

## Human rights and sport

A conference review

Andy Miah

**Host to the Y2K Olympic Games, Bondi Beach in Sydney was host to another first this year in September. The *International Conference, How you play the Game: The Contribution of Sport to the Promotion of Human Rights* represented an important part in a decade of educating in Human Rights, and a decade of sport that has epitomised concerns unique to and reflective of social, human enterprise and dilemma.**

Hosted by the Human Rights Council of Australia, the meeting was the first of its kind, bringing together sports men and women, victims of human rights abuse, academics, activists, sports organisations and administrators and that have contributed toward human rights.

The conference began on 1st September with a welcome message from the custodians upon whose land the conference was based, Bondi Beach.

Members of the tribe greeted delegates with ceremonial dancing, which was received with great respect. It had been the ambition of the conference to play host to the Millennium Stars soccer team. Many of the squad of 15 teenagers, aged 13 – 16 were child soldiers during the Liberian civil war between 1990 and 1997, some of them forced to fight from as young as eight years old. The Stars are now united by football and have been able to put their terrible past behind them, finding the teamwork and co-operation required by football a means by which they can celebrate their youth and forget their horrific wartime experiences.

However, sadly the children were denied a visa for Australia and were thus, unable to attend the conference. At present, the Stars are in the UK, touring the premier league soccer clubs. Their message to the conference was read in their place and was both moving and heartfelt by all. Despite all they had been through, their concern for human life prevailed in their thoughts and all who were present felt deeply upset to have not had the

opportunity to meet these remarkable people. By way of a gesture to these absent friends, the conference attendance will send an Australian Rules football to the Stars along with a signed club shirt of the Swans Australian Rules team with good wishes and hope for the future.

The conference was officially opened by the Hon. Sir William Deane, Governor General of Australia, whose introduction to the meeting was a perfect compliment to the aboriginal welcomes; together demonstrating the embracing nature of the meeting.

Throughout the three days of lectures, various themes for the conference were of interest that reflected the interconnectedness of human rights and sport. Critical to the people of Sydney was the way in which the 2000 Games would impact upon the social climate and priorities of the city and its people. Such concerns were informed by papers that spoke about previous Games and the bidding process itself, the South African bid to host the Games given by Charlene Houston of the Development Action Group in South Africa most notable. Throughout the bidding process, it was made quite clear that the rights of the host city's residents are, unacceptably, not always the first priority for local governments.

Such concerns are furthered by questions over the financial benefits of hosting the Games given the need to ensure a programme of use and maintenance of the event facilities after the games have taken place. Nevertheless, the potential for financial and social benefits from hosting the Olympic Games were well recognised.

Of particular interest to philosophers were themes of Olympism, drug use, and the ethics of sport. The ideals of Olympism, brought into sharp focus by the recent scandals of corruption within the International Olympic Committee (IOC), were seen to reflect the increased commercialisation and professionalism within competitive sport.

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The very autonomy and independence of such mega-events to be insensitive to anything beyond producing the spectacle for the world to see, were argued as being unacceptably so. Despite purporting to bring nations and people together, concerns were

raised about whether sports also serve to discriminate against various peoples, the Indigenous and Gay Games of particular interest.

Drug use within competitive sport has been of interest to sport philosophers for many years. Throughout the last couple of decades, with the marked concern that drug use and doping methods are pervasive of the athlete community, the question of whether governing bodies ought to prevent or deter athletes from such methods of performance enhancement has arisen frequently.

Furthermore, how governing bodies go about ensuring athletes are not 'cheating', brings into focus that the organisation of sport can make demands on athletes that, outside of sport, might be deemed unacceptable. Thus, the taking of urine and blood samples from athletes bears directly on the privacy of an athlete, such ideas furthered by the prospect of genetic enhancement and whether governing bodies would be entitled to require athletes to disclose their genetic pattern.

Questions concerning the ethical status of sport were of key interest to the delegates, with papers discussing sexual harassment and coach/athlete relationships, fan (and athlete) violence, the exploitation of child athletes, and the racial prejudice

that is apparent within many spectator sports. However, throughout the conference it was shared by all that such concerns are most alarming since sport can do so very much for the expression and promotion of human rights.



Andy Miah (delegate) with Patrick Earle and Andre Frankovitz (HRCA).

This was made most clear by Alwyn Morris's keynote speech, which spoke of his Olympic Gold experience and his gesture for his Mohawk people. Alwyn moved the world in the 1984 Summer Games when, upon receiving his medal, he held aloft an eagle feather to reflect his cultural, aboriginal origins.

This gesture spoke volumes to the world, identifying that the boundaries drawn by country do not reflect sufficiently the world of sport and all who participate within it. Indeed, such a statement is made most explicit when recognising that the very sports played within the Olympic Games reflect a sophisticated form of cultural bias.

Of course, whether sports and athletes should be used as some political tool is also pertinent to individual rights and liberties. From one perspective, sport is an environment separate from society, operating within a micro-society with its own rules, ethos, and sanctions. However, with an ever-increasing global and social interest, sport seems torn from such isolated roots.

Thus, whilst such iconic figures as basketball player Michael Jordan and the British sprinter, Linford Christie, can be seen as being in a unique position to further the interests of, for example, the social standing of black athletes, it must be recognised that these individuals are not sportspersons for their being able to further such interest; first and foremost they are athletes, not black athletes.

At the conclusion of the conference, the following statement was drafted by Professor Virginia Dandan from the Philippines and read out to the participants. Clive Linklater from the First Nations in Canada moved that it be adopted by the conference and this was approved by acclamation by those present.

"We, the participants of the First International Conference on Sport and Human Rights, recognize and affirm that sport is inseparable from human rights. We therefore resolve to work individually and collectively with others towards the

protection, promotion and fulfilment of all human rights in sport and through sport. We call on the International Olympic Committee to ensure that the Olympic Games and similar events seek to promote and fulfil human rights, and to establish a working group to elaborate and adopt measures so the Olympic movement can contribute to the protection, promotion and fulfilment of all human rights."

## Links

Human Rights Council of Australia:  
<http://www.aeo.com.au/hrca>

Opening Speech given by Sir William Deane, Governor General of Australia  
[http://www.ozemail.com.au/%7Ehrca/Sir\\_William\\_Deane.htm](http://www.ozemail.com.au/%7Ehrca/Sir_William_Deane.htm)

Conference abstracts  
<http://www.aeo.com.au/ABSTRACT2.htm>

ABC Radio National Transcripts of conference interviews  
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/sportsf/sstories/sf990910.htm>