

Risk and power factors in sport

I would like to talk about the elements which might make sport a perfect area for right-wing extremism and other anti-democratic, authoritarian and discriminatory policies and practices. And I would like to speak about the opposite: Why sport is a perfect area to fight against these tendencies.

I'm a journalist, so let me start with words: The term "discrimination" comes from the Latin verb *discrimire* which means to separate, to distinguish. Or, if we look at sport, to draw a line in the sand, to say you're on my team, she or he is on theirs. It's us against them, me against you. That's where competition starts and where me and you are symbolised by team colours or a badge, by a name or a whole city. Competition is closely linked to rivalry. We have many examples from sport, often football, where us against them doesn't end with the match, where it continues long afterwards and becomes the basis for hostility, even for violence. Especially with young people it's important to make this distinction about competition: Your sports opponent is not your enemy. You can fight on the pitch and be friends afterwards.

My second point is the connection of sport and masculinity. There are very few areas of society, maybe only the military, where the ideology of strength and honour, of endurance and the overcoming of weakness is so dominant as in sport. These are values which are strongly related to our societies' idea of masculinity. That which does not fit in here is perceived as weak – and as female. You have everyday striking examples of this in the talk of not being pussies, of players and officials who say that their team should not play like girls – and where this is clearly meant as an insult. All of this vocabulary and the imagined values that go with it can also be found in the books of right-wing politics and of every single authoritarian regime.

My third point: What I have said before is often countered by "But it's only sport", meaning something like "It's not for real". It's the idea that sport is played in a universe of its own, devoid of connections with the rest of the world and most of all with politics. That is behind the big sport bodies like the IOC forbidding political messages. More close to home perhaps is a story like this: Imagine a sport club in a village which is very much supported by a local resident couple, they are parents of a player, they drive the kids to tournaments, give money to the club, help with organising the summer party.

They are very nice. And they are members of a far right party. What do you do? It is sports or politics? Where do you draw the line? – I'll leave this unanswered

I now want to leave the risk factors of sport and will come to what I call power factors. I've described how sport begins with a line in the sand, with one team against the other. But it's also true that there is a team in the first place or a club, a community, a strong sense of belonging in sport. And it is a kind of belonging that comes very easily in many ways. There are many stories of kids and young people who are left behind by the education system, who are not successful in school, but who find their place in a sport, a team, a club they love. Where they can use a different skill set than the one they need in school, where they can feel empowered and in their turn empower others.

Before I've said that sport is closely linked to masculinity, to ideals of honour and strength. But at the same time there are very few places in society where men are allowed more emotions than in sport, where crying, embracing, touching is more normal for heterosexual men than in sport. And at the same time where women can enter a masculine world, become a part of it and can also feel empowered by its ideas of honour and strength. Especially with regard to gender sport creates huge boundaries, but at the same time it offers space to overcome these boundaries.

The great strength of sport is its ability to create a community and a collective identity but this strength can be turned into a weakness when it is connected with politics of inequality. Your challenge in this project as I see it will be to support the strength, the idea of community and be aware of the inherent danger. You need to also support values of equality, inclusion and respect.

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