

## ***Want More Women in the Olympics? Mixed Events Aren't the Answer.***

A couple of days ago, at a conference meeting in Switzerland which even the most diehard sports fans probably neglected to mark on their calendars, the International Olympic Committee made their decision on which new events to add to the 2022 Winter Olympics.

I was excited for this meeting. The Winter Olympics are my favourite sporting event of all time. Having visited the 2018 Games in Pyeongchang, and having busted my wallet to go and see every sport on offer, I was looking forward for an impetus to go back to Beijing 2022 and see something new, something that would broaden sport's horizons for the world to see and make me enjoy breathtaking athleticism in a way I never had before. As an eighteen-year old and a firm believer in gender equality, I was also proud that the IOC had decided to focus on my demographic- in their words, they would aim to cater the Games more to the younger generation, and be more balanced in terms of men and women.

The changes to that effect for Tokyo 2020, in my opinion, were by and large great picks. They added five novel, popular sports- baseball, karate, sport climbing, surfing and skateboarding- that I'm sure would inspire many young people worldwide to follow in the footsteps of their idols as they see them compete on the biggest world stage for the first time. And, while some events were cut that I feel really needn't have been (sorry, free pistol shooters), they did iron out many of the gender disparities that existed, and are on track to have a female participation of almost half.

As such, I was confident that the Winter Games would follow the successful model of new, engaging sports, and equal opportunity as with the Summer Games in 2020. I was anticipating, perhaps, that they might add synchronized skating, a intense type of figure skating which involves anywhere up to twenty people on ice at the same time, trying to keep time to the music and each other. I wondered about other sports that had been clamouring to get into the Olympics for years now- bandy, mountaineering, ice climbing, and yes, even ski orienteering, an exceptionally fun event where you get dropped into uncharted territory and have to figure your way out, or get hopelessly lost trying. I considered whether women would finally get a Nordic Combined event- the only winter sports discipline which is still contested by men only, or be brought up to par with the men in the number of ski jumping, bobsled and luge events. As far as I was concerned, the IOC could do no wrong.

I was thus mind-boggled, to say the least, when I read the list of new events they'd decided to add. Out of the seven events, absolutely none were in a sporting discipline we hadn't seen before in some form. Nordic Combined remained a male-exclusive affair, and only one event was added that would increase the number of female events relative to men's'. Even this event, though, was called by some female bobsledders as the 'greatest practical joke of all time', as instead of women getting a four-woman bobsled like the men have, they were given a

one-woman one. As most top two-woman pilots also excel in other disciplines, the chances that this event will actually result in more women competing is slim to none, as it will probably be almost fully filled by the two-woman pilots all over again. It's just another event for the same group of athletes, really, and with women being perfectly capable of competing in four-woman, even competing alongside men in the World Cup, it seems quite an irrational choice to go the reverse route, and not increase female participation when there's such a perfect opportunity to do so.

If we take a closer look at the other events, we have men's and women's big air skiing, which are a carbon copy of the Snowboarding versions that we saw in Pyeongchang, and, once again, will use the exact same athletes from the Slopestyle skiing, which already existed in 2018. No opportunities for new female athletes there. Then we have a barrage of mixed team events: mixed team short track, mixed team ski jumping, mixed team freestyle aerials and mixed team snowboardcross. All of these events use the same athletes from the individual events, once again.

Now, if gender equality was really the primary driving force for these choices as the IOC says, I find it strange that the short-track skaters, snowboarders and freestyle skiers who already have completely equal opportunities to men were judged to require more events. Wouldn't it be better for gender equality to give that slot on the program to athletes who couldn't compete at all because of their gender? With ski jumping, it's a different story as women have two fewer events, but wouldn't it work wonders for women's ski jumping if a women's team event was added instead of a mixed one? It was contested successfully twice in the World Cup last year with a decent number of teams. In four years' time, it could be a very competitive event. But, again, it was not added, and therefore, the number of women in ski jumping is likely to stay lower than the men, who do have their own team event and need the numbers to run it.

The IOC did even out the quotas of, for instance, men's and women's skeleton, and add some extra women's hockey teams, which is great. What I don't understand is why this kind of thinking wasn't implemented across the board. The whole point of gender equality is to correct the lack of opportunities presented by giving opportunities to both genders. It is not about randomly mixing genders together while not actually helping that aspiring female nordic combiner or bobsledder who can't quite make the limited two-woman team. Of course, new disciplines for women are going to be less developed than the existing disciplines for men, but if there are competitions successfully running at World Cup level, why is that not good enough for the Olympics? Isn't the best way for a discipline to grow by actually putting it into the Olympics and giving it exposure? If anything, even putting a lower-quality women's Nordic Combined would show the female athletes out there that they have a chance at Olympic glory, and more will be encouraged to strap on their skis as they go for that medal. Now, these pioneering athletes striving to compete are again in a state of limbo, and it's no telling when they'll get out of it, or even if they'll still be active by the time they do. Even if a women's sport is too recent and undeveloped to make it into the Olympics, filling their event slot with mixed events, as we've established, does very little in promoting women's sport. The IOC, I feel, would be better off

adding synchronized skating, an overwhelmingly female discipline which has been contested at World Championship level for longer than every single new discipline added since the 2010 Games.

The second reason the IOC has promoted this program was due to the aforementioned appeal to the youth, as mixed events are perceived to be more 'exciting' and 'fun'. I personally think, and I'm sure many fellow youths would agree with me, that a team snowboard cross and team freestyle aerials are fantastic ideas. After all, team snowboard cross makes for a nail biting race as one crash, which can be brought on so easily, can derail an entire team's prospects, unlike, say, in cross-country skiing. The same goes for aerials. My only point with this is that short track speed skating has a men's and women's relay already, and ski jumping, as already discussed, would be far better off with a women's event considering how many more men's events there are. Whatever the case, it seems with the sheer proportion of mixed events, especially since we already have existing ones in five sports, that the IOC is intent on increasing the number of these events for the foreseeable future in as many areas as possible.

Now, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing- I can definitely see the appeal of mixed events. They're fun to watch and a slight reprieve from the serious, cut-throat nature of more prestigious contests. But I can also see why the addition of mixed sports might not work for every discipline, especially when one considers that there is a limited number of events on the program, and a limited time in which to run them. Mixed events in Short Track, for example, and, newly in the Summer Games, athletics, table tennis and swimming, are already quite redundant in that all of these sports already have gender-separate team competitions, so they don't add much to the program that is new and will make viewers intrigued to watch it. Since mixed events are generally more on the random side, they have a tendency to be not as highly-valued or competitive as individual or single-gender events. A top short-track skater, for instance, if asked to run the 500m, 1000m, 1500m, men's and mixed relay in two weeks, will often drop the mixed relay so that he can focus on the other events. These are event slots that could be filled by new sports and events which would be more interesting to watch and competitive, as well as give the opportunities to compete to new athletes, especially, in the case of the Winter Olympics, women.

All in all, I think having mixed events can be a great thing, but I would be wary of trying to place them in at every opportunity at the expense of more pressing inclusions, whether in the name of gender equality, novelty or prestige. Mixed events are appealing to the youth, it is true, but so is variety, and an element of change and anticipation. It is a rather interesting time for the Olympics where they are changing at a quicker pace than ever before in order to keep up with the trends of today. It's just a situation where sometimes, we need to take a step back and check whether the status quo was really worth upending. For instance, again, to appeal to young people, the IOC has gone so far as to even consider video games as an addition to their program (I refuse to call them eSports as if I do, the term 'sport' gets severely devalued). I personally hope we never reach a time where that is classed as an Olympic sport, as that would open up the door to all manner of contests for which physical condition plays a very small part. I

feel it would go against the very principles of the Olympics. Faster, Higher, Stronger? Ability to pwn n00bs in the virtual face with virtual spells or a virtual AK-47? Not so much. The point is, I feel the Olympics should be careful to not get too carried away with the trends of youth, or else they risk losing what makes them so unique in the first place- an arena where physical fitness and excellence are valued and rewarded handsomely. Any activity you think of can be competitive and considered a 'sport' by some, but it is that physical element to the Olympics that makes them so special. There's just something about pushing the natural limits of the human body to be the best that you can be, and then compete against others who have done the exact same, that's really appealing to watch. There are other principles about the Olympics that make them special, too- like the ideals of pure meritocracy on the sporting field, or patriotism among the athletes and fans. These are also ideals that are becoming less popular amongst the younger generation, at least in the Western world, where equality of result may trump meritocracy and globalism may trump patriotism. If these attributes were to be toned down a bit as well, in the same way as the 'physical' part would have been with eSports, the Olympics would lose even more of what drives people to watch it in the first place.

There is a bit of an elephant in the room that I haven't quite covered yet- and that is, mixed events do save on the number of athletes needed at the Games quite a bit, since, as we've found out, they wouldn't actually require any more athletes, only more spaces on the event calendar. In fact, the goal is for the number of athletes for Beijing 2022 is set to be FEWER than for Pyeongchang 2018. Single-gender events, in order to be equal, must have two events and twice the number of athletes, which is why the IOC has been scrapping male-only events in, for example, canoeing, instead of working on developing female versions of those events. New sports as well must have both genders represented and it gets much harder to add them while limiting athlete numbers. As for Beijing 2022, there will be more women competing, but fewer athletes. In actual fact, the mixed events have absolutely nothing to do with this. The reason more women are competing is that athlete quotas have been taken away from men and given to women. It's a welcome development- unfortunately, it would have made for a better competition, though, if the number of women was raised to meet that of the men, rather than sacrificing some of the male quotas that enabled many smaller nations, for example, to take part.

I know that controlling the number of athletes is an important thing, and perhaps, it is one of the main talking points that this all boils down to. I concede that something like Synchronized Skating, with up to 20 members per team, could be challenging. However, I would be surprised if numbers were the only reason that thirty women can't compete in Nordic Combined. Moreover, even one or two inclusions could do so much for not only sport in general, but also the revenue the Olympics get. It would be a real shame if we could never see more women be allowed to compete, but also any of the new and exciting non-Olympic sports, or even axed male-only events under the Olympic Rings one day- just because of some rigid athlete limits that could surely be accommodated for with the extra revenue. And unfortunately, with zero new sports on the programme and a lack of variety in new events, I fear the Winter Olympics may be headed in that direction.

To the IOC: for what it's worth, I truly do respect and admire your intentions. In fact, I hope to work for you someday, if you'll have me. But on this occasion, I, as a youth, as a supporter of gender equality, feel that this past choice could have been a better one.