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Sport and diplomacy: an introduction

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This volume of Sport in Society focuses on the interrelationships between international sport and diplomacy. Its genesis came from the establishment in 2011 of the Diplomacy and International Sport research group by directors Stuart Murray (Bond University), Geoffrey Allen Pigman (University of Pretoria) and J. Simon Rofe (SOAS, University of London). Already scholars of diplomacy and interested in the phenomenon of international sport, we each discovered independently that there was a significant lacuna in the literature linking diplomatic studies to international sport. Our endeavours aim to craft a greater understanding of how the two subjects are interrelated, in the first instance to contribute to scholarship in the two fields, but not least in the second because both sport and diplomacy have the capacity to influence the lives of millions of people across the planet.

The international dimension of sporting competition has been considered extensively in sociological literature by scholars like David Black and Robert Redeker. A few seminal case studies highlighting the part played by international sport in international relations and diplomacy have also recently been published, including articles by Manzenreiter (2008) and Chehabi (2001). However, the publication of these works highlighted the fact that no systematic attempt to understand international sport and its rôle in diplomacy had yet been undertaken. We decided to establish the research group in an attempt to fill that void.

The time for a systematic investigation of sports-diplomacy is ripe for two primary reasons. First, nowhere has the diffusion and redistribution of political and economic power in our globalizing world been more visible to the general public and scholars alike than in international sport. Around the world on any given day, at almost any hour, sporting experiences that once were limited to thousands are now shared by millions. Now, the UEFA Champions League, the National Basketball Association, Formula One motorsports or Master’s Series tennis matches are experiences shared even by people with access to the most rudimentary technologies, particularly across the Global South. Kicked off by the Beijing Summer Olympics, the period since 2008 has witnessed the spread of the world’s largest sporting mega-events, the Olympic Games and the FIFA football (soccer) World Cup, to the BRICS nations, with the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, upcoming Olympiads in Sochi, Russia (2014), and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2016), and the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil.

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The second rationale for investigating sports-diplomacy at this juncture is the relative rise in the importance of soft power, the power to persuade and attract, as a major development in international relations since the end of the Cold War. As diplomacy is one of the primary and perhaps most important tools of soft power, there has been a heightened interest in diplomacy, and in particular the techniques of public diplomacy and place branding, amongst scholars and the general public alike. International sporting competition is perceived increasingly as an ideal channel for nations, regions and cities to share their identities, their merits and ‘brands’ with the rest of the world.

The papers in this volume are intentionally both methodologically heterodox and theoretically diverse, reflecting the burgeoning field of enquiry bringing together sport and diplomacy. To embark upon this endeavour, Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman propose a broad theoretical taxonomy of the sport diplomacy relationship. The papers that follow paint a richer picture of these relationships by considering a range of sports (football, rugby, tennis, speed skating), international sporting institutions (IOC, FIFA, RFU), events (Olympics, Rugby World Cup, Football World Cup, UEFA Champions League, Commonwealth Games, Grand Slam tennis tournaments) and nations (UK, Romania, New Zealand, Australia). At the same time, the papers address an equally wide range of contemporary diplomatic actors (national governments, cities, international sporting federations, transnational firms, transnational social groups) and functions or processes (representation, communication, multi-level diplomacy, public diplomacy, celebrity diplomacy). Mark Pope explores the public diplomacy surrounding the London 2012 Olympiad in the light of a cosmopolitan discourse that questions openness and levels of inclusiveness in the London Games. J. Simon Rofe probes the role played by an iconic sporting institution – English football club Manchester United – as a non-state actor in traditional and new understandings of diplomacy. Alan Tomlinson, focusing on FIFA, addresses the challenges faced by international sporting bodies in attracting and maintaining public confidence in them as facilitators for international sporting competition. Anthony Deos evaluates New Zealand’s use of relational public diplomacy as a means of attracting tourism and investment on the occasion of their hosting the 2011 Rugby World Cup. Antoaneta Vanc investigates Ilie Nastase’s role as a celebrity ‘anti-diplomat’ in representing a Romanian government seeking to project an international image distinct from the Soviet bloc during the cold war. Caitlin Byrne analyses the diplomatic relationship between international sporting federations and host cities, using the case study of negotiations between the Commonwealth Games Federation and Gold Coast, as Gold Coast prepares to host the 2018 Commonwealth Games. In addition to the scholarly papers, a shorter paper by a sporting practitioner, Olympic speed skater Blake Skjellerup, offers a highly personal and insightful reflection on how competitors engage in multiple diplomatic representations through their practice in international sport. The scholarly papers not only draw deeply upon the literatures of international relations and diplomatic studies, but they also draw broadly from other literatures: history, sociology, political theory and philosophy, urban studies, political science and political economy, amongst others. Research methods range from historical and contemporary documentary research to first-person interviews, investigative journalism, quantitative analysis and participant–observer research.

The divergence across so many metrics that we were able to include in this volume highlights the value of, and the need for, methodological and disciplinary pluralism as this research area emerges. In addition to providing an ideal vehicle for drawing linkages between existing literatures, sports-diplomacy research makes an important contribution to pushing out the already expanding and porous, and still contested, boundary of what
constitutes contemporary diplomacy. The papers collectively also make the case for the importance of developing theoretical frameworks for organizing the documentation of sports-diplomacy to date and for generating new case study research. Between them, these papers should offer future researchers an assemblage of tools for making comparisons and recognizing patterns in the varied relationships between diplomacy and international sport.

The research that has been undertaken for this volume has also identified a key issue for scholars and practitioners of sports-diplomacy going forward. There is tremendous variation in the standards of sports-diplomacy as it has been practised and an even wider divergence in the extent to which it has been able to achieve stated objectives. Hence there is a great need for benchmarking – identifying and disseminating standards of best practice – both in the technical practice of sports-diplomacy and in the values, ethics and objectives underlying it, and for capacity building. Governments, international sporting federations, civil society organizations, global and regional firms that sponsor sporting competition and international media firms that broadcast sport can all learn from one another not only how to do what they do better but also how to think about what they do from a more critical and well-informed perspective. At their worst, crises in international sport can undermine dramatically a sport’s public credibility and thus its ability to bring people together and mediate difference in a diplomatic sense, as the recent scandals engulfing professional cycling have illustrated. It is our objective that the forthcoming sports-diplomacy research, of which we hope that this volume is only the first major product, will contribute significantly to that learning process.

References