

Sport and Britishness: the politics of the 2018 Winter Olympics



Although primarily about medal tables, Olympism, and human interest stories, the Winter Olympics have much to say about the representation of national identities in contemporary sport, writes [John Harris](#). He reflects on the politics of the 2018 Winter Olympics.

There's always the sport. Or so people say, more and more often, as they become sadder about what is happening to the rest of television (Raymond Williams)

Raymond Williams was right, and his words seem even more pertinent now. Taking part in the Olympic Games is the dream of athletes in a range of sports and represents the pinnacle of many sporting careers. Despite the ideology of Olympism, merely taking part is no longer always enough. The medal table becomes ever more visible in a variety of media across a whole host of nations and for athletes from Great Britain and Northern Ireland (GB&NI) the rewards attached to national lottery funding means that there is an increased pressure to perform.

For us armchair Olympians, the comprehensive coverage from Pyeongchang (South Korea) across the BBC offers the opportunity to watch sports that might only capture the imagination once every four years. As the athletes do well, we get to learn more and more about individuals, and claims and counter-claims are likely to be made about the nation. As always, the curling teams will be made up entirely of women and men who compete for Scotland in the World Championships, but for Great Britain & Northern Ireland in the Olympic Games. Being both Scottish and British is something that many are [comfortable](#) with, but is a topic that gets significant coverage when it comes to sport.

The human interest stories and the dramatic events contribute to make the Olympics a kind of soap opera. The 2016 Great Britain and Northern Ireland team was celebrated for the number of openly gay athletes in the group, the number of couples taking part, and the six sets of siblings that wore the Team GB colours. The winter Olympians are not as diverse a [collective](#) but they wear the same colours and sporting success can be widely celebrated in a number of ways.

The British media focus in the summer of 2016 moved on from the stories of major health concerns and social unrest to concerns about how the diving pool turned from blue to green. Williams once noted the compulsive talk before and after a big event, the type of chat that has always surrounded sport but is reshaped by the studio ritual. There is even more studio talk about sport now and success for GB&NI in Pyeongchang will be framed around the wider socio-political sphere in much of the media coverage.

The then-Prime Minister David Cameron described London 2012 as the time that '[patriotism came out of the shadows](#)'. The decision on Brexit and continued uncertainty as to what the future holds means that the landscape has altered markedly since 2012. Yet whilst some things change, some things remain the same.

The Great Britain and Northern Ireland team won more medals than expected in 2016 as there is usually a spike in medal success when a nation hosts an Olympics and a fall thereafter. Four years earlier the negative press surrounding the so-called 'Plastic Brits' disappeared as soon as many of these athletes who were born outside of the country performed well. Research on the print media reporting of London 2012 showed that a progressive, benign version of Britishness was most visible in the [narratives of the nation](#). The successes and failures of 'our' athletes become an important point of departure for discussions of broader political issues.

Sport is often used as a tool for political means. Mega-events like the Olympic Games are never *just* about sport but much of this is politics with a 'small p'. Of more significance here in 2018 is that a Korean team has been part of the games in Pyeongchang as North and South Korea came together in the [women's ice-hockey](#) competition. China and the USA will keep a close eye on how the other is performing in the all-important medal-table and there will be continued debate on the place of Russian athletes in the Olympics. In 2022 the games will take place in Beijing as it becomes the first city to host both the summer and winter [Olympic Games](#).

The Winter Olympics have not always been looked upon favourably by the British media. For many years there was little to celebrate in terms of the number of medals won and there was limited support for athletes competing in activities often described in derogatory or sarcastic terms. With increased funding and a clear focus on the podium then we are now in a very different era and sports that do not do well face significant cuts to the funding they receive from [UK Sport](#).

It is often said that sport is a reflection of society and the Olympic Games are also a story about athletes of all shapes and sizes. But the event also offers an important window into the idea of 'Britishness' and the (re)presentation of national identities in contemporary sport. The winter Olympics may not have the same global appeal as the summer event but as a means of discussing identities, and as a site for boosting national prestige, it still has a visible presence.

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