

The Precarity, Preservation, and Praxis of Sports Media Labor

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The Olympics allows us a way to consider how bodies come to represent (or misrepresent?) the nation. Bari Weiss' publicized tweet mislabelling American figure skater Mirai Nagasu as an immigrant speaks to how some bodies are assumed to belong while others are seen as perpetual outsiders. After Nagasu became the first American woman to land a triple axle at the Olympics, Weiss tweeted a video of Nagasu and the text "Immigrants: They get the job done,". While purporting to celebrate Nagasu and her victory, the tweet made her immigration status the focus. That Nagasu was not an immigrant did not seem to matter. As an Asian-American, Nagasu was made to be an outsider. Looking at coverage of Olympians allows for an exploration of nationalism, labour and bodies.

Wins and losses are presented in national terms. A country can celebrate through an athlete's success and can be disappointed by individuals who fail to medal. Bodies are useful so long as they are productive. For Olympians who are not as successful as expected, there can be a sense from the public of having been let down. This is especially true for athletes in sports that are strongly tied to a nation's sense of itself. As a Canadian, it is hockey and curling that tend to stand in for the country in the Winter Olympics. For example, in Sochi the Canadian men's and women's curling teams both missed the podium for the first time since the sport's introduction in 1998. In response, the CEO of Curling Canada said "I would characterize this as a bit of an aberration in our system". The athletes were presented as an aberration and this response both distances the loss from the specific players while also only treating the competitors as parts of a system. That a statement was made speaks to a sense of a nation being owed an explanation for failure. In curling and hockey Canadian athletes are expected to medal, if not win. Those who succeed are personally celebrated and their wins reinforce national understandings and myths. Those who fail are both denigrated and cast aside. The desire to maintain national myths can overshadow the actual performances of athletes.

The Olympics also brings to the fore notions of labor and compensation. Amateurism has long been an ideal celebrated by the games. However, the reality is far more complicated. It costs a lot of money to train for most of the events. Athletes often have side gigs or full time careers to fund their Olympic dreams. Training and competitions are also often time-intensive. This can shut out athletes from "regular" 9-5 jobs. Many spend years and thousands of dollars preparing. These competitors can be considered to be entrepreneurs. Only a select few are able to gain endorsement deals or otherwise profit from their participation. Like workers in other industries, these athletes are expected to take on the risk and cost of training. Only if they have proven themselves successful are they provided with compensation.

Questions of compensation and labor were highlighted when the National Hockey League decided to not let its players participate in the 2018 games. One of the main issues was surrounding costs. Previously, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had been paying for items like travel, accommodations and insurance. The IOC's decision to no longer cover these costs (as it does not do so for other professional organizations like the NBA) led to the NHL choosing not to participate. Many players voiced their displeasure at the decision. While they may have been looking forward to representing their country, their team affiliation made that no longer possible. Once the costs of participation for the NHL outweighed the benefits, the league decided to withdraw. The skills and bodies of the players were not their own to control.

These examples are meant to serve as jumping off points for larger discussions of inclusion, representation, nationalism, compensation, and bodily autonomy. The Olympics is an international event often considered in national terms. This roundtable allows us to bring these athletes into wider conversations of sports media labor.