

## **Athlete-cantered Sport: A Relatively New and Progressive Concept of Contemporary Era**

Wondimu Tadesse\*

### **Introduction**

Athlete-cantered sport is currently presented as a relatively new and progressive concept (Clarke, 1994, Kidd, 1996). However, examination of the *Olympic Idea*, which has been the very essence of the Modern Olympic Movement since its inception, reveals that Olympism has always held the harmonious development of humans in the sporting context as a central principle. The socio-political climate in which the Olympic Games and the International Olympic Committee have developed in the last century has led to a marginalization of the athlete. Concerns with commercialisation, television broadcasting rights, political agenda, event marketing and a number of other administrative issues dominate the text in the pages of the Olympic Charter and the bulk of IOC activity. It is in this climate then, that the current concept of athlete-cantered programming is seen as something "new", when it in fact is an attempt to *reclaim* the essence of Olympism.

This paper cannot begin to address the many issues involved in Olympism and sport. Its purpose is not to attempt an in-depth scholarly discussion of the area, but to present the idea of athlete-cantered sport from the perspective of a practitioner in Social Sport Psychology, and to provide one case example of an effort to bring athletes' needs to the centre of a particular sport program.

### **The Mind-Body Concept, the Athlete and the Olympic Idea**

Pierre de Coubertin's humanistic approach to the revival of the Olympic Games and to the Olympic Movement is expressed in the

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Olympic Idea, which he described as, *sport for the harmony of the human machine, for the smooth equilibrium of mind and body, for the joy of feeling oneself more intensely alive*, (1966). Rationalistic humanism views the mind and body as interdependent aspects of the unified self, and *vitalistic* humanism states that the self is *experientially known as an embodied consciousness without separation of the mind and body* (Bandy, 1986, pp. 26 & 28).

While the Olympic Charter (1994) does use the term *Olympic Idea* (Lenk, 1979), its fundamental principles speak of Olympism as a *philosophy of life exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind*, and extols the importance of the "*preservation of human dignity*". Sport is the primary manifestation of the Olympic Movement. Hence, the athlete - the fundamental sport participant is at the very *centre* of Olympism. Therefore, his or her sport participation should embody the humanistic approach of balanced, harmonious development.

### **The Mind-Body Concept and the Field of Sport Psychology**

There are many approaches to practice in the field of sport psychology. Regrettably, some sport psychology consultants have assisted athletes with the separation of mind and body (e.g. mental techniques to ignore dangerous physical pain, facilitation of a one-dimensional sense of self). My personal approach to sport psychology consultation is to enhance the athlete's internal ability to harmonize the mind and body both within and outside the practice of sport. This form of sport psychology attempts to consider the various aspects of an athlete's *psychosocial development*. Hence, the athlete's needs, desires and social roles etc. are central to the consultation process. My hope is to enhance the performance of the athlete as a whole being within the sporting context, a context that provides tremendous opportunities for the discovery of self and others on a regular basis.

## **Social Context and Psychosocial Development**

Sport psychology is often viewed as simply a facilitation of the athlete's cerebral and motor skill abilities. However, the approach described above takes into consideration the tremendous impact of the athlete's social context on his or her development (e.g. family situation, income, gender, sexual orientation). Equally important is the social context of sport within which both the consultant and athlete must work. The high value placed on winning in the sporting world can often conflict with the harmonious development of body and mind. Therefore, the consultant must consider the context of the sport society carefully so that he or she effectively manages the needs of the athlete within this contradictory environment.

## **The Concept of Athlete-Cantered Sport**

Athlete-cantered sport programming is an attempt to bring the humanistic approach of mind-body development to the realm of sport practice. In particular, it is a humanistic approach, which strives to place the athlete at the helm of his or her athletic development. "Implicit in this approach is the right of athletes, individually and collectively, to participate in the formulation of what [is meant] by 'excellence,'" (Kidd, 1979, p. 26). Its aim is to assist, support and educate athletes of all ages in the harmonious development of mind and body within the social context of their sport participation. It also encourages the athlete to critically examine and take responsibility for the sport environment, and to develop a personal meaning of excellence, which can be shared with others.

## **A Canadian Case Example: The "E.D.G.E. Program" at the University of Toronto**

The Department of Athletics and Recreation and the School of Physical and Health Education at the University of Toronto embarked on a joint project to develop an educational support service for student-athletes six years ago. The E.D.G.E. is an acronym for "Educational, Developmental, and Growth Experiences". The name

was chosen to represent the goals of the program and to derive an acronym, which student-athletes could associate, to university life and sport. The basic tenet of the program involved the recognition that student-athletes, who strive for excellence in sport, school and life, have unique needs as well as unique capabilities to offer to others.

The initial focus of the program was simply to give athletes an opportunity to develop mental skills in relation to sport and to have a confidential *space* where they could discuss their concerns. The program involved typical psychological skill training in the areas of concentration, managing anxiety, etc. However, it also focused on aspects of coach-athlete relations, interpersonal communication, school-sport balance, and injury prevention and management. The program continually expanded its scope, embarking on special projects such as initiation and hazing in the sport environment, harassment in sport, body-image issues in sport, drug-education, and athlete satisfaction with the sport program. The types of outreach by the E.D.G.E. included individual consultation with athletes and coaches, team facilitation, and some community outreach education. The most recent expansion of the E.D.G.E. has been to expand programming to the fitness and health community at the University, so that a wider range of people may benefit from its services and principles.

To discuss the program in detail would exceed the limits of this brief account. However, there are some important details which must be noted. This program is unique in that it links research and practice. Graduate students in sport psychology and sociology under the supervision of an academic and staff advisor have essentially conducted its administration and services. The program has been mutually beneficial for the athlete, coach and consultant practitioners as well as for the research development of students and professors. The program has gained credibility in its six short years as represented by a consistent increases in budget allotment, partnerships with other programs on campus and in the community, and use of the service by athletes and other members of the department. It is essential to state that the program is a form of

educational consultation and not a clinical counselling centre. Its purpose is to provide athletes with a consistent *first-stop* support service. All issues beyond the capacity of the program are referred to sources that are more capable; communication with the athlete on his or her progress is maintained.

The E.D.G.E. is in a process of growth, expansion and change. It has all the logistic, structural and ethical issues of a developing program. However, while the future state of the program remains to be seen, at present it has achieved the goal of developing athlete-centered awareness at the University of Toronto.

### **Conclusion: Olympism - Reclaiming Athlete Focus**

Bringing the athlete back to centre stage in the current economic and political milieu surrounding the administration of the Olympic games and the Olympic Movement may seem very difficult, but I believe it is essential for the survival of Olympism. The IOC holds increasing responsibilities to nations, sponsors and television companies, but the fundamental principles of their movement - the commitment to the harmonious development of persons and to the preservation of human dignity make them accountable to the athletes who are the centre of sport and the centre of Olympism. Those who believe in a personal commitment to Olympic Education are accountable for the development of responsible, balanced persons in the form of athletes. Keeping the athlete at the centre, in as many small and large ways as possible is, in my belief, the best way to preserve sport, preserve health and preserve the Olympic Movement.

I believe that it would be useful if that the idea of E.D.G.E. program is shared by the Faculty of Education in the Addis Ababa University. In fact, it is timely to link research and practice in the Department of Physical Education and Sports.

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