

Nationalism, Racism and the Olympic Industry

Written by Helen Jefferson Lenskyj

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HELEN JEFFERSON LENSKYJ, AUG 21 2012

Throughout the history of the modern Olympic Games, countries that have consistently produced winners in specific sports have attracted extensive media and public scrutiny. If the victories accrued to athletes from the major western sport powers of a particular era – Great Britain, the United States and Europe in the early years of the Olympics – fewer questions were raised than when smaller and/or non-western countries generated what was seen as a disproportionate number of medallists. For example, as early as the 1920s, sport “experts” tried to explain the winning performances of runners from Finland, citing, among other factors, saunas, diet, and links to “a wild Mongolian strain” – thereby providing one of the earliest examples of “scientific racism” applied to Olympic successes.[i]

At the time of the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, German athletes’ victories were said to be linked to Nazi eugenics practices, even though some American scientists in that era were themselves recommending eugenics policies and legislation to protect (white) “racial purity” and the American way of life. [ii] In 2005, Chinese authorities were alleged to have “selected” tall parents in order to produce extra-tall basketball player Yao Ming. Interestingly, the spectre of eugenics was not raised in 2011, when an American biotechnology company developed genetic tests marketed to parents to identify the genetic traits in their children that predisposed them towards success in a particular sport.[iii]

Since the 1960s, countless theories, usually racist, about Kenyan and Ethiopian runners’ performances have identified physiology, genetics, high altitude, climate, diet, and hardship among the contributing factors. In swimming, Australian athletes were long viewed as representing the gold standard, but experts could not attribute their achievements to “race” and therefore concluded that their “secret” must be the generous level of government sport funding in Australia. As one analyst explained, “If you want 20 gold medals, then spend [Australian] \$800 million every four years.”[iv]

A clear pattern has emerged: Experts, aided by the English-language mass media, attribute what they consider an unexpected or disproportionate Olympic medal count to genetics and/or to doping. Extensive pseudoscientific research, as well as the best efforts of investigative journalists, has been directed towards finding answers to the question, “Why do [...] always win?” At the same time, it is generally taken for granted that big countries, western countries, and wealthy countries produce medal-winners who are fully deserving of victory: they have no “secret” genetic advantages and they have clean drug tests.

This line of thinking appears to imply that athletes of African origin, including African Americans and Canadians, are unlikely to share white athletes’ work ethic and commitment to training, and therefore, other variables must be at work. While respected scientists point to the “genetic good luck” that produces an ideal body type in combination with the physical and psychological traits necessary for success in a specific sport, these arguments lack the same currency in the mass media.[v] According to what I’ve termed “the myth of the pure Olympic athlete and pure Olympic sport,” world sport under the “moral authority” of the IOC is organised as a meritocracy; hard work, not good luck, genetic or otherwise, is the key to success. [vi]

The association between totalitarian regimes and doping had its roots in the 1970s, when the state-ordered doping program conducted in the German Democratic Republic was exposed and widely viewed as evidence of the evils of Communism. And in the period between the 1988 and 1996 Olympics, when the performances and muscular

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physiques of Chinese female swimmers caused international outcry among swim coaches, these protests eventually led the international swimming federation (FINA) to improve their drug testing programme. By 2000, 38 Chinese swimmers had had positive drug tests, compared to Russia, next in line, with eight.[vii] However, FINA's report for the first 6 months of 2012 showed that no Chinese swimmers had tested positive. In fact, Brazil led the count with four suspensions, ranging from 4 months to 2 years.[viii]

It was in this context that 16-year-old Chinese swimmer Ye Shiwen won the 200m and 400m individual medley events in the 2012 London Olympics, swimming faster than the winning male swimmer, American Ryan Lochte, in the final (freestyle) lap of the 400m event. Veteran American swim coach John Leonard called Ye's performance "unbelievable," "an outrageous performance" and "suspicious," and other coaches and swimmers quickly added their own allegations. Leonard identified her alleged failure to demonstrate what he termed "a normal improvement curve," and, most significantly, he claimed that "... a woman does not out-swim the fastest man in the world in the back quarter of a 400m IM that is otherwise quite ordinary. It just doesn't happen." [ix] In other words, the woman in question is either guilty of doping or not a "real woman." The possibility that Lochte's performance may have been sub-optimal was not entertained.

Interestingly, it appears that no explicit questions about Ye Shiwen's gender surfaced in this case. Apart from her muscular physique, she displayed no other "unwomanly" features, unlike South African sprinter Caster Semenya, whose "masculine" appearance, facial and body hair, deep voice, and muscularity, in combination with a record-breaking performance, had sparked extensive scrutiny a few years earlier, culminating in an IOC and IAAF decision to subject her to 6 months of intrusive testing in order to establish her genetic and physiological "abnormalities" and to prescribe "treatment." [x]

Ye Shiwen's father and the Chinese head of doping control, Jiang Zhixue, responded angrily to these allegations. "Some people are just biased. We never questioned Michael Phelps when he bagged eight gold medals in Beijing." [xi] Also in Beijing, after the American women's gymnastic team lost to China, US coaches Bela and Marta Károli alleged that young Chinese gymnasts had lied about their age or had been taking puberty-delaying drugs. In response, the Chinese coach said, "If you think our girls are little because of looks, then maybe you should think the Europeans and Americans are strong because of doping." [xii]

Jamaican sprinters also prompted doping allegations during the 2012 Olympics. In his usual blunt manner, Richard Pound, IOC member and former head of the World Anti-Doping Authority, led the pack. When asked if he was happy with the way that Jamaica tested its athletes, he said, "No, they are one of the groups that are hard to test, it is (hard) to get in and find them and so forth ... I think they can expect, with the extraordinary results that they have had, that they will be on everybody's radar." Jamaican sport authorities immediately responded to refute his accusation as "without foundation." [xiii]

Conclusion

Viewed in these specific historical contexts – the 1930s rise of Nazism, the 1960s Cold War politics, 21st century globalization and China's economic ascendancy, none of this international posturing concerning Olympic successes is unexpected. After all, sport has been termed a war without weapons, and Olympic sport lends itself to wars of rhetoric as well as highly symbolic, internationally televised victories in the sporting arena. Globalization also means that the flag under which the athlete competes may not represent his/her country of origin. And it may suit nationalistic purposes to "disown" an athlete, as seen, for example, when the media referred to gold medal-winner Ben Johnson first as the Canadian athlete, then Jamaican-Canadian athlete, and finally, just Jamaican athlete, after his medal was revoked following a positive drug test. [xiv] And there are countless opportunities for international *schadenfreude* when another country's athletes test positive while your own manage to avoid that outcome, even while producing similarly "unbelievable" performances, or offering similarly "unbelievable" rationales for positive test results. In short, racism works hand-in-hand with international rivalries and tensions to generate the kinds of media firestorms that were evident in these and most recent Olympic Games. In the face of this reality, the Olympic industry's reliance on rhetoric of international peace and friendship has long lacked any credibility.

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[i] Guttman, A. (1992) *The Olympics* (Champaign IL: University of Illinois Press), 42-3.

[ii] M. Dyreson, From civil rights to scientific racism: the variety of responses to the Berlin Olympics, the legend of Jesse Owens and the “race question,” in R. Barney and K. Meier, Eds., *Critical Reflections on Olympic Ideology*, Second International Symposium for Olympic Research (London: University of Western Ontario, 1994), 46-54.

[iii] R. Collier, Genetic tests for athletic ability: Science or snake oil? *CMAJ* 184:1 (2011), E43-E44.

[iv] Tucker, R. and J. Dugas (August 12, 2008) What Price for an Olympic Gold? The Science of Sport web site. <http://www.sportsscientists.com/2008/08/beijing-olympic-medal-price.html>

[v] Tim Noakes (August 31, 2011) Too Fast To Be a Woman, *The Passionate Eye*, directed by M. Ginnane, CBC Television.

[vi] For a full explanation, see Lenskyj (2000), “The myth of the pure Olympic athlete and pure Olympic sport,” in *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics and Activism* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 102-5. See also Lenskyj (2008), *Olympic Industry Resistance: Challenging Olympic Power and Propaganda* (Albany NY: SUNY Press).

[vii] Colwin, C. (2002) *Breakthrough Swimming* (Champaign IL: Human Kinetics), 215.

[viii] FINA Doping Cases, 2012

http://www.fina.org/H2O/docs/ad_cases_dopingcasesreport2012.pdf

[ix] Bull, A. (July 30, 2012) Ye Shiwen’s world record Olympic swim “disturbing”, says top US coach, *Guardian*

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2012/jul/30/ye-shiwen-world-record-olympics-2012>

[x] Lenskyj, H. (October 2012), *Gender Politics and the Olympic Industry* (Houndmills: Palgrave).

[xi] Adley, E. (August 1, 2012) Ye Shiwen calmly takes another gold as drug claim storm rages around her, *Guardian*

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/2012/jul/31/ye-shiwen-200m-medley-gold?intcmp=239>

Nationalism, Racism and the Olympic Industry

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[xii] quoted in Dave Zirin's blog, *The Nation* (September, 2008)

<http://www.thenation.com/signup/18366?destination=blog/womens-gymnastics-big-mac-beijing-games>

[xiii] JADCo dismisses IOC member's claim against J'can athletes (August 14, 2012) *Jamaica Observer*

http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/A-pound-of-rubbish—JADCo-dismisses-IOC-member-s-allegation_12291481#ixzz23ZKNFy00

[xiv] Miller, T. (2001) *SportSex* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 86-7.