New research explores how the Olympic Games have shaped New Zealand identity

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Credit: Victoria University of Wellington

Politics and sport have always fascinated Victoria University of Wellington graduate Micheal Warren, who is graduating with a Ph.D. in Political Science this week—and his doctoral research provided an opportunity to combine the two.

Micheal's thesis explored the contribution New Zealand's participation in

the Olympic Games has made to national identity to better understand the role the world's largest sporting event has had in shaping New Zealand society.

As part of his research, Micheal conducted around 30 interviews with New Zealand Olympians—from the 1960s to the 2016 Rio Olympics—as well as former Minsters of Sport and members of the New Zealand broadcast media who have commentated the Olympics.

Micheal says his interest in the Olympics started at a young age. "I remember as a nine-year-old in 1996 watching the Atlanta Olympic Games, seeing Danyon Loader winning gold and thinking 'this is pretty cool—here we are competing on the world stage and winning'."

While rugby arguably dominates the national conversation about New Zealand's sporting success, Micheal says it's our participation in the Olympic Games that reflects something unique about the New Zealand psyche.

"If you think about the way New Zealanders often characterise themselves—punching above our weight, Kiwi ingenuity, the underdog—when you think about the Olympics, those phrases that we grow up with really apply. In a way, our Olympic participation epitomises what it means to be a New Zealander."

He gives the example of Peter Snell winning gold in the 800 metres in Rome in 1960. "He was ranked only 25th or 26th in the world at the time—no one expected him to make the final, let alone win the gold medal.

"If you go through our history and look at some of the big sporting moments for New Zealand, they often happened at the Olympics. We hear about rugby as a cornerstone of our national identity, but New

Zealanders' relationship with the Olympics more accurately represents and defines a sense of New Zealand identity."

The 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo will mark 100 years since New Zealand sent its first independent team, and Micheal says a lot has changed in that time, including the professionalisation of sport.

He notes that a lot more funding has gone into high-performance sport since the 2000 Sydney Olympics, when New Zealand didn't perform as well as expected.

"By 2000 the world had moved on and New Zealand hadn't caught up. Government support for high-performance sport since then really has led to better results and performance."

Micheal says another aspect that has changed over time is the sense of cultural identity of our Olympians. New Zealand first sent athletes to the Olympics in 1908 as part of an Australasian team, and it wasn't until the Munich Olympics in 1972 that New Zealand's national anthem God Defend New Zealand was played at medal ceremonies instead of God Save the Queen.

As New Zealand became more multicultural, this shift was reflected in our Olympic teams. Micheal says that following the 2000 Olympics, the New Zealand Olympic Committee developed an initiative called 'One Team, One Spirit' in partnership with Ngāi Tahu that highlighted New Zealand's unique cultural identity.

"The sense of cultural identity that New Zealand athletes go away with is much stronger now, and is probably the most developed out of anywhere in the world. It's reflective of a more multicultural and inclusive New Zealand—a New Zealand that arguably became more independent over the course of the 20th century and found its place in the world."

Micheal says while the Olympic Games are a powerful platform for countries to showcase themselves, they can also be used as a political tool.

"It was really interesting to look at the relationship between politics and sport—at an academic level in New Zealand, it's all focused on rugby and the Springbok tour of 1981, and yet there's such a huge intersection between politics and our Olympic participation."

Micheal points to the African boycott of the Montreal Olympics in 1976 as an example. At the time, the All Black tour of apartheid-era South Africa had caused international controversy, and many African nations asked for New Zealand to be suspended from the Olympics.

"New Zealanders really were pariahs—we like to think of ourselves as a good honest broker on the world stage, but here we were in 1976 at the centre of a political situation that led to a boycott by a large majority of the African continent."

Micheal notes that as part of his research he spoke to some New Zealand commentators who were present at that Olympics and told people during the Games they were Australian.

"I personally can't think of any other time when a New Zealander travelling overseas would say they were Australian, because New Zealand has a pretty good reputation globally."

While many New Zealanders still avidly watch the Olympics, Micheal says research shows interest in the Games among younger New Zealanders is waning.

He says the New Zealand Olympic Committee has made efforts to boost interest through initiatives like Olympic ambassadors in schools and

having a greater digital profile on social media, but changes to the way the Olympics are broadcast in New Zealand create further challenges.

"Now that it's gone to Sky TV and the Olympic Broadcast Service, there's a lack of the New Zealand story being told in Olympic broadcasts. Our commentators used to tell our history, but we're losing that context.

"If it's not coming through the broadcasts, who's going to tell New Zealanders the story of our rich Olympic history? That's a real concern—that those stories could be lost."

Micheal says another issue is the lack of Olympic and sporting history in our museums.

"If you walk through Te Papa for example—where's our sporting history? I applaud Te Papa for showcasing Peter Snell's boots and Olympic medals, but they were only on display for a short time.

"If the Government is keen to promote our national identity, then surely our sporting history should play some part in that."

More information: Politics and Sport don't mix – or do they? National Identity and New Zealand's Participation in the Olympic Games. hdl.handle.net/10063/7630

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