

Sporting boycotts as a political tool

Marlene Goldsmith

SPORTING boycotts have a long history. The first recorded sports boycott was in 420BC when Sparta was barred from attending the games at Olympia after failing to pay a fine for breaking the Olympic truce.¹

In more recent times, of the 17 Olympic Games held between 1920 and 1992, there have been boycotts against, or exclusion of athletes from, all 17. In 1920 all the losing countries of WWI were excluded; in 1936 German Jews were forbidden from competing; in 1948 Germany and Japan were barred as a result of WWII; in 1956 teams withdrew because of the Suez invasion; in 1964 Indonesia and North Korea withdrew because of disagreement with the IOC; in 1972 Rhodesia was expelled because of its apartheid policies; in 1976 African nations did not attend because New Zealand was not expelled after undertaking a rugby league tour of South Africa and Rhodesia was again barred from competition; in 1980 various countries, including Australia did not attend because of the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan; in 1984 the USSR stayed away in retaliation for the 1980 boycott; in 1988 many countries stayed away from Seoul because of its recent unpopular dictatorship, even though a democratic election the year before had eased some of the tension. These were 'one-off' situations, so to speak.

The USSR did not attend the Olympics between 1920 and 1952, China did not attend between 1956 and 1980, and, most notably, South Africa has not attended an Olympic Games since 1968. Of course, the boycott on South African sport extended far beyond the Olympic Games, and is one that was imposed by member countries of the United Nations.

Perhaps the boycotts that have been most written about are those against the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games. As early as 1976 there were murmurings that the 1980 Games would be disrupted by the United States for reasons of national security and difficulties with the

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Soviet Union. In 1979—several months before the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR—there were boycott threats because of a variety of international conflicts. One such threat came from the United States because of the Soviet treatment of political dissidents. The Soviet Union wanted to host a successful Games. The United States wanted, four years later, to do it better. Questions remain as to whether the invasion of Afghanistan was simply a more acceptable way to boycott the Games than the vagaries of political oppression, a politically expedient way for America to attempt to ruin the Moscow Olympics.

Such a boycott was bound to fail in its public aim of forcing the USSR out of Afghanistan for several reasons. Firstly, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was so determined that anything short of military intervention was bound to fail. Secondly, earlier the same year the Winter Olympics had been held in Lake Placid and Soviet athletes were allowed to compete under the same prevailing political circumstances. Thirdly, it was by some agreed as a case of 'do as I say not as I do', in that the United States itself had intervened in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Cambodia. Finally, and very importantly, president Carter seriously underestimated the capacity and power of the Afghan peoples to resist the invader. Despite world outrage at the invasion, the puppet government of Afghanistan had athletes competing in the 1980 Games, although ironically the athletes did not compete in any shooting events, only those involving hand-to-hand combat.

The boycott of the 1984 Games by the Soviet Union and its allies was also an exercise in political muscle flexing. The USSR's reasons for withdrawing were at least as tenuous as those used by the United States four years earlier, but in this case the purported objectives were lost to most observers, the implicit objective being retaliation for the 1980 boycott. This was a boycott the International Olympic Committee tried long and hard to avert. Eventually, the Soviet Union employed the argument that security for their athletes was inadequate, a stance that the IOC could do nothing about considering not only the anti-Soviet feelings of many citizens of the United States, but also the fact that it was a reason which the IOC had always accepted as justifiable for non-attendance of a country's athletes. This was despite the fact that the Los Angeles Olympic Organising Committee had ensured that security arrangements were of a very high standard.

All of this leads to two questions which need answering. First, why sport? And second, and far more importantly, why some countries and not others?

The answer to 'Why sport?' is relatively easy. Quite often sports boycotts are part of an overall package of sanctions against a country, usually economically based. The desired effect is to cripple the economy, and while this affects the government's balance of payments, the consequences can take quite some time to trickle down to the populace. However, to deprive a sporting nation of international competition

affects a large proportion of the citizens, extending far beyond the playing fields. The targeting of sport is the targeting of a nation's right to participate in the international community, in the area most immediately visible to the citizens of that nation.

The appeal of such boycotts lies in their non-aggressive character, and the self-satisfaction of the countries imposing such boycotts that 'at least they are doing something'. Their effect must principally be on national morale: being ostracised by the majority of the world's nations may well be psychologically devastating. The South Africans obviously took their sport very seriously, to the point where the government included a minister of sport.

Yet it would be interesting to find out how many academic texts on international politics, international trade or international economics draw attention to sports boycotts as an international tool. In 1987 Trevor Taylor, in the book *The Politics of Sport*, was able to find just two such references. One related specifically to the boycott of the USSR Olympics in 1980. The other devoted 74 words to the subject in a 799-page text.² Clearly, such boycotts are not considered to be important by experts in international affairs.

The second question, 'Why some countries and not others?' is particularly challenging. Most sporting boycotts are overtly political: the result of conflicts between nations. South Africa and Rhodesia are the only countries that have been expelled from international sport because of human rights violations in their countries. In both cases, the violations concerned racism. As to Rhodesia, the irony was that sport was the only aspect of Rhodesian life which was fully integrated. When we look at other human rights issues, it is difficult to explain just why racism should be singled out for special treatment, as the only human rights issue of sufficient importance to warrant a boycott.

Take, for instance, China—the country that almost defeated Australia to become the host of the Year 2000 Olympic Games. Next year the United Nations 4th International World Conference on Women is being held in Beijing. Yet, if Tibetan Women's groups are to be believed, China is the last place the United Nations should be holding such a Conference.

In China independent women's organisations are banned, women lead lives of misery and degradation in slave labour camps, sexual abuse is widely reported in the army, free speech and political dissent are denied and result in imprisonment and women are denied reproductive rights. The regulations for Canton Municipality state: 'To have a baby outside marriage is to engage in criminal behaviour. Any pregnant woman who is not married should be ordered to have an abortion.'³ There are many reports of women being forced to abort at a very late stage, and of girl babies being murdered, because of China's one-child policy. And yet the United Nations will officially sanction such human

rights abuses by holding an international conference in its capital city in 1995.

This is the same United Nations which urged the International Olympic Committee to expel Rhodesia from the 1972 Olympic Games because of that country's policies on race. Closer to our hearts, the murder of David Wilson and his friends in Cambodia highlights another anomaly in the attitude of the United Nations. Following the Khmer Rouge seizure of power in 1975 and murder of more than one million people, the United Nations Human Rights Commission stated that the regime had carried out 'the worst genocidal crimes to have occurred anywhere in the world since Nazism'. They have now eliminated reference to Khmer Rouge 'genocide' and refer only to 'policies and practices of the recent past'.⁴ This to me is hypocrisy at its worst. What was genocide in 1975 is still genocide, and the Khmer Rouge is still the Khmer Rouge.

My parliamentary colleague, the Hon. Franca Arena, has drawn the attention of the New South Wales parliament to the plight of the Assyrian peoples in Iraq. The honourable member described how Assyrians had to declare their nationality as Arabic or face reprisal, political activity was forbidden, and practising freedom of speech and association resulted in persecution and torture. According to Mrs Arena, during 1988 scores of Assyrians were arrested and never heard of again. They were denied Iraqi citizenship, declared to be foreigners, and denied representation in government. Assyrian cultural centres and activities were closed as were schools that taught the Assyrian language. Publishing in the Assyrian language was strictly forbidden, and those who declared their nationality were barred from higher education institutions. Yet no action was taken against Iraq by the Olympic movement.

The United Nations and the Olympic movement have been strongly anti-racist when it came to South Africa and then Rhodesia denying the vote to black people, but mute on Assyria and mute on the genocide that was occurring at the same time as apartheid in Idi Amin's Uganda or Pol Pot's Kampuchea. Either apartheid is worse than genocide in the moral creed of the Olympic movement, or else one must look elsewhere for the explanation.

There is a distinction between South Africa and Rhodesia on the one hand, and Uganda and Kampuchea on the other. Perhaps the distinction is that we are indeed racist and have higher standards of behaviour for white (and therefore supposedly 'civilised') regimes than we do for black or Asian ones. Such a statement—even as a hypothesis—makes me quite uncomfortable. I would prefer to believe that the fundamental reason for the imposition of some boycotts and not others is a matter of politics, rather than the racism of expecting more from white regimes.

Ultimately, even 'human rights' sporting boycotts are a question of *whose* human rights, and the rights that get addressed are those of noisy nations. There was no nation to stand up for the victims of Pol Pot or Idi Amin, or of other oppressive totalitarian regimes, because it was those regimes themselves that carried the Olympic banner and basked in the international legitimacy which that banner conferred. Again, it was the Soviet puppet regime of Afghanistan that competed in the Moscow Olympics while the people of Afghanistan were at war with the regime and the Soviets.

The oppressed blacks of South Africa had the black governments of other African nations to support them, and—perhaps not without relevance—the USSR and its satellites, on the one hand eager to pursue popularity in black Africa, and on the other only too well aware that certain rare minerals necessary for complex industrial processes were commercially available in only two places—the USSR and South Africa. Had a communist regime been established in South Africa, the Cold War may have evolved differently. To make such comments is in no way intended as a defence of apartheid, but merely to seek to explain why apartheid galvanised the international community into action, where genocide has not.

During the controversy over the New Zealand All Blacks rugby tour of South Africa in 1985, the pro-tour spokesmen pointed out 'the disadvantages of a boycott for athletes, the futility of boycotts as an instrument of foreign policy, and, in the words of former Prime Minister Muldoon, the "pity" of singling out sports and apartheid "from all the other problems and tragedies of Africa".'⁵

P.J. O'Rourke, in his book *Holidays in Hell*⁶, summed up the hypocrisy of the sanctions against South Africa in the following way:

Everywhere you go in the world somebody's raping women, expelling ethnic Chinese, enslaving stone-age tribesmen, shooting Communists, rounding up Jews, kidnapping Americans, setting fire to Sikhs, keeping Catholics out of country clubs and hunting peasants from helicopters with automatic weapons. The world is built on discrimination of the most horrible kind. The problem with South Africans is they admit it. They don't say, like the French, 'Algerians have a legal right to live in the sixteenth *arrondissement*, but they can't afford to'. They don't say, like the Israelis, 'Arabs have a legal right to live in West Jerusalem, but they're afraid to'. They don't say, like the Americans, 'Indians have a legal right to live in Ohio, but, oops, we killed them all'.

The fact that, in order to have sporting boycotts, it is necessary to have national governments support them does not give much hope to the one group that has been and continues to be the most oppressed in relation to international participation. I refer to women.

In the very first Commonwealth Games, which, of course, were then known as the British Empire Games, in Hamilton, Ontario in 1930, there were no women's events at all. Women's athletics were not included in the Olympic program until 1928. The first women's team sport did not appear until volleyball was introduced in 1964 although men have had Olympic team sports since 1900.⁷

The Olympics provide far fewer events for women than men: at the 1992 Summer Olympics, 61.8% of events were for men, 33.4% for women, and 4.8% for mixed events.⁸ In our Olympic teams, women have consistently been a minority—and yet Australian women have won far more Olympic medals than men, in relation to their participation. These results show that selectors have repeatedly preferred to choose men of lesser ability rather than women of greater ability for Australia's team. Even gold medallist Kathy Watt, at the last Olympics, almost missed a place in the team.

More seriously, when dealing with human rights we must address the fact that some countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, literally exclude women from their Olympic teams. Yet there appears never to be any question of these countries being boycotted by the Olympic movement.

Again, there are the horrific violations of human rights which are inflicted upon females in many nations. In Saudi Arabia, women are treated as chattels, without even the right to drive a car.

Female genital mutilation is practised openly in many north African nations under the guise of cultural necessity. This barbaric ritual is practised on innocent little girls who cannot defend themselves or speak up for what they want. In its worst form, it removes the entire outer genital area, causing lifelong pain and lifelong problems with intercourse, childbirth and urination. Its rationale is to destroy sexual pleasure for the female and thus ensure she will remain faithful to her husband. The United Nations estimates that female genital mutilation has been inflicted on some 80 million females. While the practice is, increasingly, being outlawed in western cultures, we turn a blind eye to what is happening elsewhere, and there is never a suggestion that this massive physical mutilation of females is as deserving of a boycott as was racism in South Africa.

Pakistan is one of the most oppressive societies in relation to women. The *Guinness Book of Records* lists Pakistan for a most unusual reason: the lowest female-male ratio in the world, 936 women to 1000 men. The main reason cited is the generally poor health of women: baby girls are weaned much earlier than boys. The Koran dictates that boys be breast fed for two years; females usually eat only after the males have finished; even in privileged homes, boys are more likely to be given milk, eggs, meat and fruit; females become ill more often than males but are more likely to be treated at home than taken to a doctor or hospital; 97.4 per cent of all pregnant women in Pakistan are anaemic.

Because of their almost total confinement, both in dress and living conditions, they suffer from health problems such as osteomalacia, eczema and ulcers resulting from lack of exposure to sunlight, and osteoporosis from poor diet and little exercise.

In Pakistan *zina* (sex outside marriage) is a crime and carries a maximum penalty of stoning to death for a married woman and up to 100 lashes and 10 years in gaol for an unmarried woman. This includes women who are raped. In Muslim countries a rape must be witnessed by four adult males of good repute who can attest to the act of sexual penetration, an impossible criterion to ensure conviction of a rapist. As a result a woman's complaint of rape is usually viewed as a confession of illicit sexual intercourse. Seventy-five per cent of all women in Pakistani gaols are there on charges of *zina*, and of all the women in gaol 72 per cent are physically and sexually abused by their jailers.⁹

Yet all these women, and many more not mentioned here, remain without defenders in international sporting conclaves. There are no boycotts for them, for the same reason that there were no boycotts against Idi Amin or Soviet internal repression—because they are represented at such conclaves by the governments that repress them.

Personally, I believe that politics and sport should remain separate. To punish the athletes of a country, athletes who have spent most of their lives training for this brief chance at international fame and glory, for the perceived sins of their country of origin is cruelly unfair. The Olympic Charter requires National Olympic Committees to ensure that no one has been excluded for racial, religious or political reasons. Yet this has been exactly what the IOC and other nations have been doing: discriminating and excluding sportsmen and women on the grounds of politics, by imposing boycotts.

Political boycotts are wrong—and they have always been wrong, in that they violate the original spirit of the Olympics. The Greek city states may have been at each other's throats—as they mostly were—but for the period of the games, a truce was declared, and athletes could come from all over the country to compete in safety. Yes, Sparta was once boycotted, but the reason was that Sparta broke that sacred truce and refused to pay the resultant fine. Athletes should not have to pay for the failure of politicians. (See Discussion, below.)

There is a further argument against sporting boycotts. Sporting boycotts don't work. Boycotts generally don't work. 'Trade embargoes on oil . . . made South Africa a world leader in coal conversion; an arms ban . . . led to a self-sufficiency in arms. Boycotts, in the words of Chief Buthelezi, an ardent opponent of apartheid and leader of millions of Zulus, only hurt the blacks.'¹⁰ As for sport, the South African cricket team came out of its years of exile to establish itself as the team to beat. Perhaps the greatest 'slap in the face' to the Hitler regime and its policy of eugenics were the victories by the great black runner Jesse Owens in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

Regarding human rights boycotts: the genie here has been irretrievably let out of the bottle. Pandora's box has been opened. There is no moral way to justify the exclusion of a Rhodesia or South Africa while turning a blind eye to a Saudi Arabia or Uganda. But we are not talking morality here, we are talking about the Olympics.

The Olympic Charter has traditionally prohibited discrimination in the Games against any country or person on grounds of race, religion or politics. A recent redraft of the Olympic Charter has added 'sex' to these criteria. I am grateful to Kristine Toohey for bringing this new category to my attention. A close examination reveals these requirements to be contradictory. If a country could not be discriminated against on grounds of politics then there is no justification for the exclusion of a South Africa. But if a South Africa could not be discriminated against on grounds of race, then what would have happened to a black South African excluded by his/her country's politics? Or, today, to a female Saudi Arabian?

Perhaps the ultimate ideal would be to return to the original Olympic concept of athletes abandoning their political allegiances to compete as individuals, as the Greeks did. Will the time ever come to abandon the jingoistic mock warfare of flags, anthems and uniforms, in favour of a playing field where all compete as fellow humans, celebrating individual human achievement? Alternatively, perhaps we really need the mock warfare, as a surrogate for the real thing.

Discussion

Several interesting points arose in discussion of this paper at the conference, items which deserve inclusion in the proceedings of the conference.

Firstly, regarding my assertion that athletes should not have to pay for the failings of politicians, one delegate informed the conference that a country cricket team of which he was a member had chosen to decline the opportunity of a trip to South Africa some years ago, principally out of concern for the way its Aboriginal members would be treated. Such an action is one I can only commend: here athletes are making their own choice to boycott, not having the decision made for them by others who make no sacrifice. Moral boycotts should be 'chooser pays'.

Secondly, Professor Colin Tatz took issue with my assertion that boycotts do not appear particularly effective. Perhaps that may have to remain a difference of opinion, although a boycott that takes almost thirty years to work is certainly very slow to act. Shirley (Strickland) Delahunty later commented that the continuation of sporting contact, under international opprobrium, not least from participating athletes (and I would add sporting commentators), might have seen the end of apartheid much sooner.

Prof. Tatz also took issue with me for comparing South Africa with, say, Uganda under Idi Amin. Again, we must continue to differ. Apartheid is appalling, but in my view genocide is worse. So is the way women are being treated in certain countries to the present day. **AQ**

Notes

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Correspondence

Sporting boycotts as a political tool

MANY of the points raised and opinions expressed by Dr Marlene Goldsmith in her paper 'Sporting boycotts as a political tool' published in the Autumn Edition of *AQ* cannot be allowed to go unchallenged.

Apartheid did not simply involve the 'denying of the vote to black people' in South Africa as implied by Dr Goldsmith. Under apartheid, the lives of Africans were circumscribed from the cradle to the grave. They not only had no say whatsoever in the government of their country, but they were also restricted in where they could live, work and play. They were condemned to inferior education, housing and health service. Apartheid was one of the most unjust and inhumane political systems ever devised for the express purpose of keeping one section of the population in a permanent state of subjugation.

This may not be, in Dr Goldsmith's eyes, as reprehensible as genocide or the continued oppression of women, but it should be noted that, amongst other things, it involved an act of 'ethnic cleansing' requiring the forced resettlement, sometimes hundreds of kilometres away and with no compensation, of about 4 million Africans, simply because they occupied 'black spots' in what had become designated white areas.

The anti-apartheid sporting boycott started in a small tokenistic way in the early 1960s with the banning of South Africa from Olympic competition—tokenistic because there was very little chance of the Games ever being held in South Africa and because South African Olympic successes were few and far between, so that the Games did not rate very highly in the people's sporting consciousness.

In 1977 a more serious attempt at applying a meaningful boycott came with the Commonwealth Gleneagles Agreement, but this was only marginally more effective than the Olympic ban. It was restricted to Commonwealth countries and then only selectively applied by its members. Individual South African sportspersons such as golfers, tennis players etc. were barred from some Commonwealth countries, but they competed freely on the lucrative United States circuits. Some Australian and other individual sportspersons elected not to play in South Africa, but this did not stop the relevant tournaments from proceeding and the South African spectating public was not affected in any way.

The main problem, however, was that the two major sports for players and spectators alike, rugby union and cricket, continued to be played at international level between South Africa and the 'white' Commonwealth countries, in spite of the Gleneagles Agreement. The last English rugby tour took place in 1985 and a representative, albeit unofficial, Australian cricket team visited South Africa in 1986/87.

The South Africans, particularly the cricket administrators, had done a first class public relations job. Australian politicians, sportspersons, journalists and other influential people were taken on fully paid conducted tours of the country, and all returned full of praise for the degree of sports integration they had been shown and for all that was being done for young black players. Almost all came back uttering the inane cry to 'keep politics out of sport'. All conveniently ignored the fact that, prior to Gleneagles, the white sporting bodies had done virtually nothing for black sportspersons, and none seemed to appreciate that, with the ruthless enforcement of apartheid in all aspects of African life, there should be no need for anyone to ask who first put politics into sport.

A ban of any sort cannot be considered a true boycott unless it covers all aspects, and so the sporting boycott of South Africa did not really start until the late 1980s when international pressure became such that all rugby and cricket contacts were cut, and the South African sporting public was denied the opportunity to watch their provincial and international teams playing against a first class touring side, not just over a period of a few days, but for a whole season. That is what hurt.

Dr Goldsmith states categorically that 'sporting boycotts don't work'. The *South African Financial Mail*, the equivalent of our *Australian Financial Review*, on 28th September 1990, published a comprehensive survey of the African National Congress. In a section dealing with sport, it stated that 'the sports boycott has perhaps been the most successful of all weapons in the struggle against apartheid. This is because, by directly affecting their recreation, it forced apolitical whites to consider the iniquity and absurdity of apartheid.' In looking at the gradual effect of the boycott, the report went on to say that reactions amongst conservative whites 'moved from derision to outrage, to bewilderment, to surly resignation—and finally, in the last five years, to understanding and even repentance'.

There is no doubt that, contrary to Dr Goldsmith's opinion, the sporting boycott of South Africa, once it was fully applied, worked very well and very quickly. It helped achieve the demise of an obscene political system at little or no cost to anyone, and with no adverse side effects on the black population nor on those imposing the boycott.

There is little doubt that, but for the strident self-interested opposition to the boycott in Australia and elsewhere, and but for the sabotage of the boycott in the media during the 60s, 70s and 80s, it would have

achieved its aim many years earlier and South Africa would today be that much further along the road to peace, justice and prosperity.

Dr Goldsmith's reference to the possible establishment of a communist regime in South Africa harks back to the days when Australians swallowed so eagerly and mindlessly the South African government propaganda that the African National Congress was simply a Communist terrorist organisation.

In fact, the ANC turned to Russia for help belatedly, and Communist Party members probably never accounted for more than 25% of the ANC Executive. In 1913 an ANC delegation sent to England to petition for assistance in repealing some unjust legislation was treated extremely shabbily, and this attitude persisted until the late 1980s, over which period virtually all Western Christian capitalist countries ignored the plight of the blacks and continued to provide material and moral support for successive increasingly oppressive white governments. The West was, of course, even more aware than was the USSR of the country's mineral wealth and would never have allowed a Communist takeover of South Africa.

Finally, with regards to the allegation of hypocrisy in the application of sanctions to South Africa while genocide and other evils existed elsewhere in the world, I can only ask if Dr Goldsmith thinks it is hypocritical to immunise Australians against influenza while malaria and AIDS rage unchecked in other countries.

P.G. Wilson
Toowong, Qld

A response from Marlene Goldsmith

P.G. Wilson misses the point. I was not trivialising apartheid in South Africa. It was horrible, as I said, but the point of my argument was that there are things that are worse, which have not generated sufficient outrage to result in sporting boycotts. These things include genocide in a number of countries and what is happening to many millions of females right now:

- the genital mutilation of millions of little girls to prevent them ever experiencing sexual pleasure; the worst form of this barbarism causes lifelong pain (especially during intercourse), incontinence and infection;
- the 'apartheid' of house imprisonment enforced on women in Saudi Arabia, who are prevented from going out in public unescorted and without shrouding themselves;
- the gaoling of female rape victims in Pakistan;