The Promotion and Perception of the Youth Olympics Games: A Figure Skating Perspective

Lawrence Judge, Ball State University
Jeffrey Petersen, Baylor University
David Bellar, University of Louisiana Lafayette

The hope of the Olympic movement is to be associated with youth, health, sportsmanship, peace, education and enjoyment; ideals encapsulated in the Olympic Charter (Loland, 1995). However, youth today have far more interests and distractions than in the past when the Summer and Winter Olympic Games every four years was more eagerly anticipated. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) seeks to reignite interest in Olympic sports in a generation of increasingly inactive and overweight adolescents. IOC president Jacques Rogge and the general assembly developed and approved a plan for a Youth Olympic Games (YOG); a sporting event targeted specifically for teenagers (14-18) beginning in 2010 for summer games in Singapore and 2012 for winter games in Innsbruck (Digel, 2009). This new proposal, however, has provoked debate from advocates and critics alike.

It has been recognized that youth sport is often legitimized by a discourse focused on health and development (Helle-valle, 2008). Indeed, as the orientation seems positive, healthy and in the best interests of young people, it is still important to understand the YOG from a critical perspective as well (Vaugrand, 2001). Critics of the YOG worry that a worldwide spotlight on a youth competition will increase what is already negative about youth sport: overtraining, increased dropout rates, cheating, and overzealous youth coaches putting youth athletes in danger. Digel (2008) has opined a number of unintended consequences including concern that the YOG might indeed fuel hyper-commercialism and related negative aspects of sport such as doping. Even though the first YOG is rapidly approaching, the event has received very little attention from the media (Brennan, 2007). In a recent study by Judge, Petersen and Lydum (2009), personal and public awareness of the YOG was reported to be extremely low among athletes, coaches, administrators/sport officials, and parents involved in six Summer Olympic sports in the United States. The results of the Judge et al. study raise some interesting questions concerning the strikingly low personal and public awareness reported for the YOG as a global event.

The purpose of this research study was to collect data from figure skating coaches in the United States regarding their awareness and perceptions of the upcoming YOG. A survey was administered to 114 coaches (M = 33.7 years, SD = 11.5) with a gender mix of 89.5% female and 10.5% male, all of whom were involved in the Professional Skaters Association (PSA) coaches education nationwide seminars. The research questions were analyzed according to key coaching demographics including: level of certification, geographic region, age of athletes coached, gender, and ethnicity.

Primary research questions focused on personal awareness (M = 2.32, SD = 1.70) and public awareness (M = 2.04, SD = 1.50) of the new IOC initiative (YOG) through Likert scaling ranging from totally unaware (1) to very familiar (7). These total sample mean values are extremely low for a global sporting event such as the YOG. Further analysis via Manova revealed several significant differences within the demographic groups in both personal awareness and public awareness.

The level of coaching certification significantly impacted the mean levels of YOG personal and perceived public awareness (F(15, 225) = 2.34, p = 0.004, ηp2= 0.135, Power= 0.981) The PSA has a five tier certification program with five rating levels (Basic Accreditation, Registerd, Certified, Senior and Master) in ten skating disciplines. Post hoc testing with Bonferroni correction revealed that the mean values for all certification levels (M≥ 2.67, p≤0.001) was significantly greater than the mean for non-certified coaches (M = 1.18) in response to personal awareness of YOG. Similar post hoc analysis revealed that the level of certification also significantly impacted the mean levels of YOG perceived public awareness. All levels of certification responded with higher means (M≥2.31), which were significantly different (p≤0.021) than non-certified (M = 1.03).

The age of athletes coached was another demographic characteristic that significantly influenced the mean values for both personal and public awareness of the YOG (F(6,148) = 10.08, p ≤ 0.001, ηp2= 0.290, Power = 0.999). The primary categorizations for athlete age were youth, youth and high school combined, and high school aged athletes.
Post hoc testing for personal awareness revealing three significantly different means ($p \leq 0.001$) with youth ($M = 1.55$) the lowest followed by youth/high school combined ($M = 3.20$) and high school ($M = 4.82$). Similar post hoc testing revealed significant differences ($p \leq 0.001$) regarding public awareness demonstrating three distinct groups in the same rank order of mean values for youth ($M = 1.38$), youth/high school combined ($M = 2.80$), and high school ($M = 4.12$).

Manova analysis also revealed a significant level of certification by age of athlete coached interaction effect ($F(21,225) = 2.286$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta^2 = 0.176$, $\text{Power} = 0.995$). Post hoc analysis revealed that individuals who had higher levels of certification and coached older athletes tended to report higher personal and perceived public awareness of YOG.

Responses to open ended survey questions regarding the objectives of the YOG, the benefits and drawbacks of the YOG, and the preparation needed for the upcoming YOG raised more questions and intense concerns because of the lack of awareness about such a potentially high impact event for youth athletes. Primary themes identified from these responses included concerns about: management pressures stemming from economics, external media, parental pressures, and athletic scrutiny by many constituent groups. Participants in the present study also indicated that the YOG needs to increase marketing and promotion efforts due to participant lack of awareness and perceived lack of public awareness.

Although the initiative has claimed to be potentially beneficial to the development of youth sport, a discrepancy still exists in awareness and attitudes levels amongst the representative sample of figure skating coaches. However, the power of the Olympic movement cannot be understated. McCann World Group was recently appointed by the Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organizing Committee (SYOGOC) to develop the marketing campaign for the inaugural Singapore 2010 Youth Olympic Games. McCann will develop a promotions activities plan (regional and international) including planning online promotional activities to create awareness of the Games and to drive traffic to its websites for the Games (Bakht, 2009). But, will this promotional effort be enough to reach a global audience?

Results of this study raise some interesting conclusions and suggestions for future research. A vital unknown is the actual outcome of the YOG as opposed to the intended outcome. What can and will be done to and aid in the development of a YOG marketing message that increases awareness, generates interest, arouses desire for involvement, and initiates action on the part of all involved in youth sport? There is a need for future study to assess the outcome of the impending YOG. Furthermore, as this research is based in the U.S. and not necessarily generalizable internationally, a study on the impact of the YOG from other countries is warranted. In addition to figure skating coaches, athletes, parents, and officials of all affected sports of the YOG should be aware of both positive and negative consequences of the YOG and become better prepared for their arrival.