

Autocracy vs. democracy: A battle that decides the future of sport

As Europeans we have a special obligation to engage in defending the values of sport, and there should be no doubt that we chose the side of democracy. This was the message of Play the Game's international director Jens Sejer Andersen, in his keynote at the opening of the Center for Sports Integrity and Transition at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam.

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all thank you for inviting me to say a few words on this memorable occasion.

When 25 years ago I founded Play the Game without really knowing what I was doing other than trying to widen the scope of sports journalism and promote freedom of expression, academic sports research was still in its infancy or – in some cases – in its teens.

The pioneers in sports science that joined our first conferences had to fight with scorn and contempt among their peers. Professional sport was mostly regarded as superficial entertainment, opium for the people, top athletes were portrayed as simple-minded human beings, and grass-root athletes, the big masses, were also much too ordinary and mundane to deserve the attention of serious intellectuals.

Much has changed in the academic world since then. In some areas, sports science has even become an integrated part of the business and politics of sport. But although the number of sports science departments worldwide has exploded, universities still tend to come late to the party and miss the most burning questions in contemporary sport.

Early attempts to build bridges between researchers in humanistic and social sciences with those in the natural sciences have not been as successful as they should, and this may be one of the reasons that only a few universities have done what you are now doing:

Establishing a multi- and transdisciplinary centre in order to create change in sport – or as you put it more diplomatically: to use sport's "current integrity crisis as momentum for transition".

In a historical perspective, I find it most fitting that a university named after a thinker that dared challenge the most powerful institution of his time – the Catholic church – is now calling for change of a global cultural sector that is also dominated by one very powerful monopolistic institution, an institution with great resemblance to the Catholic church.

Likewise, in the spirit – or should I say Esprit - of Erasmus, it is appropriate to insist on a humanistic perspective in a sector that too often sacrifice the rights of the individual on the altar of winning glory and gold.

And last, but not least, when we deal with sports integrity, it is time we let ourselves be inspired by the European values that Erasmus the thinker has come to represent.

You deserve congratulations for giving birth to this new centre, and like a fairy at the cradle I would like not only to share my best wishes, but also bring a gift wrapped in a set of questions inspired by your name.

Local events, global perspectives

When we speak about violations of integrity, they are very often local events. They are tied to a place and a time, and they involve real people. However, I can hardly think of any transgression in sport that does not come with an international perspective, and that is what I will focus on.

The fundamental question I would like to ask, is very simple:

Does global sports cooperation mean that we have to sacrifice the values we ascribe to sport?

Can we at the international level define a set of values that gives meaning to the word integrity? How far will we go in the transition your centre propose?

To set the discussion off, I'd like to show you a short video that was published earlier this year.

--- Video at <https://video.aktualne.cz/ruske-ministerstvo-obrany-vydalo-propagandisticky-clip-v-rea/r~720ea3ec90cf11eca89f0cc47ab5f122/r~516075e090dd11eca0d8ac1f6b220ee8/>

A tiny, blue-eyed fragile and frightened figure-skating girl finds herself surrounded by a group of threatening grown-up men dressed in gowns and hiding under hoods

Then she looks up and sees she is protected by military officers in full dress uniforms, who scare the dangerous men off only by showing a steadfast attitude ...

And in the final picture, the letters on the ice reads "Kamila, we are with you"

(end)

The video was released first time 18 February on the Twitter account of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. It was a comment to the painful situation that the 15-year-old figure skater Kamila Valieva found herself in, squeezed between a ruthless entourage, a demanding home audience, rivalling antidoping authorities, and a hesitant IOC.

But, deliberately or not, it was much more than a sports political comment. It was a forewarning of what would happen six days later when Russia invaded its neighbour country Ukraine. And it encapsulated some of the most important challenges modern sport is facing.

The video and its context points to the abuse of children in multiple forms, be it political, emotional, physiological, medical, or even sexual. In this specific case, both Kamila Valieva and the girl in the video are under-age victims of adults and systems failing their responsibilities.

The images also contradict the notion of sports as a promoter of peace, by showing how sports and state powers can take athletes hostage of nationalistic and militaristic propaganda.

It symbolizes the widespread lack of rights of individual athletes in an industry where they deliver the core product without a shred of influence, so when they meet system flaws in anti-doping, refereeing, governance, politics, and all other issues off the playing field, they are kicked around as helplessly as the ball in a pinball machine.

Current tensions in sport

Above all, the video speaks volumes about the current tensions in international sports cooperation. It shows how difficult it is to try to unite all nations and people of the world in one collective endeavour, and on the other hand insist that this happens on the basis of a shared value system.

“Unity in diversity” is the slogan that has marked Thomas Bach’s nine years as IOC President, but are we ready to pay any price for unity?

It is a paradox that the Olympic Games were conceived with a clear focus on the individual talent as a way to counter nationalism, but today inspires the opposite: what we seem to have in common during the games is to measure our own nation’s qualities against other nations.

Most other international sports events are driven by our quest for national pride just as much as our fascination of sport. Every country in the world that can afford it, invest huge sums of public money in elite sports development, and the international competition ensures there is always a call for more money, public grants.

Politicians rush to get their share of the glamour connected with victorious sports people, and in return the politicians are bound to accept the ever-spiralling costs.

Dangerous nationalism

Sporting nationalism may appear relatively harmless, but we know from European history how easily national pride can be turned into something very dangerous. In the case of Russia, Putin’s regime has used sport cleverly, carrying out a strategy over two decades to seek influence in sports governing bodies abroad while strengthening national pride and resilience at home.

Since the Russian-international doping scandal erupted almost eight years ago, Russia never accepted responsibility of their state-sponsored doping system. On the contrary, it often dismissed the charges as a campaign against Russia as a nation.

Russia’s generous financial and political engagement in international sports organisations paid off, as the Olympic family engaged in all kind of manoeuvres to save Russia from harsh consequences of their doping policies.

Did any of you notice that there was, formally speaking, no athletes representing Russia at the past two Olympic Games? Only athletes representing the Russian Olympic Committee, wearing the colours of the Russian flag....

When finally international sport decided to ban Russian athletes in the wake of the Russia’s invasion on 24 February, Putin once again showed his ability to turn Olympic principles in his own favour.

At a so-called international event in Russia for a few allied nations, he condemned the boycott as a violation of the Olympic Charter referring to its definition of Olympics as a competition between athletes, not nations. That Putin of all people would remind the world of this principle, is a deep irony wrapped in a tragedy.

But even if Russia's president is the worst ambassador one can imagine for the cause of taking excessive nationalism out of sport, it should not prevent the rest of us for considering the remedies we have at hand.

IOC call for removal of national symbols

At the opening at Play the Game 2022 in June, I dared to suggest that we could start by removing flags, national symbols, and national hymns from international sports competitions.

I was of course aware that this would endanger much of the fuel that drives the economic engine of sport, so I was genuinely surprised by reading a newspaper on my iPad the other day that none less than the IOC President supported the proposal.

To the Danish daily Politiken he said on 13 September that he wishes to remove all national symbols at the Olympics:

"It is natural to be proud of one's country, but this array of national flags and hymns at any medal awarding appears to be an attempt to show that one country is better than others," he is quoted as saying.

I polished my glasses and my iPad screen an extra time, and discovered that I was reading a newspaper from 50 years ago, 13 September 1972, where the newly elected IOC President Lord Killanin laid out his visions for the games. Needless to say, he was not successful.

Sport as an enabler

It would be unfair to claim that international sport could have prevented Russia's aggression in Ukraine by responding more forcefully to its doping fraud, but it is timely to reflect about sport's role as an enabler of nationalism and militarism in Russia and elsewhere.

We have seen how China exploited the recent Winter Olympics to boost its ambition of a new world order, and a number of other autocratic states, led by Qatar and Saudi-Arabia, are now investing zillions of dollars in sport in order to improve their public image at home and abroad, open doors in international diplomacy and diversify their domestic economies.

It is important to stress that the arrival of authoritarian states in the business and politics of world sport has faced very little resistance, on the contrary. World sports leaders has been queuing up before the Arab authorities to get their share of the incredible fortunes that are on offer.

And we should bear in mind that the vast majority of presidents and secretary generals in international sport, are of Western origin from countries with a democratic culture. Europe still has a disproportionate share of the sports power, so the corruption, doping and all other integrity challenges have developed while Europeans were in charge.

And they continue to develop. UEFA has just made new regulations to make the rich clubs richer and to make it even more difficult for the rest to enter the most attractive competitions.

Special obligations for Europeans

Nevertheless, I think that we as Europeans today have a special obligation to engage in defending the values of sport. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that sport remains a geopolitical battleground.

There is war again in Europe, and the continental plates are in motion. They move toward a landscape divided in three. One strong block of autocratic states, one strong block of liberal democracies, and in between them nations who must navigate as best they can.

There should be no doubt about where sport and its organisations belong. The values of sport leave little choice. With their emphasis on the integrity of the body, the freedom of association, the rights of the individual, the combat against discrimination, the insistence on an even playing field, the open competitions, and the efforts to make playful physical activity a human right, sport should be a haven for democracy.

Unfortunately, sports organisations hesitate to make their position clear. Russian athletes are banned, yes, but not the country's sports officials. And who knows if the bans can stand the test in the unpredictable Court of Arbitration for sport or later in public court rooms?

Shakes foundation of sport

This indecisiveness from sport has consequences far beyond the Russian situation. It shakes the foundation of sport as an educational tool and as a progressive factor in our societies.

In terms of communication, propaganda and symbolic value, international sport is without any doubt the most important battlefield over the values we wish to guide our personal lives and societal coexistence. The 24/7 presence of sport on all our screens is a constant channel of messages about right and wrong, true or false, and it is no way innocent what is transmitted and what is left out.

The norms and values communicated globally via the media trickle down to all levels of sport and physical activity and make an impact on how we and our children define the ideals we should uphold, conveying among other things a message of competition as a core element of human life.

In my view, sport in itself is neither good and bad. It can be used to improve humanity as well as to drag us down. It can create mutual understanding and it can cultivate aggression. It can serve discrimination and oppression, and it can provide equality and authority to the participants.

Sport is a very powerful tool, much too powerful to leave it in the hands of autocrats.

Step up our efforts

If we believe that sport must be intrinsically linked to democracy and human rights, we have to step up our efforts and make alliances across all stakeholders.

We must start to a dialogue at the national and European level among athletes at elite and grassroots level, volunteers, sports officials, fans, local and national authorities, sponsors, media companies, governments... and do what the autocratic forces have done for decades: Create long-term strategies for achieving the goals that serve our societies best.

We need strategies to be successful in a number of areas: in improving the governance of sport, getting full financial transparency, combating matchfixing and illegal gambling, stopping the infiltration of criminal groups, putting an end to trafficking, whitewashing and tax evasion, protecting children from all kinds of abuse, in other words: Ensuring that sport lives up to the values it claims to promote, which must be the definition of integrity.

Challenges have come to stay

I have mentioned the IOC President Thomas Bach a couple of times, and I do so because he has brilliantly understood how to operate in a political system that begs to be controlled from the top. Like a one-party state, like the Catholic church.

When he was elected president of the German Olympic Sports Confederation 16 years ago, he issued a warning: “Wir stehen vor Herausforderungen erschreckender Grössenordnung” – we are facing challenges of a terrifying magnitude.

I think we must conclude that the challenges have come to stay, and their size is still scary.

If the most powerful man in the most powerful system in sport has not been able to diminish the integrity challenges, we must come to their rescue. Not for the sake of the Olympic family, but for the sake of families worldwide. Not to safeguard the Olympic movement, but to create a movement culture that can truly embody the values we wish to build our societies on.

The name of your centre implies that you will commit to truth and to change. That will not come without resistance, and I wish you a good fight.