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Youth Olympic Games statement

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“This proposal is a very important step of the Olympic movement, maybe the most important of the last years.”

Former IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch on decision to institute a Youth Olympic Games

On July 5, 2007 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced that the proposed Youth Olympic Games (YOG) have been approved and plans are already underway to implement the first ever Youth Olympic Summer Games in 2010, followed by Winter Games to be held in 2012. According to the IOC, the Youth Games aim to:

- *prepare a generation of young elite athletes to have an ethical approach to sport, with strong values (excellence, friendship and respect) and principles (universality, sustainability, no discrimination);*
- *educate young people on the importance of sport for their health and their social integration;*
- *inform young people about the dangers linked to sport, such as doping, training to excess and inactivity; and*
- *propose to the youth of the world, present in the host city and brought together through modern communication tools, to share in an immense moment of solidarity and humanism, highlighting in particular the strong Olympic symbols (torch relay, flag, anthem).*

According to IOC President Jacques Rogge, the Youth Olympic Games “are the flagship of the IOC’s strategy outlined for young people.” Beyond the sporting competitions, the Games’ strategy includes a combination of additional initiatives aimed at instilling the values of Olympism in youth throughout the world. These initiatives focus on “tackling societal issues” with youth through: an educational and cultural project on Olympic values; a dedicated web site for youth that will allow young athletes to electronically interface with peers around the globe; and a youth-oriented media campaign highlighting Olympic values.

The Center for the Study of Sport in Society is rooted in the belief that sport plays a significant role in the healthy development of youth, while also providing a means for addressing and implementing social change. We therefore affirm the proposed structure of the YOG, in its ideal vision, as a positive and beneficial movement. With the intention of utilizing the games to highlight the tremendous role sport can play in shaping youths into healthy, functioning, proactive, world-conscious citizens, the Games’ mission aligns precisely with our own core values: social justice, sport, healthy development and education.

It is rare that Olympic athletes reach their elite level without having first put forth a life-long effort of persistence, dedication and achievement and this is a welcome opportunity to showcase talent of hard-working youths from around the globe. Young people are too often the victims of a culture of “adultism” in which they are viewed through a stereotypical lens as unfocused, incapable subordinates. The proposed Games are an ideal platform to present the world with an assemblage of diligent, successful youth who serve as genuine representatives of their culture. Moreover, these athletes will showcase the positive influence sport has on young lives, including the achievement of physical health and wellbeing, educational success and the development life skills. Through these elite representatives, the YOG can honor young athletes around the globe for their achievements and dedication.

President Rogge went so far as to say that “We owe [the YOG] to the youth of the world” and indeed it is true that we should honor the success and work ethic demonstrated by athletes who reach the elite level at such a young age. However, the true reason these games are “owed” to the youth of the world is their potential as a powerful educational tool offering an opportunity and forum to teach these young athletes, as well as youth around the world, about the true spirit of Olympism. For the athletes themselves, this rare opportunity to interface with completely new cultures is a powerful way for them to realize a shared sense of humanity and camaraderie with unfamiliar “others” and to learn the value of diversity at a young age. Additionally, the proposed educational program has the potential to instill lasting lessons about ethical values, human rights and social justice within both the athletes themselves and the young spectators who will bear witness to the competition, the media campaigns and who will also have the opportunity to share in the development of global friendship and communication through the internet. Thus, the most important reason “we owe” these games to our youth is the hope that, through the understanding and awareness they develop, they will be more willing to help promote a global culture of peace for themselves and future generations to come at a time in this world’s history when such a paradigm shift is vital to survival.

It is imperative however that the IOC meticulously carries out the task of education it has set for itself. To begin, youth sports are too often stripped of fun in the pursuit of winning as competition overshadows an essential sense of play. According to a recent study, “by age 13, about 70% of kids have quit sports;” factors for this drastic drop in participation include a lack of “fun, too much pressure, angry coaches, and embarrassment over...parents' zeal.” Daniel R. Gould, Director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, states that the “emphasis on winning ignores the fact that sports is mostly about staying fit and healthy.” The Olympic Games, though they promote ethics, culture and the humanities, are fundamentally elite sporting contests. By mirroring the adult games at the youth level, the IOC walks a fine line between celebrating what sport should be and succumbing to what has become a sporting model dominated by excessive competition. We must be careful to remember that these are *not* adult athletes with a lifetime of experience (yet who still often break under the pressure of competition) – they are youths who are still in the process of maturation and developing into their true selves. By rearing elite athletes at such a young age, we take away their ability to explore their other strengths both within and outside of sport and

thereby run the risk of closing off other options for self-development. Children must be allowed to be children and we, as their parents, educators, coaches and teachers must remember that we are nurturing individuals' holistic development and not medal-winning professional athletes.

The athletes themselves are not the only ones in danger of missing out on experiencing sense of fun and fellowship through the YOG; rather, their global peers, who have not reached the elite level, may be further pushed from the sporting world as they are told at an even younger age that they are not “good enough” to compete. Further, by recognizing the abilities and training of these elite athletes, the IOC fails to recognize those young athletes who, due to economic and social disparities have been stripped of their basic right to play or, at least, do not have the means to afford elite training and can therefore not compete at the world-class level. Even in the United States, children are denied access to healthy, safe sporting opportunities due to economic, class, racial and health disparities. It is therefore essential that the true value of youth sports – fun and physical health – are constantly put on the forefront of media attention and presented clearly and continually to both the athletes and young global spectators.

It will also be easy for organizers, Olympic committees and team coaches to miss this rare and fleeting opportunity to teach these young people about the Olympic principles and values within the short time they are at the event. During this brief period, athletes will most likely arrive with their focus already on competition and winning and outside of their sport they will inevitably want to maximize their travel experience; they will therefore only be cognizant of the educational campaign if it is clearly presented to them by those responsible parties. Though they are elite athletes, they are indeed still youth and our guidance is necessary. The IOC must be proactive, therefore, in bringing teams together physically and electronically, teaching them, rather than merely marketing to them, the value of physical activity and health, ethics, humanism and culture, and making the games a celebration of fun, hard work and achievement, rather than a competition pitting nation against nation.

The Center for the Study of Sport in Society maintains the hope that the IOC remains dedicated to fulfilling the mission it has set out for itself in approving the Youth Olympic Games. It will be very easy for the Games to quickly become detrimental to the holistic idea of the healthy development of young athletes, but it is indeed a wonderful opportunity to use sport as a means of bringing together a new international culture of peace and understanding that must be seized.