



'Generation X Games', Action Sports and the Olympic Movement: Understanding the Cultural Politics of Incorporation

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Abstract

An important and mounting issue for the contemporary Olympic Movement is how to remain relevant to younger generations. Cognizant of the diminishing numbers of youth viewers, and the growing success of the X Games – the 'Olympics' of action sport – the International Olympic Committee (IOC) set about adding a selection of youth-oriented action sports into the Olympic program. In this article we offer the first in-depth discussion of the cultural politics of action sports Olympic incorporation via case studies of windsurfing, snowboarding, and bicycle motocross (BMX). Adopting a post-subcultural theoretical approach, our analysis reveals that the incorporation process, and forms of (sub)cultural contestation, is in each case unique, based on a complex and shifting set of intra- and inter-politics between key agents, namely the IOC and associated sporting bodies, media conglomerates, and the action sport cultures and industries. In so doing, our article illustrates some of the complex power struggles involved in modernizing the Olympic Games in the 21st century.

Keywords

action sports, cultural politics, incorporation, Olympic Games, youth culture

The historical centrality of the Olympics in 'the rise and spread of international sport' is beyond doubt (Tomlinson, 2005: 48) and, undeniably, for many it remains the 'world's

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greatest sporting spectacle' (Payne, 2005: para. 2). Yet, claims about its impact on the wider sportscape, and what Kellner (1995) calls the 'global popular', may well be overstated, particularly for younger audiences. The 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, for example, saw a 50 per cent reduction in 18 to 34-year-old male viewers (Simpson, 2002). Thus, in this article we address one of the 'crises' (Bale and Christensen, 2004) facing the Olympic Movement in the early 21st century; that is, how to remain relevant for contemporary youth.

Explanations for the waning youth audience include the ever-growing range of options for non-sport-related leisure participation and consumption (Bairner, 2009), and the growing popularity of other mega-sports events (e.g. Football World Cup, the Asian Games, the X Games; see Cashman, 2004). Patterns in contemporary youth's sport participation are also noteworthy, with recent reports suggesting that western youth's interest in many traditional, institutionalized sports, which constitute the core of the Olympic program, is waning (Active Marketing Group, 2007). Conversely, non-institutionalized informal sport activities generally, and action sports specifically (c.f. Booth and Thorpe, 2007; Wheaton, 2010), are gaining popularity in many western and some eastern (e.g. China, Japan, South Korea) countries (Thorpe, 2008).

Cognizant of the diminishing numbers of young Olympic viewers, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is making various efforts to appeal to younger audiences; such as launching the inaugural Youth Olympic Games (Singapore 2010), and incorporating a range of youth-driven action sports into the Olympic program (i.e. windsurfing [1984], mountain biking [1996], snowboarding [1998], BMX [2000]). However, the marriage between 'alternative' action sports and the Olympics has not been straightforward. Reflecting action sports' counter-cultural heritage,¹ many participants continue to view these activities as alternative *lifestyles* rather than as *sports* (Wheaton, 2004), and celebrate value systems that are often incompatible with the disciplinary, hierarchical, nationalistic Olympic regime (see Thorpe and Wheaton, in press). For example, in response to newspaper headlines proclaiming that 'skateboarding could make its Olympic debut at the 2012 London Games' as a wheel-based activity under the cycling discipline (Peck and agencies, 2007), thousands of skateboarders from across the world responded by signing an online petition addressed to the IOC president entitled 'No Skateboarding in the Olympics'. The petition underscored that 'Skateboarding is not a sport' and 'we do not want skateboarding exploited and transformed to fit into the Olympic program' (The Petition, 2010: para. 1). However, research examining the cultural politics surrounding the incorporation of action sports into the Olympic program, or the success of these strategies for attracting the highly lucrative (North American-focused) youth consumer market, has been extremely limited.

Here we offer the first exploration of the incorporation of action sports into the Olympic program. Drawing on media reports, personal interviews, and our long-standing and ongoing involvement in action sports as participants, journalists, and researchers, we describe the inclusion of action sports into the Olympic program as a highly complex and contested process interwoven with various context-specific social, cultural, political, and economic factors. Building on post-subcultural studies research in youth, music, and style cultures (e.g. Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003), and particularly action sports literature (e.g. Edwards and Corte, 2010; Rinehart, 2008; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2004,

2007; Wheaton and Beal, 2003), we explain how the market-driven search for younger viewers has led to complex power struggles between key agents – the IOC and associated sporting bodies, media conglomerates (e.g. NBC), and the action sport cultures and industries. To help reveal some of the nuanced micro- and macro-political relationships between these agents, we explore the inclusion of three action sports – windsurfing, snowboarding, and BMX. We argue that to understand the complexities of the cultural politics involved in the incorporation of action sports, attention must be paid to the particularities within each specific historical conjuncture. Before presenting our case studies, we briefly describe what action sports cultures are, illustrating their increasing popularity for youth, and outlining the influence of ESPN's X Games in their global diffusion. We then outline our theoretical framework for exploring the incorporation process.

Olympic Movement Seeks 'Generation X Games'

The term 'action sports', and other related categorizations including extreme, lifestyle, and alternative sports, refers to a wide range of mostly individualized activities such as surfing, skateboarding, and free-running, which share a common ethos distinct from that of many traditional institutionalized sports (Wheaton, 2004). Many action sports gained popularity during the new leisure trends of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw many middle-class participants embodying 'counter-cultural philosophies', rejecting the 'overly rationalised, technologised, and bureaucratised' world of traditional sport, and embracing free, fun, cooperative, and individualistic activities (Donnelly, 1988: 74; also see Humphreys, 1997). While each action sport has its own specificity, history, identity, and development patterns, many also shared characteristics, including anti-establishment, individualistic and/or do-it-yourself philosophies and subcultural styles; core members saw their culture as 'different' to the traditional rule-bound, competitive, regulated western traditional institutionalized sport cultures (Wheaton, 2004).

Over the past five decades, many action sports have experienced unprecedented growth both in participation and in their increased visibility across public space. In 2003, for example, five of the top 10 most popular sports in the United States were action sports, including inline skating, skateboarding, and snowboarding (ESPN Event Media, n.d.). Recent estimates suggest more than 22 million Americans participate annually in action sports, particularly skateboarding, surfing, snowboarding, and BMX riding, with many of these participants engaging in an array of action sports, and practising on a regular basis (Active Marketing Group, 2007). While young, white, middle- and upper-class, heterosexual males often constitute a dominant force at the core of many action sport cultures, demographics are shifting, particularly on the margins of the sports, with increasing participation across different social classes and age groups, as well as females and minority groups (Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2010). With increasing popularity, however, many action sports have become highly fragmented, with enthusiasts engaging in various styles of participation, often underpinned by philosophical differences. Within the current post-Fordist capitalist system, this fragmentation supports new niche markets essential for the continued economic growth of the industry, and is facilitated by action sport-related companies and media who employ an array of creative production,

marketing, and design strategies to target market segments and accelerate turnover of fashions and styles (Humphreys, 1997; Wheaton and Beal, 2003). Central for our discussion here, however, is that cultural fragmentation has led to ideological differences among participants, and some tensions and debate in relation to processes of commercialization and incorporation.

The X Games – the self-defined ‘worldwide leader’ in action sports – is at the centre of many debates surrounding the virtues and vices of the commercialization process (Rinehart, 2008: 175). The brainchild of the cable television network ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, owned by ABC, itself a division of the Walt Disney Group), and backed by a range of transnational corporate sponsors, the X Games has played a significant role in the global diffusion and expansion of the action sport industry and culture (Rinehart, 2000). In 1995, the inaugural Summer X Games held in Rhode Island (USA) featured 27 events in nine categories ranging from bungee jumping to skateboarding.² Following the success of the summer events, ESPN staged the first winter X Games in California in 1997, drawing 38,000 spectators and televised in 198 countries and territories in 21 different languages (Pedersen and Kelly, 2000). While the emergence of the X Games prompted vociferous debate among grass-roots practitioners who contested ESPN’s co-option of their lifestyle into television-tailored ‘sports’ (Rinehart, 2008), many contemporary athletes now recognize mass-mediated events such as the X Games as endemic to action sport in the 21st century, and are embracing the new opportunities for increased media exposure, sponsorship, and celebrity offered by the X Games (Beal and Wilson, 2004). The X Games have become the ultimate forum for setting records and performing ever more technical and creative manoeuvres for international audiences. Blurring the boundaries between music festival and sporting event (Rinehart, 2008), the X Games have been hugely successful in capturing the imagination of the lucrative youth market.³ Indeed, globally, 63 million people watched the 2002 X Games; in contrast to the aging Olympic viewership, the medium age of these viewers was 20 years (ESPN Event Media, n.d.).

The growing success of the X Games and the diminishing numbers of young Olympic viewers prompted the IOC to pursue the incorporation of a range of youth-oriented sports into both the summer (i.e. windsurfing, mountain biking, bicycle motocross) and winter (i.e. snowboarding, skier cross) programs (Bialik, 2002). To further appeal to younger viewers, the IOC and some affiliated media conglomerates also began to draw heavily on the representational styles developed by the X Games. For example, the NBC made a strategic effort to reframe the 2002 Winter Olympics as ‘Fear Factor on snow and ice’ emphasizing ‘speed, risk and edginess’ (Dick Ebersol, NBC Sports president, cited in Simpson, 2002: para. 12). More recently, action sport events at the 2010 Winter Olympics included live graffiti art displays, break-dancers performing in the stands, and DJs and bands during breaks in competition (field-notes, February 2010). Commentators attributed the success of the Vancouver Olympics to the ‘jazzed-up formats’ of some events (e.g. half-pipe and snowboard- and ski-cross) which, drawing on the ‘the razzmatazz and street credibility of the X Games’, transformed the ‘sometimes stuffy Olympic arena’ into a ‘party atmosphere’ (Booth, 2010: paras 3 and 11). These X Games-inspired innovations appear to have been successful, with audience figures for the 2010 Winter Olympics claiming a 48 per cent increase among 18 to 24-year-old viewers (Bauder,

2010). NBC coverage of the men's snowboard half-pipe final drew approximately 30 million viewers in the USA alone (Dillman, 2010). Recognizing the success of the strategies employed during the Vancouver Olympic Games, a spokeswoman for the London Olympic Games explained: 'the popularity of the ski and snow cross in Vancouver confirms that the way sports are staged can help capture the public imagination' (cited in Booth, 2010: para. 8). Continuing, she adds 'we are drawing up detailed marketing and sport presentation plans for 2012 for each sport to ensure that they engage and inspire ... [and] connect young people to sport' (cited in Booth, 2010: para. 8).

While the inclusion of action sports is certainly helping to modernize the Olympic Movement, as our case studies illustrate, the process of incorporation is complicated by an array of political, cultural, environmental, and ideological factors. Before exploring these processes, we briefly outline our theoretical framework for examining the Olympic incorporation of these sporting cultures.

Understanding the Politics of Incorporation: A Post-subcultural Studies Approach

Since the late 1990s, subcultural scholarship in the context of youth and style has undergone substantial revision, largely in response to criticisms of previous research (inspired) by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) tradition of subcultural research (e.g. Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003). While a review of this body of work, often referred to as post-CCCS theorizing, is beyond the scope of this article,⁴ central to our concerns here is the recognition that the CCCS's concept of resistance (as a struggle with dominant hegemonic culture) was often romanticized and misused, such that youthful leisure was over-politicized and 'the subtle relations of power play within it' were largely ignored (Thornton, 1996: 7). Additionally, the role of media and commerce in youths' cultural formations was not given systematic attention, nor an explanation provided for what occurs after the subculture becomes public or 'mainstream'. Similarly, much of the early research on the institutionalization and commercialization of action sports also tended to focus on the negative effects of these processes, seeing incorporation as a process that undermined the 'authentic' oppositional or resistant character of the 'alternative' sports (Wheaton and Beal, 2003), and typically conceptualizing commercialization as 'a top-down process of corporate exploitation and commodification' (Edwards and Corte, 2010: 1137). As Giulianotti suggests, the CCCS approach is insufficient for 'explaining "resistant" subcultures that actively *embrace* commodification, to function as niche businesses within the sport industry' (2005: 56; also see Wheaton, 2007). In contrast, post-subcultural theorizing seeks to understand and explain the complex, shifting, and nuanced politics and power relations involved in the commercialization of youth cultures before, during, and after the group becomes incorporated into the mainstream. In the remainder of this article we draw on this approach to examine the intra- and inter-cultural politics involved in the processes of incorporating windsurfing, snowboarding, and BMX, respectively.⁵ Here, intra-cultural politics refers to the dynamics between individuals and groups within each action sport culture, whereas inter-cultural politics relates to the power relations *between* social groups and agencies

such as the IOC, sporting organizations, media conglomerates (like NBC), and the action sport cultures and industries. Drawing on post-CCCS methodological approaches (see Muggleton, 2005), our work is grounded in ethnographic methods (including interviews, participant observation, documentary analysis; see Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2007), as well as critical analysis of the trends in participation, representation, and consumption across the broader action sport culture at various stages during the processes of incorporation.

An Olympic First: Windsurfing Enters the 1984 Summer Games

Originating during the mid-1960s, boardsailing, or windsurfing as it has become known, is a hybrid sport drawing on technologies and styles adapted from boat-sailing and surfing. By the 1980s windsurfing was recognized as Europe's fastest growing sport (Turner, 1983), and was thus appealing for the IOC. Windsurfing was fast-tracked in the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles as a new Olympic 'boat' in the yachting regatta; a women's division was introduced in 1992. Many members of the yachting fraternity, however, did not welcome these new additions to its program. According to three-time Olympic windsurf medallist, Barbara Kendall, the old guard of yachting saw it as 'too radical' and 'didn't understand or want anything to do with us' (interview, March 2010). Few attempts were made to accommodate the unique cultural values or ideologies, or physical requirements, of windsurfers. At this particular historical juncture – long before extreme sports captured the imagination of mainstream audiences – windsurfers entering the Games were largely unaware of their (potential) commodity value for the Olympic Movement, and as such struggled to negotiate space and exercise their agency within the Olympic model.

Ultimately, windsurfing did not have a profound impact on the Olympic Games. First, the format for Olympic windsurfing is course-racing rather than the more popular, spectacular, and media-friendly activities of wave sailing and freestyle preferred by many participants and contemporary professional windsurfing competitors. In contrast, course-racing is not a good spectator sport, and does not make good television. Racing is conducted offshore making both live spectatorship and filming difficult. Indeed, even for those who understand the tactics, it can be hard to identify who is winning. Second, strict rules regarding the technological developments and equipment which can be used in competition (e.g. all crafts for Olympic yachting fleets must be identical) made the Olympic windsurfing events seem archaic in comparison to most forms of participation. While the equipment has changed several times since the sports Olympic debut, in comparison to professional windsurfing and the windsurfing industry more widely, Olympic changes have been painfully slow. As Kendall explained, 'the rules and regulations' imposed on the Olympic class 'disabled the performance of the board', such that it was unpopular with racers and recreational windsurfers alike (interview, March 2010).

In contrast to Olympic windsurfing events, the most popular and highly valued forms of windsurfing (e.g. wave sailing, freestyle) focus on the more aesthetic, creative, and spectacular aspects of the sport. Paradoxically then, the development of Olympic windsurfing did not represent a threat to the sport or its subcultural ethos. Rather, the Olympic windsurfers were marginalized within the broader windsurfing culture, and subsumed within the sport of sailing, perceived to be old fashioned, traditional, and elitist. Despite

attempts by both Olympic windsurfers and members of the industry to modernize the equipment, and make the sport more exciting and attractive for competitors from the Professional Windsurfing Association (PWA) tour (many of whom ~~are~~ the sport's main celebrities and ambassadors), Olympic windsurfing did not gain ~~the~~ support of either core windsurfers or mainstream viewers. Olympic windsurfing did, however, gradually gain support within the yachting governing bodies and the IOC, based on its credentials as the most democratic, youthful, exciting, and athletic form of sailing (International Windsurfing Association, 2003).

Action sport cultures are dynamic and in a constant state of flux; to remain relevant to participants and younger viewers, sporting organizations and media agencies must remain flexible to accommodate quickly changing styles and technologies. When windsurfing was incorporated into the Games in the 1980s it was characterized as a youthful and 'extreme' sport, but, by the early 21st century, Olympic-style windsurfing was a lack-lustre, marginalized form, attracting little interest from either the windsurfing culture or mainstream media. Thus, in an effort to revamp Olympic sailing, the organizing committee for the Brazil Olympics are considering including kite-surfing in the 2016 sailing regatta (Sail-World, 2009). Kite-surfing is a newer, high-adrenalin sport that is more affordable and accessible than windsurfing, and is rapidly gaining popularity, particularly among a younger demographic. According to Michael Gebhardt, US Olympic windsurfing medallist and member of the International Kiteboarding Association [IKA] Olympic Commission, kite-surfing has the 'potential to be a better spectator sport than other sailing events'; 'it perfectly suits the IOC strategy; it is the best performing of all sailing classes, offers equal opportunities for any kind of athlete, and is affordable and transportable [and] media attractive' (Sail-World, 2009: para. 5). Kendall, the (former) Oceanic IOC windsurfing representative, also welcomes this initiative, recognizing that participation has been declining since windsurfing's consumer peak (in the late 1980s/early 1990s), with some enthusiasts 'diversifying' into kite-surfing; 'I totally agree with keeping up with what the world is doing ... and that's what they have got to do to keep the Olympics ... relevant for young people' (interview, March 2010).

Contemporary windsurfing and kite-surfing cultures encompass a range of sub-groups, each embodying different values and styles of participation, and different views in relation to the inclusion of their sports to the Olympic Games. Yet, reflecting trends observed in other contemporary 'post subcultural' youth and sport culture research (Beal and Wilson, 2004; Rinehart, 2008), many participants do not see the inclusion of their sports in the Olympic Games as a form of 'selling-out', but rather as offering further opportunities for participation and consumption within an already highly fragmented culture and industry. Nonetheless, most committed participants are aware that the Olympic Games are not the milieu where the most progressive manoeuvres, innovative technologies, and latest styles develop, and thus prefer alternative forums for performing, producing, and consuming their sport.

After the inclusion of windsurfing, the IOC continued to look elsewhere for other action sports that would appeal to younger audiences and new niche markets; mountain biking and canoe slalom (white-water kayaking) events were both added to the Summer Olympic program in 1996. However, it has been the inclusion of action sports in the Winter Olympics, particularly snowboarding, that has been most successful in attracting younger audiences.

Nagano and Beyond: Snowboarding and the Winter Olympics

Snowboarding, as we understand the activity today, emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in North America. In contrast to skiing, which was an expensive and bourgeois sport framed by a strong set of rules of conduct, the early snowboarders 'embodied freedom, hedonism and irresponsibility' (Humphreys, 1997: 9). Terje Haakonsen, a snowboarder of legendary status, best captured the counter-cultural ideology among early boarders when he described snowboarding as about making 'fresh tracks and carving powder and being yourself' rather than 'nationalism and politics and big money' (cited in Lidz, 1997: 114). During the mid-1990s, however, television and corporate sponsors identified the potential in snowboarding as a way to tap into the highly elusive young-male market. Mainstream companies quickly began appropriating the alternative, hedonistic, and youthful image of the snowboarder to sell products ranging from chewing gum to vehicles (Humphreys, 2003; Thorpe, 2006). Transnational events such as the X Games and Gravity Games also exposed snowboarding to new audiences, such that the activity attracted an influx of participants from around the world, and became America's fastest growing sport (Natives, 2002). During this period, the snowboarding market flourished, rapidly developing from a medley of backyard businesses to a global industry worth US\$750 million (Lane, 1995).

Recognizing the rapid growth of the sport, and the huge success of snowboarding in the X Games, the IOC decided to include snowboarding in the 1998 Winter Olympic program as a discipline of skiing and under the governance of the International Ski Federation (FIS). The IOC's decision to include snowboarding under the FIS rather than the International Snowboard Federation (ISF) infuriated many snowboarders (Humphreys, 2003). Haakonsen, the world's best half-pipe rider at the time, was particularly vocal in his criticism of the IOC's lack of understanding of snowboarding's history and consideration of snowboarders' needs. Protesting against snowboarders being turned into 'uniform-wearing, flag-bearing, walking logo[s]', Haakonsen refused to participate in the Games (Mellgren, 1998: para. 8). Other snowboarders expressed similar sentiments: 'Snowboarding is great because it's so different from other sports. Now it will get too serious, training, competing, working out in gyms ... snowboarding isn't like that' (Cara Beth Burnside, cited in Howe, 1998: 151). Some boarders embraced these changes, and proclaimed to be 'looking forward to the Olympics as the ultimate forum that would legitimize the sport', but many others 'didn't give a damn about the Olympics because it reeked of skiing – a stuffy by-the-books sport with an attitude that was the kiss of death for snowboarding's irreverent spirit' (Richards, 2003: 135).

Incorporation continued regardless of conflicting philosophies and boarders' contrasting viewpoints. But, when snowboarding finally debuted at the 1998 Winter Olympic Games, it was treated as a 'side show' event and athletes were largely perceived as 'intruders'. As one reporter explained, '[snowboarders] are the official curiosity of the Nagano Winter Games. They're totally new to the Olympics. They look different, they sound different, they are different' (Wilbon, 1998: A01). Snowboarding was further shrouded in controversy when Ross Rebagliati, the first Olympic snowboarding gold medallist, tested positive for marijuana, grabbing headlines around the world (Humphreys, 2003). While the scandal was the source of much humour, it also reconfirmed

snowboarding culture's anti-authoritarian and counter-cultural roots, and offered support for arguments – from snowboarders as well as many mainstream commentators – that snowboarding was not ready, or suitable, to become an Olympic sport. The IOC and television networks responded by cancelling much of the previously programmed coverage of snowboarding events.

Over the next four years, snowboarding became increasingly institutionalized and professional, and the IOC, FIS, and television agencies set about developing more effective strategies for representing snowboarding events and athletes, such that the coverage of snowboarding at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City (USA) was deemed a resounding success. According to a Leisure Trends survey, 32 per cent (nearly 92 million people) of the United States population watched the 2002 Olympic snowboarding half-pipe competition in which Americans won gold, silver, and bronze in the men's event (the first US winter Olympic medal sweep since 1956) and gold in the women's event (K5.com, 2004). A report released by the NBC after the 2002 Games revealed a 23 per cent increase in ratings among 18 to 34-year-old viewers (Berra, 2006). More recently, US snowboarder Shaun White was identified as one of the 'most popular' and 'recognizable' athletes attending the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver (Olsen, 2010). According to Ste'en Webster, assistant head judge for the half-pipe events at the 2002 and 2010 Winter Olympics:

It was pretty clear at the Vancouver Olympics, more so than ever before, how much of a draw card snowboarding is for pulling the numbers (viewers); Snowboarding brings viewers to the Olympics, and credibility with the youth culture of today – something I believe the Olympics has been struggling to maintain. (interview, March 2010)

In contrast to snowboarders from earlier generations (e.g. Haakonsen), many contemporary Olympic snowboarders embrace the new opportunities for increased media exposure and celebrity offered by the Games. In so doing, some Olympic snowboarders have achieved celebrity status, attracting lucrative and wide-ranging corporate sponsorship with some earning seven-figure salaries, representing the most highly paid athletes in the Winter Games (Settimi, 2010). While some snowboarders lament such trends, there seems to be a general agreement among many contemporary Olympic snowboarders and industry members that the relationship between snowboarding and the Olympics is a mutually beneficial one, particularly during the economic downturn (Lewis, 2010). Many snowboarders, however, remain adamant that the Olympics 'need snowboarding more than snowboarding needs the Olympics' (Todd Richards, cited in Lipton, 2010: para. 2).

The marriage between the Olympic Movement and snowboarding remains highly tenuous and based on compromise by both parties. Despite the increasing professionalism at the elite level, residual traces of snowboarding's counter-cultural past remain. The unique ideologies and value systems celebrated within snowboarding culture sometimes lead to 'cultural clashes' with the disciplinary, hierarchical, nationalistic Olympic regime. For example, when US snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis fell near the end of the boarder-cross course in the 2006 Olympic final in Torino (Italy), the mass media pounced on her, demanding an explanation for why she would willingly risk a certain gold medal by performing a showy stunt in the final stages of the race (Thorpe,

2009). Jacobellis' explanation – 'I was having fun. Snowboarding is fun. I wanted to share my enthusiasm with the crowd' (cited in Jenkins, 2006: para. 18) – was interpreted differently by mainstream American audiences and her snowboarding peers. According to the *New York Times*, Jacobellis 'symbolises *Generation X Games*, the dudes and dudettes more interested in styling than winning' (Araton, 2006: para. 2, emphasis added). Many commentators and members of the American public, however, perceived 'having fun' and 'styling it' to be incompatible with Olympic ideals; as *Chicago Tribune* columnist Rick Morrissey wrote: 'It probably would be a good thing if somebody explained to the snowboarders that once they decided to sit at the adults' table, they made the tacit agreement to play to win' (cited in NBC Sports, 2006: para. 15). Many snowboarders, including other medallists, empathized with Jacobellis, celebrating such behaviour as evidence of the sports' continued connection with its counter-cultural and anti-authoritarian roots. As this example suggests, despite the rapid institutionalization, professionalism, and commercialization of action sports, many participants continue to privilege fun, friendship, and creative expression (e.g. style) over winning, ruthless individualism, and conformity. The irony here, is that while such values appear contradictory to contemporary discourses of Olympic achievement – i.e. faster, stronger, higher (Bale and Christensen, 2004) – the emphasis of some (not all) action sport athletes on participation and personal achievement over winning echoes sentiments endorsed in the original Olympic charter such as global and democratic participation, and international cooperation (Thorpe and Wheaton, in press).

This analysis of snowboarding supports recent post-CCCS calls for research that examines the various forms of cultural contestation and agency even after a subculture has embraced commercialization and been popularized (e.g. Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003). Twelve years after the inclusion of snowboarding in the Olympic program, snowboarders continue to adapt and change, contesting cultural meanings, spaces, and identities from within mainstream Olympic, corporate, and media structures. It appears that contemporary snowboarders are not simply victims to the IOC's processes of incorporation, but active agents who recognize their value and unique contributions to the Olympic Games, and continue to negotiate new space *within* the Olympic Movement. While the IOC continues to hold strong on some rules and regulations (e.g. no stickers on snowboards, no large corporate logos on clothing or equipment), as Olympic snowboarding events draw growing numbers of viewers and spectators, the Committee seems increasingly willing to provide space for snowboarders' expressions of creativity and individuality. For example, snowboarders can now self-select songs to be played during their half-pipe run. Some athletes are also defining clothing styles more consistent with snowboarding cultural aesthetics. As an athlete attending the 1998 Winter Olympics, US snowboarder Todd Richards complained that the uniform was 'sooo not snowboarding' and the compulsory 'cowboy hat' made him feel ridiculous' (2003: 205). In contrast to Richards who had little room to negotiate, the 2010 US Olympic snowboard-cross team refused to wear the official competition outfit, opting instead for the waterproof blue jeans allocated to the training uniform: 'Snowboarding is the cool factor, that's what the sport is all about, so why not embellish it to its limit. To wear jeans in the Olympics? I don't think you can get any cooler than that. [So] we told 'em "we're wearing these jeans, and there's nothing you can say

about it” (cited in Graves, 2010: para. 4). The blue jeans featured on the podium days later, and quickly became a hot commodity sought by snowboarders around the world. While the strategies employed by many current snowboarders tend to be more subtle, individualistic, and less political than those of previous generations (e.g. Haakonsen), they point to shifting power relations in the Olympic Movement.

Inclusion in the Olympic program has certainly exposed snowboarding to global audiences and prompted economic growth in the sport and industry. Recognizing the value of such events for the broader snow-sports economy, the FIS recently proposed the addition of three new freestyle-focused events – snowboard and ski slope-style, and ski half-pipe – into the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi (Russia); in October 2010, the IOC Executive Board announced that it was ‘looking favourably’ on this proposal. The inclusion of snowboarding into the Olympic program has greatly facilitated the IOC’s goals of modernizing the Winter Games, and making the Olympics relevant to younger generations. In so doing, it has helped create new space for action sports in both the winter (e.g. freestyle skiing) and summer Games (e.g. BMX).

‘Olympic Cycling Needed Some Pizzazz’: BMX Debuts in Beijing

Emerging in the late 1960s in California, the early bicycle motocross (BMX) participants were mostly children and teenage boys who, inspired by the popularization of motocross (racing motorcycles on dirt trails), modified their bicycles, and built tracks. As a relatively cheap and accessible activity, the sport quickly gained popularity among groups of youths around the world, particularly North America, Europe, and Australia (Edwards and Corte, 2010; Nelson, 2007). BMX was fully integrated into the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) in January 1993, and two years later featured in the first Extreme Games (later renamed the X Games). The contemporary Summer X Games program includes a number of BMX events, including big air, vert, and street, in which internationally acclaimed riders perform spectacular stunts and gravity-defying manoeuvres on various obstacles (e.g. half-pipes, jumps, rails, and stairs).

Acknowledging the success of BMX at the X Games, and the ease at which the racing event could be incorporated in the Olympic program, the IOC announced in 2003 that BMX racing would become a medal event at the 2008 Games in Beijing (China). The process was initiated by the former UCI president, Hein Verbruggen, who offered to drop two existing track events – the kilo[meter] and 500m – to accommodate it. According to Johan Lindstrom, UCI BMX Sports Coordinator, ‘Olympic cycling needed some pizzazz’ and BMX had ‘all the right elements’: ‘it can be performed in an arena, it’s fast and short, both men and women can do it, and the concept is something a general audience would understand and enjoy looking at’ (cited in Ruibal, 2008: para. 8). While many grass-roots cyclists were disappointed and petitioned against the decision, some recognized the political factors underpinning the IOC and host-nation’s decision. British Olympic cycling champion Chris Hoy, for example, accepted the decision to drop two cycling events based on the understanding that ‘China supplies 90% of the world’s BMX bikes’ and that ‘it’s a youth sport, which they like to have in the Games’ (2008: para. 2). With declining BMX participation rates and meagre industry growth, many participants and industry members welcomed the exposure and visibility offered via the Olympics.

'Racing has been a bit dormant for a while ... racing in the Olympics ... can only benefit our sport as a whole' proclaimed one industry member (Chad DeGroot, cited in Fat Tony, 2008: para. 7).

Attempting to target younger viewers and make the event exciting and accessible for mainstream audiences, BMX racing was touted as 'NASCAR on two wheels' (cited in Ruibal, 2008: para. 1). To ensure spectacular footage, an especially large and demanding course was designed (Ruibal, 2008). Recognizing the potential of BMX for reaching younger Olympic audiences, NBC supported the decision to 'beef up' the course, even offering to trial the larger course in their Action Sports Tour (later renamed the Dew Tour) in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics. The involvement of NBC in the development of the Olympic BMX racing course is illustrative of the increasingly interwoven and complex relationships between the IOC and media organizations. The inclusion of BMX in the Beijing Olympics was widely considered a success, particularly among spectators at the event: 'It's exciting to watch ... there's a lot of carnage' exclaimed one attendee (cited in Roenigk, 2008: para. 15). Attempting to build on these successes, the UCI began making moves to include freestyle or 'park' BMX in the 2012 London Olympics. In 2009, British Cycling's performance director David Brailsford informally announced: 'the information I'm getting is I'll be performance director of street BMX so I will have to go and get my hoodie and baggie shorts' (cited in Reid, 2009: para. 3). Echoing the contestation among early generations of snowboarders, however, freestyle BMX riders were divided in opinion. Mat Hoffman, legendary rider and founder of Hoffman Sports Association, organizing body for freestyle BMX events worldwide, strongly opposed Olympic inclusion: 'We created BMX *freestyle* to do our own thing, express our own definition of sport, and to have the freedom to express this how we please; not to have our opinions sanctioned by a higher power' (cited in Fat Tony, 2008: para. 11).

Regardless of the varying opinions and intra-cultural politics among BMX athletes, participants and industry members, the decision not to include BMX freestyle in the 2012 Olympics was ultimately made by the UCI. However, as the following comments from Lindstrom reveal, this result was highly political and complicated by tensions in the cycling community (particularly track cyclists vexed by the elimination of two of their events in exchange for BMX racing), as well as by the strict rules and regulations imposed by the IOC:

In the end (September 2009), the IOC informed the UCI that they were very favourable of including BMX freestyle (Park) in the 2012 Olympic Games, although the UCI had to stay within the already set quota for athletes and medals. This left the UCI in a very difficult situation, and unfortunately it was decided that no other disciplines would be dropped. (interview, July 2010)⁶

While the IOC appeared to give the UCI power to decide the fate of Olympic BMX freestyle, it would be naive to assume that the IOC was unaware of the 'difficult situation' that such an ultimatum might create for the cycling organization as they sought to negotiate complex cultural politics between various cycling disciplines (i.e. track, mountain biking, BMX), athletes, and organizations. Ultimately, the IOC was unwilling to 'bend' the rules to facilitate the inclusion of BMX freestyle, although reports suggest that processes are in place for freestyle to make a debut at the 2016 Games in Brazil.

Action Sports and the Olympic Games: Cultural Patterns, Future Trends and Final Thoughts

The growing space for action sports within the modern Olympic Movement since the late 1990s has been facilitated by changing conditions within the broader socio-cultural and economic context, particularly the development of post-Fordist niche economies, the fracturing of the media (Harvey, 1989; Lash, 1990), and the subsequent increasing fragmentation of the global Olympic audience. With heightened competition from other mega-sports events, and changing leisure trends, the drive to explore new, small-scale markets, and new media (e.g. interactive websites, YouTube) has become fundamental to the survival of the Olympic Games. In this context, younger viewers have become an important consumer group whose cultural desires and aspirations must be catered for. Drawing inspiration from the hugely popular X Games, the IOC identified action sports as one effective vehicle to reach this lucrative, yet highly elusive, group.

However, as illustrated via the case studies of windsurfing, snowboarding, and BMX, the incorporation of alternative sporting lifestyles into the Olympic Games is a contested process, involving a range of power struggles between the IOC and governing sporting bodies, media conglomerates, and the action sports cultures and their industries. The cultural politics between and within these groups are unique, based on the distinctive history, ideologies, identities and development patterns of each action sport culture, as well as the specific historical juncture within which the incorporation processes occurred. Our research therefore supports and extends some of the conclusions drawn by post-CCCS sport cultural scholars, illustrating that inclusion does not follow a continuum from 'oppositional to co-opted' (Rinehart, 2008). Rather, contemporary action sport cultures are highly fragmented and in a constant state of flux, such that myriad types of cultural contestation are occurring, often simultaneously. In particular, the reactions to, and effects of, the inclusion of each action sport into the Olympic model are influenced by the cultural status and economic power of the action sport culture and industry during the incorporation process. Thus, the potential for action sport consumers – including participants, athletes, industry members, and viewers – to practise agency and negotiate space within the Olympic Movement is always dynamic, context-specific, and unique to each action sport culture.

Despite these contextual differences, the case studies also reveal some interesting commonalities in the way action sporting cultures, and their industries, have responded to the incorporation into the Olympic program. In their efforts to fast-track the inclusion of action sports into the Olympic program, the IOC incorporated them under existing sports with little knowledge of the unique cultural values or practical requirements of action sports participants. Windsurfing was included under the governing body of yachting; snowboarding as a discipline of skiing; and attempts continue to be made to include skateboarding as a sport under the control of the cycling federation. For many participants, such processes prompted anxiety about the IOC's motives, and the potential loss of autonomy within the Olympic structures. Snowboarding is increasingly becoming an economic force in the Winter Olympics, and some participants appear to be gaining agency (albeit limited) within the FIS, perhaps more so than windsurfers or BMX racers. However, it is difficult to assess the full extent of institutional autonomy (or constraints)

for action sport participants within these governing bodies, or the underlying motives of various agents. While inclusion has traditionally been initiated by the IOC and/or Olympic sporting bodies, with many action sport-related businesses currently struggling amid the difficult economic climate, some action sport agents and organizations are increasingly lobbying for Olympic inclusion (e.g. kite-surfing and surfing).⁷ Inevitably, the power relations between these key agents will differ considerably in this new context.

Our discussion also raised questions about the capacity of the Olympic Games to be sustained and reinvented amid the rapidly changing global sport system. While the IOC's detailed rules and strict regulations make it very slow to evolve, creating barriers for including rapidly evolving action sports or new disciplines into the program, we have seen the IOC and various sporting bodies increasingly employ an array of creative strategies in their attempts to modernize the Olympic Movement and tap into the lucrative (western) youth market. Witnessing the successful production and marketing strategies employed by other mega sporting events (e.g. the X Games) for responding to the quick-changing fashions in youth sports and popular culture, the IOC is paying closer attention to the styles favoured by youth niche markets, and seems increasingly prepared to capitalize on some of them no matter how short term or limited their influence. The Olympic committee and various Olympic sporting bodies continue to look for new action sports (e.g. kite-surfing, parkour, skateboarding, surfing) and events (e.g. freestyle BMX, ski half-pipe, snowboard and ski slope-style), and more innovative representational styles as ways to further reconnect with new generations of youth.⁸

The intention of this article, however, was not to predict the future successes (or failures) of action sports' inclusion in the Olympic program, but rather to illustrate how action sports are shifting, and are likely to continue to shift, the representation and consumption of the Olympic Games. Thus, in revealing some of the unique cultural politics involved in action sports incorporation into the Olympic program, our article also illustrates the complex power relations involved in modernizing the Olympic Games in the early 21st century.

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Notes

- 1 Our use of counter-culture here is based in the North American, rather than British, literature which tends not to distinguish counter-culture and subculture in class-based terms (see Wheaton, 2007).
- 2 New competition formats and disciplines that lend themselves to television coverage have continued to emerge.
- 3 While the Summer X Games have traditionally attracted the largest audiences, the Winter X Games continue to gain popularity; for example the 2009 Winter X Games were televised to more than 122 countries including across Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East (Gorman, 2009).

- 4 We refer interested readers to Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003), and for a discussion of the relevance of post-CCCS (and indeed post-subculture) arguments for sport cultural studies, see Wheaton (2007).
- 5 We allocate the most space to the case of snowboarding because it has had the most significant impact on the Olympic Games to date.
- 6 Another factor complicating the inclusion of BMX freestyle into the Olympic program was the highly aesthetic nature of the activity. In contrast to BMX racing, where winners are decided solely by the clock, BMX freestyle riding is highly subjective, based on a combination of technicality and amplitude of manoeuvres, and personal style, thus raising concerns regarding judging criteria. As Damkjaer (2004) has explained, the IOC tends to avoid including new sports with aesthetic components requiring unique judging criteria and audience knowledge of the sporting value system; similar observations can be made in relation to the inclusion of action sports. While creative and individualist freestyle events are the mainstay of many action sports, the IOC has traditionally opted instead for 'first past the post' format events; half-pipe snowboarding is the only exception to date.
- 7 Recognizing surfing as a key cultural driver in the action sport industry, the IOC has expressed support for the inclusion of surfing in the Olympic program, but further technological developments are necessary (e.g. affordable wave pools producing reliable and high quality waves).
- 8 Further research is required that examines the appeal of traditionally white, western action sports for young Olympic viewers from various nationalities and (trans-local) contexts, and/or considers the ways in which non-western youth are challenging these predominantly white western definitions of 'youth sport' endorsed by mega events such as the Olympics and X Games.

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