

# The horrifying human cost of big sporting events

June 26 2024, by Ofer Idels

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With the Copa América, the UEFA European Championship and the Olympic Games all taking place over a few months, summer 2024 is shaping up to be a celebration of sport.

However, many modern sporting events have been held in countries with appalling human rights records, with little pushback from fans, broadcasters or governments. In a world where celebrities are held to high moral standards—and face consequences for falling short—this inconsistency is striking.

[My historical research](#) focuses on this troubling issue, aiming to understand why sport often evades the scrutiny we so readily apply to other events and individuals.

## **Qatar 2022: One worker dead per minute of football**

For years before its first match began, the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar was [marred by accusations](#) of sportswashing, environmental damage, exorbitant costs, and most critically, severe human rights abuses—including the country's treatment of women, the LGBTQ+ community and [migrant workers](#).

Among these [widely reported allegations](#) was one especially harrowing statistic: [over 6,500 migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh died](#) while building hotels and stadiums in preparation for the 2022 World Cup. This means that each minute of football played at the tournament equated to the loss of one human life.

While the Qatari government put the death toll far lower, at 47, these abuses were no secret in the run-up to the event. Still, they had little impact on [public opinion](#)—in the weeks leading up to the tournament, fans were more concerned about how the winter timetable would affect the regular football season, or their ability to [consume alcohol](#) in a Muslim country.

[Calls for a boycott](#) failed to catch on, and the event went on to garner high ratings, with one [BBC poll](#) even declaring it the best World Cup of

the century.

Greed and corruption are obvious explanations for how this was allowed to happen. There is substantial evidence of [corruption](#) within both FIFA and Qatar, particularly regarding the [bidding process for the games](#).

Reports also indicate that some [fans were paid](#) by the host to sing and chant on command, and celebrities were [paid](#) huge amounts to attend and endorse the event, thereby whitewashing Qatar's human rights record.

Such blatant displays of greed are not always met with apathy. In 2021, for example, the attempt to form the European Super League faced [widespread, vehement criticism](#) from fans, [football players](#), managers, and politicians, and the multi-million dollar venture was swiftly axed as a result.

## **The unique, irrational appeal of modern sports**

Objectively speaking, Qatar's human rights abuses are unforgivable. However, humanity's fascination with sport is emotional rather than rational, meaning it is extremely difficult to analyze or explain from an objective point of view.

It is therefore worth [considering how organizers addressed human rights concerns in the run-up to the 2022 World Cup](#). Shortly before its opening, FIFA President Gianni Infantino and Secretary General Fatma Samoura [wrote the following](#) in a letter to competing teams:

"Please, let's now focus on the football! We know football does not live in a vacuum and we are equally aware that there are many challenges and difficulties of a political nature all around the world. But please do not allow football to be dragged into every ideological or political battle that

exists."

Such a statement may seem cynical and calculated, but it reflects a widespread perception that modern sports are pure, universal and [autotelic](#)—meaning an activity in and of itself, rather than a means to an end. This is often expressed in claims like "sport is art," or that sports should be separate from politics.

Sport's appeal for both participants and spectators therefore lies in its immediacy, and its ability to unify people into an authentic experience of the [here and now](#). The men and women on the field are much more than sweaty people wearing shorts and kicking a ball—to spectators they are heroes of pure beauty.

This might help us understand the strikingly and paradoxically different responses to the 2022 World Cup and the Super League. The Super League aimed to usurp the traditional structure of football to benefit big clubs over small ones, but it was perceived as a greedy affront to the purity of sport. However, fans may have been able to accept the death toll of the Qatar World Cup as a necessary sacrifice to preserve the universal, binding power of modern sport.

## **The 1936 'Nazi Olympics'**

The pivotal moment in shaping our modern sporting ethos was the [1936 Olympics in Berlin](#), also known as the Nazi Olympics. The controversial event ignited a widespread [boycott movement](#), which argued that holding and respecting the games under a fascist and antisemitic regime would tarnish sport's purity, and vindicate the Third Reich in front of a global audience.

Nevertheless, the games went ahead, giving a powerful demonstration of sport's ability to make the world overlook unspeakable crimes.

Oppressive nations today are still following its example.

## **Toward a more ethical sporting culture**

Nearly a hundred years later, Qatar is a candidate to host [the 2036 Olympics](#). Given the [death toll](#) of the 2022 World Cup, it is likely that such an event will cost the lives of thousands more workers, and it should be met with firm resistance.

However, history teaches us that protests should not be based solely on general terms like "sportswashing" or cynical perspectives that overlook the emotional and tangible meaning that sport holds in people's lives.

As seen in the case of the Super League, sports fans are capable of fighting for the purity of the games they love, but such a fight for the soul of modern sports should not begin only after enjoying the summer tournaments. Ultimately, as sports fans, we should know that ethics often begin in the here and now.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The horrifying human cost of big sporting events (2024, June 26) retrieved 29 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-06-horrifying-human-big-sporting-events.html>

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