



#17 – SPIRIT OF THE GAMES!

Nacer Zorgani: It's often said that when you organise the Games, you welcome the world. Well, in 2024 in Paris, we're going to welcome the whole world, with its wealth, its cultures, its stories... but also its tense international geopolitical climate.

Well, in their history and evolution, the Games have always wanted to give pride of place to dialogue and offer a space where only sport and its values reign, notably by instituting the Olympic Truce.

So just what is the Olympic Truce, and how can we organise the Games and make sporting competitions a sanctuary in the current geopolitical context? To talk about this, remotely from Switzerland, Carole Gomez, Graduate Assistant in the Sociology of Sport at the University of Lausanne, and Vincent Pasquini, Head of International Cooperation for Paris 2024. Thank you for joining us.

Guests: Hello!

Nacer Zorgani: I'll start with you, Vincent. What is the Olympic Truce, then?

Vincent Pasquini: So, the Olympic Truce was established at the same time as the Olympic Games in Ancient Greece because those Games were in fact a truce in the armed conflict, transformed into a sporting competition.

The Greek gods called for a truce, and to break the truce during the Games was also to disobey the gods, so the Games were really a time to pause in the conflicts and take part, and for the athletes and spectators to be able to attend the competitions in peace.

Nacer Zorgani: I should remind those listening that back then city-states like Athens and Sparta spent their time waging war, hence the wish of the gods you mentioned, but then what happened to the Truce?

Vincent Pasquini: The Games were reinstated in 1896. As you know, the circumstances did not necessitate a truce.

History took its course, and the truce was re-established by the IOC in 1992 at the time of the war in the former Yugoslavia, because circumstances demanded it for the same reason it existed in ancient

Greece, i.e. so that athletes from ex-Yugoslavia could travel to the Barcelona Games and take part in them too.

Nacer Zorgani: And today, as regards the Games and Paris 2024, how is this Truce taking shape?

Vincent Pasquini: Since 1992, the Truce has consisted of a United Nations resolution that is voted on before each Games, calling on all the countries of the world to cease conflicts, and the Paris 2024 resolution will be voted on by the General Assembly between now and the end of the year.

Beyond that, the Truce for Games like Paris 2024 also means promoting the values of sport that bring people together, and we have a whole programme consisting of educational content for schools, and a photography exhibition that will be displayed on the railings of the Tour Saint-Jacques in April in Paris. There's a simulation of the United Nations with schoolchildren from Paris and Seine-Saint-Denis, 16 of whom have been selected to go and watch the vote at the United Nations General Assembly in New York this year. And finally, there is a fresco that has been erected in the Village, which athletes can sign to show their support for the Truce and which some volunteers will get to see.

Nacer Zorgani: Carole, what impact have world affairs had on the history of the Games in the modern era, and has the return of the Truce changed anything?

Carole Gomez: The examples that immediately spring to mind are the boycott issue and the various boycotts that have taken place over the last few decades.

There was the 1956 Games boycott in Melbourne, the 1976 Games boycott in Montreal, to condemn the presence of New Zealand, which had broken the agreement to isolate South Africa during the apartheid period, the 1980 boycott in Moscow and the 1984 boycott in Los Angeles, all of which took place against the backdrop of the Cold War.

However, with the advent of the Truce in 1992, the boycott question became less relevant, or if it arises, it is only at diplomatic level and no longer at sporting level. In other words, athletes are no longer banned, for example, from taking part in a competition, which may have been the case in previous boycotts.

Nacer Zorgani: Back in 1956, the Melbourne Games were affected by a boycott related to the Middle East, with the Suez War, and to China because of Taiwan's participation. Today, as you said, there was a diplomatic boycott by Western countries of the Beijing Winter Games in 2022. But Carole, on a positive note, have there been any rapprochements thanks to the Games and the spirit of the Truce?

Carole Gomez: I do have an example in my mind that occurred during the 2018 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games held in South Korea, which spurred a rapprochement between North and South Korea, who have theoretically been at odds since the Korean War began in 1950, and who, as part of these Games, were able to parade together under the same flag and to compete in the same women's hockey team together. And so, symbolically but also in a very tangible way, a dialogue was able to start up again.

Nacer Zorgani: Vincent, what is the current position of the sporting authorities, and indeed of Paris 2024, regarding the participation of countries at war in the Games?

Vincent Pasquini: The general objective is to preserve this space, preserve this neutral sporting space and this ideal through the Games.

So for the authorities, the difficulty lies in reconciling this desire with what is actually happening in the world.

The most well-known case at the moment is the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes. The IOC has not made a decision on their participation; it has studied the possibility of their return to certain sporting competitions under conditions of neutrality, but it has not made a decision with regard to Paris 2024.

The IPC, the International Paralympic Committee, has decided that athletes carrying Russian and Belarusian passports will be able to take part, but as neutral participants and under a certain number of conditions.

Carole Gomez: Just to add to what Vincent said, it might be interesting to look back at an initiative launched by the IOC in 2016 at the Rio Games, the Refugee Team. There is an Olympic team and now a Paralympic team of refugees, which also shows that the Olympic Movement is active in what has been called the refugee crisis, and to show that although political resolutions can take a very long time at international level, the sporting world can organise itself to try and raise awareness of a certain number of contradictions, of certain weaknesses, and that's also what the values of sport are about, to perhaps launch initiatives that can inspire other bodies in society.

Nacer Zorgani: I remember that in the podcast devoted to the delegations, Sophie Lorient, International Relations Director for Paris 2024, told us that only at the Games can you see countries at war sharing the same venues and living together in peace. With less than a year to go before the start of the Games, is it possible to conceive of that in the current geopolitical context?

Vincent Pasquini: Obviously, with the political situation and questions of participation and so on, many unforeseeable factors will have an operational impact that we'll see as we go along.

And there are several aspects to this. The first aspect is that the athletes and delegations must take part in the competitions in compliance with the rules that have been laid down, i.e. the rules of sporting competition but also the rules of political expression that have been set by the IOC, by what is known as Rule 50, which prohibits political and religious propaganda, unless of course this propaganda is in favour of reconciliation or a message of peace, which is authorised.

Beyond that, life in the Village is organised so that everyone can take part in the competitions in harmony, and it is of course desirable for all the countries to be able to coexist, and this can give rise to moments of coexistence that only take place in the Village and that cannot take place in the rest of the world.

Nacer Zorgani: Now here I'm no longer talking to you as professionals in the sociology of sport and international relations, but to sport fans, simply. Is there an anecdote that you think reveals the spirit and values that sport can embody?

Vincent Pasquini: The one that immediately springs to mind is the historic match between Iran and the United States during the 1998 Football World Cup.

It was the first time the two countries had faced each other in a sporting event. After the hostages were taken at the American embassy in Tehran in 1979, 20 years later relations were improving at the time and the two teams met under diplomatic conditions that were quite positive.

And it allowed the fans to get together. Iran won, which caused a certain amount of jubilation among the fans. It was a truly peaceful moment of communion that had a real impact and that helped to be a kind of catalyst of hope at the time for the relationship between Iran and the United States.

Carole Gomez: Two small examples that could be quite interesting, one related to the Games and one outside. There's the example of the Irish rugby team, which is unique in sport because it brings

together two different states under the same jersey: Northern Ireland, which is part of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland.

And when you consider the history of the island, it's quite remarkable to see men and women, in both the men's and women's teams, wearing the same jersey and sharing the same anthem.

And perhaps in the Olympic Games, one image that really struck me was the high jump final at the Tokyo Games, which took place in 2021. Now, admittedly there is no ongoing crisis between Italy and Qatar, but the image was extremely touching all the same: Gianmarco Tamberi and Mutaz Barshim, who are friends, by the way, who were competitors until that 2m39 attempt, and who finally, following a suggestion from the referee that they could share the gold medal, fell very naturally and quite beautifully into each other's arms, before celebrating together and with their team. In any case, it was a really lovely image of sport that we witnessed at that moment.

Nacer Zorgani: In 2024, the future volunteers will be welcoming athletes and spectators, some of whom will be potentially involved in conflict situations, including the volunteers themselves. What advice could we give them to endorse the spirit of the Truce?

Vincent Pasquini: First of all, sport is about respecting the rules, and it will be very important for volunteers to know the rules about participation and political expression in advance, which may seem trivial but which in reality can have political repercussions.

But beyond that, the most important thing will be to not lose sight of the general aspiration we've been talking about since the beginning of this podcast, which is to create a space for peaceful coexistence. And really to foster this spirit in every interaction with all participants, to hold this idea dear that the Games will be a time of peace, an opportunity for personal encounters, above all, and a period that we must make as peaceful and as joyful as possible.

Carole Gomez: To pick up on what Vincent rightly said, we also need to bear in mind that you, the volunteers, also play a role in this Olympic truce, so you should know the provisions and above all embody these elements and message and don't just be a spectator – on the contrary, we also expect you to help make this aspiration become a reality.

Nacer Zorgani: Yes, as we've often said, volunteers are the face of the Games, the ambassadors of the Games, and those who volunteer between now and the end of the year will also become the Games' ambassadors of peace.

Thank you very much, Vincent. Thank you very much for being with us, Carole. And to you, the listeners, see you next time.

Guests: Thank you.