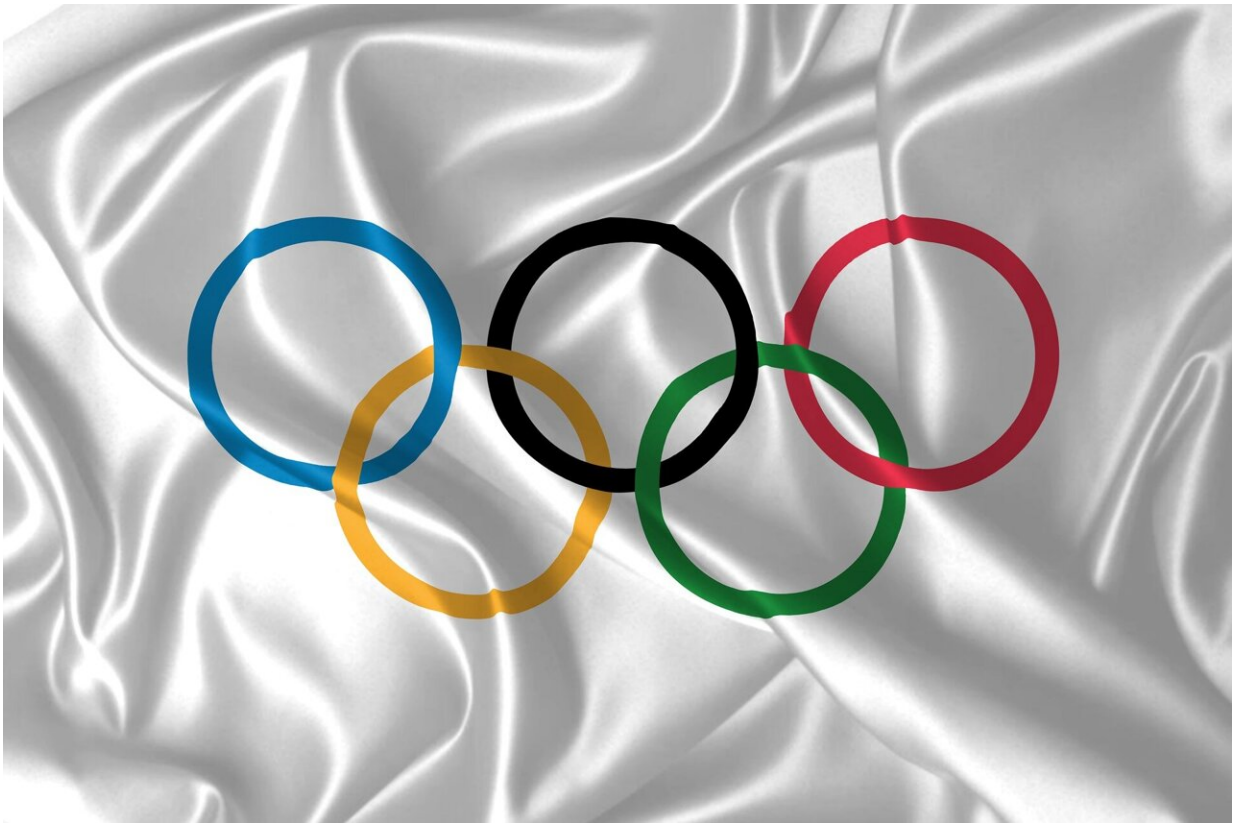


Will the 2024 Olympic Games become the playing field for social justice protests?

June 6 2024, by Sharita Forrest



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Yannick Kluch, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, studies sport as a platform for promoting social justice. Kluch has worked with the U.S. Olympic and

Paralympic Committee, U.S. Diving and the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

He spoke with research editor Sharita Forrest about the history of Olympic athletes' [social justice](#) protests and governing organizations' efforts to avert them with Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter.

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Sport Management Review*.

What was the origin of Rule 50?

A first version of Rule 50 was added to the Olympic Charter in 1955. During the Cold War, the International Olympic Committee was thinking about ways to keep politics out of sport. In my work, that's one of the key questions I look at. Spoiler alert: It's not possible. Sport and politics always mix.

The IOC views the Olympics as a neutral place where everybody can come together regardless of their differences. However, the Olympics have always been mixed with politics.

Rule 50 came into the public spotlight after the 1968 Mexico City Olympics when U.S. athletes John Carlos and Tommie Smith protested by raising their fists on the podium. That's become one of the most iconic images in sports history. The backlash was intense. After that, the IOC added the terms "racial propaganda" to the rule.

Who have been the rule's greatest proponents?

A [recent study](#) I conducted looked at that question. We found that the biggest proponents are Olympic committees representing dictatorships like China and Russia. They support the notion that we shouldn't talk

about politics in sport, whereas more democratic countries such as the U.S., Germany and Canada believe the rule infringes on athletes' freedom of expression.

The IOC advocated heavily to keep the rule, although there have been some developments, especially leading up to the 2020–21 Tokyo Games. More recently, the IOC made an addition to Rule 40 that underlines athletes' right to freedom of expression. That change has important implications for any policy seeking to silence [athlete](#) protests, such as Rule 50.

What consequences are imposed on athletes who violate Rule 50?

There's a lot of inconsistency and lack of communication about the consequences.

In 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos were expelled from Team U.S.. In 2019, when Gwen Berry raised her fist at the Pan-American Games, the USOPC put her on probation.

However, the USOPC later reversed that decision as part of a comprehensive policy change that now allows Team U.S. athletes to [protest](#) at USOPC-sanctioned events.

In Tokyo in 2021, when Raven Saunders raised her arms on the podium in protest, initially the IOC wanted sanctions, but Raven's mother died a couple days later so the IOC chose not to impose any.

There were other protests at the Tokyo Games that revealed an inconsistent stance. For example, the IOC allowed a German athlete to wear a rainbow armband in support of LGBTQ+ people during

competition—which would usually be a clear violation.

Are there indications that the IOC is becoming more tolerant of athletes' protests?

The IOC's response to the 2020–21 protestors was very different compared with 1968 and hints that things are changing somewhat.

Generally, the IOC portrays itself as more tolerant, but there is little evidence that policies have changed. The IOC issued a consultation request in 2019 inviting athletes, experts and the national committees to weigh in on Rule 50—but it remains intact.

However, we had historic changes on the U.S. side. The U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee created the inaugural Team U.S. Council on Racial and Social Justice, bringing together over 40 Team U.S. athletes, alumni, national governing body representatives and external experts. I was one of the four experts.

The Council released recommendations saying that Rule 50 infringes on athletes' freedom of expression because it's not compatible with the major human rights frameworks in sport and international relations.

About two days later, the USOPC Board of Directors announced they would no longer punish athletes for peaceful protests. This was a complete 180-degree reversal. Just two years before, they had sanctioned athletes Gwen Berry and Race Imboden, but the council's recommendation led them to lift those sanctions.

Do you foresee similar protests from U.S. athletes at the 2024 Summer Games?

Four years ago, I would have said yes because there was a lot of conversation on racial and social justice globally. Support for athletes utilizing their platforms for social good was at an all-time high.

Leading up to the Paris Games and this next decade of sport mega-events, I am a little worried that the protest momentum has fizzled out. Four years ago, I got a lot of inquiries from national governing bodies about how to manage protests. But it's been quiet, so I don't anticipate as many.

Still, there are many issues worth speaking up about right now—including systemic racism affecting athletes globally and the treatment of LGBTQ+ people. We have some great Olympic and Paralympic athlete leaders advancing social justice, so hopefully we'll see some discourse surrounding these topics.

More information: Yannick Kluch et al, How does a "neutral" rule become a systemic barrier to racial justice? Human rights activism, International Olympic Committee Rule 50, and the neutrality myth in racialized organizations, *Sport Management Review* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/14413523.2024.2341159](https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2024.2341159)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Will the 2024 Olympic Games become the playing field for social justice protests? (2024, June 6) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-06-olympic-games-playing-field-social.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.