



# The Olympics, human rights and history

*Jesse Owens runs a preliminary  
200-meter preliminary heat at  
the 1936 Olympics.*

By Bruce Kidd

International sports have long been sites of human rights struggle. With the promise of “fair play” and universal humanism pledged by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in the global, media-charged atmosphere where athletes and teams are given and bear tremendous symbolic status, those facing discrimination and exclusion and their allies take advantage of the spotlight to assert their right to full recognition. The costly staging of these events raises other demands, including the right to adequate public services, free speech and assembly, and fair labour conditions in the production of facilities and uniforms. The international boycotts against the Olympics in Nazi Germany in 1936 and athletes from apartheid South Africa during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are the best-known examples of sports-related activism, but Olympic historians point out that similar campaigns have been mounted against virtually every major event since the creation of the modern Olympics in Athens in 1896. The 2014 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in Sochi and the World Cup in Brazil were no exception.

In the build-up to Sochi, there were campaigns in support of workers’ rights and the indigenous peoples in the region and against the environmental devastation wreaked by facility construction, but the advocacy that received the greatest attention was against the Russian Government’s “anti-gay propaganda law” of 2013, that criminalizes any activity or communication, including scholarly writing, that can be construed as the affirmation of homosexuality. UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, western governments, and thousands of “civil society” organizations from around the world petitioned President Putin to repeal the law. In an open letter to President Putin, the Canadian Historical Association argued that the new law places a “chill against historical scholarship in Russia,” and “represent[s] a historically inaccurate construction of human relationships as exclusively heterosexual.” Vancouver City Council, which had initiated the institution of Pride Houses in Vancouver and Whistler during the 2010 Games, sent an official delegation to Sochi to petition the IOC to add sexual orientation to its anti-discrimination provisions, to refuse future bids from any country that does not guarantee full rights and protections to LGBTIQ, and to ensure that locally-initiated Pride Houses could be established at future games. Activists raised funds for Russian LGBT sports groups, and prepared the ground for a legal defence of any athlete, coach, official or tourist in Sochi who would have been arrested under the legislation in Sochi. As it turned out, there was very little of the expected athlete protest at the Games, so those preparations were never tested.

The Games did little to change the bleak prospects for LGBTIQ and their allies in Russia. If anything, the international agitation hardened the resolve of the Russian Government to maintain and enforce the law, and intensified the homophobic jeremiahs of the Russian Orthodox Church. Even more virulent state and religious persecution occurs in other countries that take part in international competition and/or have been awarded the opportunity to host future games. For example, despite the Commonwealth’s commitment to “development, democracy and diversity,” 41 of its 53 member states criminalize homosexuality. The Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in July will thus be another site of agitation, as activists conduct educational campaigns with teams and spectators. Similar efforts will be made during the 2015 Pan American and Parapan American Games in Toronto, and no doubt the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

Effective advocacy takes months and years, not just a single intervention. While resources are limited and there are many battles to fight, the CHA should continue to condemn homophobic legislation everywhere and make its important point that such laws and practices falsify human sexual experience and crimp and distort scholarship. It should link its advocacy to other progressive campaigns around the Olympics and major games. It is instructive that the City of Vancouver is continuing its advocacy with the organizers of the 2016 Olympics in Rio, the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang and the 2020 Olympic in Tokyo, as well as the IOC.

It’s a crucial time for international sport. The IOC is currently in deep crisis. The costs of major games have risen to such a point that very few liberal democratic countries are still interested in hosting them—in the last few years, Stockholm, Munich, Krakow and Davos all withdrew from bidding for the 2022 Winter Olympics after negative referenda. The new president, Thomas Bach, has launched a year of discussion to address the challenges, including the contradictions between the Olympic Movement’s commitment to human rights, inclusive education and truthful scholarship, the financial interests of the oligarchs who control so much of international sport and the practicalities of hosting games. As the voice of Canadian historians, the CHA should continue to weigh in.

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