

Cricket, Politics, and Moral Responsibility: where do the boundaries lie?

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Abstract

This paper will explore the issues surrounding the participation of athletes in politically sensitive sporting events. Its underlying premise is that there is a duty laid upon some person(s) to make an informed moral decision concerning participation in a politically sensitive or controversial sporting event. It will focus upon the question of who should be making the moral decisions on such matters, and to what extent various groups and individuals should be held responsible for making these types of moral judgements and taking consequential action.

This paper will open by outlining historical examples where sport has been used by Governments as a political tool to express and enforce particular moral values. Following this, it identifies the standpoint taken by international sporting boards and committees who maintain that international sporting events are not a moral issue, and highlights the inherent contradiction that results from the attempt of these committees to encompass all possible moral and cultural values. The position of the national governing bodies is also considered and questions are raised as to whether these bodies have a duty to make moral judgements on politically sensitive sporting matters for their members or whether individual athletes should be given the responsibility to make these decisions for themselves. Finally, this question is applied to the role of national governments alongside the question of whether it is morally acceptable to be using sport as a political tool in this way. In particular, it will focus upon the contentious case of England's cricket tour to Zimbabwe in 2004. The fulfilment of this tour, though met by disapproval by the British Government due to the politically and morally controversial actions taken by the regime led by Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, was left to the players and their governing body who were under the threat of financial and other penalties from the International Cricketing Committee if it were to be abandoned.

Main Paper

Keeping sport free from political interference is an understandable, if naïve, sentiment, for sport is perceived as a concept whereby the rules of competition are set merely to allow that sport to exist within its own logical space, and are irrespective of the moral, cultural and political values that participants may hold. In this, the only bar to participating in sport is the 'God-given' one of ability and aptitude. However, though such an idealistic picture can be appreciated, the desire to confine politics to an area that doesn't encompass sport is not one that can realistically be achieved. Moral, and subsequently political decisions must be made in all aspects of society, be it local or global, and sport is undeniably one of these aspects. [1]

For example, the modern Olympics were originally conceived as a method of displaying athleticism and challenging the limits of human physical endeavour and ability. And yet they were established on the back of the embarrassing French defeat in the Prussian war. From the outset, the modern Olympic Games were

envisioned as a way of restoring national and political pride. Perhaps it could be argued that if the modern Olympics were truly about the capability of the human individual then they would have followed more closely the ancient Greek model where individuals represented themselves. Instead, the modern Olympics were constructed (albeit perhaps not overtly) to be politically divisive in playing nation against nation. It is a stage upon which international political relations and grievances have been acted out. Up until Barcelona in 1992, at least ten out of twenty four games had been affected by political disputes or boycotts, most typically boycotts protesting against particular invasions of sovereign countries by another. In addition to this, there have been instances of Olympic Games which have been explicitly used to promote particular political ideologies, for example, the Berlin Games of 1936. However, in both of these types of examples, the political intervention has been driven by the Governments of the countries involved. In contrast, the ban given to South Africa in competing in the Olympics due to its policy of apartheid was provided by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Yet, this ban can be argued to have been an inconsistently applied moral position when the Black Power salute given by American athletes on the podium in 1968 was condemned by the IOC (who expelled the athletes) on the grounds that, 'The basic principle of the Olympic Games is that politics plays no part whatsoever in them. US athletes violated this universally accepted principle...to advertise domestic political views.' (Durant, 1973)

In this comparison, there seems to be a conflict of interests. On the one hand the IOC wishes to emphasise that the Olympics are free from political matters, and yet at the same time it is attempting to uphold politically conceived ideals; that the only relevance of difference between those participating should be found within the results. This conflict can evidently be seen in the attempt of the campaign group, Atlanta Plus, who around the time of the 1996 Olympics protested against the IOC decision to allow the participation of countries that did not permit women to compete in their teams. Atlanta Plus argued that allowing such discrimination against women contravened the moral ideals that the Olympics sought to exude. The IOC rejected Atlanta Plus's demands for the exclusion of such countries on the grounds that it was a politically motivated attack on the religion of Islam (Turner and Kurylo, January 26th 1995), in which case they can be seen as upholding the moral value that participants should not be excluded by their religion even if this religion excludes the participation of others. On these and matters like them, the IOC have taken a culturally relativist or even a moral isolationist standpoint in claiming that they cannot make moral judgments about other cultures and are yet, at the same making a moral judgement in making such a claim.

This position is remarkably similar to the one currently held by the International Cricketing Committee (ICC). The ICC has stringent deterrents to prevent countries from pulling out on tours that are not based on issues of safety and security or on the orders of national governments. They argue that it is not the place for the national boards of cricketing countries to make political or moral judgements and they make it very clear that cricketers should only be concerned with cricket and politicians should be left to make political decisions. The ICC president Ehsan Mani, in an interview on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme on 10th March 2004, said that it would be unacceptable to cancel a fixture on moral grounds. Asked whether there was an element of moral cowardness about that stance, Mani replied that it is not appropriate for cricket to judge between countries and regimes with different cultures and values, some which don't necessary represent Western

democratic values. He concluded by asserting that any cultural differences should have no effect on the game of cricket.

It appears that there is an inherent contradiction with the positions of both the IOC and the ICC. Both the Olympics and the game of cricket emphasise a particular set of moral values, for example: the concept of fair-play, good sportsmanship, the abiding of rules and cooperation with others. These things may well be practical necessities to prevent sport descending into chaos (a sport that did not hold rule-following as an essential adherent would not last long for the obvious reasons and may even fall outside the definition of sport) but there is an important distinction in that these features are still promoted as moral values. For instance, cheating is not something to be avoided just because it would irreparably damage the game, but because it is held to be morally wrong. Ultimately, the IOC and the ICC could find themselves in a paradoxical situation should a nation whose culture approved of cheating wish to be part of their activities. Undoubtedly, both the IOC and the ICC would rebuff this criticism by arguing that abiding by the rules and not cheating is an integral part of sport which cannot be compromised regardless of the cultural values of a particular society, whereby the exclusion of women from participating in sport, or the treatment of individuals in a particular society, does not have a direct effect on the sporting activity in itself. Nevertheless, this rebuttal does not overcome the contradictory positions whereby on the one hand, these committees advocate that they do not hold moral opinions or positions, and yet on the other, uphold a particular and moral concept of the sport(s) which they promote.

Such a culturally relativist attitude has had its vocal critics; a recent and prominent one being Des Wilson who was given the task by the English Cricket Board (ECB) to draw up a set of moral guidelines for the national governing body. Des Wilson was assigned to this task primarily to enable the ECB to overcome a particularly problematic and pressing moral issue over whether the England cricket team should tour Zimbabwe. However, Wilson resigned from this role only months after his appointment arguing that he felt the ICC's stance had placed him in an impossible situation. He said on The Today Programme (BBC Radio 4, 28th April 2004) 'Sport for far too long has tried to sustain the belief that somehow or other it can exempt itself from any kind of moral judgement or political considerations and I think increasingly people know it can't do this... the ICC is clinging to the past and I think most people in English cricket are ready to move on now...'

It may be the case that such nationally diverse institutions such as the ICC are inherently in an impossible position if they are aiming to encompass all cultures some of which may hold conflicting moral values. If disagreements are so culturally entrenched, it may be impossible for the members of these committees to reach a consensus other than to imitate the action of the proverbial ostrich and ignore such moral problems when they arise. However, if they are not to fall foul of the charge of inconsistency they should make it clear that they do not ascribe to any moral values even if such values have been traditionally associated with their sports, and only adhere to practical necessities, such as rule-following, to enable the sport to be played. The problem, of course, with such a position, is that it, in itself, is still a moral position to which all members must ascribe.

To a degree, a certain amount of sympathy can be given to the position in which internationally representative bodies such as the IOC and the ICC find themselves. They may be taking the only (pragmatic) path that is open to them. If we generously concede that these bodies can be exempt from making moral judgments and we maintain that sport, in its definition, no longer endorses any particular moral values, is it possible to take politics, and the moral implications that politics holds within it, out of the picture all together? Can sport be played in a moral vacuum?

Such a vision may well be an impossible one simply because politics is an all-encompassing aspect of human society. It isn't possible to say this matter is political and that one isn't. Every matter that is bound within society is political. The Zimbabwe cricketer, Henry Olonga, who wore a black armband during the 2003 cricket world cup to highlight the regime of President Mugabe and eventually left the country because of the political situation, conceded this argument when he maintained though it is not an ideal, sport and politics have and always will mix (BBC Sport, January 21st 2004). But perhaps this air of resignation is too negative. For many individual athletes, political involvement in sport is a positive thing. Through UK Sport, the Government allocates funding for athletes, most notably for sports that are unable to secure funding privately. There are many athletes who are provided a comfortable salary (though often slightly below the national average wage) by Government funded and supported projects. The Government's view is that by assisting these athletes in achieving their sporting potential they are providing a social function, whether it is encouraging others to participate in a healthier lifestyle, fostering a national pride, motivating the workforce, and so on. From this, it can be argued that the involvement of politics on sport is not inevitably a negative one.

However, a question is raised as to what is the morally acceptable course of action for an individual athlete to take when a clash of political and moral values and sporting competition does occur. Should an athlete be content to be used as pawns in a wider game of political chess or should they be at liberty to decide their own moral views on the matter and act accordingly even when they are representing their nation and could therefore be seen to be representing the particular moral views of that nation?

When Sebastian Coe decided to attend the Moscow Olympics in 1980 against the wishes of the British government, his father (who was also his coach) was called to the Foreign office to discuss the decision. Sebastian Coe (who, as an economics and politics graduate, presumably had the skills to be able to inform himself on the political concerns and reach a critical judgement) was not consulted about his own views on the matter. This raises two issues; first, whether an athlete who is representing his nation should be given the responsibility of making these types of decisions (In contrast to the British Government who left the decision with the individual athletes, the US Government took an authoritarian position, and refused to allow any of its athletes to compete.) and second, how much should an athlete be prepared to sacrifice for the sake of moral integrity.

If we consider a hypothetical but plausible example, the problem with allowing individual athletes to make their own decisions on such matters is that they are fully aware that someone is always waiting in the wings to fill their boots. If Smith was selected for England's rugby tour to the USA for example, but disagreed with their foreign policy and made an active decision to stay at home, she would know that they would still go with a full

squad; someone else would be drafted in her place and that decision may ultimately affect her future selection. The action that Smith took for herself on moral grounds may affect the rest of her sporting life and yet have no other significant consequences and most certainly have no effect on the political policy against which she morally disagreed.

This moral dilemma could be solved by appealing to two alternatives: either to follow a categorical imperative of the form:

‘One must always refuse to represent her nation when one disagrees fundamentally with the political policies of any nation involved in that competition.’

Or, to take a utilitarian position in that:

‘The happiness caused by my refusal to represent my nation in this competition will outweigh the unhappiness that such an action will bring about.’

Taking the former choice may be morally commendable but if it fails to be effective in bringing about any change then one may ask what use is it especially if I personally suffer from taking that action? Whereas the latter option suffers from the classic utilitarian flaw in the difficulties of making an accurate judgement regarding consequences prior to committing the act itself, irrespective of how we can quantify the measure of happiness or unhappiness.

One may point out that to follow a categorical imperative is to do so regardless of the consequences simply because it is the right thing to do. Yet we would often feel a degree of sympathy with the athletes that have intensively trained for years to take part in a competition at which they may have only one chance. Current evidence suggests that it takes an athlete ten to twelve years of training to achieve gold at the Olympics. As this event only occurs every four years, their peak potential is likely to happen at only one Olympics. It may be an enormous sacrifice to make if an athlete were morally obliged to follow such an imperative. Yet on the other hand, if one were to take a Utilitarian stance on the matter, one may be accused of morally ducking the issue as it would be relatively easy to claim that refusing to compete on the grounds that I disagreed with the political policies of a particular nation would only damage my own interests. This returns us to the objection, ‘if I don’t go, someone else will and nothing will have been achieved.’ To hold such a position can only be effective if everyone were to follow it. If this is the case, then one could argue that such a decision needs to be a collective one agreed and followed by both athletes and management. In addition, if one were to make an individual decision not to compete when the management are prepared to take a team to do so, taking a stance against competing would implicitly undermine the authority of the coaching and administration staff by implying they had made a wrong decision. Undermining decisions made by the management may not be an astute move to make when it is may be those very same people that make decisions on team selection.

Nasser Hussain was noted for his courage when he took the moral decision not to send England to play Zimbabwe in the last World Cup but in this, he made a judgment for the whole team and he therefore wasn’t

taking the risk of making a personal sacrifice. The Australian cricketer, Stuart MacGill, could be held as an example of an individual who made such a personal sacrifice when he pulled out of the national squad to tour Zimbabwe on moral grounds. It has been suggested that there were other players who shared MacGill's beliefs and were touring reluctantly but were not prepared to sacrifice their position in the team. Most recently, Steve Harmison has made himself unavailable for the England tour to Zimbabwe on moral grounds, and there has been speculation that others, including Andrew Strauss, are struggling with this ethical dilemma. The courage and conviction that is needed to take such a stance may be one that most athletes believe to be too great. Indeed, there have been suggestions that MacGill was only able to take the position he did because he was drawing very near the end of his international career and therefore it wasn't as significant a sacrifice as it might have been, but this cannot be said for players such as Harmison and Strauss who are in the prime of their cricketing career. Perhaps the most we can legitimately and reasonably ask for is to demand that an athlete consider the morality of participating in a competition, to express vocally the views and conclusions they reach, and urge a collective decision to be made, but not to expect them to make a solitary act of boycotting the event if it will ultimately affect their sporting career and achievements.

If we accept the conclusion that individual athletes should not be left with the final decision on whether to represent their nation in politically sensitive sporting competitions, the question remains as to who should be making these decisions? Perhaps consideration can be given to the role of a sport's governing body or team's management.

The case against governing bodies making such decisions rests on two issues. First, it could be claimed that they have a vested interest in maximising profit for their sport, and second, the argument that governing bodies should represent the views of its athlete members above the views of other institutions. Both of these could conflict with making a moral decision on a political matter. It is unsurprising that the England Cricket Board did not wish to renege on their fixture with Zimbabwe when they were faced with a fine of two million dollars, irrespective of the lost revenue and publicity from television and other media coverage. But this leaves the question; if athletes wish to participate in a politically sensitive competition, does their governing body have a duty to support the athletes' decisions rather than the wishes of the Government, the media or the general population? In the case of whether England should tour Zimbabwe, its governing body attempted to answer this question with the appointment of Des Wilson in drawing up a set of moral guidelines. Yet Des Wilson's resignation indicated that formulating these guidelines proved to be more of a task that had been originally anticipated and one, it appears where there are too many conflicting interests.

If we take a pragmatic line on resolving these issues, we can accept the following three conclusions, 1) international sporting committees are unable to reach an unanimous moral position regarding political matters if they are to represent conflicting cultural values, 2) it is unreasonable to ask individual athletes to sacrifice their highest aspiration in a political act that may have little positive effect, and 3) it is also unreasonable to expect national governing bodies to make moral decisions that may conflict with other valued interests.

It appears that we are still no closer to being able to answer the principal question of who should be making the moral decisions regarding participation in politically sensitive sporting competitions. Perhaps the only other institution to which we can turn to place such a responsibility is the national Government.

The British Government is often reluctant to take an unequivocal position in politically sensitive sporting situations, as can be seen in their comments on England's cricket tour of Zimbabwe in 2004. Although the Government expressed their opposition to such a tour, they were unwilling to become directly involved in the surrounding discussion and certainly in the decision making process. Peter Hain, the Government minister at the time, left the burden on the players' shoulders. He said in an interview with the Independent newspaper (January 6th 2003), 'if other governments will not back our own Government's stand, then it is still important for English cricket to show some moral backbone. The idea that cricketers or cricket officials are absolved from moral decisions simply seems to me to be wrong. We all have to take moral decisions in the jobs that we do.'

Yet, as indicated with the arguments set out in this paper, this seems to place the England Cricket Board and its players in an impossible situation; a position highly criticised by Lord Coe (January 9th 2003) who maintains that sport and its players shouldn't be shouldering the burden of the government's moral conscience. Through his comments, Peter Hain seemed to imply that though the Government disapproved of any action that may be seen or used as an act of support for the Zimbabwe authorities (and thus they expected the England cricket team to abandon the tour on moral grounds), the Government was prepared to let the players and their governing body suffer the consequences of cancelling the fixture (which may have entailed a multi million dollar fine and suspension from international test cricket).

Although from a practical point of view the Government's direct intervention in the matter could have quickly resolved the matter, their view is that such decisions are outside its remit. And yet, this seems to be inconsistent with the belief that the Government does have moral decisions to make regarding the place of, and participation in, sport in society. This can be seen with the enforcement of physical education within the school curriculum and the funding of sporting events and athletes. The Government recognises that the provision for school sport and physical exercise amongst children is becoming an increasingly important issue in an attempt to stem the rise in obesity levels. That there is a minister for sport seems to indicate that there must be areas of sport which the Government believes it should be concerned with. Here arises an interesting dichotomy and perhaps a point at which sport can be legitimately used as a political tool: between athletes and teams that represent themselves, and athletes and teams that bear the name of their nation. A team that plays under the name of England is as much a representative of that country as is their Government. In contrast, we would probably hold that the Government should not be using local teams for example, as a political tool because they are not direct representatives of that Government. Whether an amateur or professional team, for instance, the Old Trojans 2nd XV from Barnsley, decide that it is morally acceptable to tour a particular country is a matter purely for them though others, including the Government and the media, should be at liberty to express their disapproval. However, it seems that the Government is, in reality, more willing to become politically involved with sport on a local and amateur scale, for instance, with the Sport For All campaign of the late 70s and 80s, than it is willing to become embroiled in international sporting affairs of

which the national team can be viewed as an ambassador or at least, by definition, a representative of that country. A cynical view of this would be that the Government wishes to avoid being caught in politically sensitive issues which can occur on the international sporting stage and in these situations they are quite content to argue that such decisions are not ones that they ought to be taking.

If the Government were to take an authoritative stance and say to a national team, we don't think you should be travelling to and playing such and such a nation because of their record on human rights, or their war against country x, the team has an obligation to assent to their Government's wishes. Here it should be emphasised that this is an obligation for a national team and not a bunch of like-minded athletes. In a country such as Britain, where the Governing Party is democratically elected, we can maintain that this provides the Government with the authority to make decisions that affect the society which it governs, including making decisions regarding our behaviour and attitude towards the Governments of other countries. If we hold that teams playing under the name of that democracy, England for example, are representatives of the elected Government, the Government should have the authority to decide whether the participation of its national team or athletes in a particular event or competition consistently reflect the views and attitudes of that Government. If the national team or athletes participation conflicts with the Government's stance towards a particular country, as in the case of Zimbabwe, then they should not allow the team, bearing the nation's name, to compete. This was the situation with the British athletes in the Moscow Olympics (in which the British athletes competed under the Olympic flag and not the British one) and Mike Gatting's select eleven which toured South Africa in the 1980s. The position illustrated by these examples enables the Government to take a strong moral stance using sport as a means to an end but it still allows individual athletes to reach their own conclusion and decide upon the action they as an individual will take. Ultimately, if an individual athlete disagrees with the government's position, then they should be at liberty to compete under a different banner but to avoid claims of inconsistency and hypocrisy they should not receive any Government funding to do so.

As a counter-argument to all this, and one held up by those who believe that sport should be kept free from political interference, is the view that keeping the participation in sporting competitions separate from its respective political regimes can have beneficial political effects. For instance, it can play a part in encouraging hostile nations to restart diplomatic talks, something that arguably happened with India and Pakistan after last year's Afro-Asian games. This is the type of evidence that supports those that believe continuing the links between the Zimbabwe and English cricket teams will have a positive effect on diplomatic relations and provide a form of communication between the two countries whereby their political differences can be resolved. Indeed there is evidence where sport has provided the initial contact from which positive diplomatic talks can proceed. For instance, during the Cold War, when the US and China were not on good diplomatic terms, representatives from each country still faced each other in table-tennis competitions. After the 1971 World Championships held in Japan, the American player Cohen, approached the three times men's singles World Champion, Chinese player Zedong Zhuang, to ask if they could practice together and exchange skills, strategies and techniques. The Chinese player, fearful of his coaches and the Chinese government, declined the invitation and reported the incident to his manager who in turn reported it to those above him. News of this eventually reached Chairman Mao Xedong who decided that it would be acceptable for this player to practice

with the American. A small incident as it may seem, this ultimately led to a new channel of communication termed 'ping-pong diplomacy' between the two nations and paved the way for renewed dialogue. In the same vein, a united Korean table tennis team triumphed at the World Championships in 1991 and the subsequent jubilation of millions of North and South Koreans was believed to have smoothed diplomatic relations between the two countries.

So the question may not be whether sport should be used as a political device but how it should be used. On the one hand, there are those that argue that sport enables and continues a form of communication between countries and should be as such left alone in much the same way as if two adversaries found themselves admiring the same sunset. Sport in this respect, provides a shared locus of attention from which other dialogue may emerge. On the other hand, there is the belief that in today's global economy where sport is not only a source of national pride but also a source of revenue, restricting a country's access to this revenue is an effective sanction against that country. There are those that argue that the sporting sanctions against South Africa during Apartheid were significantly more effective than the half-hearted trade sanctions that had also been imposed.

There is often the view that sport and politics shouldn't mix; that sport should be kept free from political interference. Such views may stem from the low regard and cynicism many have for political decisions, which to their mind are not determined from consistently applied moral values. Perhaps the problem is that we like to retain the view that sport is better than politics, that in a way, it is of a higher moral standing than politics because it is an area where humans can cooperate yet at the same time compete with one another in a consensual paradigm. Things are relatively simple and straightforward in sport because they are black and white, the ball was either in or it was out, either it is a goal or it isn't. And if there is a difficult decision to make, there is an adjudicator whose decision is final. Naturally, things aren't always so trouble-free, as one may remember from England's disallowed goal which ejected them from the Euro2004 football cup, but the fundamental difference is that these decisions are not moral ones. Decisions in sporting events are based on an agreed set of rules and, technology allowing, the correct decision can be determined. However, no amount of technology can determine the right or wrong of moral decisions. Sport as a part of real life must reside in an environment whereby moral and ethical decisions have to be made and consideration is required to determine where the duty and responsibility for making the types of moral decisions regarding the place of sport within a wider political environment lies.

The tentative conclusions that have been reached from the arguments presented, is that in the domain of national representation, individual athletes should be free to come to their own decision regarding whether or not they should participate in a particular sporting competition, but further to this, that a 'democratically' elected government should take the leading role and have the ultimate responsibility in making informed decisions in these cases and taking appropriate action from these decisions. Sport on the international stage cannot be played in a moral vacuum but it appears that it is only the national Government that is in a legitimate position to be able to determine the moral acceptability of the participation of its national team or athletes.

Endnotes:

[1] In this, I will hold that the political actions of a nation represent the moral values to which the Government of that nation adheres. Therefore, any resulting political action or inaction taken by any individual Government will implicitly condemn or condone particular moral values. This will hopefully explain how the discussion can often seem to indicate that the terms 'political' and 'moral' are used almost interchangeably. I do concede however that political action and the moral values held by the Government of a nation do not always correspond to this exact degree, as there are often pragmatic and consequentialist arguments behind tallying up these two aspects, in which case I have attempted to be as careful and clear as I can in the use of these two terms.

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