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Sport and the Russian War

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
SPORT AND THE RUSSIAN WAR
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Two months into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, criticism of Russia continues to mount across the world. The world of sport also has been impacted by the invasion. Countries and sports organizations have raised objections to the invasion, and calls for a boycott of Russians and Belarusians in sport increase daily. Generally these are of two types: calls for bans on Russian national participation in international competition and calls for the banning of individual Russians competing in sporting events.

The list of sport organizations banning Russians has grown rapidly. Within days, International and European Football organizations banned Russia, and then Belorussia, from competition in their events, including the qualifying rounds for the 2024 World Cup. The International Paralympic committee took similar action against both nations, reversing their original decision.

In motor sports, participation of those drivers or officials from Russia and Belorussia was banned. No sanctioned competition will be allowed to take place in either country. Formula One racing is very popular in Russia. World Athletics has banned both countries from any of their events including the World Championships in Oregon in July and the world indoor championships that opened March 18.

The International Tennis Federation suspended both the Russian and Belorussian Federations. This was followed up in the last two weeks by a ban from Wimbledon. Neither country will be allowed to compete in the Davis Cup or the Billy Jean King Cup competitions. The ATP and WTA tour events will remain open to individual players. However they will not be allowed to play under the flag or name of their country. Both the ATP and WTA have been critical of the action by Wimbledon authorities.

It seems as if every other sport from A to V (archery to volleyball) has taken some sort of sanctioning action against Russia and Belarus. Essentially, these actions are of boycotts of national teams or of individuals from the Russia or Belarus. In some cases, individual athletes are

not banned if they do not compete under the flag or name of Russia or Belarus.

In some cases, there are individuals from Russia playing a sport on a professional team like players in the National Hockey League, or a sport in which they compete for themselves as in the Boston Marathon.

For the most part the boycotts or banning of national teams has been accepted by sports fans in the United States, where a remarkable number of Ukrainian flags have appeared at sporting venues of all types and at all levels. One of those strongly stating the case for such boycotts is Bruce Kidd, sport historian and Olympic runner for Canada in 1964. Kidd argues that this is an effective means of bringing pressure on Russia because of Vladimir Putin's love of sport and because he uses sport to demonstrate Russian power and increase its prestige on the international stage. Kidd was active in the long and effective boycott of South Africa over apartheid and points to the effectiveness of that action to argue for the current sports boycott of Russia. He supports sanctions on both nations and individuals.

The banning of individuals in some cases such as Wimbledon and the Boston Marathon has generated critical comment. The Boston Athletic Association's decision effected over 60 runners from Russia and Belarus. Bret Stephens in the *New York Times* wondered how such a ban on an individual Russian could be justified. He asked a representative of the Boston Athletic Association what power these runners had over Russian policy. He then asked if one of the runners denounced the invasion would they be allowed to run. No answer to either question was forthcoming. Stephens calls the Boston Ban a policy of moral oversimplification and one that violates American notions of fair play and sportsmanship.

If the objective of the boycotts and bans is to impact Russian policy, it is difficult to see how individual tennis players, runners, or others involved in sport as individual contractors will have any impact. On the other hand, it may be important to shine the light on Russia and the war wherever and whenever possible.

Perhaps, the most interesting and complex issue in regards to sport and this war comes within the National Hockey

League, where some forty-three Russians and Belarussians play professionally. None of these players has been banned from competition in the league; although, it can be said that many have felt pressure to denounce the invasion. Alex Ovechkin of the Washington Capitals and close friend of Putin has been pressured to denounce the invasion, but he has chosen to say no more than "stop the war." The Washington Capitals have four Russian and Belarussian players, while Tampa Bay, Colorado, Dallas, St. Louis, and the Florida Panthers have three players each. All of these are playoff teams, and these players are key figures on these teams.

Imagine for a moment that the National Hockey League decided that Russian and Belarussians would not be allowed to compete in the league until Putin stopped the war. The uproar among the fans in these and other NHL cities would be something to behold. This is not likely to happen. Nor is it likely that these players will denounce the war not wishing to be disloyal, or seem to be disloyal, and thereby risk the safety of friends and family in Russia.

In the short-run, nothing akin to this is likely. In the longer run, heading into next season, what happens if a Russian star player goes home in the off season? Will they be able to get back into the United States and Canada? The answer to that question may well be, "no." How will sports fans feel about the policy of boycotts or bans in this case?

By late summer, the war could turn in any number of directions, and the questions of boycotts, bans, and consequences could become considerably more complex and harrowing than they are now.

Indeed, we seem to be living in interesting times, which can be a curse as often as it is simply interesting.

It is a good thing that Sport and Politics never mix!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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