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U.N. role offers IOC chance to place sport amid global priorities

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Like us, a few of you may have read with mild interest the October 2009 press announcement that the United Nations had granted the International Olympic Committee official observer status.

And like us, you may have been a bit perplexed and thought, “How could this only be happening in 2009?” Both organizations are venerable, established and, most would agree, far-reaching. The U.N., founded in 1945 after World War II, has 192 member nations while the IOC, founded in 1894, has 205 member national Olympic committees, representing 205 jurisdictions globally.

Given that more countries marched in the Beijing Summer Olympic Games than are recognized by the U.N., all waving their flags proudly, some of you probably thought the IOC was just a better political machine.

So why is this even worth talking about?

We think it is for two reasons. First, this announcement was another demonstration of sport’s continued influence in larger society but also it might point out sport’s past failure to strategically link to higher global priorities such as health, education, equality (including racial, gender and religious), environmental concerns, the fight against AIDS and world peace.

But make no mistake: No one person, company or organization controls sport, and considerable progress in addressing social causes has been made in the last 50 years. In that sense, only a contrarian might bark that sport has not done enough for underserved communities. The issue, as always, is doing more.

Secondly, and this ties to the first point, this official U.N. role provides a tremendous platform for the IOC to lead so many sports (Olympic or not) in addressing social issues.

But hang on.

Does U.N. observer status even matter? By most accounts, U.N. observers hold little true power and influence. Generally speaking, U.N. observer status is a distinct privilege that should give the IOC the ability to participate in U.N. activities and the right to speak at U.N. General Assembly meetings (but not vote on resolutions).

But what if observer status provides the IOC, the champion of the Olympic movement and arguably the most powerful sport organization in the world, a seat at the most important global political table in the world? That seat might then provide IOC, its stakeholders, and its members with opportunities to involve sport in global priorities and to communicate as much to its vast membership.

IOC President Jacques Rogge was quoted in the original press release as saying, “This is a huge recognition of the role sport can play in contributing to a better and more peaceful world. The Olympic values clearly match the U.N.’s philosophy. Today’s decision further strengthens the partnership between the IOC and the U.N. system.”

All well and good, and the IOC president is nothing if not diplomatic. But coming off the 19-month high of Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010, we can now ask a series of tougher questions for the various bodies involved with this landmark anointment:

- Has the IOC quietly become the world’s best nonpolitical vehicle (a sport-bearing Trojan horse, if you will) to broker social change or influence those governments most likely to pull up their drawbridges at the first sign of a U.N. peacekeeper?

- If the IOC is in fact that vehicle, do its members, always elected on their commitment to sport and the values of fair competition, hold a larger obligation than selecting sports to be played, rules for sports and cities for sports to be played in? To wit, should IOC members in the future be selected with a strategic eye toward peace, prosperity and pollution?

- Should the U.N. think strongly about the IOC playing a more significant role in guiding the future of the planet? After all, the IOC can assemble more countries for a parade than the U.N. Plus, the IOC can get the networks of the world to cover their quadrennial proceedings (and pay for the privilege to boot).

- Should future global sponsors of the IOC and upcoming Games in London 2012, Sochi 2014 and Rio 2016 enter into these agreements (or uphold them) with a stronger commitment to the IOC and its many Olympism in Action causes (environment, women, education, peace)? Should IOC sponsors, as part of their global corporate social responsibility agenda, take to heart the IOC’s U.N. observer status? Said another way, should IOC sponsors be advised that by aligning with the Olympics, they are expected to save the world?

We’re not sure of the specific answers. The operational concepts of the U.N. and IOC, particularly after the completion of a spectacular Winter Games, seem awfully vague relative to quarterly reports, the world economy, job security and world peace.

But as two Olympic fans looking into the crystal ball from up here in the ivory tower we see gray uncertainty — call it clouds of apathy — out there with only a hint of golden outcome. This might be one of those issues more of us in the Olympic family should continue investigating.

That or we need more contrarians pushing us to reach beyond the mediocre.

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