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Introduction

Sport, Discrimination, and the Olympic and Paralympic Games

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Abstract: This introduction outlines some of the core themes and concepts that cut across this special issue. We begin by discussing the Olympics and Paralympics and how athlete activists have used the Games to highlight inequity and social injustice. With television audiences surpassing five billion people, these mega-events have the potential to not only reach onlookers from across the world but perhaps change attitudes, practices, and policies. Despite IOC-imposed restrictions around athlete activism, we offer an array of campaigns and activist organizations in the French context to illustrate how discriminations are being challenged in advance of the Paris Olympics and Paralympics. At the 2024 Games, it is highly likely that issues of discrimination will be highlighted, and athletes are central to this discussion. Therefore, across this special issue, we focus on representations of gender and ethnicity in television, radio, and newspaper coverage; social media abuse directed at athletes; and disability inclusivity at the Games. Using an intersectional approach where possible, we illustrate how this myriad of identities shapes experiences and the mediated representations of individuals, groups, and nations. Every article within the special issue offers recommendations for positive and transformative change, or possible areas for future research. We end this introduction by presenting some of these core recommendations designed to challenge inequalities.

Keywords: *Olympics, Paralympics, Discrimination, Media, Gender, Disability, Racism, Activism*

Introduction

When Tommie Smith emphatically won the 200-meter gold medal at the Mexico City Olympic Games in 1968, he made history as he became the first person to (officially) break the twenty-second mark, a record which he held for almost eleven years. However, he gained wider notoriety and secured an enduring legacy for what happened next rather than his world record achievement. On the winners' podium, Smith, alongside fellow United States athlete John Carlos, who won bronze, opted to bow their heads and raise their gloved fists in protest against racial injustice. They raised their clenched fists high to symbolize strength and unity, and stood without shoes to represent Black American poverty. This act of protest is arguably one of the most famous and iconic cases in sporting history and reminds us that sport and politics are often inextricably intertwined.

More recent acts of athlete activism were witnessed at the Tokyo Olympic Games 2020 when Great Britain and Chile's women's football teams both "took the knee" (see Black et al.

2023; Duvall 2020) to highlight and challenge racial injustice (Young-Myles 2021). During Olympic trials in 2021, US Olympic hammer thrower Gwen Berry protested during the national anthem by turning her back on the flag, receiving widespread criticism as a result (Torres Burtka 2021). Finally, Ethiopian runner Tamiru Demisse, who took silver in the 1500m event at the Rio Paralympics in 2016, passed the finish line with crossed arms above his head in reference to the political persecution of the Oromo ethnic group by the Ethiopian government (Withnall 2016). In short, athlete activism at the Olympic and Paralympic Games has a rich history as these acts and settings go hand-in-hand.

Despite these acts of protest, Rule 50 of the International Olympics Committee (IOC) prevents podium protests although the IOC have recently extended opportunities for athletes to express their views in other contexts and settings (IOC 2021). Similarly, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) allows participants to demonstrate, protest, and/or make political statements as long as they do not involve any “Impermissible Elements” that stand in opposition to Paralympic values. Despite IOC and IPC regulations that attempt to constrain or manage protest in some way, we are very likely to see examples of athlete activism at the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Paris 2024. If protest is designed to highlight issues to help generate positive and transformative change, then the Olympic and Paralympic Games are ideal settings, considering that the Tokyo Olympic Games 2020 and Beijing 2022 Paralympic Winter Games, the largest multi-sport events in the world, were watched by global television audiences of 3.05 billion and 2.1 billion people, respectively. We must understand, however, that although the aforementioned examples attempt to challenge societal ills, these ills do not exist in a vacuum, and such inequalities manifest in nation states and wider societies are entrenched within sporting structures, including the Olympics and Paralympics. It is therefore important to critically investigate discrimination, which refers to the differential treatment of an individual or group based on their protected characteristics (see Kilvington and Price 2017), within the context of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

There is a relatively extensive body of literature that focuses on various types of discrimination within the context of the Olympics and Paralympics. Research has investigated sexist (Allen and Frisby 2017; Musto, Cooky, and Michael Messner 2017), ableist (Kolotouchkina et al. 2021; Pullen, Jackson, and Silk 2020), and racist (Farrington et al. 2012) discourses in the sport media; gendered and religious discrimination relating to athletic dress codes (Benn and Dagkas 2013); LGBTQ communities and a lack of belonging (Van Rheenen 2014); the legacy of the Games for disabled people in the host cities (Brittain 2017); online abuse directed toward Olympic athletes (Adá-Lameiras and Rodríguez-Castro 2023); and ways to resist discrimination and promote athlete activism (Boykoff 2022; Haslett and Smith 2020).

This special issue, timed to coincide with the 2024 Paris Games, aims to bring together original and substantial contributions to knowledge that critically investigate the Olympic and Paralympic Games across a variety of contexts. It attempts to build on previous literature and where possible and necessary, uses an intersectional lens to understand current issues and

trends in the context of discrimination. The articles included thus delve into different forms of discrimination relating to gender and misogyny, “race” and ethnicity, and disability, while making those intersectional connections. The articles focus on a range of contexts whereby discrimination(s) exist including the sport media, digital spaces, and in the stadiums. The common thread, though, throughout this special issue is that each article offers recommendations for change or areas for future research or action. Just like the athletes noted above who used their voices and platforms to highlight social injustice, academic researchers can also play a part in bringing inequalities to public attention, which is why practical guidance for positive change is offered toward the end of each article.

The following section provides some context for the articles that follow by outlining some relevant themes relating to discrimination and sport in France. Again, in keeping with the ethos of this special edition, it argues that discriminations are best understood in relation to one another and by taking an intersectional approach to the subject.

Paris 2024: Sporting Discriminations in the French Context

While Paris hosted the Olympic Games in 1900 and 1924, women athletes were virtually erased from these events, as they represented 0.9 percent and 4.4 percent of the participants (IOC 2024). Baron Pierre de Coubertin, known as the founder of the Modern Olympic Games, is still widely acclaimed to this day despite his opposition to a “female Olympiad” (Coubertin 1912). Yet, at that time, women were already organizing themselves and campaigning for their inclusion in the Olympics in sports in which they were exempt. Activist Alice Milliat, founder of the International Women’s Sport Federation, encountered significant opposition at that time, and organized the first “Women’s World Games” in 1922 to draw attention to the power of women athletes and the necessity of being included in more events at the Games (Carpentier 1922). Yet, Milliat received little support, and it took another century to get to today’s celebrated gender parity (Olympics.com 2024), and to see a statue of her erected at the French Olympic Committee next to Coubertin’s, thanks to the effort of the Alice Milliat Foundation. A century later, French sport and society are still plagued by discriminations related to gender and other issues such as racism, sexism, and ableism.

In French sport, the motto for women is the same as in society in general: “Ne nous libérez pas, on s’en charge” [Don’t Free Us, We’ll Take Care of It] (Pavard, Rochefort, and Zancarini-Fournel 2020). Indeed, the history of women’s sport is one of activism in the face of inequality and stereotypes from sports institutions and media. This activism has taken on various forms, from symbolic acts and representation to groundwork and political campaigns. This movement, however, has faced multiple hurdles. Activists have been historically framed in a negative light, and feminism has been the “F-word” of French sport, as women athletes refrain from positioning themselves in this heritage or supporting feminist movements such as the one for equal pay which was started by the women’s national football

team in the United States. Also, many works by French historians have focused on contesting the feminist dimension of women's sport and their pioneers (Carpentier 2019). However, the #MeToo movement has triggered a new paradigm, and today, a multidimensional wave of activism has risen, fighting against discrimination on the field of representation while also demanding and carrying out concrete actions. In other words, the case of French sports is a good lens through which to assess the current global fight against discrimination in sport and the different themes this fight may take.

One of these themes is fighting discrimination from within sporting systems, and a good example of this is French sociologist and governing figure Béatrice Barbusse. A former National 1 handball player, she is the first woman president of a men's professional club, at handball club US Evry (2007–2012), a former director of the National Center for the Development of Sport (2015-2017), and has been the vice-president of the French Federation of Handball since 2020. Throughout her career, she has been actively fighting discriminations through several means. First, she has been vocal on gender discrimination, openly denouncing the system from within. She has written two groundbreaking books on sexism in sport (Barbusse 2016) and the glass ceiling faced by women governing figures in French sports (Barbusse 2024). Also, she routinely posts on social media channels on issues of "race" and gender, and appears in multiple media to spread her activist messages and criticize both men and women from governmental or sports institutions who prevent social change. Last, beyond campaigning for meaningful symbolic actions like the creation of Milliat's statue, she strives for change as vice-president of the handball federation, especially pushing for more women representation in handball or supporting the use of hijab to support Muslim women's participation (Fédération Française de Handball 2023). Other figures have also tried to fight discriminations as governing figures, such as former athletes Laura Flessel and Marie-Amélie Le Fur, who used the Paralympics to bring more visibility to issues faced by disabled athletes.

A second theme is the need to view and fight discriminations in an intersectional way, as noted in the previous section. Among those doing this intersectional work, the association Les Dégommeuses (meaning "those who take opponents out") is a case in point. First, they fight a truly intersectional fight, tackling issues of sexuality, "race," and gender. Indeed, they lead everyday actions to fight sexism, transphobia, and racism through their football club (which is built as a safe space for people who are discriminated against) and daily activism. Second, this association often takes its fight from the field to the streets and beyond, by marching to condemn discriminatory practices and transphobic or Islamophobic laws, or by organizing communication coups, like displaying feminist banners in stadiums condemning sexual assaults. Created in 2020, the association Les Hijabeuses (meaning "those who wear the hijab") has also fought discriminatory practices and decisions by French sports federations preventing access to sport to women athletes wearing the hijab, going to court to protect these women's right to practice sport. In other words, field work by associations and within clubs, in direct contact with society, is another tool to fight multiple discriminations.

Another theme is the importance of the media as a critical battlefield in the fight against discrimination. In the case of gender discrimination, beyond the stereotyped representation of women athletes by journalists (Descamps 2017; Lapeyroux 2021), another issue was recently brought to light—the sexual harassment faced by women sportscasters (Everbach 2018). Indeed, French sports media experienced its #MeToo moment through the outpouring of testimonies from women sports journalists following the release of a documentary entitled *Je ne suis pas une salope, je suis une journaliste* [I Am not a Bitch, I Am a Journalist], directed by Marie Portolano and Guillaume Priou (2021). In it, then-Canal Plus journalist Portolano shares her own experience facing sexual assault from a colleague of hers and uncovers the sexist ways in which women sports journalists were treated in sports newsrooms. In the wake of this collective denunciation, French women sportscasters decided to unionize and create the association Femmes Journalistes de Sport to encourage more women representation in sports newsrooms and fight discriminatory and sexist behaviors and practices on the part of men journalists. Before that, a new magazine entitled *Les Sportives* was launched in 2016 to make up for the lack of representation of women athletes of different races and ethnicities in the French media. Its creator, Aurélie Bresson, is now the President of the Alice Milliat Foundation, and a recipient of the 2024 IOC Gender Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Champions Award. Between her work and that of editor-in-chief Mejdaline Mhiri, the magazine promotes these women athletes and showcases a new “gaze” on them (Mulvey 1989). Now, they have created a publishing company that releases feminist essays and athletes’ autobiographies. One of their contributors, Assia Hamdi, is the author of a book entitled *Joue-la comme Megan. Le marathon des sportives pour l'égalité* [Bend It Like Megan. Women-Athletes’ Marathon to Liberty] (2021), which tells the story of emancipated women athletes like Megan Rapinoe and others who fought sexism, racism, and conservatism in sports. Last, other media, like comic books and mangas, have played a part in giving rise to new representations to athletes lacking visibility. In France, Akata publishing company released Narumi Shigematsu’s manga *Blade Girl: Kataashi no Runner (Running Girl. Ma course vers les Paralympiques* in French) (2020), prior to the Tokyo Paralympics. The three-volume series discussed ableism and deconstructed the usually stereotyped representation of disabled athletes (DePauw 1997; Thomas and Smith 2009), while giving birth to a new, empowered archetype in popular culture—the Track-and-Field Paralympic Woman-Athlete. These cases show that concrete actions by institutions and associations and efforts to fight stereotyped representations are now going hand-in-hand, as the systemic nature of discriminations is discussed more frequently by scholars, institutions, and media alike.

A further, important theme in the fight against sporting discrimination is the roles played by athletes themselves. In the French context, a few athletes have been very vocal on several issues. A former professional football player and member of the national team, Melissa Plaza, received a PhD in social psychology and wrote a groundbreaking book on sexism and football in France entitled *Pas pour les filles?* [Not for Girls?] (2019), in which she uncovers the experiences

of women athletes. Since her playing career ended, she has been advocating for equality by giving conferences in enterprises and working with sports retailer Kipsta to create appropriate football clothing made for women. Now, she is also a performer, writing slam poems to denounce the oppression of women in French society. Before her, 1998 football world champion Lilian Thuram became the face of anti-racism in French sport and society. Already vocal in denouncing racist chants in Italian football stadiums, he created the Lilian Thuram Foundation after his playing days to educate the youth and help people deconstruct racist behaviors and stereotypes. Still with the idea of reaching young audiences, he published a two-volume comic book series on black history, based on his own life experience (Thuram, Camus and Garcia 2014, 2017). He also wrote multiple books translated in several languages to celebrate black figures (Thuram 2021a) and openly target systemic racism (Thuram 2021b). Last, he is constantly working with scholars, museums, and institutions to raise awareness of racism. Unfortunately, these figures are the odd ones out in French sport. Among current athletes, some issue statements in the press or on social media denouncing sexism and racism, yet openly feminist, anti-racist voices criticizing systemic issues in French sport and society are scarce.

This section has offered an introduction to some of the key ways that sporting discriminations are experienced and challenged in French sport. In a pre-Olympic context in which the French government and sports institutions brand themselves as defenders of gender equality, all these cases reflect the different tools used by activists—from taking up governing roles to writing essays, unionizing, creating associations, and performing onstage—to fight discrimination on and off the fields of Olympic sports and raise awareness of lasting issues related to gender, sexuality, and “race” in French society. Through their actions, they hold institutions accountable and denounce the spectacle of equality, when history shows otherwise (Debord 1967). They are also proof that fighting discriminations requires a multidimensional action. At all levels, change is coming. Yet there is much work to do. First, the people cited here are still pioneers and/or outliers. Second, this is a multidimensional fight, as the intersectionality of discriminations shows. Beyond the French case, this special issue shows the global dimension of the ongoing fight. These issues are important to consider when following the Olympics and Paralympics, and in particular their opening ceremonies portraying today’s France and Olympic and Paralympic movement, while also monitoring change beyond this spectacle, to see whether representation and action lead to positive and transformative change.

The following section outlines the structure of this Special Edition and gives a brief overview of the issues and methods covered by the six articles, before a final section summarizes some of the articles’ key findings and recommendations.

Structure of the Special Edition

This special edition comprises original articles discussing different, but related aspects of discrimination in relation to the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It begins with two articles focusing on representations of gender in the French sports media and the development of—or lack of—this from the 1960s to the present day. The third article then brings us up to the modern day with a discussion of the representation of sportswomen in the UK press from the most recent Olympics. The fourth article widens the discussion to social media and addresses the online abuse aimed at athletes, before a fifth contribution critically considers racialized sports media representations in relation to the Olympic Games. The final article considers recent developments around access to the Games and the contested issue of legacy.

Lapeyroux's article focuses on media representations of high-level women athletes in France. It is based on a socio-semiotic analysis of TV broadcasts of World Championship and Olympic competitions from 2005 to 2015 across six sports—gymnastics, tennis, basketball, football, rugby, and boxing. The article critically examines the discourses of commentators and the filmed images (camera movements) that participate in the construction of sports broadcasting. Television representations of female athletes are analyzed at the intersection of gender, class, "race," sexuality, and national identity, alongside the gendered identities of relevant media professionals.

Philippe's article provides some historical context for the sports media representations of female athletes. Based on the premise that the media are a magnifying glass for male domination of society, and therefore of sport, the article focuses on the television and radio representations of three female champions from the 1960s: Christine Caron, in the 100-meter backstroke, and Maryvonne Dupureur, in the 800-meter track, both Tokyo 1964 silver medalists; and Colette Besson, 1968 Olympic 400-meter track champion. Subjected to heteronormativity, the author discusses the reasons for the differential treatment of the three sportswomen, based on a study of media archives (radio and television) from the French Institut National de l'Audiovisuel.

Campbell and Davis's article notes the Paris 2024 Summer Olympic Games are the first Games with equal numbers of male and female athletes competing. Furthermore, during the Olympic Games, the proportion of coverage sportswomen receive in the media is significantly greater than outside of the Games, albeit considerably less than sportsmen. In this context, the authors analyze UK news media coverage of three British sportswomen during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games: Dina Asher-Smith (athletics), Helen Glover (rowing), and Bethany Shriever (BMX racing). Despite evidence of some progress in female Olympians' media representations, ambivalent narratives and gendered discursive journalistic practices are still prevalent in British news media. The authors conclude by suggesting ways that the journalists and media organizations can improve representations of

sportswomen to facilitate progression towards gender equity in sports reporting at future Olympic Games.

The article by Burch et al. examines social media abuse directed at Olympic athletes. The authors observe that while social media use by athletes has increased and can provide various benefits, it can also contribute to detrimental pitfalls, such as abuse. Their article draws on a quantitative, longitudinal case study analysis to examine the discriminatory online abuse directed at six Olympic athletes on Twitter/X between 2018 and 2022. Its findings are based on the analysis of 243,276 tweets.

Van Lienden et al.'s article examines racialized representations in the sports media. The authors contend that critical examinations of mediated sport events such as the Olympic Games can advance understandings as to why representations take the shape that they do. Their article draws on recent empirical studies of the production of televised football in four different European countries: Spain, England, The Netherlands, and Poland. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Cultural Studies and Critical Race Theory, it explores the role of race/ethnicity in the production process of mediated sport and discusses the lessons of this for media coverage of big sporting events such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Finally, Davis and Brown provide a critical overview of academic literature relating to accessibility and provisions for disabled people at the Olympic and Paralympic Games from Sydney 2000 to London 2012. Their article also explores the concept of legacy linked to the Olympic/Paralympic movement from London 2012 to Beijing 2022 and, in doing so, identifies areas requiring future research in terms of accessibility and provisions for disabled people at future Games.

Findings and Recommendations

There is much evidence in the articles of this special edition that points toward the continuation and perpetuation of familiar forms of discriminations. Philippe identifies how historical sports media coverage of French sportswomen dating back to the 1960s comprised “traditional” views of gender—centered around beauty and femininity—and always from the perspective of the “male gaze” (Mulvey 1989). Lapeyroux shows how these trends have been perpetuated by the French media into the current century. She identifies the trivialization and sexualization of female athletes, an under-recognition of their sporting achievements, and undue mention of their “feminine” character and physical appearance.

Burch et al. find gendered, racial, and homophobic discrimination present in online content directed at athletes in their case studies. Similarly, Van Lienden et al. find that stereotypical discourses concerning race/ethnicity, are habitually found to persist in televised sport content of major events, despite at least some basic form of ‘racial literacy’ among sport media producers. Meanwhile, while Davis and Brown identify improvements over time in the scale and prominence of the Paralympics, they point to enduring problems with continued

imbalance between the Paralympic and Olympic Games, plus a lack of genuine legacy in terms of tangible social improvements for disabled people once the Games have finished.

Campbell and Davis find some grounds for optimism in that they identify “progressive shifts” in the coverage of female athletes in the UK written press. They find evidence of the recognition of sporting achievement in their case studies, some celebration of athletic performance and an increased sensitivity in how female athletes are reported in relation to wider social issues. These positive trends are caveated with the acknowledgement that the authors also find some evidence of perpetuating tropes in coverage, including an ambivalence towards female sport and an idealization of feminine traits. Encouragingly, the authors identify some positive change while offering recommendations for how the embedded nature of stereotypical coverage may be further challenged.

This embedded nature of discriminatory content, compounded by a lack of reflexivity among sports media professionals and their organizations, is another common finding to emerge from the research. These media professionals are sometimes able to acknowledge problematic, discriminatory content in the work of others but are reluctant, or unable, to identify it in their own work. The high level of time pressure and dynamism in sports media work is identified by Van Lienden et al. as being an exacerbating factor in this. The fact that many commentators in the Olympics often cover sports they are less familiar with is also seen as increasing the risk of falling back on stereotypes; as are the familiar journalistic norms of objectivity and fairness, which media professionals often fall back on to defend their own work and the work of their colleagues.

So what is to be done? Education and training are at the heart of the recommendations of the articles in this special edition. Burch et al. argue that sports governing bodies need to develop training programs, based on authoritative wellbeing and mental health resources, to help athletes cope better online. Furthermore, they argue the need for athletes and officials to receive media training to manage their online presence and provide personal distance from the content. They argue:

Education emerges as a foundational pillar of any solution... by implementing education, awareness campaigns, comprehensive policies, and targeted support mechanisms, sport organizations can effectively address the complexities of online abuse, ensure the well-being of athletes and officials, and create a more inclusive and secure environment for all involved.

Campbell and Davis argue that sports journalists need to be trained to identify and challenge the reproduction of detrimental stereotypes and discursive journalistic practices. Editorial leaders also need to be educated in how to ensure that style guides and reporting practices avoid negative stereotypes and ambivalence. This training, they argue, should be mandatory and aimed not just at new starters, but also at well-established professionals as part

of their continuous development. Such training, they identify, is of particular importance when it comes to the reporting of sportswomen who are recognized as being in marginalized groups (e.g., minoritized ethnic groups, disabled people, and LGBTQ communities). At the heart of such training and education lies the notion that journalists need to be encouraged to reflect more critically on the nature and impact of their work. As Campbell and Davis argue, the Paris Games offer a timely opportunity for the media to reflect in this way, “otherwise, reporting of sportswomen in the media will continue to develop in its current gradual state and will not reflect societal changes toward women’s involvement in sport.”

In addition to better training, Lapeyroux argues that a more diverse sports media would produce less stereotypically sexist content. She argues that if cultural injustice is to be tackled (the perpetuation of damaging, stereotypical content) then economic injustice (such as salaries, access to training and employment) needs to be tackled as part of the solution. Recognition and redistribution, she concludes, go hand in hand.

In terms of future research, the authors across this Special Edition identify issues, actors, and methods that have been relatively underused or ignored to date. Burch et al suggest future research needs to be widened to examine social media abuse on non-English language platforms such as Weibo to capture cultural differences that may spark “trigger events” (see Kilvington 2021) and subsequent online abuse. While much research to date has focused on Twitter/X (see Kearns et al. 2022), future studies also need to look at other social media platforms, such as TikTok, which is identified as a rapidly growing as a source of sport entertainment. Researchers would also benefit, argue Burch et al., from employing combined coding methodologies of lexicon-based analysis, such as with the VADER model, which is a sentiment-based lexicon specifically designed for social media content. The pairing of lexicon-based analysis with manual thematic analysis would allow for larger data analysis to better measure and understand the scale of online abuse. While research to date has been effective at capturing the types of discriminatory abuse directed toward athletes on social media, it has been less good at measuring the impact of online abuse on the athletes in these case studies. Future research should be employed from a qualitative, interview-based perspective to ensure that the varied perspectives of these athletes and the impact of online abuse are both well understood. Davis and Brown, meanwhile, identify the need to examine the perspectives of disabled people during and after both Paralympic and Olympic Games to better understand their lived experiences and the effectiveness, or lack, of legacy claims.

Van Lienden et al. recommend the widening of the type of research methods used to explore these issues, arguing their research shows the relevance of participant observations in production studies of sport media. Such an approach, they argue, could reveal how everyday production processes tend to routinely reproduce practices that are situated in hegemonic discourses of Whiteness and male-ness. Campbell and Davis suggest it is crucial for production studies of this kind to explore the role of (self)reflection in organizational cultures

and structures and the significance of time pressure in the everyday production of Olympic broadcasts.

The findings and recommendations summarized above, and expressed more fully throughout the following articles, point to both positive change and the enduring nature of sporting discriminations. The Olympic and Paralympic Games, with their core value of respect and claims of positive legacy, provide a useful lens for identifying, understanding, and challenging these discriminations. It is in this spirit that this Special Edition has been produced.

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