

# Match Point

## *SPORTS, NATIONALISM, AND DIPLOMACY*

---

7 **The Death of Doubt?**

*Sport, Race, and Nationalism in the New South Africa*  
DEREK CHARLES CATSAM

15 **Cross-Strait Tug of War**

*Taiwan and the World Games*  
JUNEWI YU

25 **Sports without Diplomacy**

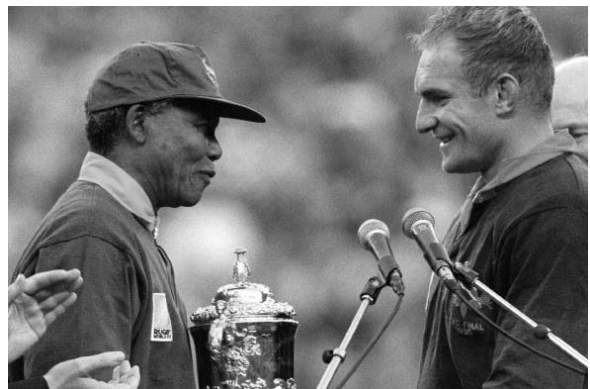
*The United States, Cuba, and Baseball*  
THOMAS GAROFALO

---

George Orwell, in a famous essay in 1945, described sport as “war minus the shooting.”<sup>1</sup> Exaggerated as this description may sound, Orwell observed a seemingly obvious relationship between sport and politics that has not systematically been studied. Given all our theories about how nation-states interact in international relations, this gap in the literature is somewhat astounding, especially since sport is an activity engaged in by all of the world’s population—across territorial, cultural, religious, and ethnic boundaries.

There are many ways to think about the link between sport and politics. The historical practice of sport, for example, can have a pacific effect among peoples. In the ninth century B.C.E., at the first Olympic festival of the ancient games, three kings—Iphistos of Elis, Cleosthenes of Pisa, and Lycurgus of Sparta—signed a treaty establishing the “Olympic Truce,” which banned all hostilities while the games were played.

Sport can also be a prism that refracts political conflict. Nowhere was this role more apparent than during the Cold War,



where matches between the United States and Soviet Union had meaning beyond the playing field. Victories became statements of the superiority of one social system over another. Ironically, the politics of this sporting competition reached its apex in Moscow and Washington's decisions not to compete in the 1980 and 1984 summer Olympic Games, respectively.

Sport has also been a political target of terrorism. Athletes, strewn in the colors of their countries, often represent the personification of their nation's policies and international conflicts. While athletic venues, moreover, were seen as soft targets by terrorists, they offered a world stage on which terrorists could make their grievances known. The tragedy of the 1972 Munich Olympics is so well-known that, today, organizers spend almost as much in dollars on security at venues as on the events themselves.

Sport has also become useful as a tool of diplomacy. On certain occasions, it has helped break the ice in otherwise frigid relations between countries—and in a way that years of conventional diplomacy could not. The seminal example here is “ping-pong diplomacy,” in which China invited the U.S. table tennis team to play exhibition matches in Beijing in April 1971. The matches played an important role in helping to pave the way for Sino-American reconciliation. Of course, there were a number of other factors at play which led to Richard Nixon's eventual trip to China, but the image of these unassuming diplomats—ranging from an IBM programmer to a housewife from Grand Rapids, Michigan—as the first Americans since the 1949 revo-

lution to sightsee on the Great Wall and to place a long distance call to the United States was an undeniable boost to Nixon's diplomatic efforts.

Keeping in mind the many purposes of sport in the international arena, this issue's Forum brings together authors who advance our knowledge of the relationship between sport and politics.

Junwei Yu's contribution looks at the highly successful 2009 Kaohsiung World Games in Taiwan. The article's focus—the relationship between sport and national identity—represents an important facet of sport and politics. Sport evokes emotion and unity in a way that no other form of politics, art, or music can accomplish. In this regard, Yu shows how the Games provided a stage for Taiwan to promote political ideology and Taiwanese identity in the face of difficult cross-Strait relations.

In the past, sport has also been used as a form of sanction. The international community banned some countries from participating in the Olympics after the two World Wars; perhaps the most well-known use of sport as sanction concerned apartheid in South Africa. Derek Catsam's article, however, offers another side of this story—that is, the redemptive power of sport. He looks at the interesting intersections between race and nationalism as they are represented through South Africa's experience with rugby and—in anticipation of this summer's FIFA World Cup—football.

Finally, Thomas Garofalo's study of baseball and Cuba shows us the potential opportunities, afforded by this shared national pastime, for diplomacy between Washington and Havana. His work demonstrates that the link

between sport and diplomacy is more than just love of the game. It requires a degree of political leadership and a willingness to seek change rather than the status quo. As he sees it, with proper leadership, sport can be an agent of political change.

The authors of this Forum hold different opinions of the utility and role of sport in international affairs, but they do agree on one thing: the poten-

tial influence of sport on the nation-state. Sport, as Orwell opined, may lack the shooting of a full-blown war. But sport, like war, may be just as intense and just as defining for the character of a country and for relations among states.

**Victor D. Cha** IS D.S. SONG PROFESSOR OF GOVERNMENT AND ASIAN STUDIES AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> George Orwell, "The Sporting Spirit," in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 321; originally published in *Tribune*, 14 December 1945.