

Boxing and the Youth Olympic Games

Cesar R. Torres

The College at Brockport, State University of New York

crtorres@brockport.edu

Jim Parry

Charles University in Prague

s.j.parry@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

Boxing has been featured in the Competitive Program of the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) since the event was inaugurated in Singapore in 2010. This paper examines whether boxing is a suitable sport to advance the professed goals of the YOG. It concludes that it is not, and that it should be removed from the YOG's Competitive Program. One line of argument focuses on the questionable impact of boxing on the health of young athletes. In this regard, issues of autonomy, consent, and paternalism are discussed in relation to the health of these athletes. A second line of argument focuses on the central purpose of boxing and its relation to Olympism. The paper suggests that, in light of the sport's moral failings, the discontinuation of boxing would better align the YOG with the values of Olympism.

Keywords

Youth Olympic Games, boxing, Olympism, ethics.

Torres, C. R. & Parry, J. (2017). Boxing and the Youth Olympic Games. *Diagoras: International Academic Journal on Olympic Studies*, 1, 169–190. Retrieved from <http://diagorasjournal.com/index.php/diagoras/article/view/14>



The Youth Olympic Games (YOG) were inaugurated in Singapore in 2010 and constitute not only the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) latest enterprise but also the largest multisport international event for young athletes. Its Competitive Program was based on that of the Olympic Games, with the same number of sports, but with fewer disciplines and events. However, some new disciplines were introduced, such as the very popular basketball three-on-three tournament, and other innovations included contests for mixed-gender and mixed-nationality teams.

Boxing has been part of the Competitive Program of the Olympic Games since 1904, although women were only allowed to box in Olympic arenas over a century later, in 2012, with youth following soon after (International Olympic Committee [IOC], 2015).¹ Although the YOG are intended for athletes between 15 and 18 years of age, each International Sport Federation determines a specific age bracket for its sport. In the case of boxing, the second YOG held in Nanjing in 2014 included 78 boxers (60 men and 18 women) between 17 and 18 years of age competing in ten categories for men and three for women. Since the inaugural YOG in Singapore in 2010 did not include women's boxing, the 2014 YOG in Nanjing were the first open to both male and female boxers (IOC, 2013, p. 7).

In this paper we will argue that boxing is not a suitable sport to advance the professed goals of the YOG and that it should be removed from the event's Competitive Program. One line of argument will focus on the questionable impact of boxing on the health of young athletes. Issues of autonomy, consent, and paternalism will be discussed in relation to the health of these athletes. A second line of argument will focus on the central purpose of boxing and its relation to Olympism. The main issue will be whether boxing coheres with the philosophical vision at the heart of both the Olympic Games and the YOG. To accomplish the goals of this paper, we will start by explaining the vision and goals of the YOG. We will also provide an account of the idea of "youth" and discuss the role that adults should have during this period of life. These two lines of argument will allow us to build the case against boxing at the YOG.

1. At the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, boxing was not contested because at that time Sweden banned its practice.

The Youth Olympic Games²

The idea to establish a global multisport international event for young athletes seems to have gradually developed among Olympic officials in the last two decades. Former IOC president Jacques Rogge was the driving force behind the initiative. In this regard, he declared that “The Youth Olympic Games is a project I’ve had at the back of my mind since being elected IOC President in 2001” (as cited in Slater, 2009, p. 33). Rogge traced his interest in the creation of this kind of international sport opportunity for youth back to the early 1990s. Rogge eventually formalized his project to create the YOG, the IOC studied its feasibility, and on April 25, 2007, its Executive Board unanimously approved it during a meeting in Beijing. Two months later, on July 5, the IOC approved the creation of the YOG during its 119th Session held in Guatemala City and decided that the first edition would take place in 2010. Early in 2008, Singapore was elected as the host of the inaugural YOG.

Apparently, it took some time to conceptualize and garner support for the YOG. Gilbert Felli, a former IOC Executive Director of Olympic Games, provides insight into this process. Although “The IOC had been thinking about it for many years,” Felli said, “when we talked about a purely sporting event the response was pretty negative” (as cited in Slater, 2009, p. 35). It was only “when we talked about a different kind of event in which sport, culture and education were equal, an event based on Olympic values, people said, ‘Ah, maybe this is something we should explore’” (as cited in Slater, 2009, p. 35). Although modeled after the Olympic Games, in the course of exploring possibilities for the YOG it was decided to depart from this model in certain respects.³ Whilst the event’s competitive element was retained, keeping along with all of the sports in the Olympic Games’ Competitive Program, the YOG were to be infused with “culture and education at its core” (as cited in Slater, 2009, p. 35). Thus, the structure of the event created by the IOC for athletes between the ages of 15 and 18 sought to maintain a balance between “sport, education and culture” as well as to “work as a catalyst in these fields throughout the Olympic Movement and to encourage young people to play an active role in their communities” (IOC, 2010, p. 4).

So, although the motivation for the YOG retains a commitment to the value of athletic competition, it also provides a fresh emphasis on the values that have inspired and framed the Olympic Games

2. The next three paragraphs are borrowed from Torres (2010). For another historical account of the event, see Houlihan, Hanstad, and Parent (2014).

3. See Lucidarme and Parry (2013).

since their inception in the late nineteenth century, a philosophical vision known as Olympism. Thus, as Rogge articulated before the inaugural YOG, “The main goal is not competition as such. The main goal is to give the youngsters an education based on Olympic values” (as cited in Wade, 2010, para. 7). In other words, the YOG have been envisioned as a sizeable and unique Olympic pedagogical effort. At the very core of the YOG is the attempt to familiarize young athletes with Olympism and its values “in a fun and festive spirit and to raise awareness of important issues such as the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, the fight against doping, global challenges and their role as sports ambassadors in their communities” (IOC, 2010, p. 5). In this regard, the IOC announced in a press release following its Executive Board’s approval of the YOG in 2007 that “Sports events would be carefully chosen to protect the health of the young athletes” (IOC, 2007). Likewise, one of the themes of the Culture and Education Program, which along the Competitive Program was created to accomplish the goals of the YOG, is “Well-Being and Healthy Lifestyle” (IOC, 2013, p. 2).⁴

Given that the YOG is obviously designed for young athletes, it is important to characterize briefly what it means to be a “youth.” Given the complex cultural, legal, social, and economic factors that influence its definition, it is difficult to precisely establish the parameters of the term youth, and our task is not assisted by the fact that, in many jurisdictions, the distinctions between child/youth/adult are a) confused and b) cut across the YOG’s 15-18 age range.⁵ Acknowledging that complexity and that there are different legal demarcations in different countries, the term youth typically refers to the relatively lengthy stage of life prior to adulthood. While these temporal boundaries are flexible, this stage of life roughly ranges from the age of twelve to the age of legal adulthood and it shares some of the attributes of childhood. Youths are closer to adulthood than younger children but they are children nonetheless and hence exhibit some of the attributes of childhood.

Following Tamar Schapiro’s (1999) Kantian approach to childhood, it could be contended that youth are not fully “in a position to speak in [their] own voice because there is no voice which counts as [theirs]” (p. 729).⁶ For Schapiro, childhood presents a normative predicament in which persons are in a state of underdevelopment. By this she means that “the undeveloped

4. The Culture and Education Program has been rebranded “Learn & Share,” but its mission remains the same. See IOC (2016a).

5. For example, in the United Kingdom, a 16-year-old can live alone, marry, join the army, and die for the country, factors which accord adult status. However, the (adult) courts do not deal with cases involving 16-18-year-olds, which go to the “Youth Court.” Presumably, this means that 15-year-olds are dealt with as “children.”

6. This paragraph is borrowed from Torres and Hager (2013).

agent, unlike the developed agent, is unable to work out a plan of life ‘all at once’” (Schapiro, 1999, p. 730). Schapiro is aware of the enormity of the normative predicament in which children find themselves and believes that such a condition excuses a paternalistic attitude towards children if their ability to work out a plan of life all at once is not yet developed. Thus, she proposes that adults have a duty to help children overcome this normative predicament, but realizes that it is only children themselves who can do so. In other words, children have to develop a voice that counts as legitimately theirs that will assist them in conceiving a broad life plan. Schapiro supports a principle stating that adults should, to the best of their ability, help children become developed agents. To do so, she contends that adults must recognize both negative and positive obligations to children. Adults have a negative obligation to abstain from impeding children’s quest to find their own voice and a positive obligation to support such children’s quest in every way possible, the ultimate goal being to facilitate the latter’s most exigent quest to develop as autonomous agents who can authoritatively rule over themselves. For Schapiro (1999), the negative and positive obligations adults have to children “all stem from the idea that in order not to abuse our privilege as adults, we must make children’s dependence our enemy” (p. 737). This view indicates that paternalism toward children is only temporarily justified. It also recognizes that children develop a capacity to rule authoritatively over themselves as they grow. Finally, it suggests that adults should allow this developing capacity to be exercised in matters that children are capable of facing and handling, especially those that affect them directly.

Youth Boxing, Health, and the Youth Olympic Games

One of the most common objections to boxing is that it exposes participants to potentially debilitating and devastating injuries, and even death. While facial, head, and neck injuries are the most frequent in boxing, “Brain injury is the most significant risk . . . and acute subdural hematoma is the most common cause of death in amateur and professional boxers” (American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, & Canadian Paediatric Society, Healthy Active Living and Sports Medicine Committee [AAP and CPS], 2011, p. 618). According to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Canadian Paediatric

Society, there were 659 boxing deaths between 1918 and 1997, all due to brain injury (AAP and CPS, 2011, p. 618).⁷ Moreover, for these medical associations, “There is evidence that amateur boxers are at risk of structural brain injuries, cognitive abnormalities, and neurologic deficits from the sport” (AAP and CPS, 2011, p. 618). In a recent discussion of what is known about the relationship between boxing and neurological injuries, Anthony Petraglia, Julian Bailes, and Arthur Day (2015) explain that “chronic neurological injuries from boxing tend to have an insidious onset and often present and progress once a boxer’s career is over” (p. 13).

Concussions, a form of traumatic brain injury, are of special concern in youth boxing because “there is evidence that a child’s brain is more vulnerable to injury and that recovery from concussion is prolonged when compared with adults” (AAP and CPS, 2011, p. 619). From the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles until the 2012 Olympic Games in London, boxers were required to wear head guards to reduce the risk of concussions and other head injuries. That requirement was lifted for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, but only for male boxers, since their female counterparts still had to wear head guards. The rule change generated much controversy, partly because of differential rules across genders, but mainly because it remains unclear whether boxing without head guards is safer than boxing with them.⁸ As much as concussions are of special concern in youth boxing, “There is also evidence of diminished neurocognitive functioning on neuropsychological tests in amateur boxers without concussions” (AAP and CPS, 2011, p. 619). In short, there seems to be ample medical evidence that boxing (and not only professional boxing) poses significant risks to the health of participants. These risks seem to be even more significant in the case of youth boxing.

Due to their concerns over the risks that boxing poses to the health of participants, several medical associations oppose the sport and have called for its ban. For instance, the American, Australian, Canadian, British, and World Medical Associations recommend that boxing be banned. Likewise, the American Academy of Pediatrics as well as the Canadian Paediatric Society oppose boxing for children and adolescents (Purcell, LeBlanc, & Canadian Paediatric Society Healthy Active Living and Sports Medicine Committee, 2012).

The significant risks that boxing poses to the health of young athletes indicate that its inclusion in the YOG’s Competitive

7. Other sources cite a larger number. For instance, an internet site lists 1,865 deaths between 1890 and 201 (“Death in the Boxing Ring,” 2016). See also Svinth (2007).

8. There were many newspaper and magazines articles discussing this rule change. Two examples are Belson (2016) and Zhang (2016).

Program contradicts the IOC's announcement in 2007 that the event's sports "would be carefully chosen to protect the health of the young athletes." A sport that exposes participants to the risk of potentially debilitating and devastating facial, head, neck, and brain injuries, and even death, could hardly qualify as one that protects the health of young athletes. This contradiction seems enough to show that boxing is not a suitable sport to advance the professed goals of the YOG and that it should be removed from the event's Competitive Program. However, before accepting this conclusion, plausible counterarguments should be considered.

One argument against removing boxing from the YOG's Competitive Program is based on libertarian grounds. It would propose that youths close to the legal age of adulthood should be free to decide to engage in boxing even if they are likely to be harmed by their decisions. Furthermore, it would also propose that allowing these youths to decide to engage in boxing and respecting their decisions is compatible with fostering their "well-being," one of the YOG's goals. This argument contends that children should be allowed if not unlimited at least an ample degree of freedom and that adults should show maximal respect for their autonomy.

The radical libertarian and anti-paternalistic argument to allow youth boxing at the YOG though is open to serious objections. For instance, even John Stuart Mill (1865), the great defender of human freedom, accepted that the anti-paternalism articulated in his Harm Principle, which argues "That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others," (p. 6) has limits. Such paternalistic limitations apply, for example, to children whose decisions lack autonomy and may require protection from adults. It could be argued that young boxers lack the adequate information to make autonomous decisions. Yet, radical liberals could retort that providing relevant information rather than removing boxing from the YOG's Competitive Program is the most adequate response to promote and respect young boxers' autonomy. The crucial question, however, is not whether young boxers lack the relevant information needed to make an autonomous decision, but whether they are in a position to comprehend the risks of boxing and ponder about a life with the kind of potentially irreversible injuries that boxers sustain. Child psychology strongly suggests that children lack the cognitive ability to function as adults. In other words, they do not possess

the cognitive abilities and thus are not in an advantageous position to carefully reflect on the impact that boxing may have on their future autonomy. As such, young boxers' requests or actions are not autonomous.⁹

Nicholas Dixon (2001) maintains that "In such cases, respect for autonomy may actually require paternalistic intervention" (p. 325). His position is compatible with Schapiro's view on childhood, which says that paternalism toward children is justified as they develop a capacity to authoritatively rule over themselves. Dixon further maintains that "protecting boxers from the effects of agreements to which they have not given sufficiently voluntary consent—justifies *pre-emptive* protection of boxers, in the form of banning such contracts in the first place" (p. 331). In the case of youth boxing, because of the boxers' inability to fully deliberate on their current and future interests, participants are unable to provide meaningful voluntary consent. If boxing creates conditions that severely jeopardize the current and future autonomy of young participants, there is a very strong case to remove boxing from the YOG's Competitive Program. It should be noted that similar forms of paternalism are accepted in society and are well established in legal system around the world, since it is the most obvious rationale, for example, for the prohibition on selling alcohol and tobacco to minors.

Another argument against removing boxing from the YOG's Competitive Program is based on the value that dangerous athletic activities have for children. John Russell (2007) contends that dangerous athletic activities, including boxing, are valuable because they help children develop not only personal health, safety, and good decision-making, traits related to personal independence and responsibility, but also character virtues like courage, perseverance, and self-sufficiency, which are constitutive of well-functioning, rational people. He also contends that dangerous athletic activities are uniquely valuable for children because they provide opportunities for what he terms "self-affirmation," which refers to "pressing individual boundaries and thus defining new self-understandings and conceptions of the self" (p. 182). That is, dangerous athletic activities "challenge us to push the boundaries of who we are by extending in certain ways the physical, emotional, and intellectual limits of our finite, embodied selves" (p. 181). Since childhood "is a time of self-affirmation par excellence" and self-affirmation is profoundly present in dangerous athletic

9. The following is a very short list of works addressing how children and youth develop: Bjorklund (2012), Bjorklund and Hernández Blasi (2012), and Thornton (2002).

activities, Russell claims that “The elimination of all physical risk or danger from children’s lives . . . would impoverish what it is to be a child . . . by preventing the creation and discovery of what sort of beings we are and what we are capable of along certain physical and related emotional and intellectual dimensions of our being” (p. 182). For him, children should be permitted “to participate in self-affirming risky physical activities” (p. 183).

Russell’s (2007) position is obviously at odd with the soft paternalism mentioned above, “which holds that we are entitled to interfere with incompetent individuals [and children in particular] for their own good, especially if their behavior poses an unnecessary danger to themselves” (p. 183). Soft paternalism requires that adults prohibit children’s participation in dangerous athletic activities until they are capable of making autonomous decisions to participate in such activities. Russell recognizes that there is a genuine moral dilemma between self-affirming dangerous athletic activities and soft paternalism. While acknowledging that there is no “straightforward resolution to this dilemma,” he thinks that “self-affirming behavior ought often, if certainly not always, be respected” (p. 185). The main reason Russell provides for his position is that “there are goods that can only, or perhaps only reasonably, be achieved in childhood” and that precluding participation in dangerous athletic activities until “adult competence is established . . . denies access to important, time-limited opportunities for self-affirmation” (p. 187). Attempting to balance the tension between soft paternalism and allowing children to engage in self-affirming dangerous athletic activities, Russell explains that “Children should only be permitted to engage in risky behavior that they have a reasonable prospect of succeeding at, and thus of avoiding serious injury” (p. 188).¹⁰

Meeting this balancing requirement in youth boxing seems extremely difficult if not impossible. What would be a sign of readiness to succeed in youth boxing in light of the “concern that repeated head injuries associated with [the sport may] lead to long-lasting neurocognitive effects” (AAP and CPS, 2011, p. 620)? Even if it could be established, readiness to avoid serious injury in a single bout or tournament does not necessarily seem to be a reliable indicator that a young boxer is similarly ready to avoid the risk of chronic traumatic brain injury that boxing over an extended period of time poses. It could also be questioned if children, whose development is very much in progress and are still learning

10. Russell’s account has been criticized for failing to distinguish adequately between risk and danger. Exposing children to risk (for example, to “risk-of-failure”) is very different from exposing them to danger. See Martínková and Parry (2017).

to master the skills of the sport, are ever fully ready to succeed at boxing and thus avoid serious injury, both during single bouts and in the long run. A related objection would propose that to have a reasonable prospect of succeeding at the sport, aspiring boxers have to start training years before they meet the age requirement to qualify for the YOG, when young boxers are developmentally even more vulnerable to the pernicious effects of debilitating long term injuries that jeopardize central human functionings. These objections are strong enough to render boxing an unacceptably dangerous athletic activity for children, which indicate that its inclusion at the YOG is equally unacceptable.

However, even if young boxers could successfully avoid serious injuries, it does not follow that boxing, and more precisely all self-affirming dangerous athletic activities, is morally tenable. It may be that boxing is a self-affirming dangerous athletic activity whose central purpose is so objectionable as to make it unacceptable, especially for children and especially at the YOG. The next section briefly examines the moral status of boxing, and the one after articulates what boxing demands against what Olympism means. This will allow us to suggest that boxing is morally untenable and that it is incongruous with Olympism.

The Moral Status of Boxing

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Canadian Paediatric Society define boxing as a “sport in which participants fight and win points for scoring clean blows to the head and body above the belt” (AAP and CPS, 2011, p. 611). As Colin Radford (1996) argues, a boxer can only win “by knocking his opponent out, or by out-pointing him, and he can only do that by punching his opponent more frequently, cleanly and effectively than he is punched himself. . . . A boxer, therefore, is hoping and trying to hurt his man” (p. 156) Robert L. Simon (1991) agrees with this description of boxing asserting that it “has the goal of infliction of harm by one opponent on another at its core, and so makes violence central” (p. 64). Similarly, Joyce Carol Oates (1987) argues that “boxing is the only sport in which the objective is to cause injury: the brain is the target, the knockout the goal” (p. 93).

Notice that Radford says that the objective of boxing is to hurt, whereas Simon says it is to harm, and Oates says it is to injure.

These, however, are significantly different objectives. A boxing bout might be lost owing to an injury (say, a cut above the eye due to an accidental clash of heads), without much hurt and with no significant harm. The same injury might occasion a substitution in soccer or rugby. A boxing bout might be won on points without injury or harm. A boxer might seek to hurt his/her opponent, whilst wishing him/her no harm (just like a soccer or rugby player might). A boxer might win without seeking to cause injury, without targeting the brain, and without looking for a knockout. This is especially true of Olympic-style boxing, which does not fall to the kind of objections often marshalled against professional, or “gladiatorial,” boxing.

Nevertheless, it does seem that the ability to inflict injury and pain on opponents is an important component of success, since the rules of boxing permit (and to that extent also encourage) such violent interactions between opponents. A concomitant problem with the sport is the alleged attitude to selves that is inherent to it and that it promotes. Boxing requires that participants be, at least temporarily, numb to violence and the infliction of injury and pain on another self. As Dixon (2001) puts it, “In attempting to injure their opponents, boxers treat them as mere objects to be disposed of in order to achieve victory” (337). Selves are thus disrespected and diminished. Paul Davis (1993-1994) summarizes this objection forcefully claiming that “The boxing ring seems to legitimize an attitude towards another self that is otherwise regarded morally unacceptable, and the psychology that might get someone imprisoned seems to be a part of the toolkit that can gain the boxer the status of local, national, and international celebrity” (p. 56).

However, the same is true with some football skills, which are equally disallowed in the rest of life. For instance, shoulder charging is not allowed in the bus queue. Davis’s argument ignores the sporting context, which is clearly crucial. It transfers the understanding of morality within the sport to morality outside the sport.

Consider what routinely happens at the end of a fight. Immediately on the final bell there are cuddles and mutual respect. It is claimed that the attitude and response to selves, which outside of the ring would be unacceptable and mystifying, makes boxing morally unintelligible. However, this objection fails to recognize the many attempts there have been to describe the virtues of combat (and combat sports). Whatever war is, and however evil it might

be, it is surely intelligible, and some argue that it is the source of human virtues. So we still stand in need of a solid criterion for the unacceptability of boxing.¹¹

Furthermore, if we consider the incidence of concussive contacts, or the effect of repeated concussive blows on participants, there are other sports than boxing that may be seen as morally problematic, including soccer, rugby and football. Similarly, if the attempt to hurt opponents were seen as illegitimate, then these same three sports would again be morally problematic, since hurting opponents is an important element in these sports, serving to diminish their stamina and their capacities at later stages of a game. The crucial difference between these sports and boxing is as follows. In soccer, rugby, and football, as well as other sports, hurting opponents is seen as legitimate only in the context of achieving some other legitimate aim in the game. In rugby, for example, the primary aim in tackling is not to hurt, but to tackle, and to achieve the aim of the tackle (to stop opponents, or to ground them, or to force them into touch, etc.). To be able to do so in a way that also brings them hurt (rattles their teeth, or takes their breath away) is an additional benefit. There is nothing wrong with that. It is unreasonable to participate in these sports with the expectation that one would not get hurt, either by accident or by the intentional action of another player.

Similarly, all these sports treat other humans “as mere objects to be disposed of.” Think of “driving” techniques in rugby, which are designed with precisely this effect in mind. Think of a linebacker shunting an opponent out of the way like a sack of garbage. Furthermore, as Cei Tuxill and Sheila Wigmore (1998) point out, the effect of such actions is one of reflexive self-objectification:

Clearly what is going on here is the objectification of opponents, seeing them merely as their “role”; but the player is also objectifying himself, not treating himself as a person, a being who is responsible for others and for the wider implications of his behaviour. (p. 112)

In any case, it is an unjustified assumption that, because boxers hit each other, they must be “objectifying” their opponents. To treat one’s opponent as an object would be to fail to notice their humanity. Objects do not hit back, opponents do. Boxers rather see themselves as overcoming another boxer’s capacities and abilities. To overcome another human requires some apprehension of his/her humanity, his/her strengths, weaknesses,

11. Wacquant (2004) is one of those who has explored the virtues, along with the complexities and significances, of boxing. For an account of “romantic militarism,” which highlights the opportunities for self-affirmation in war, see Russell (2005).

abilities, and capacities. In all these ways, boxers may think just the same as linebackers or rugby forwards. The crucial difference between soccer, rugby, and football and boxing lies not in the incidence of concussive contacts, or in the intention to hurt, or in the objectification of opponents. It rather lies in what the rules of boxing permit (which is not to say that it happens, or happens often). That is, it lies in the fact that the rules of boxing permit the player to adopt a reckless attitude as to harm the opponent, and even to intend to harm the opponent, without penalty. Contrast soccer, for example, in which recklessness as to harm an opponent not only draws a free kick, but also a caution (yellow card). The intention to harm attracts immediate exclusion from the game (red card).

The moral dubiety of boxing lies not in its requiring the infliction of injury and harm, nor in its requiring the moral viciousness of its participants (as if all boxers were psychopaths, bent on securing harm to and destruction of the opponent), but rather that the rules of boxing permit such attitudes to be expressed without penalty. Behind this lies a failure of recognition, a kind of denial, which fails to acknowledge the extent of possible harms to participants, and a consequence of which is a failure in the duty of care—a certain tolerance of, and a failure to protect adequately against, possible harms that might affect a future life of open possibility.

Boxing and Olympism

To determine whether boxing is congruent with Olympism or not, the latter has to be explored. One way to do so is to look at how the IOC articulates Olympism. The *Olympic Charter* (2016b), which “is the codification of the Fundamental Principles of Olympism,” (p. 9) explains that

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, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. (p. 11)

It also states that “The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity” (p. 11). Moreover, it asserts that

The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play. (p. 11)¹²

Despite the vagueness and generality of these formulations, it is clear that Olympism's ambition is to explicitly pursue moral values through the practice of sport.¹³ In other words, Olympism is an educational program that considers sport as a means to promote moral and social improvement. Different scholars have arrived at similar conclusions. For instance, while Jeffrey Segrave (1988) posits that "Olympism places sport in the service of an enlightened humanity," (p. 159) Jim Parry (2006) considers it "a social philosophy that emphasizes the role of sport in global culture, international understanding, peaceful coexistence, and social and moral education" (p. 190).

Olympic advocates typically underscore the fact that one of Olympism's most noticeable, and noticed, characteristics is the promotion of peace and international understanding. Since their beginning in 1896, the Olympic Games have been defended as a quadrennial multisport and multinational gathering meant to facilitate dialogue and empathy among the nations of the world. This feature of Olympism has been long enunciated as combining the expression of *amor patriae* along with the universal moral considerations demanded by the rest of Olympism's features. It was Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the IOC at the dusk of the nineteenth century, who first combined these elements in Olympic circles. As Sigmund Loland (1995) observes, "Coubertin's special blend of patriotism, peace and international understanding merged into what he called 'internationalism'" (p. 65). In Coubertin's own words, internationalism must be "understood of course as respect for, not destruction of, native countries" (2000a, p. 537) and Olympism "as a destroyer of dividing walls" (2000b, p. 548). The Olympic Games are supposed to be the pinnacle of Olympism and the values it propounds. Historically, this has not always been the case. Nonetheless, as Loland (2014) contends, "The setup and structure of the YOG seems to a larger extent fair and closer to the Olympic ideals of mutual understanding and a sense of community than can be said of the [Olympic Games]" (p. 28).

12. It is often asserted that sport is a human right, but sport is not accorded such status in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), in which it is not mentioned, nor in the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990), which mentions play as well as recreational and leisure activities, but not sport.

13. Some material in this and the next paragraph is borrowed from Torres (2012).

There are at least two areas in which boxing seems to be incongruous with Olympism. Both refer to our previous characterization of the crucial difference between boxing and other sports, which lies in what the rules of boxing uniquely permit - namely, they permit participants to adopt a reckless attitude as to harm opponents, and even to intend to harm opponents, without penalty.

Firstly, boxing hardly seems a promising sport to advocate “a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity,” as stated in the *Olympic Charter*. The harm that may legitimately be intended by boxers is in stark contrast with these goals. While peace is a complex concept, “scholarship has long emphasized the distinction between *negative peace* and *positive peace*” (Fiala, 2014, para. 1).¹⁴ The former is the absence of violence or war while the latter encompasses a tranquil order in which there is solidarity, mutual respect, caring concern towards oneself and others, and more broadly human flourishing.

Boxing’s character and potential for violence contradicts either conception of peace: it flatly denies negative peace as well as some of the values encompassed by positive peace. For instance, boxing is degrading because a) it permits participants to inflict injury and pain on opponents, b) it permits a temporary suspension of concern for persons (including oneself), and c) it permits without penalty “an attitude towards selves that is forbidden in other sports and that finds no moral sanction in the rest of life” (Davis, 1993-1994, p. 61). We argue that human flourishing, the actualization of human capacities to the highest degree, is belittled when this kind of permissiveness takes place. This argument applies even more so to children, whose capacity to consent to the possibility of such assaults is questionable, and whose vulnerability to the possibly pernicious effects of such assaults is much higher.

Second, boxing hardly seems either a promising sport to advance international understanding. On the contrary, if anything, the attitude that boxers adopt toward one another is more likely to create animosity than amity. As Davis (1993-1994) affirms, “Boxing legitimizes a non-simulated viciousness towards another,” and “seems uniquely fitted, among sports, to the discharge of this attitude towards an opponent” (pp. 61 and 52). In reply, the following could be argued. During the bout, one is trying to win, of course, with all that entails for assaults and the effects of combat. But this does not transfer out of the ring. Indeed, the respect due to a fellow competitor in boxing is of the very highest order, since

14. See also Galtung (1969).

every boxer knows what it takes just to dare to get in that ring. To the suggestion that it is difficult to display caring concern, friendship, and mutual understanding towards opponents when the activity that brings them together demands the infliction of hurt and a rancorous attitude, quite the reverse could be contended: the common challenge faced, and the very facing of it, brings boxers together. The mutually produced contest, based on the intention to overcome the other, is instantly forgotten at the final bell, where mutual congratulation and respect emerge.

Nonetheless, the central failing in boxing cannot be escaped: that, despite the values of honorable combat and courageous resilience, the activity does nothing to prevent or to discourage the intention to inflict injury and harm. Whilst the infliction of harm need not necessarily be a boxer's motivation or intent, the rules *fail to rule out* such intent. This is what distinguishes boxing (as a combat sport) from other body-contact sports, such as varieties of football, which explicitly rule out violence (the intention to harm).

One wonders whether, because of this inescapable failing, boxing can be a sport conducive, paraphrasing Coubertin, to destroying the walls that divide the peoples of the world. The advancement of international understanding through the Olympic Games is a formidable challenge under the best of circumstances. We do not see why we should make such a goal even more challenging by endeavoring to accomplish it through a sport whose structure and rules are morally unacceptable. Other sports that do not pose this sort of moral challenge to the values of Olympism are to be preferred in the Olympic Games and obviously in the YOG. To do so would bring the YOG closer to those values.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that boxing is not a suitable sport to advance the professed goals of the YOG. Its central moral failing is to decline to outlaw the seeking of harm, injury, or pain to an opponent, as a means of securing victory. This is not to suggest that all boxers have rancorous attitudes towards their opponents, or are seeking to injure or harm them, but it is to point out that boxing as a sport permits (which might also mean "encourages") those attitudes. The case against boxing as an appropriate sport for children and youth is that, whereas all other Olympic sports take adequate steps to minimize harm, especially in relation to

concussive blows to the head,¹⁵ boxing does not (and, indeed, cannot, since the head is a possible target).

Any subsequent risk to the health and well-being of young boxers justifies paternalistic protection, which is all the more urgent because children lack the capacity to make autonomous decisions regarding participation in such a potentially dangerous, even if self-affirming, activity. Whatever values boxing may offer children, the risk afforded by its permissive rules, and the potentially irreversible harm that might result, overwhelmingly indicate the inadvisability of allowing them to box. The rules are morally dubious and seem to be in contradiction with some of the tenets of Olympism, such as the fostering of human dignity, peace, and international understanding. Rather than advancing an enlightened humanity, boxing seems to undermine it. Boxing is an objectionable component of the YOG's Competitive Program and should be discontinued, thus better aligning the YOG with Olympism.

15. As evidenced by the recent emphasis on the treatment of head injuries in soccer (see Mundasad, 2017) and recent concerns over concussive injuries in rugby (see McNamee, Partridge & Anderson, 2015).

References

American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, & Canadian Paediatric Society, Healthy Active Living and Sports Medicine Committee. (2011). Boxing participation by children and adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 128(3), 617-623.

Belson, K. (2016, August 6). Making Olympic boxing safer by eliminating head guards. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/07/sports/olympics/making-olympic-boxing-safer-by-eliminating-head-guards.html?_r=0

Bjorklund, D. (2012). *Children's thinking: Cognitive development and individual differences* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Bjorklund, D., & Hernández Blasi, C. (2012). *Child and adolescent development: An integrated approach*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2012.

Coubertin, P. (2000a). The neo-Olympism. Appeal to the people of Athens (November 16, 1894): Lecture given to the Parnassus Literary Society at Athens. In N. Müller (Ed.). *Olympism: Selected writings* (pp. 533-541). Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.

Coubertin, P. (2000b). Olympic letter III: Olympism and education. In N. Müller (Ed.). *Olympism: Selected writings* (pp. 547-548). Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.

Davis, D. (1993-1994). Ethical issues in boxing. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 20-21, 48-63.

Death in the Boxing Ring. (2016, October 4). *How They Play*. Retrieved from <https://howtheyplay.com/individual-sports/Death-in-the-Boxing-Ring>.

Dixon, N. (2001). Boxing, paternalism, and legal moralism. *Social Theory and Practice*, 27(2), 323-344.

Fiala, A. (2014). Pacifism. In E. Zalta (Ed.). *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/pacifism/>

Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *The Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167-191

Houlihan, B., Hanstad, D., & Parent, M. (2014). Introduction. In D. Hanstad, M. Parent, & B. Houlihan (Eds.), *The Youth Olympic Games* (pp. 3-13). London and New York: Routledge.

International Olympic Committee. (2007, April 26). *IOC Executive board welcomes idea of Youth Olympic Games*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.

International Olympic Committee. (2010). *Youth and Olympism. Olympic Studies Centre content package*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.

International Olympic Committee. (2013). *Factsheet Youth Olympic Games. Update – December 2013*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.

International Olympic Committee. (2015). *Boxing: History of boxing at the Olympic Games*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.

International Olympic Committee. (2016a) *The YOG Learn & Share. Beyond the field of play. Updated – January 2016*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.

International Olympic Committee. (2016b). *Olympic charter*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee.

Loland, S. (1995). Coubertin's ideology of Olympism from the perspective of the history of ideas. *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, 4, 49-78.

Loland, S. (2014). The Youth Olympic Games and the Olympic ideal. In D. Hanstad, M. Parent, & B. Houlihan (Eds.), *The Youth Olympic Games* (pp. 19-33). London and New York: Routledge.

Lucidarme, S., & Parry, J. (2013). The first Youth Olympic Games of 2010 – Innovations and challenges. In S. Harvey & R. Light (Eds.), *Ethics in youth sport* (pp. 40-54). London: Routledge.

Martínková, I., & Parry, J. (2017). Safe danger – On the experience of challenge, adventure and risk in education. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 11(1), 75-91.

McNamee, M., Partridge, B., & Anderson, L. (2015). Concussion in sport: Conceptual and ethical issues. *Kinesiology Review*, 4(2), 190 -202.

Mill, J. S. (1856). *On liberty*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.

Mundasad, S. (2017, February 15). Football headers “Linked to Brain Damage.” *BBC.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/health-38971750>

Oates, J. C. (1987). *On boxing*. Garden City, NY: Dolphin/Doubleday.

Parry, J. (2006). Sport and Olympism: Universals and multiculturalism. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 33(2), 188-204.

Petraglia, A., Bailes, J., & Day, A. (2015). *Handbook of neurological sports medicine: Concussion and other nervous system injuries in the athlete*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Purcell, L., LeBlanc, C., & Canadian Paediatric Society Healthy Active Living and Sports Medicine Committee. (2012). Boxing participation by children and adolescents: A joint statement with the American Academy of Pediatrics. *Paediatrics and Child Health*, 17(1), 1-8.

Radford, C. (1996). *Driving to California: An unconventional introduction to philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Russell, J. S. (2005). The value of dangerous sport. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 32(1), 1-19.

Russell, J. S. (2007). Children and dangerous sport and recreation. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 34(2), 176-193.

Schapiro, T. (1999). What is a child? *Ethics*, 109(4), 715-738.

Segrave, J. (1988). Towards a definition of Olympism. In J. Segrave & D. Chu (Eds.). *The Olympic Games in transition* (pp. 149-161). Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics.

Simon, R. L. (1991). *Fair play. Sport, values, and society*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Slater, M. (2009). Youthful outlook. *Olympic Review*, 71, 26-49.

Svinth, J. (2007). Death under the spotlight: The Manuel Velazquez boxing fatality collection. *Journal of Combative Sport*. Retrieved from http://ejmas.com/jcs/jcsart_svinth_a_0700.htm

Thornton, S. (2002). *Growing minds: An introduction to children's cognitive development*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Torres, C. R. (2010). The Youth Olympic Games, their programs, and Olympism. Paper written in the framework of the IOC's OSC Postgraduate Grant Selection Committee.

Torres, C. R. (2012). Expatriate coaching, Olympism and the Olympic Games. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 6(2), 289-304.

Torres, C. R., & Hager, P. F. (2013). Competition, ethics, and coaching youth. In R. L. Simon (Ed.), *The ethics of coaching sports. Moral, social, and legal issues* (pp. 167-184). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Tuxill, C., & Wigmore, S. Merely meat? Respect for persons in sport and games. In M. McNamee & J. Parry (Eds.). *Ethics & sport* (pp. 104-115). London: E & FN Spon, 1998).

Wacquant, L. (2004). *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an apprentice boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wade, S. (2010, April 25). No kidding: Teens to get Youth Olympic Games. *USA Today*. Retrieved from http://www.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/2007-04-25-2774646336_x.htm

Zhang, S. (2016, August 1). Why Olympic boxers aren't wearing headgear anymore. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/2016/08/olympic-boxers-arent-wearing-headgear-anymore/>

Authors

Cesar R. Torres, PhD, is a professor at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. He is a fellow in the National Academy of Kinesiology and a former president of the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport (IAPS). He has been awarded the Warren P. Fraleigh Distinguished Scholar Award by IAPS.

Prof Dr **Jim Parry** is former Head of the Department of Philosophy and of the School of Humanities, University of Leeds, and is now Professor at the Faculty of PE and Sport, Charles University, Prague. He is former chair, British Philosophy of Sport Association, former Chair British Universities Physical Education Association, and Founding Director, British Olympic Academy.

Funding

This work was supported by Charles University, Czech Republic [grant number PROGRES Q19].

