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CENTRE FOR SPORT POLICY STUDIES

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THE MORE MEDALS CANADIAN ATHLETES WIN,
THE FEWER CANADIANS PARTICIPATE IN
ORGANIZED SPORT

Peter Donnelly and Bruce Kidd
University of Toronto

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CSPS Research Report

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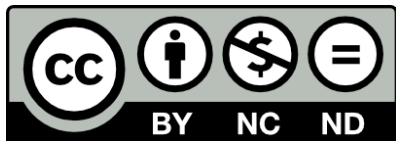
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Research Reports Editor:

Simon Darnell (Director, Centre for Sport Policy Studies)
simon.darnell@utoronto.ca

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Centre for Sport Policy Studies
Faculty of Physical Education and Health
55 Harbord Street
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2W6
www.sportpolicystudies.ca

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent appeal for greater public funding for Canada's Olympic athletes, the President and CEO of the Canadian Olympic Committee, David Shoemaker, spoke about the athletes "inspiring" the country to become participants in sport – an echo of Tony Blair's 2012 Olympics promise to 'inspire a nation'. He warned that, without increased funding for Olympic athletes, there will be "dramatic reductions in participation in [grassroots] sport" (cited by Houpt, 2024).

Researchers at the Centre for Sport Policy Studies (CSPS, University of Toronto) have, been exploring and collecting data about the relationship between high performance sport and grassroots participation in sport for more than 20 years. That research has led us to dispute the widely used justification for government funding for high performance sport – namely that the achievements of a nation's high-performance athletes will inspire others to participate in sport.

In the academic literature this justification has been referred to as the 'trickle-down' effect or more recently as the 'demonstration' effect.¹ The assumed effect has often been used by politicians and sport leaders, in Canada and other countries, to justify public expenditures on high performance sports and on hosting international sports events.

Sport leaders and national team athletes often provide anecdotal evidence in support of 'inspiration' – that national and international sport achievements will 'inspire' a higher percentage of the population to participate in sport (and warnings that the failure to 'inspire' will result in declining participation). Athletes often refer to an athlete or event that 'inspired' them to become involved in the sport or to pursue it more seriously, or they refer to someone they know who was similarly 'inspired'. This relationship has become so deeply rooted that many high-performance athletes have begun to express their own ambitions in these terms, i.e., that their overarching goal is to inspire children and youth to take up their sport.

Yet as we show in this *Report*, the evidence does not support the claim. We do not dispute that excellent performances by Canadian national athletes are inspirational to some, and that some athletes were themselves inspired by other athletes and/or their performances. However, the effect of inspiration on increasing participation is far less clear. To actually increase participation, a strategic investment in new opportunities will be necessary, including accessible facilities, qualified leaders, and the means for children, youth and adults to overcome the socio-economic barriers they face.

Inspiration is not enough

Other than rhetoric, it is lamentable that the Canadian sports system makes no concrete or intentional effort to enable increased grassroots participation. On the one hand,

reports from sports such as speed skating and rowing suggest that successful performances by Canadian athletes, especially during Olympic Games, may actually 'inspire' some young people to seek out opportunities in the sport. On the other hand, reports from those same sports organizations indicate that the large majority of young people who attempted to register for the sports were turned away because of the lack of capacity (equipment, instructors, and so on) in the clubs or facilities. Neither sport had made any plans to accommodate, let alone provide rewarding opportunities for, new participants (Donnelly, et al., 2008/2012).

Similarly, in terms of 'new' participants, there is no evidence to show the proportion of such individuals who were net new participants. It is far more likely that those 'inspired' to try out a sport were already involved in sports at some level. With their preliminary understanding and experience of participation, it is easier to understand how an individual would be inspired to choose and pursue a specific sport; and perhaps to develop the ambition to represent Canada in that sport.

Thus, there is likely little, if any, overall increased participation in sport – an interpretation that conforms best with the following data, and suggests that there are far more cost-effective ways of increasing participation in sports.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, inspiration does not break down any of the barriers, the social determinants of participation, that prevent so many young people from participating in sport in the first place. Family income, gender/sexuality, (dis)ability, geographical location and other factors can all, individually and in combination, have an enabling or a constraining effect on the possibilities of participating in organized sports.

Many may be inspired, but few have the means to realize their inspiration.

As a consequence, it seems inappropriate, perhaps even hypocritical, to make claims about inspiration leading to participation without first ensuring that young people have the means and opportunity to realize their 'inspiration'. It is insensitive to threaten decreases in participation, or blame people for failing to be inspired, when nothing has been done to enable their participation.

Canada is a signatory to international treaties that ensure the right of all citizens to participate in sport,² and Canada's *Physical Activity and Sport Act* stipulates specifically that: "The objectives of the Government of Canada's policy regarding sport are; (a) to increase participation in the practice of sport and support the pursuit of excellence in sport..."³ The Canadian Sport Policy, in line with the Act, gives equal weight to participation and excellence.⁴ And yet Sport Canada, the government branch charged with enforcing the policy, focuses primarily on funding high performance sport.

Sport Canada, together with Own the Podium, an organization largely funded by Sport Canada, ensure a relatively well-funded/well-resourced and efficient system to achieve

high performance success, and fails to take any meaningful measures to ensure an increase in participation in sport.⁵ This does not mean that all athletes receive the funding they need, but that the system overall only benefits the tiny high-performance sector.

THE RESEARCH

As a follow-up to a project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) (Donnelly, et al., 2012), researchers at the CSPS have used the best available data on: (a) sport participation in Canada; (b) Sport Canada's reported annual budgets; and (c) the total medals won by Canadian athletes from Olympiads since 1988 to examine the relationships between sport participation in Canada, the way that sport is funded in Canada, and the Olympic success of Canadian athletes.

The results on the following pages show that: (1) the more federal funding Canadians spend on sport, the fewer Canadians participate in sport (Figure 1); (2) the more Olympic medals Canadian athletes win, the fewer Canadians participate in organized sport (Figure 2); and (3) the more federal funding spent on high-performance sport, the more Olympic medals Canadian athletes win (Figure 3). (4) Table 1 provides a measure of the public cost of Canadian athletes winning each Olympic medal, and the ranking of Canadian teams at successive Winter and Summer Olympics.

(1) The more federal funding Canadians spend on sport, the fewer Canadians participate in sport (Figure 1):

This result appears to be a consequence of the federal government's self-defined high-performance mandate, a mandate that was both implicitly and explicitly in place even before Canadian athletes failed to win any gold medals at the first two Olympics hosted in Canada (Montréal, 1976; Calgary, 1988). Prior to 1970, the federal government tried to invest in high-performance sport, broadly based participation and physical education in equal measure, and made multi-year shared-cost grants to the provinces and territories to assist with broad-based participation. In 1970 it established Sport Canada with a high-performance mandate and unilaterally withdrew from its support of provincial and territorial programmes, on the grounds that participation should be more of a provincial, territorial and municipal responsibility. While it retained a rhetorical interest in participation, and launched the social marketing agency, ParticipAction, to persuade Canadians into increased participation, ever since the early 1970s, no routine federal funds are transferred to provinces/ territories/municipalities for sport participation, and provinces/territories/municipalities provide limited, often decreasing funds to support broadly-based participation in communities and schools.

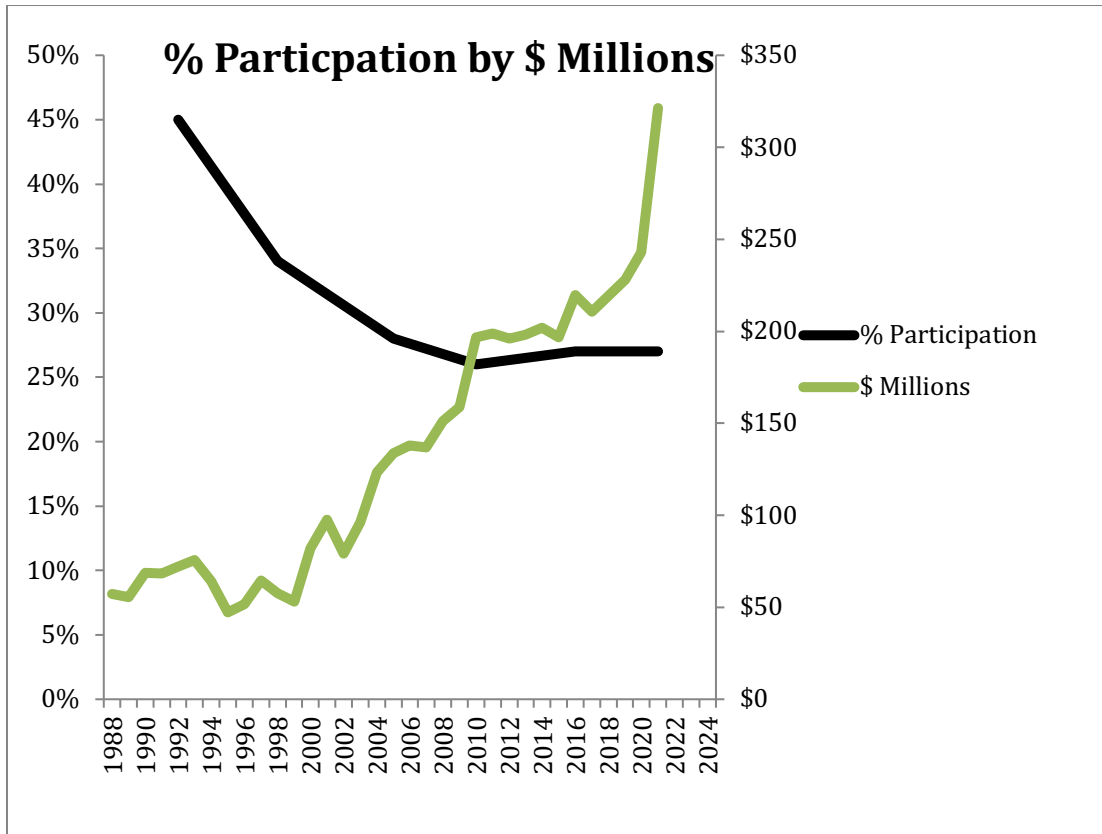
Data for Sport Canada annual funding is derived from Canadian government online sources (e.g., <http://canada.pch.gc.ca/eng/1414510019083> for 2002-2015; <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/corporate/publications/evaluations/grouped-evaluation-sport-canada-program.html#a14d> for 2015-2020; https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2022/pch/CH1-38-2021-eng.pdf for 2021; and <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/sport-organizations/national/funding.html> for 2022). The data show a persistent increase in funding, with a marked increase in the last year available.

The General Social Survey (GSS) is the best available measure of sport participation in Canada. It involves the largest sample, the same questions are asked from survey to survey, and the results are comparable over time.⁶ Sport participation questions are asked every five to seven years.

It is important to note that the decline in GSS measured participation evident in Figure 1 cannot be taken as an indication that participation in sport and recreational physical activity in a more general sense has declined. Because of the specific definition of sport – the specification that participation means regular participation in organized, competitive sport, and the age limitation (over 15 years of age) – the GSS is not able to, or intended to measure more informal forms of sport participation, or forms of physical activity that people participate in for recreation or exercise.

What it does show, very clearly, is an ongoing decline in participation in organized, competitive sport among Canadians over 15 years of age, from 44% in 1990 to 27% in 2010. It has remained at around 27% since 2010.

Figure 1:
Sport participation in Canada,^a and spending on sport by Sport Canada^b



^a Data on organized, competitive sport participation in Canada by those 15 years of age and older obtained from the previous five General Social Surveys (1992, 1998, 2005, 2010, 2016). [Data on sport participation from the 2016 GSS were not available until 2019.] Because there are no recent GSS data, an alternate source – the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute's Physical Activity Monitor – has been used to provide data for 2021.⁷

^b Annual funds provided to national sport organizations (NSOs) by Sport Canada are supplemented to varying degrees with funds received by NSOs from, for example, International Federations, sponsors, commercial endeavours (such as televised broadcasts of events), or the Canadian Olympic Committee. These additional funds vary widely from sport to sport, and are not reflected in the Figure above.

(2) The more Olympic medals Canadian athletes win, the fewer Canadians participate in organized sport (Figure 2)

The data employed here are from July, 2023. With the increased use, by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), of retrospective testing for anti-doping violations, it is possible that some of the Olympic medal data may change as recorded medalists have their medals revoked and those originally finishing outside the medals move up in the standing to belatedly receive a medal.

The data on declining participation in Tables 1 and 2 are **not** intended to be interpreted as a result of direct or singular **causality** between the increased spending on high performance sport shown in Table 1 and the consequent (see Table 3) increased number of medals won by Canadian athletes shown in Table 2.

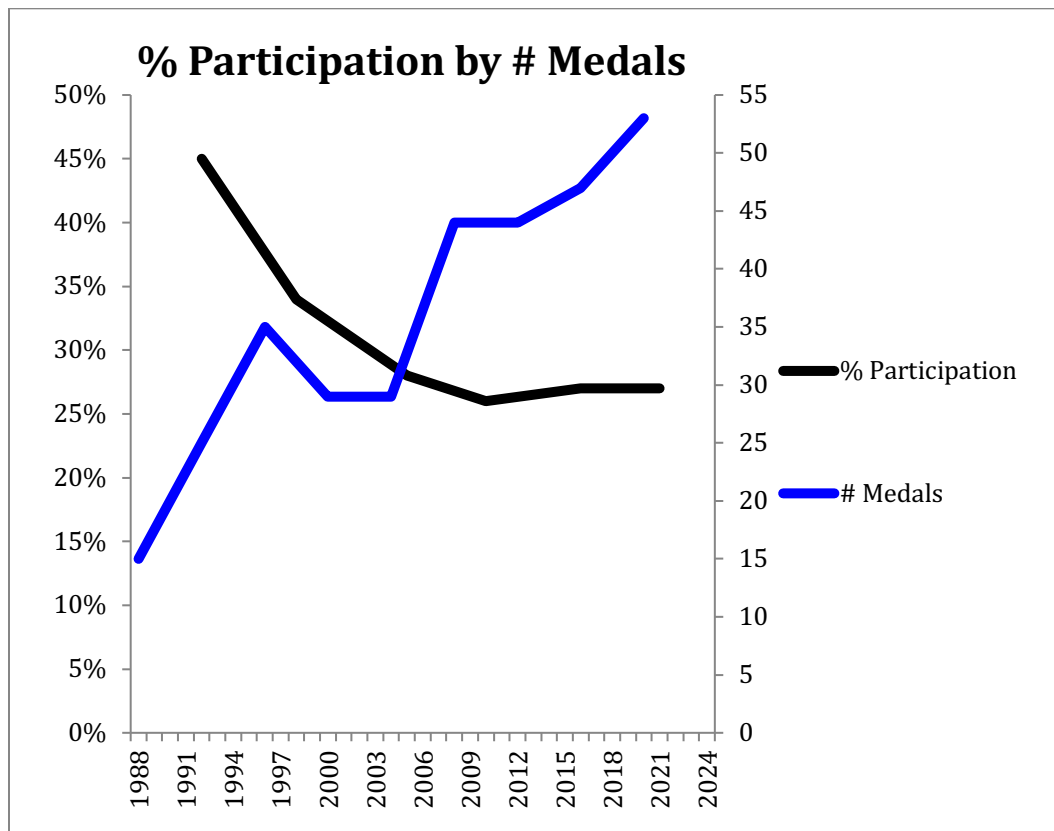
Other factors that help to account for the decline in sport participation include:

- a) an aging population – data consistently show declining participation in organized and competitive sports by age;*
- b) increasing numbers of new Canadians who are less likely to participate in traditional organized sports;*
- c) the growing focus of public funding at the provincial/territorial levels on high performance and high-performance development, resulting in increasingly exclusive sport systems and less support for broadly-based participation; while at the municipal level, cuts to school boards and municipal recreation programmes have decimated after-school and community sports;*
- d) the focus on high performance and early specialization is believed to discourage those young participants whose growth or skill development is slower and who see little prospect for continued participation;*
- e) increasing cost and the privatization of participation ('pay for play') at a time when a large proportion of the population has seen little real increase in income for many years, and when Canadian society is marked by growing material inequality; and*
- e) a much more international shift away from playing traditional organized sport.*

As Houlihan and Zheng note, in countries that have invested in Olympic success, there is a "clear risk that the prioritisation of elite sport will impact on the finance available for community sport, but more importantly that investment in community sport and particularly youth sport will be assessed in terms of its contribution to elite sport success..." (2013, p. 352).

And, as Donnelly and Kidd point out, “it would be a mistake to discount shifting federal priorities, and the structure of Canadian sport policy has enabled this increasing investment in international sport success by decreasing investments in grassroots participation” (2015, p. 62).

Figure 2:
Sport participation in Canada,^a and the number of medals won by Canadian athletes at Summer and Winter Olympic Games^b



^a See Figure 1, Note ‘a’

^b Since Canada sends full teams to both Summer and Winter Olympics, medal totals are calculated for each Olympiad. Thus the 1988 and 1992 data are for the Winter and Summer Olympics held in those years; in 1994 the Winter Olympics were separated from the Summer Olympics, so the 1996 data point, and subsequent points, are for medals won by Canadian athletes in the Winter Olympics two years previously, and the Summer Olympics held that year. The final data point includes the Pyeongchang 2018 Olympics and the Tokyo 2020(21) Olympics.

(3) The more federal funding Canadians spend on sport, the more Olympic medals Canadian athletes win (Figure 3)

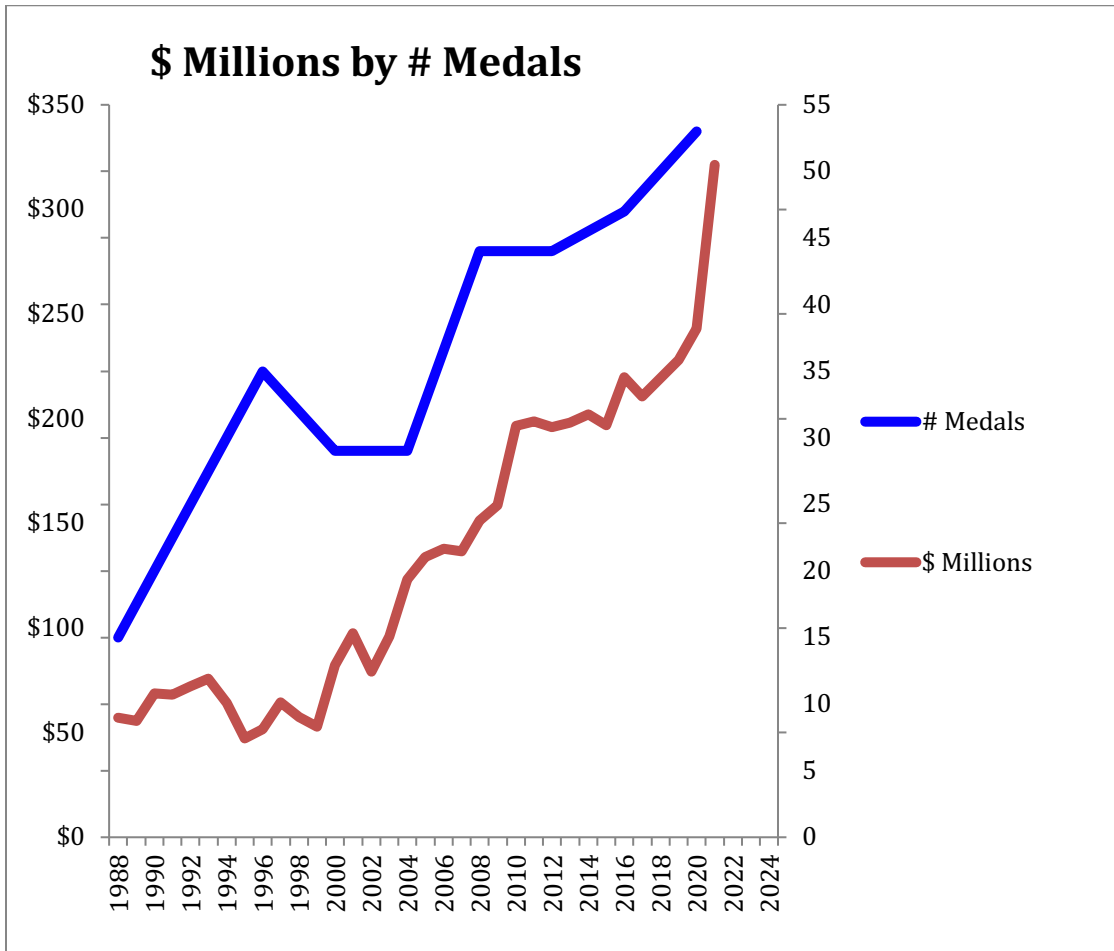
It is now widely recognized that the sport systems of countries that are involved in the *global sporting arms race* (deBosscher, et al., 2008; Oakley & Green, 2001) are quite similar. They all:

- a) dedicate significant public (or, in the case of the USA, private) funding to achieving international success in sport;
- b) establish a system of early talent identification for children and youth;
- c) encourage early specialization in a sport, or a position/event in a sport; and
- d) require intensive training in their specialization for those identified (see, Centre for Sport and Human Rights. 2022).

It is also widely recognized that winning Olympic medals costs money, and that for those countries in the global sporting arms race "the cost of maintaining a country's relative position in the medals table is considerable and arguably locks countries on to a path from which it is difficult for them to deviate" (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013, p. 338). Thus, the cost of climbing the medals table is even more considerable.

Figures 3 and 4 show this for Canada and the UK respectively.

Figure 3:
Spending on sport by Sport Canada^a and the number of medals won by Canadian athletes at Summer and Winter Olympic Games^b

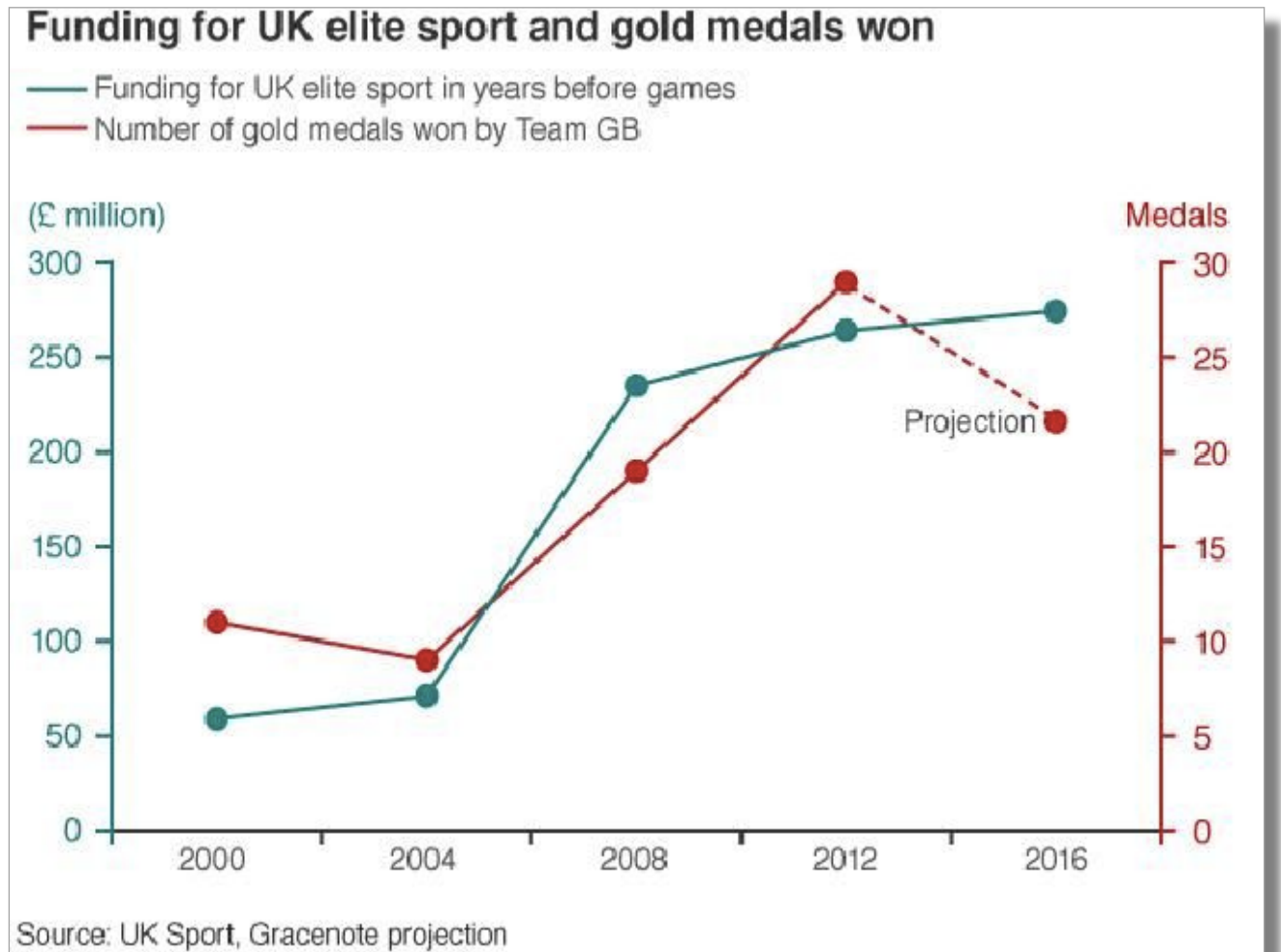


^a See Figure 1, Note 'b'

^b See Figure 2, Note 'b'

Figure 4:

UK Sport funding and UK (Summer) Olympic gold medals won (2000-2016)^a



^a Although the UK data are limited to the number of gold medals won, they show a similar pattern to data for Canada – more money, more medals. UK Sport funding increased for the Olympic Games in Rio (2016), and UK athletes actually won 27 gold medals (2 fewer than 2012, but more than projected in the Figure), and 67 total medals (2 more than 2012). Although data from UK Sport annual reports show total funding increasing each year between 2017 and 2020 (see amounts on p. 17), British athletes won 22 gold medals at the Tokyo 2020/21 Olympics, 5 fewer than Rio 2016.

(4) How much does it cost to win an Olympic medal? (Table1)

Table 1 proceeds logically from Figure 3. The Table shows the cumulative public spending (Sport Canada budgets) for each four-year Olympiad (1988-2020/1), the total number of Olympic medals won by Canadian athletes at the Winter and Summer Olympics in each Olympiad, the ranking (based on total medals won) of Canada on the Olympic medals table for the Winter and Summer Olympics respectively, and an estimate of the cost of each medal based on dividing the total Sport Canada budget for each quadrennial by the total number of Olympic medals won by Canadian athletes during that period of time.

Determining the full cost to the public of Olympic medals is exceedingly complex. It is impossible to estimate the actual public costs involved in the career of any Olympic medal-winning athlete, and these will certainly vary with the athlete and the sport. Is it necessary to account for publicly-funded sports facilities used by the athlete, especially when most such facilities have been designed for multiple use?; publicly-funded sport science that facilitates an athlete's performance and recovery and rehabilitation from injury?; the proportion of a coach's salary derived from Sport Canada funding to the national sport organization?; publicly-funded health care for athletes' injuries; the cost of planning, administration and travel that are so crucial to athletes' careers? These and many other costs are involved from the time an athlete becomes part of a national sport organization's (NSO) development programme up to the moment of winning the medal.

The decision made here matches decisions made by other national sport funding authorities (e.g., UK Sport, Australian Institute of Sport [AIS]) to estimate the cost of a medal as a proportion of the total funding for high performance sport in the four-year period between Summer Olympic Games [for the purposes of this paper, the focus is on public funding], and not attempt to calculate the full comprehensive cost by including indirect forms of support such as a national health care system. In the case of the UK and Australia, sport funding is divided between two funding authorities – UK Sport for high performance and Sport England (Sport Wales, Sport Scotland) for participation; Australian Institute of Sport for high performance and the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) for participation. Unfortunately, the division is not as clear as it appears, and there are many overlapping costs between the funding authorities. For example, part of the mandate of the ASC is "to increase involvement in sport and enable continued international sporting success" (<https://www.ausport.gov.au/about>) and some of the programmes of the AIS are intended to stimulate participation. So, although the medal costs are often considered to be a proportion of the budgets of the high performance funding authorities, the actual costs of high performance sport may be even higher.

In the case of Sport Canada, as noted previously the branch's primary focus is on high performance. A small portion of the annual budget is devoted to costs such as funding participation research (https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/sport_can-eng.aspx), and supporting the measurement of participation in the form of the Physical Activity Monitor (<https://cflri.ca/population-studies-self-report>),

but the vast majority of funding is concerned with high performance. Thus, the Sport Canada annual budget is assumed to provide a measure of the cost of Olympic medals.

With the countries noted here, and many others with a publicly-funded sport system that engage in the *global sporting arms race*, Olympic medals are seen as the most important metric of success, and are used as the primary measure of success in this paper (and in Australia, the UK, and other countries).

It is important to recognize that Sport Canada funding also supports Canadian Paralympic athletes, and Canadian athletes (often Olympic and Paralympic athletes) participating in non-Olympic events such as the Commonwealth Games, the Pan American Games, Jeux de la Francophonie, World Student Games, national and international championships, and so on.

The performances of Canadian athletes at these non-Olympic events are carefully monitored and recorded, and contribute to a more comprehensive metric of success. However, Olympic success is used here, and by many other countries as a proxy for determining the effectiveness of their high performance funding programmes.

In the case of Australia, an article published shortly before the Tokyo 2020/21 Olympics counted the "dollars distributed by the AIS to individual sports in the past four years" to estimate that, "If the Australian Olympians repeat their performance of Rio in Tokyo – eight gold medals, 11 silver and 10 bronze – that would equate to around A\$16 million per medal" (Pender, 2021), an amount close to the Table 1 estimates for Sport Canada during the same time period.

Figure 4 provides UK Sports "Funding for UK elite sport in years before games." In the most recent three measures of funding, the amount was given as between approximately £240m and £270m. Applying the metric in use here, each gold medal won by a British athlete in 2016 cost £10m. In this case, it is not clear whether the amounts referred to the entire UK Sports budget, or whether selections were made from the total UK Sport budget, or whether overlapping costs with the Sport England/Wales/Scotland budgets were included. Similarly, it is not clear from the UK Sports data whether the amounts given were for all four years between Summer Olympics.

Table 1:

Medal table ranking of Canadian Olympic teams and public spending cost per medal won^a for the previous eight (quadrennial) Olympiads

Olympiads	Sport Canada total ^b budget, 4 years (\$m.)	# medals ^c	Rank ^d W/S	Cost per medal (\$m.)
1989-92	265.0	25	9/15	10.6
1993-96	238.8	35	6/11	6.8
1997-00	257.1	29	5/17	8.9
2001-04	396.1	29	4/19	13.7
2005-08	559.8	44	3/13	12.7
2009-12	750.0	44	3/14	17.0
2013-16	816.7	47	4/10	17.4
2017-20 ^e	901.3	53	3/11	17.0

^a Assumptions contributing to this metric are outlined on the previous pages.

^b Other sources of funding (as noted previously) contribute to medal success; this analysis is restricted to the public funding available.

^c See Figure 2, Note 'b'

^d The medal rankings of Canadian teams at the Winter/Summer (WS) Olympics are based on total medals won since that is the success metric in use for this paper. In many published medal tables, the rankings give priority to gold medals won.

^e The 2020 Olympics took place in Tokyo in 2021, the delay caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. It may be argued that five years of funding should be applied to this line, and only three years of funding to the future 2021-24 line. However, use of Sport Canada funding in 2020 likely varied from the norm in ways that it is not yet possible to determine. Thus, in order to establish some consistency in terms of four-year Olympiads, and because of the overlapping nature of high performance sport funding [athletes who appeared at the Beijing (2022) and those who will appear at the Paris (2024) Olympics were likely already being funded during the 2017-20 Olympiad], a decision was made to continue to base medal costs and rankings on the basis of four years of funding.

A more direct comparison can be made using data from UK Sport Annual Reports between 2017 and 2020. To maintain consistency with Sport Canada data, only public funds from the budgets were counted – in the UK Sport case this includes direct grants from the government, and grants derived from the non-tax revenue of the government-run lottery. The amounts:

2016-2017	£128.11m
2017-2018	£139.10m
2018-2019	£143.50m
2019-2020	£148.80m ⁸
TOTAL:	£559.51m

Again, using a comparable metric with Sport Canada, UK athletes won 5 medals at the Pyeongchang 2018 Olympics, and 64 medals at the Tokyo 2020/21 Olympics. Thus, each medal is estimated to have cost £8.11m.

Given the differences in the sports and funding systems, and the data available, it is not possible to state with any confidence that Olympic medals cost less for UK athletes than for Canadian athletes. It is reasonable to state that Olympic medals cost a great deal of money, and that it costs a great deal of money to maintain a place in the Olympic medals table, and even more to move up the table. Canada is currently at 4th place in the Winter Olympics table based on total medals won (Beijing 2022), and has held third or fourth place for over 20 years; in terms of the Summer Olympics, Canada has only appeared in the top-10 places one time in the last 30 years listed here.

DISCUSSION

Ever since its 19th century origins, the amateur/Olympic sports movement and many Canadian political leaders have explicitly linked the performances of Canadian athletes in international competition to national pride and well-being. One of the stated motivations by prime minister John Diefenbaker for the creation of the Fitness and Amateur Sport Act in 1961 was to improve Canada's image abroad through more successful international sports competition, while a decade later, prime minister Pierre Trudeau created Sport Canada to strengthen, through sports, the image Canadians had of themselves. (Kidd, 2013b).

Those sentiments were accentuated by the strong Canadian showing at the Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2010. The high performance sport lobby (sport leaders and some politicians) hoped that, as a consequence, more Canadian citizens would support high levels of funding for high performance sport. This message is echoed in other countries in the global sporting arms race. For example, the Australian government's 2021 budget contains the line, "The Australian Institute of Sport will strive to deliver national pride and inspiration through international sporting success" as a result of the generous budget allocation (cited by Pender, 2021); and a British strategy for sport document claimed that "major sporting success leads to great national pride" (HM Government, 2015, p. 74).

While it is a frequently voiced assumption that international sporting success enhances national pride, research seems to suggest that it is not a reliable indicator of national pride (Shibli, et al., 2021). Even as Own the Podium funding was starting, a Sport Canada commissioned report acknowledged that "there is little empirical evidence to support the anecdotal claims that high performance sport leads to social benefits such as building national pride, enhancing cultural awareness and encouraging healthy behaviours" (Bloom et al., 2006, p. ii).

Despite the absence of any evidence of positive social changes or improved quality of life for citizens resulting from international success in sport, the "well-organised internal lobb[ies] on behalf of elite sport" (Houlihan and Zheng, 2013, p. 352) that have emerged in countries with high levels of government spending on high performance sport, have continued to promote intangible and difficult to measure 'benefits' of elite sport. The success of high performance athletes comes to be equated with the well-established benefits of recreational and grassroots participation, presumably because of the (unsupported) effects of 'inspiration'.

Our research about the trends involved in the global sporting arms race, and that of others (e.g., deBosscher, et al., 2008; Donnelly, 2009, 2010; Houlihan and Zheng, 2013), suggest a proposition, and two corollaries:

Proposition: it is generally true that Olympic and international sport medals cost money – the more money a country spends (on training, development, athlete support, technology, sport science, and so on), the more medals the athletes win.

Corollary 1: from one Olympics to the next, as other countries in the ‘sporting arms race’ increase their budgets and expectations, it costs more and more money even to stay in the same place in the Olympic medal table (see, for example, Sport Canada/Own the Podium funding, and funding for UK and Australian sport) (Figures 3 and 4; Table 1).

Corollary 2: entering the global sporting arms race has the potential to distort a national sport system in two ways:

First, most funding is directed to those sports where national sport leaders see the greatest chance of being able to win medals. The focus tends to be on individual, multi-event sports such as track and field, swimming, cycling, and so on. Because there are only two gold medals available in team sports (men’s and women’s), national funding for team sports is often quite limited in comparison. In contrast, high levels of funding may be provided for sports in which there are very few participants. For example, in the lead up to the Vancouver Olympics, the sliding sports (bobsled, luge and skeleton) in Canada received approximately \$3 million in additional funding (over and above Sport Canada's annual funding for the sports); in comparison, for one of the most popular sports in Canada, Basketball Canada’s annual budget from Sport Canada was approximately \$3 million. An inquiry in Australia found that more government funding was going to archery than to the national sport of cricket (not then an Olympic sport) (Crawford, 2009, p. 7).

Second, and related, unless strong policies are in place to ensure support (budget, staff and infrastructure) for grassroots participation and early low-cost development in sport as in, for example, the Scandinavian countries, the vast majority of government funding for sport tends to go to high performance sport. Those funding models provide most support to the sports where athletes – based on past performance – are likely to win medals. As noted previously, "There is a clear risk that the prioritisation of elite sport will impact on the finance available for community sport, but more importantly that investment in community sport and particularly youth sport will be assessed in terms of its contribution to elite sport success" (Houlihan and Zheng, 2013, p. 352).

It is time to consider whether current high performance sport systems are sustainable or fair, and to outline some solutions.

An Unsustainable System?

The Canadian government spent over \$900m., primarily on high performance sport, in the four years between 2017 and 2020; and the 2020-21 budget (shown in Figures 1 and 3, but not part of the current analysis) increased significantly to \$321.3m. In the 16 years since the Beijing 2008 Olympics, the Sport Canada budget has more than doubled, now at more than a quarter of a billion dollars each year, and the Canadian Olympic Committee

has recently asked for a further \$104m to support NSOs (CBC Sports, 2024). As Houlihan and Zheng pointed out 10 years ago, there is the question of:

...the sustainability of the current upward trend in public investment in elite sport identified in many sports powers. Logic would suggest that this upward competitive financial spiral is not sustainable, not only due to the escalating cost of winning a gold medal and maintaining a country's relative ranking but also due to the political risk of public disillusionment with excessive spending. At some point in the medium-term future, the government of one of the major sports powers will step off the policy path, facing the challenge of justifying its decision to its electorate/public. However, there is no sign that over the short term there is a desire among either the public or among governments to rein in their increasingly generous, if not frankly absurd, level of spending on the pursuit of Olympic success" (2013, p. 352).

There is still no sign of governments stepping off the current sport policy path, although public disillusionment may be on the horizon with the polarization of wealth, money increasingly flowing to the top decile of income earners and declining real income/ increasing costs for more than half the population of many countries.

The unsustainability of expensive, medal-focused sport systems is bracketed on the one side by the similarly absurd cost of hosting international sport mega-events, a cost exacerbated by the climate crisis; and on the other side by the unsustainable maltreatment of athletes on their journey to, and in, the highest levels of sport.

Perhaps the first signs of public disillusionment are evident in city referenda that frequently, in recent years, fail to provide public support for hosting international sport mega-events. Cities and regions in democratic societies are beginning to acknowledge that such events are not worth the ever-increasing costs. Most recently, the State of Victoria (AUSTRALIA) bailed on its contract to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games, citing unreasonable/unaffordable cost overruns – the originally budgeted A\$2.6bn. had increased to an estimated A\$6 - 7bn., with no guarantees that there would not be further increases. Similarly, Hamilton (CANADA) has withdrawn from its status as preferred candidate to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games (the centennial of a Games first held in Hamilton) when it failed to gain support from the provincial and federal governments. And the British Columbia government declined to support a bid for the 2030 Olympics and Paralympics (CBC Sports, 2022).

It has been an article of faith among Canadian sports leaders for more than a century that the best strategy for domestic sports development was through the stimulus of hosting international games. Canadians created the Commonwealth Games in 1930 for this explicit purpose, and since World War Two, have hosted three Olympics (1976, 1988, 2010), three Commonwealth Games (1954, 1978, 1994), three Pan American Games (1967, 1999, 2015), one World Student Games (1983) and one Jeux de la Francophonie (2001). With little future for major games in sight, a new strategy is long overdue (Kidd 2022).

Since Australia and Canada are both competitors in the race for Olympic medals, these recent examples of lack of government support may indicate that some governments prepared to support an expensive, medal-driven sport system are not now prepared to support domestic venues for what might be considered as second-tier events. However, Brisbane (AUSTRALIA) is set to host the 2032 Olympics, and a group of Calgary businessmen only failed in their attempt to host the 2026 Winter Olympics when Calgary citizens easily won a referendum against hosting the Games.

The financial unsustainability of sport mega-events is exacerbated by the climate crisis as fossil fuels and planetary resources are used in increasing amounts to organize the events. Green initiatives cannot compensate for a million or so people from all countries in the world converging on one small part of the planet for a two-week sports event; and climate changes may create increasing problems for actually completing the events as scheduled.

Finally, the (mal)treatment of athletes, sometimes from childhood, in the high performance sport system and the earlier development systems is now being recognized. Calls from both athletes and academics, over the last 40 years, to create a safer sport experience for athletes are finally being heard. Athletes have found a more collective voice, the media and governments are paying attention, and sport organizations are under pressure to change their culture of abuse. Traditional ways of training athletes are becoming unsustainable.

The current ways of practising high performance sport are no longer viable. It is necessary now to discover and negotiate new and more sustainable ways to play sports at the highest level.

An Unfair System

The unfairness of a medal-driven sport system is evident at both ends of the spectrum – for high performance athletes themselves, and for the larger sport opportunity system in Canada.

At the *elite* end of the spectrum, funding to high performance athletes and NSOs is often administered on a reward and punishment basis. Athletes who are expected to win medals enjoy enhanced funding while those considered to have little chance to place in or close to the medals may experience limited funding. Cuts to NSOs for failing to meet expectations affect athletes and organizational staff. For example, sports such as artistic swimming enjoyed Own the Podium funding in the lead up to the London Olympics, which was cut when the team failed to win a medal.

In other cases, athletes who achieved their International Federation's Olympic qualifying standard have been refused a place on Canada's Olympic teams on the basis of an even stricter metric developed by their NSO and the COC (e.g., the athlete's likelihood of

finishing in the top 12) (see, for example, Doyle, 2016). Because of the risk of losing funding, NSOs can become risk averse – not selecting qualified athletes who may not achieve Own the Podium's narrower definition of success.⁹ And it is easy to see how, in a cash for medals system, NSOs may adopt a win-at-all-costs training and competition ethic at the expense of the athletes.

At the *lower* end of the spectrum are the large numbers of children and adults who have little means or opportunity to participate in sport at any level, or to develop any embryonic skills they may have. Even if they live near high quality sports facilities, those facilities are often reserved for use by high performance athletes.

It is evident from the data presented here that overall participation in sport has fallen to a relatively low plateau in Canada. Participation was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and reports suggest that, in certain sectors, participation has not returned to the already low pre-pandemic levels. And this outcome is despite federal government funding for sport having recently increased to close to one-third of a billion dollars a year. The relatively exclusive focus of public funding on high performance sport has been drawing increasing criticism since before the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. For example, with reference to the 2016 Olympics, Michael Doyle, the editor of *Canadian Running* magazine noted: "What's sad about all of this is that [NSOs] and Own the Podium are probably leading this country down the wrong path when it comes to the most lasting impact that sport has in this country. [Recent research] reveals that participation in sports is at an all-time low, and that children become less interested as the emphasis becomes overly performance based" (Doyle, 2016).

In a number of high income countries there is a growing body of evidence indicating that the national Olympic teams are largely drawn from a relatively small, higher income segment of the population. For example, in the UK the Sutton Trust has been tracking the schools attended by Britain's Olympic medalists, private or state. Some 7% of British children attend privately-funded schools, but Sutton Trust's data show that 36% of the British medalists in London (2012), 31% in Rio (2016) and 40% in Tokyo (2021) attended privately-funded schools (Vasagar, 2012; Weale, 2016; Belger, 2021).

Data on the composition of the whole Olympic team are more limited, but the Sutton Trust (2016) reports that 20% of the London (2012) team attended privately-funded schools, and 28% of the Rio (2016) team. Thus, in comparison to attending a state school, attending a privately-funded school leads to a three to four times greater likelihood of being on Britain's Olympic team, and a four to six times greater likelihood of winning a medal. Thus, in Tokyo for example, representatives of 7% of the British population received 40% of the medals won by British athletes, while representatives of 93% of the population won 60% of the medals.

In a more substantial study, Lawrence (2017) provided a comprehensive analysis of all athletes from four countries (Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and United States) at the Sochi (2014) and Rio (2016) Olympics. The study determined the number of white

and other-than-white athletes from each country and the number of privately-educated and state-educated athletes from each country, comparing those data with national population data for race and education for each country. In every case, the proportion of privately-educated athletes in each of the four countries at each Olympics was substantially higher than the proportion of privately-educated citizens in each country.¹⁰

The reason for this aspect of unfairness is quite evident. As noted previously, it costs public money to win Olympic medals. But it costs a great deal of private money, mainly from parents, to support the development of young athletes before they become eligible for government support and/or sponsorship. In addition, private schools frequently maintain more substantial extracurricular sport programmes than those possible at state schools impoverished by government austerity measures.

In the modern era of early specialization and sometimes full-time training, there was also a period of democratization in Canada and other countries in terms of access to organized sport participation. It appears to have peaked in 1992 in Canada when some 45% of those over 14 years of age claimed that they participated regularly in organized sport, and has been declining since. There are various causes (as noted on p. 9), but growing economic inequality has been a key factor in determining 'who gets to play'. Lower taxes and reduced support for the public sector has wiped out many low cost opportunities to participate in, for example, community and school sport programmes. Participation has been increasingly privatized in a for-profit, pay-to-play culture, and even state schools and not-for-profit sport organizations charge user fees.

As a consequence, participation has shifted largely to the middle and upper middle classes (cf., Gruneau, 2016). Olympic medals are won increasingly by athletes from those social classes, and the government support for many athletes represents another entitlement for those from middle and upper income families.¹¹ Sport participation opportunities for children from low income families are often left to the limited availability of support by charitable organizations such as JaysCare, KidSport, the MLSE Foundation and Canadian Tire's Jumpstart.¹²

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is worth reiterating that inspiration does **not** break down any of the barriers, the social determinants of participation, that prevent so many young people from participating in sport. Family income, gender/sexuality, (dis)ability, geographical location and other factors can all, individually and in combination, have an enabling or a constraining effect on the possibilities of participating in organized sport. Many may be inspired, but few have the means to realize their inspiration.

A Proposed Solution – Intentionality

In 2008, in the lead up to the Vancouver 2010 Olympics/Paralympics, and again in 2012, before the Toronto 2015 Pan Am/Para Pan Am Games, researchers with the Centre for Sport Policy Studies developed an earlier version of the critiques outlined in this *Report*

(Donnelly, et al., 2008/2012). Before both events they pointed out that “there [were] still public voices loudly proclaiming that the mere fact of hosting, and the performances of Canadian athletes... will somehow ‘magically’ inspire young people to become more active, despite the absence of any plan or provision.”

The *Position Paper* (Donnelly, et al., 2008/2012) addressed ways to forge a more direct link between high performance sport and grassroots sport participation. The paper outlined **intentional** steps that might assist in “the need to plan and prepare for increased participation.”

If we wait for people to be ‘inspired’ to participate, they may well be ‘inspired’ by the achievements of our high performance athletes. However, if the material and structural conditions of participation, the sport development system, and the capacity of sports to accommodate new participants is still exactly the same after the Games as it was before, then all of the claims of a legacy of increased participation become empty promises.

The steps outlined in the *Position Paper* represent the only concrete plan we are aware of in Canada to establish intentionally a direct link between high performance and increased grassroots participation. These steps are up-dated and reproduced here as a starting point in attempts to deliberately leverage Canadian participation in high performance sport to increase sport participation overall.

We recognize that additional resources are necessary in order to implement the proposed plan, but those resources are within the purview of the *Sport and Physical Activity Act* and *The Canadian Sport Policy*. Such resources, if provided judiciously in order to directly fund the proposed steps, could involve funding conditions to incentivize or reward a sport organization’s good faith participation in the steps. The proposed steps include:

Capacity: Survey all Canadian NSOs and provincial/territorial sport organizations (PTSOs) in order to determine their capacity to incorporate new participants. The willingness of sport organizations to even embrace this notion may vary but, increasing sport participation in Canada depends on the willingness of the organizations – even those with limited facilities – to take in new members.

Exposure: Develop an ‘open house’ strategy for all sports, to take place during (if possible) and immediately following major Games where Canadian athletes are competing. Clubs and facilities for all of the sports included in those Games should open to the public to come and try (under appropriately controlled and safe conditions) the sport.

Coaches, instructors, athletes, and former Olympians (whenever possible) should be present to talk about the sport, and to take people through some basic steps. We recognize that, for most of the sports, major Games such as the Olympics will take place

close to the end of their seasons – not an ideal time to register new participants. However, it is an ideal time, with the Games fresh in people’s minds, to provide an ‘open house’ experience with the sport, and to collect the names and contact information of those who attend so that they can be informed about the sport and provided with information about forthcoming events, and about participating during the next season.

Recruitment: Major target populations for recruitment include children and youth; low income individuals; Indigenous, ethnocultural and immigrant communities; and, for certain sports, persons with a disability and older individuals approaching retirement or recently retired, who may be looking for a form of physical activity in which they may participate.

Given that all Canadians have the potential to be ‘inspired’ by the achievements of Canadian and other athletes, and given that many Canadians are underserved in terms of opportunities to participate in sports, it is important to appeal to as many Canadians as possible when attempting to increase participation.

Basic skills: School physical education often had learn-to-swim and learn-to-skate programmes as part of their basic curricula, and sometimes outdoor programmes (e.g., learn-to-paddle a canoe/kayak). Many of these programmes have been a victim of budget cuts in state schools. Any serious attempt to increase sport and recreational physical activity participation in Canada must include the re-invigoration of school physical education programmes and intramural and extracurricular sports. However, as a bridge for those of school age, and for those past school age, coalitions of sport organizations could use their facilities and expertise to introduce free basic skills development programmes for all who are interested. These could build on the ‘open house’ strategies noted above in ‘**Exposure**’.

Publicity: Ensure widespread publicity for the participation initiatives. The period leading up to a major Games, and during the Games, represents an ideal opportunity to announce the ‘open house’ and ‘basic skills’ programmes. News announcements should be made to indicate that NSOs / PSOs, sports clubs and facilities across the country are “ready for a rush of new participants;” announcing the appearances of former and current national/Olympic team members; prominently indicating the times and dates; and making it clear that large numbers of individuals are expected to take the opportunities to try out the sports, and learn the basic skills to become new participants. Thus, instead of the “unexpected” line-ups of ‘inspired’ young people that have occurred in the past, many of whom have been turned away, and which have not resulted in any noticeable increases in participation, this planned initiative is based precisely on ensuring that capacity and opportunities are available.

The news announcements will have a double impact:

(a) they will contribute to any momentum in terms of increasing participation initiated by the major Games; and

(b) they will show the public that a legacy of participation is an expected result of hosting a major Games, or Canadian athlete success at Games inside and outside Canada; and that the Canadian sport system is ready and willing to receive new participants.

Facilities legacy: Develop a clear subsequent use policy for major Games facilities, one that includes grassroots participation. [See, for example, the Toronto Pan Am Sports Centre, jointly managed by the City of Toronto and the University of Toronto: <https://www.tpasc.ca/facility>]

Canada has a rather distorted system of constructing major sports facilities almost exclusively in association with hosting major sports events; and of choosing the site of major sports events on the basis of regional and national political interests. By 2010, Western Canada had hosted seven major international sports events in the previous 80 years, compared to Ontario's one (the British Empire Games in 1930).

Some of the facilities constructed for those events have not been ideal for subsequent use, and others have been used almost exclusively for professional sports. In both cases these represent a wasted investment of public funds in terms of increasing sport participation.

New facilities should be designed and constructed with multiple uses in mind (more than one sport, if appropriate; and for various levels of participation from novice to high performance), with frequent use in mind, and with green and energy saving principles. Design, location, and future use issues should all be taken into account at the planning stage. Far too often, future use considerations have been limited to professional or high performance sport, and not to adding the facility to the bank of 'sport for all' opportunities for the community.

Ongoing evaluation: Develop an evaluation strategy. Every effort should be made to determine the success of participation initiatives introduced in association with major Games. Such evaluations become a part of determining the success of the initiatives; they provide data for announcements regarding any increases in participation, and for a claimed legacy of the major Games; they may help to determine if that legacy is lasting; and they can help to determine if the strategies need to be amended for future initiatives.

Caveats: In the steps outlined above, it would be tempting for sport organizations to treat the initiatives outlined here as talent identification and specialization exercises. This would be a great mistake since it immediately involves exclusionary thinking. Ideally, individuals would be introduced to an activity and learn enough to be able to participate, and enjoy the activity at a novice level. Being able to take pleasure in the activity, rather than being introduced to an exclusive focus on skill development, is much more likely to sustain participation. Those with skills/talent will become evident, but it's not necessary to have skill/talent in order to have fun participating.

Similarly, in new participant interactions with athletes and former athletes, it will be important to avoid the motivational clichés that so often characterize such interactions.

While made with the best of intentions, the false modesty of “if I can do it, anyone can do it” (demonstrably untrue) and the frequently heard mantra that “if you work hard enough/want it badly enough, you can achieve anything” (again, demonstrably untrue), are unlikely to encourage participation. If, as many athletes have stated, their overarching goal is to inspire children and youth to take up their sport, then it’s important not to focus on the seemingly unattainable goals of becoming a champion. Rather, it would be more fruitful to talk to young participants about the fun and pleasure of participation, teach them some basic skills, and enjoy participating with the young novices.

Funding conditions imposed by F-P/T governments could help to resolve the first caveat. For example, grants could be provided to sport organizations that register new participants following 'open house' events in order to subsidize the user fees that would otherwise be charged to participants. Athlete training and appropriate supervision could help with the second caveat.

AFTERWORD

The current Minister of Sport in Canada, the Hon. Carla Qualtrough, recently announced the retention of a third party panel to review the Canadian sport system and recommend options for reform (Canadian Heritage, 2024). The review panel is a result of growing concerns for the health, well-being and safety of athletes, and the governance of sport in a win-at-all-costs system. It is likely that many of the issues raised in this *Report* will be on their agenda (Future of Sport Commission, 2024).

Ideally, this review of the sport system will address the fairness and sustainability concerns raised in this *Report*. It will follow the ideals outlined in UNESCO’s (2015) *International Charter on Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport* (to which Canada is a signatory), whereby the opportunity to participate in sport and recreational physical activity is recognized as a right of citizenship. The widespread enjoyment of sport for all should also make the possibilities of achieving high performance available to a far broader base of the population.

In addition, a sustainable high performance sport system would end the culture of win-at-all-costs and recognize athletes as rights-bearing citizens whose safety, health and well-being, current and long-term, is more important than the immediate gratification of a medal.

Notes

1. The parallel with Reaganomics/supply-side economics is evident in that economic benefits to the wealthy are theorized to 'trickle-down' to other social classes. As in sport, these theories have been found wanting. For analyses of the effect in sport see, for example, Veal, et al., 2019; Weed, et al., 2015.
2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts the right of all people to 'rest and leisure' (Article 24) and the right 'to freely participate in the cultural life of the community' (UDHR, 1948). The International Charter on Physical Education and Sport, 1978 (now the International Charter on Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport, 2015) declares the right of all persons to participate in sport (UNESCO, 1978/2015). UN Conventions on the rights of girls and women (CEDAW, 1979), children (CRC, 1989) and persons with a disability (CRPD, 2007) all assert the rights of those populations to participate in sport; and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples makes a similar assertion (UNDRIP, 2007). All have been endorsed by Canada.
3. The Physical Activity and Sport Act (2003): <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/p-13.4/>
4. The Canadian Sport Policy (2002, 2012, to be renewed in 2023 (still pending at the time of writing): <https://sirc.ca/canadian-sport-policies/>
5. In 2021-22, Own the Podium's budget was over \$79.2m: \$66.1m from Sport Canada, and \$13.1m from a combination of the Canadian Olympic Committee (\$11.1), the Canadian Paralympic Committee (\$1m) and the Canadian Olympic Foundation ([https://www.ownthepodium.org/getattachment/Resources/Annual-Report-\(1\)/Annual-Report-2021-22-EN.pdf](https://www.ownthepodium.org/getattachment/Resources/Annual-Report-(1)/Annual-Report-2021-22-EN.pdf)). Thus, selected Olympic sport NSOs and high performance sport centres are funded directly by Sport Canada and indirectly by Sport Canada via Own the Podium.
6. In the 2016 GSS (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190521/dq190521c-eng.htm>), the survey modules were changed but the questions about sport participation remained the same, and Sport Canada considers that the 2016 results may safely be compared to the results of previous General Social Surveys (Joanne Kay, personal communication, 22/5/19).
7. The Physical Activity Monitor data are from the 2019-2021 survey (<https://cflri.ca/sport-participation>). The data are from a much smaller sample than the GSS, and have somewhat different criteria than the GSS. 'Adult' sport participation data are derived from individuals 18 years of age and older, with less restrictive criteria for 'sport participation'. However, in the absence of GSS data, these data represent a timely and somewhat comparable substitute.

8. Following the precedent established for Table 1, Note (e), only four years of funding (2017-2020) have been included, despite the Tokyo Olympics actually taking place in 2021.

9. Since at least the 1970s the Canadian Olympic Committee had a restrictive, medal-focused selection policy before the emergence of Own the Podium (OTP). OTP was preceded by Game Plan in the early 1970s and Best Ever in the early 1980s. Both of the earlier elite funding programmes were ended following Montréal and Calgary Olympic Games they were intended to support (Kidd, 2013a). However, funding for OTP has been maintained since the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. A part of the original argument for OTP involved the insulting suggestion that many Canadian Olympic athletes before 2005 had been 'tourists' who were not really attending the Olympics to compete.

10. The Olympic teams in each country were also whiter than the population in those countries, a result that matches Danford and Donnelly's (2018) pilot study showing Canadian university athletes were whiter than their university populations.

11. A tax credit for children's participation in sport and physical activity, which was offered by the federal and some provincial governments in Canada, provided a similar subsidy to middle and upper income families (Spence, et al., 2024; Stearns, et al., 2021).

12. Bruce Kidd has described some of the television advertising by Jumpstart as "almost Dickensian" – see, for example: Jumpstart: Sidelines from Canadian Tire (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WmgrikR52c>) and Jumpstart: Help Wanted from Canadian Tire (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olkpiEG-CaI>). The current cost-of-living crisis is now having measurable effects on participation (Cruikshank, et al., 2024).

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