

Homosexuality and the Olympic movement: towards better Games

Written by Ian Jobling, Honorary Reader and Director of the Centre for Olympic Studies in the School of Human Movement and Nutrition Studies, The University of Queensland

Sport remains “one of the [last bastions](#) of cultural and institutional homophobia” in Western societies. The first openly gay Olympians did not compete until the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics.

But the first known gay Olympic athlete was actually [Otto Peltzer](#), a German middle-distance runner who competed in the 1928 Amsterdam and 1932 Los Angeles Games. In 1935, Peltzer was sentenced to 18 months' jail after being accused of being a homosexual. He was subsequently sent to the “death camp” in Mauthausen-Gusen, Austria.

Between 1950 and 1990, many gay athletes felt they were the only “[gay person](#)” in the world. American Olympians, such as decathlete Tom Waddell (1968 Mexico City) and diver Greg Louganis (multiple gold medallist, Seoul 1988 and Barcelona 1992) expressed their sense of “aloneness”.

Even without coming out to the public, some Olympians did advise their coaches of their sexual preferences. Canadian gold medallist Mark Tewksbury (1992 Barcelona) [stated](#) :

I dropped 1.3 seconds off my backstroke in just ten months because I fed so much off my energies after finally telling my coach that I was gay. I had been working years to gain tenths of a second, but after I told him, I dropped 1.3!

Gay Games

The [Gay Games](#) – a social, cultural and multi-sport festival – was introduced by Tom Waddell in 1982 in San Francisco. Waddell wanted the Gay Games to be called the Gay Olympics, but the US Olympic Committee denied him the right to use the word because of potential confusion with the forthcoming Los Angeles 1984 Games.

Over 10,000 athletes participated at Gay Games IV in New York City in 1994, which was more than the 1988 Seoul Games. Unable to be at the opening ceremony, Greg Louganis recorded a video in which he publicly proclaimed he was gay.

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Upon arrival to compete, [Louganis said](#) ,

I've never felt so warmly embraced in my life and for the first time, I felt like a complete person.

Similarly, Australian diver Matthew Mitcham, one of the most well-known openly gay athletes at the 2012 London Olympics and now an ambassador for the Gay Games, [said](#) :

The Gay Games is a great chance for all gays and lesbians to show that we as a community are not like the stereotypes the straight media loves to portray ... I strongly feel we have to celebrate our own values and help others to accept that it is ok to be different.

Ambiguous terrain

Still, sport remains [ambiguous terrain](#) for gay athletes, as events in Russia early in 2013 highlighted. The Russian government enacted [anti-gay laws that would especially impact Olympians](#) attending the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

[One such law](#) banned:

... spreading information aimed at forming non-traditional sexual behaviour among children, suggesting this behaviour is attractive and making a false statement about the socially equal nature of traditional and non-traditional relationships.

A Pride House was [introduced](#) at the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics and present at the London 2012 Games. Olympians – gay and straight – along with influential gay leaders outside Russia, were vocal about the [denial of a Pride House in the Sochi Games](#)

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A comparison of Summer Olympic Games from 1996 to 2012 shows the percentage of openly gay athletes has risen from 0.019% to 0.218%. That statistic may seem insignificant but shows that over 16 years – or five Summer Olympics – the total percentage of openly gay participants increased tenfold.

So has their success: as of 2012, [104 gay Olympians have competed](#) in the Summer Games and more than half (54) have medalled. In [London 2012](#), of the 23 gay Olympians, 10 medalled, including seven winning gold.

Although there is still much progress to be made, especially by the IOC, the tide has turned in favour of gay Olympians.

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