

**GoodWork® Project Report Series, Number 47**

**Excellence and Ethics in Olympic Sports**

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### **Abstract**

How do Olympic athletes define success in sport? Through interviews with 10 Olympic athletes whose participation in the Olympic Games ranged from 1976 to 2004, I examine the motivations and perceptions of these athletes, and evaluate the role played by ethical behavior in their definitions of success. I present a model for high quality, socially responsible work in Olympic sports, built upon 3 lines of research: the GoodWork® Project's (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon, 2001, 2006) models of "good work," field, and domain; Takács's (1992) model of ethics in Olympic sports; and Sullivan's (2005) and Freidson's (2001) models of professionalism, bureaucracy, and markets.

### **Excellence and Ethics in Olympic Sports**

“What counts in life is not the victory, but the struggle; the essential thing is not to conquer, but to fight well.”

- Baron Pierre de Coubertin (2000, p. 589)

*“Citius, Altius, Fortius”*

- Olympic Motto (Coubertin, 2000, p. 591)

#### **Introduction**

The modern Olympic Games, which Pierre de Coubertin is credited as launching, rest upon the ideals of excellence in sport and fair competition. The first Fundamental Principle of Olympism (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2004) states:

Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles (p. 9).

Since 1984, when the organizers of the Los Angeles Olympic Games showed that the Games could be a profitable enterprise with the aid of corporate sponsors, the Olympics have become increasingly associated with monetary consideration (Simson and Jennings, 1992). The potential of large financial rewards for athletes, coaches, administrators, and corporations, through association with the Olympic Games, has led to several high-profile contraventions of the principles of Olympism. Chief among these incidents have been the Salt Lake City bid scandal (Cable News Network, 2001), the 2002 figure skating judging scandal (Lauerma, 2002), and the 2003 conflict of interest case that led to a major restructuring of the United States Olympic Committee (Institute for Global Ethics, 2003), not to mention the ongoing struggle against doping in Olympic sports that has continued unabated since the 1960s. (Thankfully, the 2006 Winter Games in Torino were free of major scandal.)

While the ability of the Olympic Games to remain solvent is undoubtedly a good thing, corporate interests bring corporate expectations to what Coubertin initially conceived of as an idealist enterprise. To an increasing degree, corporate sponsors are viewing their sponsorship of the Olympic movement less as a philanthropic enterprise and more as an investment that demands a return (Miyazaki and Morgan, 2001). The return on investment for Olympic team sponsors is measured in one currency: Olympic medals.

In the context of the GoodWork® Project (2006), “good work” is defined as that which is “of high quality, socially responsible, and meaningful to the worker” (p. 4) The same objective standards that inspire athletes to excellence—the fact that each competition has winners and losers—may complicate the abilities of athletes to perform good work. There are times when an athlete’s drive for competitive excellence and his social responsibility come into conflict. I investigate these conflicts based on the concepts of field and domain alignment as used by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2001).

The Olympic athletes who stand on the podium every four years represent only the tip of the iceberg of the Olympic movement. Olympic athletes serve as role models and mentors for hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of young athletes. Olympians have the potential to instill ethical behavior in those athletes who look up to them.

Olympic athletes struggle with the components of good work on a daily basis. On the one hand, they are the stewards of the Olympic movement, whose creed states: “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well” (IOC, n.d.). On the other hand, the athletes’ ability to eke out even a marginal existence depends on the largesse of corporate sponsors, who care more for the triumph than the struggle. They must reconcile within themselves the proper balance between objective standards of excellence on the field of play and “respect for universal fundamental ethical principles” (IOC, 2004).

My question can be stated as follows: How do Olympic athletes define

success, and does that success have an ethical component? Is there a place in modern Olympism for Coubertin's (2000) notion that "the essential thing is not to conquer, but to fight well," (p. 589) or has such a sentiment become antiquated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century business environment of the Olympic Games?

### **Literature**

The current literature in the field focuses largely on the psychology of athletic achievement: what motivates athletes to train hard, to compete, and to succeed, and how the psychology of champion athletes differs from that of non-champions. Much of the literature also focuses on the variables affecting performance at the Olympic Games. In "Doing Sport Psychology at the Really Big Game," Sean McCann (2000) describes the compound pressures that athletes face at the Olympic Games, when media scrutiny, family interest, and coaching pressures are much greater than at other competitions throughout the quadrennium. Anne Marte Pensgaard's (1999) case study of the 1996 Norwegian women's Olympic soccer team indicates that, in order to maintain perceptions of control, athletes and coaches must remain focused on the task at hand, not the outcome. "At this level, a focus on outcome, winning and beating others, is undertaken by both the media and spectators. Thus an additional focus on these factors by the coach is unnecessary" (Pensgaard, 1999, p. 124).

Another topic that occupies much of the contemporary literature regarding the ethics of sport is the use of performance-enhancing substances (Shapiro, 1991; "Superhuman Heroes," 1998). Much has been written on this topic, concerning both professional and amateur sport. Although I address doping as an ethical concern, it is as part of the overall framework of ethical behavior in Olympic sports, rather than as an isolated subject. Doping emerges as a binary subject in Olympic sports: either it is a major challenge in a sport, or it is hardly a challenge at all.

Several economists (Hoffman, Ging, & Ramasamy, 2002; Johnson & Ali, 2004) have developed predictive models of a nation's Olympic success based on national characteristics such as population, Gross National Product [GNP],

climate, and governmental structure. In general, temperate climates, greater population, higher GNP, and strong centralized governments correlate with increased participation rates and medal-winning success at the Olympic Games. The Johnson and Ali (2004) model boasts an accuracy rate as high as 95%. These models describe the national socioeconomic variables and global climatic variables that associate with winning Olympic medals; I will deal with Olympic success from the perspective of the athlete.

Simson's and Jennings's (1992) *The Lords of the Rings*—and Jennings's (1996) subsequent *The New Lords of the Rings*—study the commercialization of the Olympic Games and the IOC. While bribery, nepotism, and political maneuvering at the IOC level do indirectly affect athletes, they are not daily motivating or demoralizing factors in athletes' performance. This indirect influence does, however, disillusion athletes, affecting their decisions to continue “giving back” to the sport, as well as the alignment between the field and domain. The IOC is one of the primary institutions within the field, and it is the highest authority for defining the written codes of the domain.

The struggle between excellence and ethics has been studied before; I add to that body of research by detailing the market pressures that exist to a much greater extent for current athletes. Ferenc Takács (1992) investigated the tension between two “moral pillars” that make up Coubertin's Olympism: the Olympic motto, *citius, altius, fortius*; and the concept of the primacy of the struggle. Takács argues that the two concepts are in opposition. The Olympic movement cannot simultaneously be inclusive *and* exclusive, encouraging participation for all yet keeping a running tally of gold, silver, and bronze medals by country. My research explores the tension between these polar principles from an athlete's perspective.

Drawing on the writings of William Sullivan (2005) and Eliot Freidson (2001), I explore the move of Olympic sports away from a bureaucratic or professional model and towards a marketplace model. I will argue that, despite the Olympic Games' status as the pinnacle of *amateur* competition, the Olympic movement would better fit into the professional model proposed by Freidson.

**Method**

This paper is an empirical paper based on a qualitative analysis of the attitudes and perceptions of Olympic athletes. I interviewed 10 individuals who have competed in the Olympic Games. These athletes I interviewed represent a broad cross-section of Olympic athletes in the following ways:

- *Nationality*: Individuals interviewed hailed from three separate countries
- *Number of Olympics*: Olympic experience ranges from one-time to five-time Olympians
- *Historical Focus*: Individuals' Olympic participation years range from 1976-2004
- *Status*: All individuals have Olympic competition experience as an athlete. Some individuals went on to become coaches and sports administrators.
- *Sport*: Cycling, fencing, rowing, swimming, shooting, weightlifting, diving, gymnastics
- *Olympic Success*: medal winners through 31<sup>st</sup> place finishers

Prior to each interview, I researched the athlete's competitive career, including published interviews, educational background, degree and type of successes, and so forth. This prior research allowed me to focus immediately on those aspects of the athlete's career that were most pertinent to my research. Through these interviews, I attempted to determine the motivating factors for these individuals. By doing so I attempted to place the perceptions and motivations of Olympic athletes within the context of the Good Work project and Freidson's concept of professionalism. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed to reveal each athlete's motivation for training and competitive success, influences on behavior, and ethical challenges that were faced. The interviews concluded with several broad questions on the athlete's concepts of ethics in sport and the athlete's definition of success. I recorded the interviews

and transcribed them verbatim.

I then coded each interview using etic and emic codes to reveal broader patterns among athletes (see Appendix B). Several of the patterns confirmed my preconceptions: e.g., that athletes compete for intrinsic reasons rather than financial reward, that they see themselves as role models, and that the Olympics have become more commercialized over the past 20 years. Other, less expected patterns emerged through the interview coding process: e.g., the significance of the Olympics only occurring every four years, the ideal of the Olympic Games as a forum for international brotherhood, and the importance that athletes attached to “giving back” to the sport.

It is helpful to separate the ten athletes into two groups. Four of the athletes that I interviewed competed in the Olympic Games in the 1970s and 1980s, while seven competed in the 1990s and 2000s. (One athlete bridged the gap between [i.e., competed in both] the 1988 Seoul Games and the 1992 Barcelona Games.) The perceptions of the “older generation” of athletes—all three of whom had at least competed in the 1980 Olympic Trials, if not been named to the 1980 Olympic Team—are helpful in establishing a historical perspective on how the Olympic movement has changed over the past twenty-five years.

### **Findings**

In order to map Olympic athletes’ perceptions onto the “good work” framework, I have grouped my findings into subsections that loosely correlate with the two components of “good work”: excellence and ethics. The subsections that describe athletes’ perceptions of excellence include Intrinsic Motivation, Sacrifices, Life Outside of Sport, and External Pressures. The subsections that describe athletes’ perceptions of ethics include Ethical Conduct and Fair Play, Doping, Olympism, and Giving Back. The groupings are flexible, however; ethical considerations influence athletes’ perceptions of excellence, and vice versa, as detailed in “Success Defined,” below.

### Intrinsic Motivation

All ten of the athletes that I interviewed were consistently self-motivated. Seven of the ten athletes made comments that they competed primarily for the love of the sport. One cyclist said, “I *loved* bike racing. I just loved the sport. And if I wasn’t good at it, I would have done it anyway.” “This sport is really something that you do because you enjoy doing it,” stated a weightlifter. A diver added: “I was doing what I wanted to do more than anything in the world, so I never felt like I’d sacrificed anything. I felt fairly fortunate on that front.”

Athletes indicated that the potential financial rewards for success were too paltry to compete for anything *other* than the love of the sport. Athletes devoted anywhere from twelve to more than thirty years to training for their sport, and their personal assessment of the total financial payout for winning Olympic gold to be anywhere from \$0 to \$3,000,000. The four athletes of the “older generation” who competed in the 1984 Olympic Games concurred that there were very few financial rewards for successful athletes at that time. One athlete who placed fourth in the 1992 Olympic Games is now in a top-five American MBA program and talks about monetary value of an Olympic gold medal compared to that of a prestigious MBA: “[It’s] not huge money, in the overall context of what the kids out of this place make when they go into hedge funds or private equity firms. They’re paying five hundred grand [per year]. It’s incredible.”

Financial support during the peak competition years was also extremely limited. No athlete lived a sumptuous lifestyle during his or her training years. One athlete lived with his coach for eight years. Another attended college on a half scholarship. A weightlifter described his living situation at an Olympic Training Center: “I was making probably less than \$6,000 a year, living in the dorms, and I didn’t have a car. All of my possessions that I had could easily fit inside the dorm room and the drawers of the dresser that was provided for me.”

Seven of the ten athletes felt that their particular sports were “minor,” or less-glamorous, sports. One athlete referred to “...the peasant Olympic movement...” A sport’s “peasant” status was cited as a reason for the limited potential for financial reward. One diver explained, “When it all comes down to it,

diving's a tiny, low-profile sport which is on the fringe, and quite frankly there was never going to be a lot of money in it." Athletes who referred to their sports as "minor" were most likely to emphasize the lack of financial rewards for success at the Olympic level, yet even the three athletes from the more visible sports of swimming and gymnastics felt that the payoffs in the "glamour" sports were paltry. "This work's so hard anyways, if people are concerned about money to be good at it, you're not going to last," said one gymnast.

Nine of the ten athletes mentioned particular coaches, family members, or mentors that influenced them at an early stage in their careers. However, none of the athletes indicated that they felt a great deal of pressure from their parents to succeed. This is not to say that their parents were unsupportive; but rather that the pressure to succeed came from within. Three athletes even cited the negative perceptions of parental pressures in more mainstream sports as a contrast to their own experience. One athlete stated:

No, I mean this was kind of my own desire to become better. I think it was kind of unusual, when you deal with fencing, with other amateur sports that are not the mainstream like baseball and hockey and football, those kind of things, those people that excel are those that really kind of push themselves, I think. There's not a lot of parental pressure.

### Sacrifices

Every athlete indicated that there were other goals—career, family, education, and so forth—that he or she either neglected or postponed pursuing while he or she was actively competing. These concerns influenced athletes' decisions whether to continue competing in the sport or to retire. One athlete who was an officer in the armed forces spoke explicitly about a point where he faced the choice between pursuing an athletic career or a military career:

After I came back from the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, I had a crossroads to pick, and I picked that I wanted to go compete. And I basically gave up a military career to compete in the '88 and then the '92 Olympics.

Another athlete with a Master's degree in a lucrative technical field stated:

I had a huge opportunity cost by doing this, you know, instead of joining the workforce. I was watching my classmates move up the career ladder, buying houses and things where I was just toiling in near poverty. It was hard to justify to myself and other people that choice.

The “opportunity cost” of competing in an Olympic sport was referenced by another athlete, as well: “I would say with everything there's an opportunity cost. I always sort of look at all the things I got out of it.”

Despite the financial hardship that athletes faced during their training years, most felt that they were not making “sacrifices” (in the sense of losing something precious) to continue competing in the sport. They made a conscious decision to compete rather than pursue a career, and they were glad they had made that decision.

### Life Outside of Sport

The Olympians that I interviewed stressed the importance of making preparations for a career once they were finished competing. None of them viewed athletics as a lifelong vocation, because of the stresses associated with training and competing. They were cognizant of the things that they were postponing in order to compete, and most used that knowledge to prepare themselves to make a living after retirement. One athlete described the first full-time job he obtained after retiring from competition:

And things have just kind of worked out for me because before I went to Sydney—I didn't end up competing there—I had applied for a job here at the [National Olympic Committee]...The job description looked like it was written just for me, you know, with the experience that you have, on a [National Sport Federation (NSF)<sub>1</sub>] and the [National Olympic Committee (NOC)<sub>2</sub>] level, because I did participate on my board of directors, both at the [NSF] level and the [NOC] level and athlete rep and all of that, so I did have extensive experience within the Olympic movement.

<sup>1</sup> National Sport Federations (NSFs) are the organizations charged with governing a sport in a particular country. In the US, these organizations are termed National Governing Bodies (NGBs). I use these terms interchangeably throughout this piece.

<sup>2</sup> National Olympic Committees (NOCs) are one level above NSFs; they govern Olympic Sports within a particular country. The United States' NOC is the United States Olympic Committee (USOC).

One diver explained that he focused on competition to the exclusion of formal education—a decision that in retrospect he feels was a mistake:

I think the big thing of making that kind of sacrifice in my mind, it just ended up not being a very helpful thing, and that having a bit more balance, having something else to focus on, actually may have ended up being a good thing for my sporting career as well. And I never even contemplated that.

Another athlete explained that the education that he obtained before beginning a serious competitive career was liberating for him mentally:

My participation in the sport ... was never going to be something where I did it, and then I rested on my laurels for the rest of my life.... in the end, I would still have to go and do something else. I knew that. And I think I was more in tune to that than most people given my educational background. A lot of athletes don't have that. And I had that more than most people, so I had a different perspective on that, and it was obvious to me that I did.

Most of the athletes referred to the opportunities that were open to them because of their experience in Olympic sports. "You get to know people that you wouldn't meet [otherwise], so it's more networking," says one swimmer. A weightlifter added:

Now if you make these sacrifices and don't ever make an Olympic team I think you're going to be in a much more difficult situation, but if you do make an Olympic team, at least a potential employer can say, "This is pretty neat, and I can look at the characteristic traits that went into making this person an Olympian. Obviously he had to set goals and work to achieve those goals and he was committed to this, and stayed motivated, and he worked with his coach so he can get along with people." So a lot of the aspects of being an athlete carry over into life and into the workplace.

A gymnast confirmed this theme:

People are always finding me and I think that, a lot of it's because my gymnastics network is so huge that all the peripheral people, even the gymnastics community and the peripheral gymnastics community, that know of me and my work ethic and the things they've seen me do in my career, they also get the feeling from me that it translates into other things that I do.

The opportunities that athletes enjoyed because of their Olympian status helped to balance the sacrifice, hard work, and poverty of training.

### External Pressures

As discussed earlier, almost all of the athletes were intrinsically motivated. However, eight athletes also reported external pressures that they had to deal with to a certain degree. Athletes who competed in multiple Olympic Games described these pressures as increasing greatly between their first and second Olympic Games. Furthermore, the athletes from the "older generation" were the athletes that did not identify any specific external pressures on them as an athlete, yet they voiced the opinion that those pressures are much greater for today's Olympic athletes. NSFs and the popular press were most often the source of these external pressures. For the NSFs, the issue was usually one of funding, with the federations expecting a "return on investment" for the support

they gave the athlete. The news media and the general public expected the athlete to improve on his or her performance from the previous Games.

“There was also a lot of pressure coming via the, the way I see it, via the federal government in terms of results,” stated one athlete, who competed for a country where Olympic sports received state support. “There was really no one else doing that well around, so I felt that pressure and I sort of became more withdrawn.” Another described the pressures that the National Governing Bodies place on an athlete:

But as you get older and at a certain level, yes, performance measures are put into place, and now certain performances are expected of you because now investments have been made on your behalf and financial considerations have been laid out there, and so now there is a pressure to give them a return on that investment.

That athlete internalized this pressure as well:

When you’re living out here, and eating, and you’re getting your medical attention, you are benefiting from all the services that are provided for you, there is something—and when people are sending you on international competitions, your federation is sending you overseas and whatever, to me, I personally, somebody spent the money on a plane ticket to send me somewhere, I certainly wanted to make sure that they felt that was a good investment. So there was a lot of pressure to perform.

A former Olympic athlete who is now in a management position at a National Sport Federation described the external pressures this way:

I think now with the huge emphasis that the [NOC] is placing on medals and winning the medal count, and winning the gold medal count, I think that the pressures have been ramped up a notch... more and more pressure was placed on the coaching staff to get the results internationally because it all trickles down. The [NOC] comes to the [NSF], the [NSF] comes to the coach, the coach comes to the athlete, because ultimately if

the athlete isn't performing, the [NSF] is going to look down on the coach, and the [NOC] is going to look down on the [NSF], so there is quite a bit of a pressure-cooker here, but not only for the athletes but for the coaches as well.

These external pressures were seen as distracting athletes from concentrating on performance and training. While the press and the federations have the best of intentions to motivate the athletes to perform at their best at the Olympic Games, the athletes' motivation comes from within. Many athletes cannot withstand the external pressures, and so leave the sport. One athlete and coach described the mounting external pressures coming from the NOC:

It's like a person starts off skinny and finds out that hey, this food's really great, then they want more weight, and more weight, and more food, and more food, and more food, and pretty soon they're obese, then all of a sudden some of that food gets cut off and they start crying. You're working in that spiral. You're either going to fall out of it or you're going to have to join it.

### *Ethical Conduct and Fair Play*

All ten athletes experienced internal conflict at some point in their careers that made it challenging for them to continue to perform good work as an Olympic athlete. The amount and types of conflicts varied widely among sports, but they fell into two general categories: whether to quit the sport or remain in it, and whether to cheat or not cheat. Athletes in some sports, such as weightlifting, cycling, and fencing, had the option to cheat, whether through gamesmanship, bribery, doping, or other methods. Athletes in other sports, such as shooting and rowing, did not have the ability to cheat as easily, yet they faced the question of whether or not it was worth it to remain in the sport and face the external pressures described earlier. If an athlete willingly leaves the realm of Olympic sports, he is by definition excluded from performing good work within it. Several athletes had to deal with both types of pressures.

In gymnastics and diving, the athletes that I interviewed acknowledged that bribery was a problem among the judges of subjective sports, yet felt that such conduct was out of their control as athletes. When asked about having to manage the ethical challenges of competing in a judged sport, one athlete stated, “I think that’s a better question for a judge rather than for athletes, because an athlete just has to play by the rules.”

One diver described an ethical conflict regarding team selection procedures for the World Junior Championships (at a qualifying meet earlier in the year, he had placed third in one event, which was not sufficient to place him on the team in that event):

...then we had a national championships before this World Championship, in July or August or something, and I’d improved so much by that stage that the event that I wasn’t selected in, I won by so much it wasn’t even funny, and the selectors sat me down and said, “If you want to go and compete in the World Championships, we’ll tell the kid who’s in it that he’s staying home.” That was actually quite a big deal for me. I said no. It just instinctively felt like the wrong thing to do because I hadn’t done what I needed to do back in February.

One Olympic cyclist who also competed as a professional racer in Europe discussed the ethics of bicycle racing at the elite professional level:

In cycling, races are bought and sold all the time. Where someone will be in a break with a bunch of other riders and there’ll be a deal where someone will come up and say, “Hey, I’m going to attack, don’t come after me. Let me do something that will increase my odds of winning and I will pay you \$50,000.”

A fencer described a similar situation in fencing World Cups, whereby one fencer would offer another fencer hundreds or even thousands of dollars to throw a bout in the early qualifying rounds. Since the mid-1990s, however, these *quid pro quo* arrangements in fencing have been largely eliminated with the change to

a direct elimination format.

### Doping

Of the athletes that I surveyed, only athletes in weightlifting and cycling felt constant pressure to take performance-enhancing substances, because the athletes who win at the Olympic level are taking them. Athletes in those sports felt that they were not competing on a level playing field if they chose not to dope. In contrast, in gymnastics, rowing, fencing and shooting, athletes held the belief that there was little, if any, benefit from doping.

In the United States, top weightlifters must pass out-of-competition drug tests on a monthly basis. Random, out-of-competition drug-testing is widely regarded as the most effective means for eliminating doping (Goldman, 1984, p. 155). Other countries are not as strict in their drug-testing requirements, and this laxity leads American weightlifters to feel that the deck is stacked against them in international competition. One weightlifter stated:

There is such a problem with steroid use in our sport on the international level ....No matter how hard you try or whatever the performance expectations that are put on you are, you still know that you are very limited in the success that you're going to have until the powers that be make the playing field level for everyone ...

Cyclists dope for the same reason that weightlifters dope: doping is effective.

One cyclist stated:

Doping in cycling *absolutely works*. Absolutely, it's scientifically proven, I've seen [people] make transformations that were the results of doping and it absolutely works, it's absolutely beneficial. Ergo, if you don't do it, you're not taking an advantage that other people are. If you do do it, you will get much better, and when you get to a pretty high level, the differences between athletes is pretty darn small, and you realize, "Boy, if I really did get five percent more watts, well, *that* would be huge." So that's the other big one, is this idea of "Do you do it?" and sometimes it's

dramatic, like, “Do I take EPO?” undertake a regimen—it’s not easy, that’s a regimen, that’s a lifestyle, that’s a big deal.

Several athletes referred to a highly-publicized (albeit unscientific) survey conducted by Dr. Bob Goldman, the results of which were published in his book *Death in the Locker Room II: Drugs & Sports*. Dr. Goldman asked 198 athletes the following question:

If I had a magic drug that was so fantastic that if you took it once you would win every competition you would enter, from the Olympic decathlon to the Mr. Universe, for the next five years, but it had one minor drawback—it would kill you five years after you took it—would you still take the drug? (Goldman, 1992, p. 24)

52 percent of the athletes responded that they would take the drug. The results of this survey were published in a 1997 *Sports Illustrated* article (Bamberger and Yeager), and have attained urban legend status within the Olympic sports community. Dr. Goldman states that he surveyed athletes in “combative and power sports” (p. 24), which are not representative of Olympic events as a whole. (I attempted to contact Dr. Goldman in the course of my research and did not receive a response.) Of the athletes that I surveyed, only two felt that the pressure to take performance-enhancing substances was a constant ethical struggle.

### Olympism

Olympism, or the “Olympic Spirit”, meant something different to each athlete. Nevertheless, some trends did emerge, although none of the trends appear with all of the athletes.

In terms of what sets the Olympic Games apart from other major sporting events, four of the athletes mentioned that, since they only occur once every four years, the scarcity makes them special. One swimmer said:

...it’s only every 4<sup>th</sup> year, every time there’s an Olympic year, everybody

starts swimming fast and they try to do their best in that year, at the Olympics, especially in the US. That's why if...they said Olympics it will be every two years, it wouldn't be that special.

Television rights for the Olympic Games command a high price because of the Games' scarcity. Media scrutiny is astronomically higher during an Olympic year for most Olympic sports. "How many cameramen did you see during the 2002 World Championships?" asked one athlete. "Everybody didn't come by and stick a microphone or camera in your face. Wow! It's the Olympics! It's the Olympics! It's the Olympics!"

Olympic athletes nearing retirement usually do not decide to continue for "just one more year." They must commit to four additional years of "toiling in near poverty"—a prospect that is extremely daunting for one additional fleeting chance at glory. "I'd say 90% of all gymnasts retire after an Olympic year because that's it. They're not waiting around for another Olympics," said one gymnast.

Athletes also addressed the ideal of the Olympic Games as a symbol of international brotherhood. Their responses reflected widely different opinions of how closely the reality matched the ideal. One non-American athlete responded, "They try to put [it] in a perspective that...it's about world peace and all that. I think that's just talk and they're trying to sell the Olympics." He later added:

It would be nice if everybody would respect that: OK, there's no wars and there's world peace during the Olympic games, but it's just an ideal, something that the Olympic image has and they're trying to preserve it, but if countries don't care about the Olympics then it's not going to happen. It'd be nice and it's a great reason not to fight.

An American athlete from a different sport offered this contrasting viewpoint:

It's a chance for you to compete against the rest of the world. And it truly is the rest of the world. Everybody else, every other country has an opportunity to send athletes to this one competition, and whatever corners of the world, everybody kind of pulls together and there's a certain sense

of, a kind of beauty around it..

Six athletes in total voiced this sentiment, that the Olympics—as opposed to the Super Bowl or the World Series, for example—are a world championship where athletes from the entire world are invited to compete. One foreign athlete living outside of Boston put it this way: “It really made me laugh last year [2004], the whole World Champion, you know: ‘We’re World Champions in baseball and football.’ This is just the most bizarre concept that I could imagine.”

Six of the athletes that I surveyed—including all of the “older generation”—felt that the current emphasis on profitability has detracted from the purity of the Olympic Games as an amateur athletic competition. A spectacle designed to provide maximum visibility of sponsors’ products is not compatible with the ideals of international brotherhood and of each athlete striving to get the most out of him- or herself. The stories of the “older generation” paint a picture of a different Olympics from those contested today. One 1984 silver medalist tells of having to contribute several hundred dollars towards the cost of attending the following year’s World Championships. He also was advised by his NGB to contribute to charitable organizations and keep receipts to offset \$3,000 he earned as a coach one year. He offered:

There was so much more purity. It gets back to that whole, “Wow, this guy’s a college student!” or “This guy’s a plumber!” or “This guy’s a lawyer!” or “This guy’s a Naval Ensign, but the Navy’s letting him compete in the Olympics, but when he’s done in the Olympics, he’s going to go back on his submarine!”

A 1988 Olympic medalist that I interviewed was in the armed forces when he won his medal, and was instructed by his branch to return his \$2,000 grant to the National Olympic Committee because he was a “supported athlete.”

The Olympic Games traditionally have provided a forum for amateur athletes to compete at the highest level, on a world stage. While most athletes decried the increasing commercialization of the Olympics, they felt that the magic

of the Games was the athletic feats accomplished by *amateurs*. Many names surfaced when athletes were asked to name an “ideal Olympian” or an “Olympic hero”: Rafer Johnson, Dan Jansen, Wilma Rudolph, Jesse Owens, Arndt Schmidt, Greg Louganis, the 1980 Olympic Ice Hockey Team, and many others. The athletes mentioned these individuals or groups because of the adversity that they had overcome to triumph at the Olympics, or because they were amateur athletes in the true sense of the word. Speaking of Arndt Schmidt, the Olympic fencing champion, one fencer said:

...he was a great sportsman, and he was also a dentist, so here he's got this other career, this other life, profession, this other skill, and so he wasn't just an athlete. A lot of the athletes that we competed against, this is all they did, even in fencing. The European guys are pretty much, a lot of them are just professionals. Here's a guy went to postgraduate school and had a successful practice so he accomplished a lot of things in his life and I kind of admired that.

However, one rower acknowledged that the level of competition in the Olympics today has risen to the point that it is very difficult for athletes to remain truly amateur:

Especially now, the rowers just can't do that ... so many hours on the water and they go to training centers out in San Diego or wherever ... and that's the problem with the system now is you're not getting a lot of longevity with American rowers because ... a lot of rowers are college graduates, and they just can't see postponing career that long.

Finally, four of the athletes discussed what they would like to see when they look back on their athletic careers, and of the importance of preserving the spirit of the Olympics for future generations. One athlete who finished in the top six in two Olympics said,

When it's all said and done I think if we fast-forwarded twenty, thirty years and I sat down with my kids or grandkids and reflected on the whole

career, I don't really think it would've made much of a difference if I had won or come in twentieth.

Another athlete, a five-time Olympian, spoke of how watching the 2004 Olympic Games on television with his three children for the first time in their lives brought a tear to his eye:

I had one son on one side of me, and the other son on the other side, and my little girl out there playing in front of me. And I was thinking, "you know, one of these guys might be in a future Olympics."

Finally, one athlete emphasized how important it was that he had competed fairly in looking back on his career: "So for me, the ethical component was really important, because I knew most of my life was going to be looking back on what I had done."

### *Giving Back*

One theme that emerged was the obligation that many of the athletes felt to "give back" to the sport. They felt that their sports had given them so much, had helped them to grow as an athlete and a person, that they felt motivated to devote time and energy to promote the sport and help younger athletes once their own competitive careers were over. Eight of the athletes either mentioned work they had done in "giving back" to the sport, or expressed a desire to do more of that work in the future. One athlete who had gone on to be an elite-level coach in his sport stated, "There is nothing better than taking someone who has little or no knowledge and seeing them mature into a better person." Another athlete said:

I just feel that the sport of swimming was so good to me ... I've learned how to goal set, I've learned how to focus on something, I've learned how to manage my time ... and being able to work w/ young athletes and teach them how to goal set and teach them that things are possible, and I can use my own life as an example for them.

Athletes acknowledged their responsibility to society—both within their sport and at large—through their desire to “give back” to young athletes.

### Success Defined

While each athlete had a different definition of success, all of the athletes indicated internal parameters that defined success for them. One recurring theme was that of doing one’s absolute best. One athlete stated:

If you do your best, you’re successful. You did your best mentally, physically at that point and at that time, then you’re successful. And then you did that at the Olympics, that’s crazy, because most people don’t do their best at the Olympics because of the pressure or some other reason,

Another added, “[Success is] just I think getting the absolute most out of yourself. If it’s placing 2<sup>nd</sup> at the national championships and never even qualifying, or not even qualifying for the Olympic trials.” One athlete offered this pithy definition of success: “Never giving up.”

Ethical conduct was seen by most of the athletes as a foundation for success in sport. It was a concept that was so fundamental that few of them verbalized any ideals of fair play or sportsmanship in their definitions of success. One athlete put it this way:

...the way I see [ethics] are that they’re just the bare minimum requirements to be considered successful in any sport really. So if you don’t have those, no matter what else you’ve done, I don’t think you can be considered a true success....and then it’s sort of the performance on top of that creates it.

### Summary of Findings

Most of the athletes surveyed felt that the Olympic Games have become

more commercialized over the past twenty years. Despite this commercialization, success at the Olympics is not a pathway to riches for athletes. These athletes are all highly internally driven. They compete for the love of the sport, not for financial rewards. The financial rewards that are most meaningful for them are those that allow them to continue training and competing. Athletes view ethical conduct in sport as a prerequisite for competing, but not as a daily struggle between right and wrong. Most athletes made a decision to compete fairly at an early point in their careers, perhaps after an initial conflict. They allow that early decision to guide their everyday conduct. Athletes define success according to internal parameters. They feel that the external payoffs are too paltry to compete for anything other than intrinsic reasons. Important responsibilities of their success included giving back to the sport, and being able to look back upon their athletic careers without shame in the way that they achieved success. Even though Olympic sports offer concrete, objective measures of success—there are winners and losers in every event—these athletes view success as being able to get the most out of themselves, regardless of event placing.

## ***Discussion***

### *Alignment of the Field and Domain*

Ferenc Takács (1992) described the tension of Olympism between two poles: that of the Olympic motto of “faster, higher, stronger,” and the Olympic creed of “the most important thing is not to win but to take part.” He argued that the way to address this tension was “by admitting it and trying to find possible ways of solving this ethical paradox” (p. 231). The athletes that I interviewed indicated that they placed more emphasis on the latter, while they believed that the administrators of the Olympic movement, and the mass media, placed a much greater emphasis on the former.

*Figure 1.* Pressures from the field pull athletes away from the values of the domain, towards “citius, altius, fortius” and away from the Freidson professionalism model.

This misalignment within the field (see Figure 1) compromises Olympic athletes' ability to perform good work. Certainly athletes are focused on athletic excellence, but they also feel a responsibility to “give back” to the sport, either during or after their competitive careers. In some cases, the misalignment leads to unethical behavior. However, in many more cases, it drives athletes out of the sport. As one athlete said earlier about the spiral, “You’re either going to fall out of it or you’re going to have to join it.”

When athletes who are concerned with the social responsibility of being an Olympic athlete are driven out of Olympic sports, the field continues to shift towards the “faster, higher, stronger” side of the equation, and the ability of the remaining athletes to perform good work is lessened.

Freidson/Takács/Good Work Continuum, CurrentGood Work ModelTakács Model

Citius, Altius, Fortius

Taking Part

Freidson Model

Marketplace Model

Professionalism Model

Definitions of Success

Judging by these athletes' definitions of success, the inclusive portion of Coubertin's philosophy of Olympism—the primacy of the struggle—still rings true. The athletes that I surveyed agree with the concept that “the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle.” Their philosophies of Olympism are consistent with their philosophies on life. The importance of taking part is not dead, but athletes feel that the increasing commercialization of the Games places it in danger.

Ethical issues are important to these athletes, but they do not struggle with them on a daily basis. The ethical decisions that they made were often made early in their careers, and then internalized. Their responses to ethical conflicts were henceforth automatic. This response corresponds to Anne Colby and William Damon's (1994) discussion of automatic responses to ethical dilemmas in ordinary people and “moral exemplars” (pp. 302-303). The larger-scale ethical struggle, and the one that hinders good work, is that between staying in the sport, or getting out.

A Model of Professionalism

Despite the Olympic Games' historically providing a venue for *amateur*

sport, Eliot Freidson's (2001) model of professionalism provides a suggestion for how Olympic sports can become a vehicle for social change. He argues for the professions to move away from a marketplace model and towards a model where the profession regulates itself. He states, "I believe that the emphasis on consumerism and managerialism has legitimized and advanced the individual pursuit of material self-interest and the standardization of professional work which are the very vices for which professions have been criticized, preserving form without spirit" (p. 181). Of the free market model, William Sullivan (2005) adds: "In this view, the only moral obligation of any enterprise is to maximize its economic well-being" (p. 20).

*Figure 2.* A balance between "citius, altius, fortius" and "the most important thing is to take part." The values of the field, the domain, and the athletes are in alignment.

Based on the interviews of these ten Olympic athletes, I argue that the field of Olympic sports currently tends toward the marketplace model, and is moving further out of alignment (see Figure 1). Olympic sports as a profession would be more conducive to the performance of good work if the profession implemented specific aspects of Freidson's professionalism model, particularly those that reflect "...an ideology serving some transcendent value and asserting greater devotion to doing good work than to economic reward." (p. 180). I agree with Freidson when he states that no one model provides a utopia. I would advocate a balance between a professional model and a marketplace model. This balance would equalize the influence of the two opposing Coubertin ideals as proposed by Takács and reconcile them with the principles of the GoodWork® Project (see Figure 2).

*Freidson/Takács/Good Work Continuum, Proposed**Good Work Model**Takács Model*

Citius, Altius, Fortius

Taking Part

*Freidson Model*

Marketplace Model

Professionalism Model

The power of the Olympic movement as a vehicle for social change is palpable. Most of the athletes spoke of the work they do with younger athletes specifically, and young people in general. The mystique of Olympic athletes as amateur athletes remains strong. Each athlete I interviewed believed that young people view Olympic athletes as role models. As the field moves toward a more explicit marketplace model, the ability of Olympic athletes to perform good work weakens.

*Validity and Limitations*

This study is not meant to be conclusive. I make no claim that the findings presented here are representative of the views of Olympic athletes as a group. Rather, this study is meant to serve as an introduction to the domain of Olympic sports as a forum for performing good work. Several factors limit the validity of applying these findings to a broader group:

- *Sample size*: I only interviewed ten athletes
- *Minor sports*: Most of the athletes I interviewed came from “minor” Olympic sports
- *Gender*: Of the ten athletes I interviewed, nine were male and one was female

- *Lack of Winter Olympians*: All of the athletes I interviewed competed in the Summer Olympic Games
- *Nationality*: Eight of the ten athletes I interviewed competed for the United States
- *Retirement Status*: All but one of the athletes that I interviewed were retired from their Olympic sports

Finally, I emphasize that this research represents the views of only one group of stakeholders within the field and domain of Olympic sports: Olympic athletes.

### **Conclusion**

Olympic athletes are torn between doing everything that they need to put themselves first above everyone else, and the social responsibility that comes with being a highly visible athlete in a field founded upon the “fundamental ethical principles” of Olympism. Finding this balance is challenging for athletes, and yet the ability to find it is what makes their work meaningful, and how they ultimately define success. Furthermore, the Olympic athletes I surveyed indicate that it would be easier to perform good work if the ideals of the field were more aligned towards their social responsibilities.

The limitations discussed above provide directions for continuing the scholarship presented in this study. The lack of active athletes in my sample lends my research a hindsight bias. Actively competing (and particularly aspiring) athletes might well provide a different perspective than those who have retired and had an opportunity to reflect on their Olympic participation. I would like to interview athletes from “major” Olympic sports such as boxing, track and field, women’s gymnastics, figure skating, basketball, and so forth. I would also like to add Winter Olympians to the sample group. It would be informative to interview athletes who have been found guilty of doping violations, in order to understand the pressures they felt and the reasons they chose to dope. For similar reasons, it would be helpful to interview athletes who have been *accused* (but not convicted) of doping violations, to gain their perspectives on the purity of the

Olympic ideals. Finally, the study would benefit from interviews with coaches, administrators, and bureaucrats within the National Olympic Committees and National Governing Bodies. These individuals could better explain the financial environment surrounding the Olympic Games, as well as detail the difficulties of modeling the field of Olympic sports on Freidson's model of professionalism.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

### **Background Questions:**

- 1) How did you get started in the sport?
- 2) What led you to you continue to pursue your sport?
- 3) What were your goals when you were first starting in the sport?
- 4) How did your family influence your participation in sport?
- 5) Were there any mentors that had a particularly strong influence on you?
- 6) Please tell me about any pressure you felt to succeed from family, coaches, or others

### **Athletic Career Questions:**

- 7) Have the external expectations to win medals changed over time? How?
- 8) Have your internal expectations to win medals changed over time? How?
- 9) To what extent do fame and sponsorships motivate you to perform well?
- 10) Please describe any work you do with young athletes in your sport
- 11) Do you consider yourself a role model?  
What sort of influence do you feel that you have over young athletes in your sport?
- 12) Do you consider other Olympic athletes to be role models?

### **At the Pinnacle Questions:**

- 13) What were your goals going into your first Olympics?
- 14) What were your goals going into subsequent Olympics?
- 15) What does "Olympism" or the "Olympic Spirit" mean to you?
- 16) Who would you name as an "ideal Olympian" or an "Olympic hero"? Why?
- 17) How are the Olympic Games different from other high-level competitions in your sport?
- 18) How are Olympic sports different from professional, non-Olympic sports?

### **Staying in the Sport Questions:**

- 19) What aspects of your life do you feel have been ignored or postponed in order to compete at the elite level in your sport?
- 20) What factors did you consider before making the decision to retire?
- 21) Did you making a living solely through your sport, or did you have other means of support?
- 22) Did you forego a different career (athletic or otherwise) by staying in your Olympic sport?

### **Post-athletic-career Questions:**

- 23) What plans did you make for life after your athletic career?
- 24) What were your other life goals (family, school, career, etc.)?

### **Ethical Considerations:**

- 25) Can you describe any situations in your career that you, or another athlete(s), faced an ethical dilemma? How did you respond?
- 26) How widespread is doping in your sport? What about cheating?
- 27) How would you define ethical conduct (fair play, integrity) in your sport?  
How important is that to you?
- 28) Did (or would have) winning an Olympic medal significantly change your life (for the better or the worse)? To what extent?

29)How would you define success in your sport? Does that success have an ethical component?

30)Is there anything else you'd like to add?

### Appendix B: Codebook

<b>Etic Codes</b>	
Medals	Olympic medals
Doping	Doping, drug use, performance-enhancing substances or methods, steroids
Cheating	Cheating, unethical conduct on the field of play
Records	World, Olympic, national records
Sponsorship	Endorsements, sponsorships, contracts
Role Model	Role model(s), role modeling behavior
Mentors	Coaches, mentors
Goals	Goals, goal-setting
Mgt.	Management, administration (within the sport or the Olympic movement)
Sacrifice	Sacrifices; things that were ignored, postponed, etc.
Financial	Financial rewards
Ext. Press.	External pressures
Int. Press.	Internal pressures
Ext. Motiv.	Extrinsic motivation
Int. Motiv.	Intrinsic motiv
Olympism	Olympism, Olympic spirit
Heroes	Olympic heroes, ideal Olympians
Commercialized	Commercialization of the Olympic Games
WCH	Other major competitions such as World Championships, World Cups, Pan American Games, etc.
<b>Emic Codes</b>	
Love	Athlete's love of the game
4-yr	Reference to the Olympics coming around every four years

Minor	“Minor” or “peasant” sports
Conflict	Ethical conflict (internal)
Support	Financial Support
Doors	Opportunities because of Olympian/medalist status
Parents (neg.)	Negative influences of parents (of other children)
Skills	Transferable skills from Olympics to career
Int'l	International brotherhood, international nature of Olympics
Multi-sport	Olympics as a multiple-sport competition
Attn.	Increased media, audience, family attention
Lookback	Looking back on athletic career
Success	Success, successful
Injury	Injuries
Amateur	Amateur, amateur ideals, amateurism
Giveback	Giving back to the sport
Tng.	Amount, difficulty of training



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