

4 Reforms Needed To Prevent More Inexplicable IOC Decisions

By **Ronald Katz** (March 8, 2018)

The International Olympic Committee's decision last week to reinstate Russia, despite evidence of continued Russian doping at the Pyeongchang Olympics, had as its basis, according to a statement from the IOC official from Aruba responsible for monitoring Russian compliance, that "we have to draw a line and look to the future." The quality of this explanation is actually higher than that given by the IOC president, who was quoted as saying, despite the participation of 168 Russian athletes at Pyeongchang, that "I don't think, quite frankly, that these Olympic Games have been tainted by the Russian affair because we had no Russian team here." The current IOC governance structure does not inspire confidence that future decisions will be any better unless there is major reform of the structure.



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An indication that reform is needed is that, as mentioned above, an official from the tiny country of Aruba is monitoring the compliance of a large, powerful country like Russia. This fact, in turn, reflects a broader problem with Olympic governance. The Olympics are run by a private organization that generates billions of dollars and that is composed of many small countries as well as the large countries that win most of the medals. This situation creates the possibility that those who run the Olympics can bestow financial and other benefits on those small countries.

Such largesse can potentially have a very beneficial effect on the ability of the Olympic officers to win elections and to perpetuate their rule. In fact, presidents of the IOC have enjoyed long tenures, averaging 14.8 years, many of them notable for their retrograde views. The founder of the modern Olympics, for example, Baron de Coubertin, banned women from competing on the grounds that such competition would be "impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic and incorrect," and other presidents include one who sympathized with the Nazis, one who was an official in the fascist Franco regime in Spain, and one who has acquiesced in Chinese censorship of journalists. The latter was a Belgian count, and the current president is the first person entitled to have the initials "OLY" after his name, an honor created during his tenure.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the IOC is perceived as an old boys' club that can make important decisions like lifting the Russian ban with no real explanation. This can, at least partially, be remedied by decreasing the current 12-year term limit to six years for the president. Such a change would allow a president to manage three Olympiads, which would give the president time to learn on the job and to prepare the ground for a successor. Any number of years beyond six would cement the power of the president in a potentially unhealthy way and would also be an impediment to the new ideas that often come from new people.

Also, the large sporting countries should be given more of a say in IOC actions than the much more numerous smaller countries. A system, for example, like the Security Council and General Assembly of the United Nations would reflect reality better than a tiny country

like Aruba occupying a position in which it can evaluate the conduct of Russia.

Under such a system, all countries would be members of a general assembly that could vote on all matters. Once a vote occurs, the proposition would be sent for approval to a senate composed of the five largest countries plus four others from the general assembly who had won the most medals in the most recent Olympiad. As in the United Nations today, each of the five largest countries in the senate would have veto power. If a veto is exercised, then the proposition could be sent back to the general assembly for revision. In that way, the structure of the IOC would more accurately reflect athletic, political and financial power, which will help the organization to run more smoothly.

Another problem with the IOC structure is that the IOC has absolutely no obligation to follow the recommendations of the World Anti-Doping Agency, which the IOC created expressly to monitor doping violations and which receives 50 percent of its funding from the IOC. Indeed, the founding president of WADA, Canadian Richard Pound, the senior member of the IOC, recently criticized the IOC for being too lenient on Russia.

He left the Pyeongchang Olympics before the closing ceremony to protest the leniency toward Russia of his fellow IOC members, advocating that the athletes demand reform: "The only people that scare these old farts are athletes saying, 'if you won't clean this up, we're not going to participate in these events.'" The dismissive response of an IOC spokesman to Pound — in effect, inviting him to leave the organization — was what one would expect from an organization with no real oversight or checks and balances: "In the end, if you don't like the coffee, if you don't like the décor or the prices, you can go to another coffee shop."

Although lacking diplomatic polish, Richard Pound makes an excellent point. Unless and until WADA is given independent funding and has the power to punish doping violators, dopers have an incentive to believe that the more political IOC will let them off leniently, as many think happened with Russia. In short, the IOC created WADA to have a solid basis for drug enforcement, and the IOC would be well advised to let WADA be WADA.

Also, doping punishments should not be arbitrary. WADA should establish punishment guidelines so as to inspire confidence that what has become an important aspect of athletics — punishment for doping — is being fairly administered. Currently it is not predictable what penalty will be imposed, and some penalties seem to be inconsistent with others.

These reforms — a shorter IOC presidential term limit, a more UN-like structure for the IOC, WADA independence, and clear doping punishment guidelines — would have avoided all of the drama and unfairness associated with the recent Russian doping saga. The most important sporting nations should take the lead in proposing and implementing these reforms.

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