



IS COMPETITIVE SPORT STILL APPEALING?

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ORIGINAL TEXT IN ENGLISH

Is competitive sport still appealing? I think we can answer this question very simply and directly: yes, no or maybe. I do not want to seem unsure of the answer, but before we look at sport and its appeal, we must understand the varied nature of many of the world's sports. And in this regard, I am addressing the competitive appeal of Olympic sports.

For a sport to be viable in today's increasingly difficult economic environment, it must possess several special characteristics that set it apart:

- Does it reach out and grab the imagination of today's young people? In other words, is there something unique about the sport that makes young people wish to take it up on a recreational level?
- Does it touch some of these young people in such a way as to make them want to continue to develop their skills? Will they continue in the sport to what would be considered an internationally competitive level?
- Once we have top-level athletes wanting to participate at an international level, is there something about the nature of the sport that makes it accessible to the general public?
- If it is accessible to the viewing public, does it possess the excitement level necessary to attract the interest of television broadcasters?
- Is the sport sufficiently developed to satisfy the above groups, and can it provide a level of competition that we would define as "Olympic"?

All sports must have an initial entry system that brings young people into the sport. This can be on a recreational basis or on a competitive basis. Without an efficient method of introducing young people to the sport, the chances for competitive appeal are greatly reduced. When young people, young adults, and adults are not exposed to the sport on a broad-based level, the acceptance of the competitive nature of the sport is limited.

Next, we must look at the jump that it is necessary to have in order to get from an entry/recreational level to a highly developed international level. Are there national organisations that can direct and give support to the development and growth stages of the sport? There are

many ways in which children become interested in a sport. However, without a structured national and international development effort, the competitive appeal of a sport will be restricted to a few specialists. In some countries, entry systems are very local yet widespread. In others, there are national efforts to develop sports, which are not a part of the traditional sporting environment of that country. Either way, it is helpful for a sport to have a broad base of participation so that its competitive nature can be understood by the general public.

Ok, now we have got a sport with a broad base of understanding and participation in a significant number of countries around the world. But can the public accept it as a quality sport? Does it have a high degree of competitiveness and is therefore appealing? Is the competition direct, without a lot of twists and turns on the road to victory? Is the competition immediate? In other words, does the competition offer a certain level of excitement and competitiveness from the very beginning that can be seen and appreciated by spectators? Speaking from the perspective of my own sport, in the past our competitive shooting round lasted four days. All competitors shot 144 arrows. It was a marathon. Frankly, by the end of the first day's shooting, we could mentally eliminate nearly 75 to 80 percent of the athletes on the field from a medal position. At the end of the second day, we knew the medalists would emerge from a small handful of athletes. Spectator appeal was virtually non-existent. This was especially true when there was a runaway winner, or two leading contenders, in a gender or competition category. It was nice to see someone shoot so well. However, the aspect of competitive appeal was completely lost in such an environment.

Archery's answer to this was to change the nature of our competitive rounds. We went from a shooting marathon to match play and elimination. From the outset, there was to be a match winner based upon a very limited number of shots. This created instant drama for both the athletes and the spectators. It was easy to follow the flow of our event. There were no tricky rules or insider knowledge to master. An archer won a match or he lost a match. Simple. Direct. Immediate. And then he advanced to the next stage. The viewing public was able to see and experience competitive drama from the first day of the competition. No waiting.

The next aspect of competitive appeal is telling people that we have a great sport and that it is worth taking time to watch it. This means aggressively taking the sport to the world. We cannot wait for the viewing public to come to see us. There are too many sports out there for us to sit and wait for the people to come. We all have great sports, and we should feel proud of their competitive nature. But we have to sell them. And this generally means having a format that television likes. If we have a great sport, well distributed around the world, with an immediate competitive impact and easy-to-understand rules, how do we emphasise its competitive nature? How do we use the available means of communication to enhance its competitive appeal?

We must have a competition format that is suited to and ready for television presentation. When one looks at two of the most successful international sports in the world today, we see that they have a concise presentation window. Formula One has a time frame of less than two hours. Football is the same. This is a convenient and successful time frame within which to run an event. The viewing public can maintain its level of concentration throughout the programme and be satisfied with the experience. My sport has arranged its finals events to fall within this time frame. It gives television a convenient time block. It lets us highlight our best athletes. It allows for an intense focus of concentration



upon the best athletes, who are performing incredibly difficult feats under strict competitive conditions.

Thinking along the same lines, are we using the capabilities of 21st century technology to spread the appeal of our sport? Live internet feeds? YouTube productions? Have we taken our sport to the several billion people on this planet by all means available?

We cannot just allow our sport to “happen” without guidance. We must focus on its essential nature. We determine its basic characteristics and then develop and highlight its best parts. This must be done in such a way that the public sees a serious athletic effort with competitive appeal. It requires us to ask ourselves whether we are doing the right things or whether we are doing things because we have always done them this way.

To find the level of competitive appeal we need, we have to consider all levels of our sporting operation. First of all, the focus must be on the athletes. Obviously, without them there is no game. Our sport must be so interesting that young people will want to try it at an early age, so that later some of them will become our champions.

Does our sport make a significant contribution to the Olympic Games? Do we have broad appeal around the world? Do we have a good distribution of athletes when we look at our Olympic participation lists?

Does our sport fit well into the structure of the Olympic Movement? Are we aggressively pursuing the Olympic ideals of fair play, equality, and open access?

Does our sport support the ideals of Olympism and Youth? Are we involving young people around the world in trying our sport? Even though all young people cannot be successful at the Olympic level, does their participation encourage the growth and principles of Olympism?

Have we found the best means of using the “digital revolution” in taking our sport to the public? Have we aggressively taken the opportunities that exist to present our sport in the best possible light and with the greatest chance of reaching our public?

Many decisions need to be made by all sports as we develop the means to reach out to our athletes and everyone else involved. We all have many stakeholders. If we do not satisfy them, they will find other sports that give greater satisfaction.

Finally, some of the most important things to consider in developing a strategy to satisfy our public: do we have a sport that is interesting, direct, immediate, exciting, and dramatic? This will make the sport competitively appealing.