions onto their young athletes. So the danger exists that nations, trainers and parents want to achieve excellence at any cost – and we have seen examples of excessive training, the obligatory use of drugs, and the forging of identification papers. For the young athletes, it is almost impossible to stand up against these forms of dishonesty and abuse.

4 Education

There is therefore a great need for an effective educational initiative. In this short paper we shall not be able to reflect upon probably the most important development of the YOG – its educational and cultural programmes. Let me just make four positive observations:

- There *was* a programme (and this is sensational enough in itself). Might we look forward to something similar one day in the Olympic Games?
- Somebody had given much thought and planning to it – in terms of both content and method – and resources were committed to it.
- There was a genuine attempt to reach out beyond the fortunate few to be directly involved, to the general public (and to youth in particular), using innovative methods, including ‘new media’.
- The educational and cultural programmes were genuinely and explicitly organized according to Olympic values and principles.

Those responsible deserve great credit for this.

And finally some caveats:

- There should be some attempt to spell out what concept of ‘education’ is being employed, and this should be more than simple information-transmission, or ideological indoctrination.
- Anything that calls itself ‘Olympic Education’ must draw attention to the educative value of sporting competition itself. It is not enough to see the YOG as a merely convenient *venue* for education – ways should be found of also highlighting the internal values of sport.
- It is not clear just how much of the programme is accessible by how many of the athletes, and what its effect on them actually has been, given differences in motivation, educational level, language competence, etc.
- The education of a child or a youth takes place over a very long period of time. No matter how dramatic or powerful a short YOG experience might be, Olympic Education requires the participation of many people around the athlete in his formative years: coaches, parents, teachers, friends. Ways must therefore be found of influencing these groups, too.

Conclusion

Young athletes (even child athletes) have always participated in the Olympic Games, but the YOG represents a new step towards the systematic distribution of elite sport into the child population. This brings with it serious ethical risks, and so its effects should be carefully monitored, and serious efforts must be made towards an effective education programme.

Whilst some novel issues are thrown up by a 'Youth' edition of the Olympic Games, many of the issues covered simply highlight already-existing challenges for the Olympic Movement in a novel form. It will be interesting to see what the First Winter Youth Olympic Games has in store for us in Innsbruck in 2012.

Postscript: Winter YOG

At the Liberec conference¹ in February 2011, we were only 11 months away from the Opening Ceremony of the first edition of the Winter Youth Olympic Games. Innsbruck WYOG 2012 will host over 1,000 young athletes representing their countries in the seven sports on the programme: biathlon, bobsleigh, curling, ice hockey, luge, skating and skiing, with a limited number of disciplines and events. Just as with Singapore 2010, some new disciplines and events have been introduced into the sports programme: for example, there will be a combined discipline of cross country and biathlon, as well as the first ever Olympic inclusion of women's ski jumping. In most sports there will be mixed team events (gender and/or nation). The age groups are 14-18 years, with a specific two-year age group participating in a sport or discipline (although some sources suggest that, again, there will be no 14-year-olds).

As in Singapore, there will be a Culture and Education Programme, with workshops and forums on the Olympic values, healthy lifestyles, anti-doping, etc, designed to develop a new generation of athletes with a higher awareness of societal issues and problems linked directly to their practice of sport. Communication with youth is another key feature, through internet forums, chats and blogs, and other new media.

In its official publication, the IOC expresses high hopes for the YOG, as the 'flagship' of the IOC's youth strategy. Its aims for the sporting and educational/cultural programmes are:

- to bring renewed life and vigour to the Olympic Movement
- to inspire young people around the world to take up sport
- to create a true community between the youth of the world and the participants
- to help athletes to become better human beings, true sportspersons, ambassadors in society for sport and the Olympic values

This is a lot to ask from a small cohort of youngsters from around the world, but it seems to me that the YOG are bringing new ideas and setting new standards for the Olympic Games. To anyone interested in Olympic Education, they are a breath of fresh air.

As Colin Moynihan, another speaker at this conference, says: "The benefits are far wider and greater than purely the experience gained on the field of play. Youth Olympic events are focused on combining high-level sporting competition with an environment where young athletes are encouraged to learn, share and build friendships. To gain an in-depth knowledge and respect for the Olympic values of excellence, respect and friendship whilst aspiring to their own goals, is unique to the Olympic Movement." [17]

¹ Conference EUROPE-YOUTH-OLYMPISM in Liberec, Czech Republic, 10-12 February 2011, prior to the European Youth Olympic Winter Festival, 12-19 February, 2011

It will be interesting to see the extent to which these hopes and aspirations are met in future editions of the YOG, both summer and winter.

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VÝZVY PRO LETNÍ I ZIMNÍ OLYMPIJSKÉ HRY MLÁDEŽE

Tento článek se věnuje Olympijským hrám mládeže, které se poprvé konaly v Singapuru v srpnu 2010 a které se vyvinuly z Evropského olympijského festivalu mládeže (EYOF), jenž se poprvé konal v Bruselu v roce 1991. Vzhledem k účasti 3500 sportovců ve věku 14 až 18 let z 205 Národních olympijských výborů a programem zahrnujícím kompletní Olympijský program a kulturní a výchovný program (CEP) jsou Olympijské hry mládeže významnou událostí vyžadující zamyšlení. V textu se podíváme na sportovní program, některé nové sportovní formy, disciplíny a soutěže (např. FIBA33, skoky do vody za měsíčního svitu), mixové soutěže pro hochy a dívky a mixové soutěže pro zástupce různých NOV, technické inovace (např. laserové pistole), problémy s účastí vzhledem k věku a rovné příležitosti, nezralost a poškozování, identifikaci talentů a možné zneužívání. Budeme se také stručně zabývat novým kulturním a výchovným programem, zdůrazníme důležitost jeho existence a zmíníme jeho problémy. Nakonec stručně představíme nadcházející Zimní olympijské hry mládeže v Innsbrucku, dále pak naděje a aspirace pro budoucí Olympijské hry mládeže.

HERAUSFORDERUNGEN FÜR DIE OLYMPISCHEN JUGEND-SOMMER- UND WINTERSPIELE

Dieser Artikel widmet sich den Olympischen Jugendspielen, die erstmals im August 2010 in Singapur stattfanden und sich aus dem Europäischen Olympischen Jugendfestival (EYOF) entwickelt hatten, das erstmalig im Jahre 1991 in Brüssel stattfand. In Anbetracht einer Teilnehmerzahl von 3500 Sportlern im Alter zwischen 14 und 18 Jahren aus 205 Nationalen Olympischen Komitees und eines Programms, welches das olympische Programm sowie das Kultur- und Bildungsprogramm (CEP) umfasst, sind die Olympischen Jugendspiele ein bedeutendes Ereignis, das zum Nachdenken anregt. Im Text wird Folgendes betrachtet: das Sportprogramm, einige neue Formen des Sports, Disziplinen und Wettbewerbe (z.B. FIBA-33-Basketball, Wasserspringen bei Mondschein), gemischte Wettbewerbe für Jungen und Mädchen und gemischte Wettbewerbe für Vertreter verschiedener NOKs, technische Innovationen (z.B. Laserpistolen), Probleme im Zusammenhang mit der Teilnahme bezüglich des Alters und der Chancengleichheit, die Unreife und Benachteiligung, die Identifizierung von Talenten und mögliche Missbräuche. Wir werden uns auch kurz mit dem neuen Kultur- und Bildungsprogramm befassen, die Wichtigkeit seiner Existenz hervorheben und seine Probleme ansprechen. Zu guter Letzt stellen wir kurz die bevorstehenden Olympischen Jugend- Winterspiele in Innsbruck und die Hoffnungen für und Erwartungen an künftige Olympische Jugendspiele vor.

WYZWANIA DLA LETNICH I ZIMOWYCH IGRZYSK OLIMPIJSKICH MŁODZIEŻY

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest Olimpiadzie Młodzieży, która po raz pierwszy odbyła się w Singapurze w sierpniu 2010 roku. Powstała na bazie Europejskiego Festiwalu Olimpijskiego Młodzieży (EYOF), który odbył się po raz pierwszy w Brukseli w 1991 roku. Ze względu na udział 3500 sportowców w wieku od 14 do 18 lat z 205 Narodowych Komitetów Olimpijskich i program obejmujący kompleksowy program olimpijski oraz program kulturalno-edukacyjny Olimpiada Młodzieży stanowi ważne wydarzenie wymagające głębszej analizy. W artykule analizowany jest program sportowy, niektóre nowe formy sportu, dyscypliny i konkurencje (np. FIBA33, skoki do wody przy świetle księżyca), konkurencje mix dla dziewcząt i chłopców oraz konkurencje mix dla przedstawicieli różnych NKO, innowacje techniczne (np. pistolety laserowe), problemy z udziałem ze względu na wiek i równe szanse, niedojrzałość, identyfikacja talentów i możliwe nadużycia. W krótkim zarysie uwagę poświęcono również nowym programom kulturalnym i edukacyjnym, podkreślono znaczenie ich istnienia oraz wymieniono problemy z tym związane. W zakończeniu przedstawiono krótko przyszłą Zimową Olimpiadę Młodzieży w Innsbrucku oraz nadzieje i aspiracje związane z przyszłymi olimpiadami młodzieżowymi.