The Conversation Team Blog

Our voices on, in and at the Games



Associate Professor of Sociology at Swinburne University of Technology

POSTS BY KAREN FARQUHARSON

31 July 2012 Becoming Australian

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20 July 2012 Gender and news coverage of the Olympics

31 July 2012, 1.46pm AEST

What makes an Olympic sport?



OlympicSports, by Kieran Healy http://crookedtimber.org/2012/07/29/olympics-trolling/#more-25339

Sociologist Kieran Healy posted this fun diagram on the Crooked Timber blog, a two dimensional model of Olympics sports by whether they are good (or bad) sports, and whether they belong in the Olympics (or not). Along with making me laugh, the diagram made me think of what makes a sport appropriate for the Olympics, and why we have these particular sports and not others.

For an activity to be a sport it needs to be organised/have rules, involve skillful use of the

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body, and be competitive (have winners and losers). On top of these criteria, sport is fundamentally organised through social processes that shape who gets to play and the resources and value afforded it. These social processes affect different activities/sports in different ways. And they affect which sports are part of the Olympics.

Given these criteria it is clear that lots of activities that we don't normally consider to be sport could be included. Things like tug-of-war and ultimate Frisbee might be sports depending on the context (indeed it seems that tug-of-war was once upon a time an Olympic sport). Whether they become Olympic sports is down to the power of those advocating their ascension, and the power of those who are against them.

For a sport to become Olympic, it needs to be institutionalised (i.e., have an international governance body) and it needs to have a broad following around the world. It also needs to meet criteria set by the International Olympic Committee. So although Australian football is an excellent sport, it wouldn't meet the criteria as its not widely played around the world.

The current Olympic sports are a somewhat odd mix, and are there due to historical circumstances and various power relations. All nine original modern Olympic sports (athletics, cycling, fencing, gymnastics, swimming, shooting, tennis weightlifting, and wrestling) are still included today. However others, such as golf and polo, have come and gone. And many newer sports are not included. For example, skateboarding has long been mooted as a potential Olympic sport, but its inclusion has successfully been resisted. However its alpine cousin, snowboarding, is part of the Winter Olympics. Some artistic events (e.g., synchronised swimming and diving, rhythmic gymnastics) are included, while others (e.g., ballroom dancing) are not. All the activities I've mentioned so far meet the criteria for being a sport, and all have International Federations the govern them and substantial global followings.

If I were to add a sport to the Olympics, I'd strongly consider skateboarding. What would you take out or add in?

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