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# Athletes as community; athletes in community: covid-19, sporting mega-events and athlete health protection

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'This is far bigger than our dreams right now. Now more than ever is a time to think bigger than yourself. Protect yourself, your families and your communities'.

Melissa Bishop-Nriagu (Canadian 800 m record holder).

The current coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic presents an extraordinary public health challenge. The WHO defines a pandemic as the global spread of a new disease for which there is little or no pre-existing immunity in the human population. Worldwide, we have seen ambitious public health measures implemented by governments, non-governmental organisations and individuals alike. Yet, there is still more to be done to 'flatten the curve' and mitigate the impact of this pandemic.

Sporting 'mega-events' are international, out of the ordinary and generally large in composition.<sup>1</sup> These include the Olympic Games, which provide mass-spectacle for the public<sup>2</sup> while producing significant health and socioeconomic impacts for host nation(s),<sup>3</sup> including an increased risk for transmission of infectious diseases.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, pandemics like covid-19 bring added urgency to examine the impacts of hosting sporting mega-events.

As sporting mega-events have been cancelled and postponed in response to covid-19, the rhetoric emerging from international sporting organisations, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), has emphasised the importance of protecting athlete health. While this messaging around the decision to postpone Tokyo 2020 aligns with the Olympic Charter, and complements the IOC's

investment in athlete health protection,<sup>5</sup> it is necessary to interrogate what the unintended impacts are for athletes and others in relation to the cancellation, postponement or continuation of staging sporting mega-events in the moment, and aftermath, of a communicable pandemic. The current covid-19 crisis spotlights the need to create and codify a rigorous system of checks and balances that ensures greater accountability on the part of mega-event organisers, while ensuring that the athletes' voice is heard.

## TENSIONS: ATHLETE AS COMMODITY VERSUS ATHLETE AS COMMUNITY

In observing early decision-making processes during the current pandemic that proposed that mega-sporting events *continue as planned*, a tension emerged between maintaining 'athlete as commodity' within a lucrative commercial industry, while recognising and promoting 'athlete as community' in a world that requires social cooperation to mitigate the impact of covid-19. In the case of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, an upsurge in athletes speaking out, such as Melissa Bishop-Nriagu, and action taken by athlete associations and National Olympic Committees, instigated by Canada, clearly prompted the IOC's decision to postpone.<sup>6</sup>

## COMPLEX SOCIAL SYSTEMS: RECOGNISING ATHLETES AS COMMUNITY

The cancellation or postponement of sporting mega-events comprise a clear effort to safeguard athlete health. Given the current situation, any other course of action would be contrary to public health measures. Yet, the disproportionate focus on the health protection of *individual* athletes has sidelined a larger and more pressing conversation: that of athletes as being situated in wider communities. In sports injury prevention it has become common to reference biopsychosocial models and complex systems in athlete health protection work, yet the underpinning frame of reference still seems to be on individuals, rather than communities.

Given the current moment—a world-wide pandemic—it has never been more important to recognise, hold space for and negotiate the complex social systems of which athletes are a part. This lens is particularly important to consider.

Public health centres on the recognition that *individual* athletes are situated *in*—and are integral parts *of*—wider communities that include other athletes, their multidisciplinary support teams, families and local/national/international societies. Flattening the curve of a pandemic depends on recognising that a single athlete can be a vector for this communicable disease (and preventing that), but also that their role within their own complex social systems matters. Prevention here is bigger than *individual* athletes alone. Recognising, holding space for and negotiating athletes *as* community—as human beings who are part of this world rather than simply being commodities—has never been more important.

## RETURNING TO SPORT: ENSURING EQUITY

By its very nature, elite sport is not equitable. Every athlete has a career trajectory that requires navigating several barriers to and facilitators of performance, with only one athlete (or team) standing on top of the Olympic podium at the end of each quadrennial cycle. However, in the aftermath of a communicable pandemic, these inequalities will become more apparent and dependent on different public health responses—representative of an international postcode lottery.<sup>7</sup> Given that elite athletes will periodise their training programmes towards sporting mega-events, which thus requires access to specialist facilities and multidisciplinary support teams, how can these different approaches be taken into consideration for postponed events? Simply moving the timeline may not be enough. Indeed, a recent editorial advocated that 'maximal caution' should be taken in resuming sporting activity.<sup>8</sup> These considerations matter, and returning to sport will thus be about more than the resumption of training schedules and a revamped sports calendar.

## REFLECTION: ATHLETE-CENTRED APPROACHES

Sporting mega-events can provide hope and unity. Amid an extraordinary public health challenge, optimism and solidarity matter more than ever. We don't know what a return to sport will look like after this pandemic; however, we do already

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know that the community matters more than ever. Athletes are demonstrating that ‘social distancing’ is a misnomer: in their insistence to *physically* distance, and encourage others to do so, they show remarkable social interconnection. Taking this physically isolating moment to reflect on athletes as *whole human beings*, situated in communities that they care about, enables us to adopt more of an athlete-centred approach to athlete health protection when we return to sporting mega-events in the future. The fierce urgency of this task has never been clearer.

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