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Advancing the Olympic spirit year around

Eli Wolff is the coordinator of the Olympism and Social Justice Institute *photo by Lauren McFalls*

February 25, 2010

Northeastern's **Sport in Society** center recently launched an Olympism and Social Justice Institute, which has been recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). As the Winter Olympics in Vancouver wind down, Eli Wolff, coordinator of the new institute, discusses the new role for Sport in Society.

Sport in Society's Olympism and Social Justice Institute became one of 10 Olympic studies centers in the world last fall. What did it take to make this happen?

Sport in Society has been involved with Olympism and Olympic education for many years. The ideas behind Olympism are very similar to the vision and values that guide Sport in Society. The Olympic Charter defines Olympism as "a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind."

Sport in Society has engaged in research, education, outreach and advocacy activities related to these ideals. In discussions with the IOC, we mutually recognized the unique opportunity to formalize our activities as an Olympic Studies Center. The IOC recognized our particular focus in the context of linking research with education, outreach and advocacy to make an impact on individuals and communities.

What has been your involvement with Olympism and the Olympic movement?

I had the honor and opportunity to compete for the U.S. soccer team in the 1996 and 2004 Paralympic Games. From this experience, I became very interested in the educational teachings of Olympism and the Olympic movement. From 2002 to 2006, I had the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the International Olympic Academy, based in Olympia, Greece. Since 2006, I have also collaborated with Olympian speed skater Nathaniel Mills to develop the Olympism Project, an initiative to provide substantive education about Olympism for Olympic athletes. As an athlete, educator and advocate, I have been inspired by Olympism-related work.

Is the Institute involved currently with the Winter Olympics in Vancouver?

The institute has and will continue to serve as a resource to athletes, coaches, administrators, officials and media involved with the Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Games. We provide information, materials and insight about Olympism and social justice issues. So far, we have provided support and assistance on topics including gender equity, athletes with disabilities, diversity, nationalism, peace and conflict resolution, human rights, health and wellness and leadership.

Do you address or conduct research on topics such as whether athletes can change nationalities to compete in the Olympics?

We do address issues related to nationalism and national identity. Interestingly, the Olympic charter states that, "The Olympic Games are competitions between athletes in individual or team events and not between countries." We feel that athletes do have a right to choose how they want to identify by country, as individuals or as global citizens. It is important that there can be a public discourse and dialogue about this issue.

What is the most urgent long-term goal of this new Social Justice Institute?

The primary goal of the institute is to provide education and outreach about Olympism and social justice. We

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feel that there is a need for increased education and awareness regarding Olympism, particularly with respect to issues of social justice and human rights. By raising awareness, we hope to challenge thinking, open dialogue, and inspire leadership; this is the overall approach of Sport in Society, and we aim to also utilize this framework within the Olympism and Social Justice Institute.

The Winter Olympics are coming to a close. What is your overall sense of this past competition? What would you change or improve?

Vancouver has hosted a great Olympics. There have been thrilling performances, and wonderful stories have emerged from these Games. It does seem like these Games will have a long legacy in Canada and worldwide. It will be exciting to also see the Paralympic Games from March 12 to 21. It does seem like there is an opportunity for the organizers of future Games to bring Olympism into the community before, during and after the Games in a more meaningful way. Through participatory education and outreach, Olympism should be made vibrant and accessible as an approach to values education and critical thinking.

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