# Sports are Not Just Sports: A Philosophical Reflection on Hans Lenk's Selected Writings "S.O.S Save Olympic Spirit"

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#### **Abstract**

Hans Lenk is the first modern philosopher who was an Olympic champion (1960). He is also Honorary President of the world academy of philosophers. The purpose of this paper is to review his recent selected writings "S.O.S Save Olympic Spirit: Toward a Social Philosophy of the Olympics" with reflection on current issues in the modern Olympic movement. The first task of this paper is to reflect on the meaning of sporting life. The second task is to address Lenk's concern about the dangers of the Games in our victory-obsessed society as well as exaggerating "telecracy", which is related to the media bias that might affect the integrity of sport. The final task of this paper is to propose Olympic education with critical reflection approach. By reflecting Hans Lenk's ethical insights about top-level and Olympic sport, the authors will illuminate some of the issues that all the Olympic stakeholders should face and still need to readdress within their local context. As a result, we contend that stakeholders in the future of the Olympic movement should not just focus on mega-event management, but rather, should do better at making more considered investments in its educative and philosophical potentialities.

Keywords: Humanity, Meaningful life, Olympic Spirit

#### Introduction

Hans Lenk (b.1935-) is the first modern philosopher who was an Olympic champion rower (winning gold in the men's eights in Rome 1960). In addition to his prolific academic undertakings, Lenk is also Honorary President of the world academy of philosophers. To note, unfortunately (at least for many scholars) the majority of his work is written in German. As such, he remains a relatively unknown (or certainly underutilized) figure in contemporary philosophical critiques of sport. Lenk has, however, shown some interest scholarly interest in sport (e.g., 2007; 2012). Helpfully, Lenk's collective work was edited by two German Olympic scholars Prof. Manfred Messing and Prof. Norbert Mueller and published in January 2012. It is latter of this particular work, "S.O.S Save Olympic Spirit: Toward a Social Philosophy of the Olympics" - with reflection on current issues in the modern Olympic movement – that this paper takes as its focal point.

Although the modern Olympic movement has long been imbued with (quasi-)philosophical overtones, Lenk has been among the earliest contemporary philosophers to clearly conceptualize and articulate some of the event's distinct metaphysical dimensions. As Messing and Mueller (2012) attest, Lenk often contributed to Olympic philosophy and anthropology with new ideas like "the essence of Olympic man", "authentic achievement", "the sovereign athlete", "democratic coaching", "Herculean and Homeric myths" in sport and about Coubertin's elitism and the Olympic idea. Although Lenk is not the only philosopher to examine the Olympic's idiosyncratic and nuanced dimensions,<sup>2</sup> his utility in helping us appreciate sports' complexities (which we discuss further below) remains profoundly relevant.

One thread of Lenk's Olympic observations is his critique of the advantages and dangers of the Olympic Games (and other comparable events) in our victory-obsessed global society. For Lenk, winning is fine, but, it is not 'the only thing', and, the potential satisfaction drawn from it is ultimately contingent and predicated on the preservation the athlete's human dignity.

In relation to the above, in particular, "telecracy" <sup>3</sup>, which is related to the media bias that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> These concepts are all related to a very essential humanistic perspective of Lenk's work. In a brief note, "the essence of Olympic man" is about the holistic development for elite athletes such as Olympians, "authentic achievement" has to do with the meaning of sporting life, "the sovereign athlete" is related to athletes' self-autonomy for protecting their basic rights and dignity to participate in sports, "democratic coaching" is related to a more humanistic coaching philosophy and training methodology and "Herculean and Homeric myths" links with ancient myths concerning the intriguing features of the modern Olympic Games. For further and deeper exploration about all these concepts, see his latest collective work: Lenk (2012). S.O.S. Save Olympic Spirit – Toward a Social Philosophy of the Olympics. Selected Writings by Hans Lenk. Manfred Messing & Norbert Mueller (Eds.). Agon Sportverlag Kassel.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See MacAloon (1996), Bahng (2004), Loland (2004), Wamsley (2004), Bale (2004), Parry (2006), Wigmore (2007), Binder (2010) and Kid (2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> "Telecracy" is about media bias with respect to the teletechnological undoing of democracy by the short-circuiting of

might affect the integrity of sport nowadays, has grown more into "dynamic social media network" which could lead with "over-commercializaton" and damage the athletes' rights to take part and enjoy their sports. For example, Olympic event schedules could be changed in order to fit TV's broadcast time zones. Hence athletes are forced to change their normal time for the competition. Here is just one of the scenario in relation to 2008 Olympic events reported from a British sports news correspondent (Campbell, 2006):

### BBC at war over 'mad' Olympic start times: Protest at bid to change times of 2008 events to suit American viewers

British sports fans will have to get up at 3am to see some of the biggest events at the next Olympic Games in Beijing because timings are being changed to suit American television. Showpiece finals in swimming at the 2008 Games have been moved from their traditional evening slots to the morning to please US broadcaster NBC, which is a key sponsor of the Olympic movement. The finale of some athletics events, such as the men's 100m, the gymnastics and men's basketball tournament may also be moved for the same reason. ...The executive said that NBC had also asked for some other of the most glamorous finals in the Olympic timetable - including track and field, gymnastics and basketball, all of which are popular in the US - to be switched... the media were fiercely critical of the perceived US influence on a global event.'

Consequently, this paper furthers Messing and Mueller's (2012) suggestion that Lenk's work is useful here for not only stimulate the academic discussion about the reform of the Olympic Movement, though may also contribute to eventual solution implementation. Fundamental to Lenk's thinking was the tenet that the Olympic spirit (defined loosely around aspirations toward collective humanistic values and beliefs) has to be ultimately adapted to remain relevant (and essentially 'fit-for-purpose') to today's younger generation. For Lenk, much of the inherent symbolism of the Olympic movement and associated ideological aspects (for example, jingoism, politicized and polarizing nationalism, winning at any price, compulsive manipulation by powerful media in relation to sponsors, the totally autocratic style of coaching and the dictatorship of officials such as sports federations or political regimes) were essentially outdated and had to be either eliminated or at least mitigated. The potential problem of media in the modern Olympic Movement has been

further elaborated by Bruce Kidd (2013) in his recent work titled "The Olympic Movement and the sports—media complex". In particular, Kidd (2013) stressed that:

The history of sport is inseparable from the history of the mass media. The rules and the ways games are played, the values and narratives associated with sports, teams and rivalries, the audiences that follow or ignore particular sports and of course the revenues that certain athletes and enterprises enjoy have all been profoundly shaped by the mass media. In most countries in the world today, most people form their knowledge of sports from the mass media and not from direct experience. While mass media coverage of sports is usually presented as a series of neutral windows, and most of those who report on sport try their best to be as accurate as possible, the presentations of sports in the media are deeply structured – if not deliberately framed – by the institutions that produce and disseminate them, as the last several decades of scholarship have clearly shown. In the world of rights fees, very few broadcasts are independent of the interests they cover; on the contrary, they are contractually controlled by those very interests in the partnerships called 'the sport–media complex'. These partnerships now extend to the Olympic Games.

By reviewing 1988 Olympic Winter Games history and its implications for the Olympic Movement, Kidd (2013) argued that the International Olympic Committee should use its control over the Games in the way that other sports enterprises do to ensure that Olympic broadcasters contributed to the humanitarian educational goals of the Olympic Movement and, at the very least, to ensure a multitude of broadcasting perspectives.

In keeping the similar line with Lenk's intentions, we must not exaggerate "telecracy" for top-level and Olympic sports. Thus we propose in this paper that the intellectual reform of the Olympic Movement and sports is basically, and first and foremost, a philosophical task. In understanding the philosophical importance of the Olympic movement (or at least it's contemporary relevance) this paper draws on Lenk's ontological articulations and their relevance to the significance of the Olympic movement in the global context.

In particular, we draw on one major aspect of Lenk's work; namely, notion of self-discovery. This concept helps reiterate the continued saliency of the Olympic movement as a site in which to explore the metaphysical. We then proceed to discuss the related concepts of authentic achievement and creative being; both of which attend to the need to destabilize the athletic emphasis on solely goal-orientated success. To conclude, we explain how Lenk might attune our sensitivities and

sensibilities toward the dangers of the Olympic Games and hopes for the future (one of which, we propose, is through recrafting Olympic education initiatives). Our underlying intention of using Lenk is to illuminate some of the issues that all the Olympic stakeholders should face and still need to readdress within their local context.

## Sport as a genuine means of human creativity: Potential meanings of a sporting life

If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives.

From Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, 1903-1990

Hans Lenk's very first reflection on Olympic ideas is concerned with what constitutes an 'authentic achieving being'. Lenk (2012)<sup>4</sup> believes that "self-engaging activity and authentic achievement are essential components of human self-understanding. The human being is not only the rational/cognitive, social and cultural, ever-self-civilizing and creative being, but also the authentically achieving being"(p. 22). Thus, for Lenk, proper and personal achievement is a very important, necessary trait within the pluralistic spectrum of defining traits for humankind. In a deep anthropological, and even existential sense, only one who acts, achieves, and improves the self and its constituent qualities can be called alive. Two perspectives concerning "self-discovery" and "authentic achieving being" can be reflected upon here in relation to the meaning of life from Lenk's insight.

#### **Self-discovery**

For Lenk, the question of human engagement in sport was as much a metaphysical one as it was practical. To put simply, participation and sporting interaction ultimately can be a challenge towards oneself, and, a supreme test of one's personal moral, ethical and ideological limits. Engagement in competition could be, philosophically speaking, part of the potential progress to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The original article was written by Hans Lenk in 2007 titled "Sporting Enthusiasm and Authentic Achievement", which was published in Philosophy Now, 2007, pp. 26-30.

question/objective/achievement of "knowing oneself".

In attempting to better understand the role of sport in the framework of personal attainment and discovery, Lenk (2012: 175) draws on the example of Sir Roger Bannister (renowned Olympic track runner) and his oft cited article, "The Meaning of Athletic Performance". As indicate in the short passage below, Roger makes implicit and explicit inferences to the purpose of sporting achievement in fulfilling a greater sense of, and knowing about, the self:

"We run not because our country needs fame, nor yet because we think it is doing us good, but because we enjoy it and cannot help ourselves... As a result, sport leads to the most remarkable self-discovery, of limitations as well as of abilities. This discovery is partly physical- one learns, for example, that feeling tired does not mean that one is reaching the limit of exhaustion. But mainly the discovery is mental and brought about by the stresses which sport imposes. The self-discovery is most rapid if we set out on the early stages of this journey alone. In time we learn how far from being self-sufficient we are, we realize the value of co-operation and assistance from others. But unless we start out alone, we never learn questions others can best answer and those which we must answer for ourselves."

For Lenk, and using Bannister's reflections, the important point was that sporting life is not merely akin to normal life. Although it served to produce, reproduce and engender some of life's general lesson, foible, characteristics and qualities, sport rather, represented a model of the world. Sport, for Lenk, operated as a "mythical" model of symbolized, competitive role behavior is governed by archetypical norms.

#### Authentic achieving as well as creative being

Lenk was also interested in what he called the "recording life". Conceptually, this period was the stage when a sportsperson was essentially trying to perform their personal best and strove for the highest levels of personal attainment (e.g. setting personal records). However, the 'recording life' was often a difficult one. Frequently, an Olympian or an elite athlete had to sacrifice personal time (such as family gathering and social time with fellow friends, etc) and overcome many obstacles (such as sports injury and normal life) for rigid training schedules. This dynamic or dualistic life style sometimes brought internal conflict. The process of going for personal records can be rewarding when the progress is made from time to time. The desire of pursuing one's personal best and hence set up the personal records is strong and meaningful in itself. One of the greatest

examples we can refer to and learn from is through Rafer Johnson's (an Olympian in decathlongold medalist in 1960 Rome Olympic Games) story who represents the classic American dream: hard work leading to success, honor, and glory. In his autobiography, Johnson (1998) writes about his humble beginnings in an obscure African American Texas ghetto, his growing up in the all-white, sun-drenched Californian town of Kingsburg, and his time at UCLA as the president of the student body and an acclaimed athlete. His talents brought him to dramatic athletic duels in Moscow, Melbourne, and Rome, and to the glamour of acting, broadcasting, and politics in Hollywood, Washington, D.C., and the rest of the nation in the USA. His memoir vividly describes an exceptional life. It tells of obstacles and tragedies--crippling injuries, an alcoholic father, the assassination of his close friend Robert F. Kennedy--and what it takes to overcome them. With tact, integrity, and acute observation, Rafer Johnson shares the intimate moments that have shaped his life and the lives of others. In this regard, sport achievements present a particularly attractive medium of demonstrative individualization, self-development, and self-confirmation for younger men with reference to goals and value patterns which are emotionally approved in the culture. In other words, sport involvement necessarily is personal; it requires a real personal endeavor and effort and a genuine proper action, at times even total personal devotion.

From Lenk's (2012: 30) philosophical anthropology perspective, "the outstanding personality (in terms of will power, self-devotion, and almost total involvement in a goal-oriented activity) may still be found in sport today. The athlete is a symbol of "the achieving being". Lenk (2012) further stresses that the human seems to be the personally acting and performing being at the same time – the personally achieving being. In other words, humans are not only acting beings (i.e. the being consciously orienting himself towards goals); however, they are more specifically beings who try to materialize goals better and better by acting themselves, as individual agents. Hence, the "achieving being" certainly implies more than merely the acting being, or the compensating being. Lenk argues that one does not try just to make good for shortcomings and sufferings, but to take them as challenges in order to be able to overcompensate, to act in a creative, non-compulsive manner. It is not just passive compensation that is decisive here, but active creative improvement according to standards.

However, the question remains here is that, "are there any absolute limitations in Olympic sport?" The question arises as to whether Olympic top-performance sport has become the exclusive prey of record mania. Is an end of the record series at all possible, and does a statistical survey give

us any indication of the future quantitative and qualitative development of records? (Lenk, 2012: 109). This would be on Hans Lenk's ethical insights about the future of the Olympic Games.

#### The Dangers of the future Olympic Games

In his earlier work, Regarding Philosophy of Sport: Olympic Publicity and Philosophical Anthropology (1982), Lenk (2012: 30-31) already perceived that future Olympic Games will increasingly be faced with difficult "telecratic" problems. Commercial, political and public information needs will rather frequently conflict with the athlete's rights. Such issues have already been raised in debates over the murky nexus between athletes' official contracts, freedom of speech rights and media obligations and responsibilities. While it will not be easy to find a compromising strategy which simultaneously covers the public's need for information and the athlete's rights, he suggests that we have to develop a kind of protection program for the athlete to secure athletes' rights against the managers and constraints of the public media, including their manipulative and alienating effects.

For Lenk, "telecracy" is and will remain, even grow, to be a major problem of the Olympics and top-level athletics in the future. In addition, the postulated athletes' rights program has to pertain to their sovereignty and freedom of decision-making as against autocratic officials and coaches<sup>5</sup>. However, if properly and carefully operated, media (especially television and internet platforms) can also play an important role to provide excellent and equal contests worth watching and really enhancing physical achievement. Television enhances this impact through the extended visibility of the Olympic contests all over the world. In addition, it can also carry the peace message which is the fundamental mission of organizing the Olympic Games. While the Olympic Movement cannot bring about world peace as a direct consequence as was alleged sometimes, Lenk believes that it can certainly serve an *indirect* mission in getting the peoples to understand and respect each other in a benevolent way using the Olympics as a symbol of a more peaceful and better world and of an ideal unity of mankind.

With this in mind, in their recent collective work, Qing and Richeri's (2012) also encourages us to examine the ways in which new media might enhance the impact and visibility of the Olympic contests all over the world, but, at the same time preserve human dignity and a diversity of human values (Hsu, 2014). In this sense, the Olympic Games and moreover, the Olympic Movement

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In relation to this issue, for the further discussion about athletes' rights, see Murphy, P. & Waddington, I. (2007). Are elite athletes exploited? Sport in Society, 10 (2) 239-255.

generally potentially can be perceived as fulfilling an important symbolic role and function for an ideal unity of mankind.

In order to reach this goal, Lenk stresses Coubertin's vision that the Olympic Games should offer the youth of all nations and sports a regularly scheduled opportunity to meet and learn to respect each other. A pertinent example here about the four times Olympic champion in speed skating Johann Olav Koss (who himself took the initiative in founding and representing and Olympic aid program from money donated by Norwegian medal winners of the Lillehammer Games for Eritrea). He stated that the Olympians should not only bring in the energy for just sports victories, but also for humanitarian aims: only thus and then Olympism would prove itself as a global peace movement.<sup>6</sup>

#### Olympic movement as educational movement

For Lenk, the Olympic Movement is too important a humanistic idea to get sacrificed or to fall victim in the jungle of commercialism, telecracy and nationalism. To resolve these potential problems, he believes that more care should be given to training the intellectual and critical ability of our athletes to reflect on their role and significance of their successes. In fact, high performance sport as a sphere for culture and education has been seriously challenged over the past decade (Loland, 2004). And from global perspective (Wamsley, 2004: 241), "we are grossly uncomfortable with the contradictions seemingly inherent in sport. We continue to apologize for sport, unable to concede that we enjoy forms of culture that are often not purely ethical or honourable, and even harmful." For example, Lenk described that Olympic Motto "Citius-Altius-Fortius" can be a quite dangerous statement if no restrictions are observed. This could lead inhumanity toward "winning is everything" which could result some unethical conduct such as doping.

In relation to this, it has been argued by Wigmore (2007) that the problem of our youth (young athletes are included here) lies too little self-reflection for their obligation but too much entitlements in their mind. In order to avoid the potential manipulation (if not alienation) for the athletes, Lenk suggests that it is necessary to find possibilities for explanation, for critical thought in order to contribute to the emancipation of the athlete, to avoid senseless and unnecessary experiences of alienation and to minimize those possibilities of manipulation which are morally irresponsible.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Koss is now the CEO of the International humanitarian organization *Right to Play* (based in Canada, but with branches in USA and Europe.)

Hence, sports organizations and the public should demonstrate initiative and creativity to develop such educational programs that would be essential and necessary as part of guiding image to enlighten and educate athletes toward critical thinking, participation in discussions, and independent judgment. Coaches, guides and mentors (all of whom have a particularly high pedagogic responsibility in this respect) ought to lead the young athlete, at least by attempting a step-by-step approach.

For Lenk, the notion of the Olympic elite should also ideally be a "school of nobility and moral purity as well as of physical endurance and energy". On this basis, Olympians should invest equally in the concepts of honor and sportsmanship as they do the development of their physiques and physical capabilities. This, ideally excludes any justification of doping. The most important functions of sport are not just sport. They are and remain educational, societal and philosophical.<sup>7</sup> Olympians are not just for the Olympic Games and their national pride – but they should have educational responsibilities and missions to fulfill. If they can receive a more positive and powerful educational message through proper and carefully designed programs organized and endorsed by each of our official educational authorities (e.g. Each Ministry of Education in collaboration with the NOC, such as developed in New Zealand (Kohe, 2010), they can motivate and inspire more youngsters to take part sports they like (but, we acknowledge there are considerable limitations with such resources and practitioners should approach with care). They certainly can fulfill a more or less direct educational function. Olympic elite should not be seen as a specific social class, but should serve as an ideal educational model for achievement-oriented youth generally, but in particular for sports. Especially for a popular Olympic athlete who must take a certain moral responsibility as an ideal model for young emulating boys and girls. Via this educational and motivational sequence, they certainly still fulfil a more or less direct educational function, retain their stimulating and motivating force for the emulating young athlete.

In sum, from Lenk's view, top athletes are also human beings, not "mechanical producers of medals", not high performance muscle machines, not useful performances-idiots or "luxuriated performance animals". One should not forget that even fun, humor and play also have their place in modern sports – even in today's high level and top performance sports.

#### **Concluding remarks:**

Lenk (2012: 179) argues that "life is a physical and a metaphysical effort, goal-guided activity,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See following scholars who all share and endorse the similar views: Parry (2006), Binder (2010) and Naul (2010).

dynamic rhythm and externalization of the self in feats, in doing, or works, a continuous run for one's best potentials." On the other hand, one has to know that there is an end to life for everyone. In other words, life is short, and we only live once. This is the same as for one's sporting life. By reflecting Hans Lenk's Olympic ideas, the intention of this paper was to draw attention to contemporary and enduring concerns about future Olympic movement. In keeping with Lenk's interest in the holistic development of the athlete, and the wider aims of the Olympic movement to promote intellectual and spiritual development, here we propose some possibilities for Olympic education based around critical reflection. The main fundamental questions for this approach are: What does sport reflect on our personal life? And from the educational point of view, where shall we start? We believe that all Olympic stakeholders have the responsibility to face these questions within their local context.

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