

Politics and morality – the foundations of the sports boycott

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In April next year, the Ice Hockey World Championships are scheduled to be decided in Latvia and Belarus. For ice hockey fan and dictator Alexander Lukashenko, it is an opportunity to offer a well-directed spectacle. After the stolen elections in August and the brutality of the Belarusian regime, the question is whether he will be given that opportunity. The International Ice Hockey Federation is considering moving the championship, and in several countries discussions are underway about a boycott. Again, the question is asked about how much sport and politics belong together and whether boycott is the right method – or whether major sporting events can rather focus on the absence of democracy and human rights?

Stop the game!

After the junta's coup in 1973, the commitment to Chile had grown strong and attracted many of the Swedes who had previously engaged in the Vietnam issue. When Sweden was drawn against Chile in the Davis Cup tennis tournament in 1975, the Chile Committee and many others demanded that the match not be played. The Swedish Tennis Federation stood its alone and wanted – not least for financial but certainly also for sporting reasons – for the match to be played, and for it to take place in Båstad. When the Socialist Government had to deal with the issue, it was initially critical of the match, but then landed in the position that it

was in favour of "freedom of assembly and demonstration" and that it therefore did not want to stop the match.

Jan Guillou watched the demonstrations in connection with the match in Båstad and skrev in Fib/Kulturfront about a press conference with the then Prime Minister Tage Erlander and SSU chairman Lars Engqvist. Also at the press conference was former Chileambassador Harald Edelstam, known for his heroic efforts to provide shelter to more than a thousand Chileans at the Swedish Embassy in Santiago. "It would be a loss for Swedish democracy if there were riots," Erlander said. He and Edelstam also spoke at a demonstration organized by the SSU criticizing the fascist junta while defending the match and what they called "freedom of assembly".

About 7000 demonstrators were present in Båstad to protest against the match as well as against the junta and Pinochet. They also did their best to disrupt tennis matches on centre court and chanted "Stop the match".

It was also the title of the song that Mikael Wiehe wrote and sang with the Hoola Bandoola Band. The song was released as a single with the song about Chilean freedom singer Victor Jara, who was executed by Pinochet's junta, on the b-side. Wiehe's lines of text point to the support that a sporting event is for the junta. "If the game is stopped, we will show our support for the people of Chile," he sings, as well as:

"At the Berlin Olympics, in 1936, Hitler got so much advertising that he almost got perplexed
And the generals of Chile's judgment are after the same thing
But we shouldn't propagate their terrorist apparatus"

Already in 1968 there had been riots before a Davis Cup match in Båstad. Then the demonstrators managed to stop the match against the racist Rhodesia, a match that was later decided on the French Riviera. In 2009, memories of the clashes of 1968 and 1975 were revived when demands were raised for a boycott of the Davis Cup match against Israel in Malmö. This discussion was also conducted at political level and led to a divided social democracy on the issue.

The fact that sporting events are the focus of discussions about boycott or acceptance often is based precisely on the view that the events are an opportunity for positive exposure to a country's political leaders; perhaps also an acceptance of its system and the methods used to control its citizens.

In 1990, political scientist Joseph Nye launched the concept of *soft power*. He argued that a state in addition to tools such as coercion and reward can gain international influence and succeed in influencing through attraction, what he calls *soft power*. A country's soft power can be derived from three sources: culture, political values and foreign policy.

Major international sporting events have the opportunity to play a significant role in a soft power strategy. Grix and Houlihan (2013) argue that influence and a positive image of a country's *image* have previously been a welcome effect, but in recent years have clearly justified large investments based on conscious strategies. They underline the importance of prestige, not least with countries with growing economies that want to gain a stronger position on the international stage.

Brix and Houlian highlight the good outcome of Germany's conscious strategies of hosting the 2006 World Cup. This meant not only a large increase in tourism, but also a more positive image of Germany abroad and a stronger sense of domestic nationhood. When such effects are in the pot, interest from countries in need of either improved *image* or with the desire for prestige increases, which also includes countries with a lack of democracy and human rights.

For example, when China, Russia and Qatar have been awarded major sporting events in recent years, this has resulted in extensive discussions. The organisations that have decided on host countries have, of course, become primary targets of criticism; but also the individual sportsman and the national federations have often been held to account. The demands, which can come from several independent quarters, are often about boycotting the sporting competitions and thereby highlight resistance to the injustice staking out in the competition's host country.

History professor Johnny Wijk, who researches sports boycotts, has in an opinion piece from 2009 meant that sport benefits from being attributed to the importance it gives when calling for a boycott. "Although sport is complaining and feels exploited in nasty games, it should perhaps have a more relaxed attitude. The attention that discussion of politics and sport always generates only reinforces the importance of sport in the social arena and in the media world," he writes.

Wijk also writes that sport has not only survived political interference but has also been strengthened out of it.

In the longer term, the attitude of sport and its own ideology of trying to avoid political-ideological interference has been very successful. It has survived the grip of fascism in the 1930s, several decades of cold war between the superpowers, the sometimes very sharp criticism of the China Olympics and is most likely to cope with the political action of the near future around sport as well.

Johnny Wijk divides the history of sports into three different phases to explain how the mobilization and attention of sport has been used for political purposes. The first phase extended to World War II and was a showdown between states and was often described in military terms, the second was an extension of the *kall k riget* and the struggle between good and evil, while the third phase's link between sport and politics focuses "on different aspects of ethics and morality".

So what is sport's ethical responsibility? The competitive element, the tough conditions of elite sport and the huge sums of money are constantly testing ethical boundaries. Sport has to deal with issues such as doping, hooliganism, racism and how children are subjected to excessively harsh training and exploitation. These are also areas that sport deals with within itself, both internal and external influences force federations at both national and global level to regulate, control and norm.

The sports movement is not homogeneous, but if you are looking for some kind of core and common denominator, it is probably the ambition to operate on your own terms. For athletes and coaches, it is to be able to devote themselves to their sport and challenge yourself and their opponents. It is, of course, also to receive

attention and reward – and it is in this endeavour that sport forms alliances with commercial and political forces.

Could be Russia instead of Belarus

On *Dagens Nyheter's* editorial page, Susanne Nyström writes that Sweden should consider not going to Belarus if it is allowed to keep the World Ice Hockey Championships. She points out that the Czech Republic has expressed such an idea.

Despite the demands of the Swedish Ice Hockey Federation, she makes the most obvious demands of the International Ice Hockey Federation. "It doesn't matter how many times representatives of democratic countries or organizations say that sport and politics don't belong together. When a whole- or semi-dictatorship decides to use championships as political propaganda, it does not want to do it whether the outside world wants it or not," she writes.

The president of the International Ice Hockey Federation says they are not a political organization that can move championships for political reasons. Nevertheless, an expert group has been set up to examine the matter in order to possibly review the decision. The fact that Latvia has said that it no longer wants to arrange the championship with Belarus is a strong driving factor.

It is therefore reported that the possibility of moving matches from Belarus to Russia, a country without a functioning democracy that has annexed a neighbouring country and which seeks to poison opposition politicians while at the same time deteriorating freedom of the press and human rights, is being

investigated. An interesting question is being raised: is it necessary for the situation in the country to be brought to the fore or is there an objective democratic point of when sporting events should not be allowed or boycotted?

After Chile had been defeated in Båstad, Sweden met the communist dictatorship czechoslovakia in the final – without it giving rise to similar protests or demands for the match to be stopped. Was it a result of the Swedes having become accustomed to and to some extent accepted the situation in Eastern Europe's communist dictatorships but was influenced by what the historian Charlotte Tornbjær (2008) describes as a "moral shock" in Chile, that the situation there was given great space and engaged many Swedes emotionally? Sweden has throughout history participated in competitions in both communist and fascist dictatorships, but with varied discussion about the appropriateness of it.

When sanctions are discussed and planned, the ambition is for it to "hit the right one". A measure should strike those in power, not double punish those who are already affected by the policies of an authoritarian leader. Can you see a cancelled Ice Hockey World Cup in Belarus as a punishment against ordinary people who now do not get a chance to watch top-class ice hockey? Or are they not the ones who get tickets to the games? And if Sweden does not participate in an ice hockey World Cup, does it punish Lukashenko's regime or the Swedish players who do not get the opportunity to play in a World Cup the most? Or is the moral responsibility to mark more important than the opportunity to participate in it?

Another relevant question is how much room there is for Lukashenko's regime to export a positive image of the country and the regime through a

sportschampionship. The demonstrations and the regime's hardline resistance have received a lot of international attention and should have set a picture that an ice hockey world championship cannot change. However, the aim may be different. The researchers Grix and Kramareva describe in an article (2015) how Russia through the 2014 Sochi Olympics did not primarily seek an international audience; rather, the strategy was based on strengthening a national identity by emphasizing patriotism and displaying Putin's national idea and his "strong" leadership. Mr Lukashenka may well have the same strategy.

Strong support for boycotts

Calls to boycott championships in countries that violate human rights have strong support among the population. In a survey by Svenska Spel, 57 percent said that they think Swedish sports federations should not send national teams to competitions in countries that do not respect human rights. More than half (53 percent) think that Sweden should boycott major events in such situations as the Olympics and the World Cup.

The next Winter Olympics will be held in Beijing in 2022 and several human rights groups have criticised China hosting the Games. British Foreign Minister Dominic Raab has said he thinks the country should consider boycotting the Olympics because of the way China treats the Uighurs, a Muslim minority that, according to Human Rights Watch, is heavily oppressed. Raab says that "in general, my stance is to separate sports from diplomacy and politics, but it gets to a point when is no longer possible."

The President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), The German Thomas Bach, has had to deal with these demands, underlining that the Olympics are not hosted by the host country:

The Olympic Games are not about politics. The International Olympic Committee, as a civil society organisation, is always strictly politically neutral. Whether to be awarded the Games or to participate is a political assessment of the host country. The Olympics are organized by the IOC, not by governments. It is the IOC that invites the national Olympic committees to participate, the invitation does not come from the host country's government. It is then the national Olympic committees that invite politicians to follow the athletes to the Games. The head of state of the host country is only allowed to say a sentence, formulated by the IOC, to open the Games. No other politician is allowed to play any other role, not even during the medal ceremonies.

The question, however, is whether it is the intentions of the Olympic movement or the practical outcome that should be valued highest. The governments of our countries value the possibility of organising an Olympic Games on the basis that they are behind the application and contribute both financially and in other ways to the country's ability to arrange an Olympic Games.

Sports historian Malcolm MacLean [reacts in an article on drottsforum.org](https://www.drottsforum.org) to Bach's statement and calls the idea of a political sport a "myth". He believes that the statement either shows how little the IOC representatives understand about international politics and its tools or that it is a way of creating confusion in order

to protect their business interests. He believes that the host cities and the countries themselves see the possibility of hosting the Games as a support from the IOC.

"Gave me the hell to form an opinion"

When Sweden qualified for the 1978 Fifa World Cup in Argentina, the discussion began on whether it was reasonable to participate. When the Swede Dagmar Hagelin disappeared in 1977, the Argentine military junta also drew attention to brutality especially in Sweden and the Swedish national team players faced a moral dilemma.

Malmö FF player Roland Andersson was politically aware and was on the left; he was also the one who ended up in the media's focus. In an interview on Sveriges Radio in the autumn of 1977, he says that he has been hesitant but that he has decided after mature consideration to accept if he is selected in the World Cup squad; "although I'm not sure if I made the right decision either."

"I am well aware that the whole World Cup event is a major propaganda stunt for the current regime; and if it is carried out without intermezzon, it is a great propaganda victory for fascism," he said in the interview.

Roland Andersson partly justified his decision by the fact that representatives of the liberation movement had welcomed the World Cup in the hope that it would draw attention to the political situation in Argentina.

"It's grossly underestimating both journalists and footballers if you think they'd go there with notes in their eyes, that's not the case." He means instead that in the

wake of the World Cup will "follow a lot of general reports" and "there will come out a lot of stuff".

Roland Andersson said he gave himself "the hell to get me out and form an opinion. I'll take the experience home and tell you about it." He took Roy Andersson – also from Malmö FF and with political opinions on the left – as well as Björn Nordqvist, Kent Karlsson and Ralf Edström to the "mad mothers" demonstration to some extent show their position.

Not all players were as clear and emotionally involved. As the issue became big, many players were forced to relate to the issue and came to different conclusions. According to Jesper Högström's book on the history of the national team (2008), Conny Torstensson said that if you could play in the Soviet Union, you could also play in Argentina.

Coach Georg "Åby" Eriksson was not particularly involved in the moral issues. He was noticed – and heavily criticized – when he described that the Argentineans "seem to have joy, I have not seen anything – have not sought out anything is well best to say – that suggests that it is not a fine country this" and "about a people, as they say at home, who are like that discouraged and think that everything is boring, how they can then show such tremendous joy for their own country"? He was critical of the journalists' questions and troubled by the debate that was going on about the national team's participation. We haven't really believed in that you're doing back home, he said.

Sports boycott against the apartheid regime

Already several years before the Olympics were to be held in Moscow in 1980, the United States and other allies considered boycotting the Games. There were various reasons, but when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the United States had a concrete reason to boycott the Games (Goldsmith 1995). When the Olympics were held in Los Angeles four years later, the Soviet Union and the other communist states in Eastern Europe, apart from Romania, responded with a boycott.

The neutral and nonaligned Sweden managed to avoid being drawn into loyalty conflicts and has not boycotted any of the Olympic Games. The motto that sports and politics should not be confused has served as a motive.

Although the issue of participation or boycott is generally a matter for sport's organisations, as in the case of the Swedish Government in the Davis Cup match against Chile, it tends to become a political issue and a matter for a country's parliament and government. In 1980, Jimmy Carter, president of the United States, was at the forefront of a boycott. He was supported by the U.S. Olympic Committee, which recently asked the athletes who bestals the opportunity to participate in an Olympics to apologize for their stance. The Secretary-General of the United States Olympic Committee wrote that the boycott had no impact on the global politics of the time, only that it affected the athletes who were not allowed to participate.

The United States got West Germany, Canada and Japan in the boycott, while several other countries abstained. Britain's newly elected Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was keen on the "special relationship" with the US

and called for a British boycott, which was also decided in the Cabinet. But unlike the United States, the British Olympic Committee refused to follow the government, arguing that the Olympics were not about politics, a position of strong popular support. Thatcher, for her part, argued that British athletes had obligations, and to participate in the Olympics would be considered an "international crime". She also announced that athletes would not receive any state financial support and that participants who were government employees would not be granted leave. The sports movement's response was that the British government used Soviet methods (Corthorn 2013).

Most of the Swedish sports movement participated in the sports boycott of South Africa. For example, when reactions to the apartheid regime's policies grew stronger and stronger, Fifa reacted by excluding South Africa in 1963. A UN resolution and an embargo later supported both the International Olympic Committee and individual federations and countries to initiate a boycott of sports exchanges. The country was excluded from the Olympics from 1964 to 1992. The athletes who nevertheless participated in competitions in South Africa or met South African athletes were blacklisted, which had a strong effect.

What significance the sports boycott had for democratization and the end of apartheid policy can always be discussed, but the symbolic importance of broadly choosing distance against racist politics was nevertheless great (Karlsson 2016). After the release of Nelson Mandela and the democratization of the country, South Africa was released back into the sports community. The country's unexpected victory in the Rugby World Cup on home soil in 1995 has been portrayed in a film starring Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon.

Can put the light on a situation

In the run-up to the 2006 Fifa World Cup in Germany, the then Equality Ombudsman Claes Borgström called for a boycott. He argued that the championship supported human trafficking and that a boycott would be a mark against prostitution. However, he did not believe that a boycott would have much effect in the short term. " A boycott would aim forward in time. By drawing attention to the slave trade of our time, we can contribute to its eventual abolition," he wrote on DN Debatt. He wrote about the reactions to the proposal on idrottsforum.org.

Borgström's move was unusual in the sense that the basis for the boycott was not a lack of democracy, the goal of the criticism was instead the prostitution in Germany and the cities in which the matches were played. The fact that U.S. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham wanted to boycott the 2014 Sochi Olympics because Russia granted political asylum to Edward Snowden after he leaked sensitive information to the media shows that there is a breadth of reasons for boycotting sporting events. The fact that Dow Chemicals – which in 1999 had bought the company Union Carbide, which in 1984 was responsible for a gas leak that killed 20 000 people in Indian Bhopal – was one of the main sponsors of the 2012 London Olympics called for an Indian boycott.

It is beyond doubt that calls for sports boycotts often attract a great deal of attention and are an opportunity to shine a light on a particular issue. In the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the discussion was appropriate in giving China the Games comprehensively, which highlighted the state of human rights in the

country. Through this, the Olympics became an opportunity to inform and get attention on various human rights violations in China.

Driving forces of sports federations

Every sports organization believes in its sport and generally has an inherent power to spread its sport around the world. A major sporting event can mean increased interest in the form of both audiences and the number of active performers, thereby creating more money and more development opportunities. It is therefore no wonder that various international sports federations place competitions based on this logic.

If you want to see FIFA's decision to host the World Cup in Qatar as an expression of the desire to spread and even more establish football in the Arabian Peninsula, it is probably naïve. The huge sums of money that authoritarian regimes are prepared to invest for the respect and flair of a major international sporting event can give one suspicion that international sports federations are ignoring a moral responsibility in favour of commercial opportunities.

At the same time, the reality is brutal. Major sporting events have involved interventions and pressures, including the demolition of homes, making people homeless, but also around almost slave-like working conditions. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have reported inhumane working conditions and violations of fundamental rights. The construction of stadiums in Qatar is estimated to cause several hundred deaths.

Although the organising international sports organisations have to balance different interests, it should be reasonable that the responsibility for the non-hosting of sporting events does not support or cause unreasonable conditions and restrictive of freedom of expression lies with them and does not force individual athletes or their national federations to strike a balance around moral responsibility and the will to compete. Both the International Olympic Committee and FIFA have adopted new principles requiring host countries to respect human rights, which has not yet been tested in practice (Hess and Bishara 2019).

The sports competition as an opportunity

When Roland Andersson negotiated with himself to participate in the World Cup in Argentina or not, he mentioned the possibility that journalists from all over the world come to the country and that it provides an opportunity to, in addition to what is happening on the pitch, also put the light on the lack of democracy and human rights. On the basis of this reasoning, sporting events in countries with oppressive egos would be positive. However, the examples show all too clearly that the races are instead hijacked by political leaders who see them as their ability to be washed clean.

Should sport really be outside politics and remain neutral? Or should sport become more political and make use of its great impact, such as the American athletes who knelt to demonstrate against racism or Tommi Smith and John Carlos who for the same reason raised their clenched fists on the podium in Mexico City?

Boycotting sports competitions in non-democratic countries can of course be a method, but sport can also enter these countries as a Trojan horse and – as Roland

Andersson did – pay attention to politics and express its criticism of it. Or as Emma Gren, who painted her nails in the colors of the rainbow at the World Athletics Championships in Russia in 2013. To the same end, the Swedish ice hockey players would visit and draw attention to opposition forces in Belarus.

However, the issue is complex. The Belarusian artist Uladzimir Tsesler has created an image in which an ice hockey puck with the text "2021 * IHF * World Championship" glides on a blood-colored ice. The message is that an Ice Hockey World Cup in Belarus would legitimise Lukashenka. The Belarusian Ice Hockey Federation is also closely linked to the regime. The President of the Union has been accused of being present at the fatal beating of an innocent young man. The Finnish players' association has opposed the World Cup being played in Belarus.

Boycott political issue

"At the Berlin Olympics in 1936, Hitler got so much advertising that he almost got perplexed," the Hoola Bandoola Band sings in Stop the Match. The 1936 Berlin Olympics have become something of the age of both for a championship to be exploited politically, but also around the moral dilemmas athletes and states face.

The sports movement rejected all calls for a boycott for the 1936 Olympics. Calls for a boycott came from different quarters. Among other things, the SSus in the City of Stockholm ran a boycott and got stockholm's workers' municipality and its chairman Zeth Höglund in the demand. At the Social Democratic Party Congress in April, the boycott issue was lifted with the demand that congress should decide on a statement. Prime Minister Per-Albin Hansson was chairman of the editorial

committee that formulated a statement that it was the sports movement that had the right to decide. In the counter-proposal there was an appeal to athletes not to participate in the Olympics. Previously, the LO had also landed in a similar position.

Robert Nilsson describes in a historical c-essay (2007) that parts of the labour movement, however, pushed the issue of boycott further, as did the liberal Gothenburg Maritime and Commercial *Newspaper*. Otherwise, it was in political leftcircles that the demands for a boycott were strongest. They argued that the Social Democrats, through their position, left the athletes "without moral support".

Do the Ice Hockey World Cup in Belarus, the World Cup in Qatar and the Beijing Olympics shine a light on the lack of human rights or are they supportive of the regimes? The calls for a boycott will allow the discussion to continue. The sports movement could act not to open up such discussions, but instead use the power of sport to influence politics and demand human rights.

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