

Sport and International Relations.

Does it foster friendship or animosity?

Wally Dyba and Hernán Humaña

York University, Canada

Prologue

Serendipity is wonderful until a colleague from another Faculty and discipline considers that you have something valuable to offer. The offering being a presentation and paper to an international scholarly conference she is hosting. In reality, what do two long-standing university volleyball coaches whose scholarship is less than noteworthy have to contribute to distinguished scholars of English and French literature? It seems obvious, from a cursory standpoint, that there is very little common ground.

This presents the backdrop of the crisis that occurred once Professors Hernan Humana and Wally Dyba acquiesced to the request to make a presentation at the bilingual "Pluri-Culture and Migrant Writings: An Interdisciplinary Approach" Conference.

On closer consideration, perhaps there may be something that literature and sport have in common. Literature uses the language of the written word to communicate and express. On the other hand, sport uses the language of competition to communicate and experience.

Introduction

One of the most common mantras used in the sport realm is the role sports play in fostering good will and friendship among nations. Particularly at the Olympic Games, the International Olympic Committee claims sports are the key to international understanding and camaraderie. However, there are also plenty of evidences of the opposite to be true.

Just last academic year, August 18, 2011, the men's basketball team from Georgetown University, USA went to China for a "goodwill" sport tour. The game turned into a brawl as players and fans got involved in an out-of-control fight.

Maintaining the malleability of sport vis-à-vis international relations in mind, this paper will look at some examples of positive exchanges as illustrated by the experiences of our York University volleyball teams either travelling abroad or hosting foreign teams (Japan, Mexico, Holland, Cuba). It will look into the conditions under which good international relations can be fostered throughout sports and offer some suggestions to avoid undesirable outcomes.

One of the most iconic and older sport events in the world is the Olympic Games. Then games fulfilled a unifying role among the many Greek states: "The Olympic games became a link, a bond between people of a common blood." But the Games provided another fascinating expression: the presence of poets, writers, and sculptors. It is in the possibility of re-capturing that spirit that we are writing this paper. Priscila Uppal, a professor here at York, has already done much to re-build this bridge. The Poet in Residence at the last 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, she was a sensation with media, athletes and fans alike.

Methodology

We will describe each trip the York men's and women's volleyball teams have experienced internationally in the last few years. The men's team has travelled to the Netherlands, and Mexico (Cancún). The women's team has travelled to Cuba (Habana City and Santa Maria beach) and Mexico (Mexico City and Cancún).

The paper will discuss the experience of hosting teams from abroad. The York University men's team has hosted teams from Japan (Budo and Ts) and a team from Mexico (Universidad Anáhuac México Norte).

We will analyse the conditions under which these exchanges have occurred: accommodations, relationships of coaches and athletes, social interaction, fans' behaviour, billeting, gifts exchange, goals and objectives, briefing to athletes, and overall, the environment created beforehand.

We will address the role that a non-contact sport may have in these exchanges as opposed to contact sports. After all, it was a non-contact sport (table tennis) the one that Nixon and Kissinger used to reestablish diplomatic relations with China in 1971, the so-called "Ping-pong Diplomacy."

Trips by the York University women's teams

1994 Habana City, Cuba – under the organization of the Canada-Cuba Sports and Cultural Festivals group, the team went to Habana City. We were hosted by the organising group in the Triton Hotel, a three star facility.

The team trained with and played exhibition games against an all-star Cuban team that was getting ready to play at the 1995 Centennial celebration of volleyball as one of the greatest teams ever. As well, we had the opportunity to have Cuban coaches to run practices for our team. No spectators attended the games.

2002 Santa Maria Beach, Cuba – also under the organization of the Canada-Cuba Sports and Cultural Festivals group, this time the team went to Santa Maria Beach, a resort around 45 minutes from Habana City.

The team trained and played against ex-national team players from the excellent Cuban teams, one of the most successful teams in the history of volleyball.

The nature of the exchange was both athletic and cultural. Athletes were exposed to the Cuban life style by visiting museums and places of interest: Hemingway's hangout "Bodegita del Medio" and Al Capone's favourite hotel, Hotel Nacional. The Cuban players were extremely

friendly and we brought with us many presents (shirts, sport shoes, cookies, gum, make-up, and the like.) No spectators attended the games.

2008 Cancun – México – the men’s and women’s teams were invited by two Mexican coaches from the region to play exhibition games against all-star teams. We played six matches including one at “Isla Mujeres” on New Year’s Eve. All games in Cancun were poorly attended except the one at “Isla Mujeres,” where an enthusiastic group of fans, mainly tourist, attended the game.

2010 Mexico City – Mexico – the men’s team went to an exhibition tournament at the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM).

Tours and Event Hosting by the York University men’s teams

Background

The motivation to engage in international tours and event hosting was fostered relatively early in my [Wally Dyba] athletic career. It began in the late 60’s with the CANUSA games, multi-sport summer competitions between Flint, Michigan and Hamilton, Ontario. It was further reinforced with a Scandinavian tour in the early 80’s. The excitement and new frontiers presented instilled a positive overall ambition to continue with such endeavours.

The Excalibur Classic and NCAA

The Excalibur Classic, which first began in 1980, is the longest continuous university men’s volleyball tournament in Canada. Its initial purpose was to fill a competitive void during the Christmas examination/break period. The tournament was also used to help promote and develop the sport. Many of the top NCAA and CIS teams participated.

There were minimal hosting arrangements. Teams stayed in hotels and interaction usually occurred briefly prior to and after each match. The

overall environment from a social standpoint was relatively sterile. Coaches would, however, get together and discuss common issues at the host hotel's lounge.

A few years later, a social was implemented in conjunction with the tournament, although other aspects remained the same in terms of hosting arrangements. A greater degree of camaraderie amongst the athletes ensued.

The perception of prestige, glamour and competitive superiority of the NCAA are ingrained in the beliefs of many Canadians. In the sport of men's intercollegiate volleyball this is not the case. Since 1980, the first year of the Annual Excalibur Volleyball Classic, a number of NCAA teams have competed in the tournament. This includes many of the most noteworthy schools such as Ohio State, Penn State, Michigan State and Long Beach State from California. Penn State captured the first two tournament titles, but many of the CIS schools have defeated their NCAA counterparts since.

In the 1995 tournament, the defending CIS (Laval) and NCAA (Penn State) champions were both competing in the tournament. The tournament champion that year? – neither the defending CIS nor the NCAA champion but another CIS school – Manitoba.

Interactions with the CIS and NCAA coaches identified that in men's volleyball, there was a degree of competitive parity, and the prestige and glamour associated with the NCAA had a mythical element. Many important issues and challenges were ripe with similarities on both sides of the 49th parallel. These included program funding and minimal spectator attendance and support. Nevertheless the quality demonstrated in the game was similar.

Outcomes:

1. Competitive parity evident in NCAA and CIS men's volleyball;
2. Quantity and quality of interactions enhanced when planned;
3. Prestige of the tournament related to a function of the prestige of the competing teams.

The Netherlands 1993

I had always wanted to take my team to Europe. There is a romanticism about going to the historically rich cultures that can be found in the continent. I became aware of the Kerst Volleybal Toernooi (KVT) held in Assen, Holland in 1992 from a coaching colleague. The KVT is the largest international student tournament in the world and sees over 90 teams, of both genders, primarily from Europe, compete.

The first tournament was organized in 1948 as a means to get students from different countries and cultures together to play volleyball and then socialize at a tournament closing dance and party. The goal was to foster understanding and friendship amongst students from various cultures, thus serving as a means to prevent future conflict. The tournament still continues with a strong emphasis on developing friendly relationships both on and off the court.

At this event, we were hosted by “foster families.” Accommodation, meals and transportation were provided. As many Dutch people speak English, language was not an issue. This situation provided greater opportunity to interact with the townspeople and be a part of their lives. A large social at the conclusion of the tournament provided an ideal setting for greater interaction with individuals from many different backgrounds.

It became evident very quickly that the popularity of the KVT was not based on the prestige of the tournament per se (organization, facilities, teams, officiating, publicity, etc), but primarily on the size and quality of the post tournament social.

Our team was very fortunate in being able to play relatively well and not succumb to the detriment of jet lag. After two days of heavy competition, we managed to advance to the championship final in the top division of the tournament. Our opponent was a team from Belgium.

The final was played in the primary competition facility and was filled to capacity with about 2,500 enthusiastic and highly knowledgeable

spectators. By comparison, the audience's passion and excitement for volleyball would be equivalent to that found for hockey in Canada during a World Junior Hockey Championship.

Player introductions had significant glamour and glitz. The lights were turned down, strobe lights danced throughout the gymnasium to heart pounding music while spotlights focused on the athletes as they were introduced to the crowd.

We as Canadians were the initial crowd favourites. The crowd was appreciative and acknowledged our fine play with cheers and thunderous shouts of CA-NA-DA. Nevertheless, the crowd had an appreciation for the underdog and when it appeared we were going to win handily, they began cheering for the opposition Belgian team. The crowd's support propelled the Belgians to an impressive comeback to tie the match and take the lead.

Once again, the crowd switched their support. This support, which increased with each point we scored, helped propel us to an amazing comeback victory. The gymnasium was delirious as the crowd literally threw themselves onto the court. Players, coaches and everyone involved began celebrating "one of the best finals in the history of the tournament."

For most on our team, this may have been their only venture to Europe in their lifetime. To this day, they have had an opportunity to be exposed to a rich cultural heritage (Rijksmuseum), a different way of life and a different way of living. This exposure, although transitory, has enriched their lives in a way that few may ever have the chance to experience.

Outcomes:

1. Hosting by "foster families" made for a more intimate experience;
2. The spectator support appeared to assist in the match momentum;
3. The most important aspect of the KVT was not necessarily the competition but the associated social;
4. The competition provided the means by which the individuals were given an exposure to the rich cultural history of the Netherlands;
5. Winning the tournament magnified the overall emotional experience.

The Netherlands 1995

We returned to Holland in 1995 to further experience the KVT and attempt to have a fuller and more rewarding experience. Most of the hosting conditions were the same. We were considered a primary tournament draw and received advance publicity in the local media. In addition, we had members on the team with very recognizable Dutch names. Wiebe, Jansen and van Huizen became household topics of discussion in Assen. Richard van Huizen was perhaps the prototypical “super star” for the tournament. Standing 6’8” with blond hair and blue eyes, he was easily identified. His superior attacking ability led the crowd to give him the moniker “Bam-Bam”.

We did not disappoint. We once again found ourselves in the tournament final, but this time against a local team. We played well and had an opportunity to win the championship, but unfortunately lost in a very tight match. The socialization after the competition was once again memorable.

We extended our stay in Assen for New Year’s celebrations. We also managed to take a trip to Groningen. The oldest document referring to Groningen’s existence dates from 1040. However, the city already existed long before then: the oldest archaeological traces found are believed to stem from the years 3950 BC–3720 BC, although the first major settlement in Groningen has been traced back to the 3rd century.

New Year’s Eve and fireworks are synonymous for the Dutch neighborhood in which we stayed. The first sounds of firecrackers began at midnight and proceeded for a full hour. During this time, the peaceful neighborhood streets resembled a war zone with cannon booms and the rat-tat-tat of firecrackers tied together. A layer of smoke lay above the surface of the yards and roads and eerily drifted slowly upwards. Firework debris was strewn knee deep throughout the neighborhood.

The next day, reports of local fires and injuries related to the fireworks were prevalent.

The next day we went to the theatre to see the recently released movie “Starship Troopers” directed by Dutchman Paul Verhoeven and starring Casper van Dien. The film has a militaristic theme with satire embedded in many of the scenes. Symbols and clothing styles are modelled after the Nazi regime. The satire was not lost on the Dutch audience as their reaction was immediate and stirring. This provided a poignant moment in understanding why our Canadian team was a crowd favourite at the tournament.

Outcomes:

1. Reinforcement that the most important aspect of the KVT was not the competition but the associated social;
2. Firework traditions differ in different cultures;
3. Emotions related to the Second World War continue to linger in the Dutch;
4. The tour is a means for further discovery.

Mexico - Cancun 2005

The men’s and women’s teams were invited by two Mexican coaches from the region to play exhibition games against all-star teams. We played six matches including one at “Isla Mujeres” on New Year’s Eve. All games in Cancun were poorly attended except the one at “Isla Mujeres,” where an enthusiastic group of fans, mainly tourists, attended the game.

Mañana is a noted Mexican term – meaning tomorrow. It is facetiously said when things are not done on time. This tour allowed us to appreciate this aspect of Mexican culture first hand. Airport pickup by our hosts was over two hours delayed. Selection for matches scheduled for 7:00 pm was done at 6:30 pm (for a trip of half an hour) and the opposition did not arrive to the competitive venue until 8:00 pm. Mañana!

Our initial accommodations were at best a one star quality (no glass panes in window wells) while food and refreshments were late in being served. We were in Cancun, where the locals live, not Cancun where the tourists go. These are some of the challenges when competing in less developed areas.

Although the athletes were briefed prior to departure, specific behavioural expectations were not mentioned. “Cancun” had a holiday/party connotation in the minds of the athletes, not necessarily a cultural and competitive experience. The first order of business when checking in was purchasing alcoholic beverages.

The competitive level was low and the facility quality left much to be desired. What was the purpose of the tour?

Outcomes:

1. The quality of the experience is based on expectations;
2. There are underlying reasons why perceptions exist;
3. Getting to know the people builds an appreciation for what they have to offer.

Mexico - Mexico City 2010

The men’s team went to an exhibition tournament at the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM). This event was far better organized and of a much better quality in terms of hosting arrangements. Accommodations were in a 3 star hotel and a high performance training facility. Food was restaurant style and buffet.

Competition was excellent with the team finishing fifth in an eight team tournament. Lack of significant competitive success diminished the overall quality of the experience. Nevertheless, planned outings to the Mayan ruins and a first division soccer match at Aztec stadium were very worthwhile.

Outcomes:

1. Cultural experiences were the most rewarding aspects of this tour;
2. Exposure to their high performance centre left many questions as to whether Canada had any similar centres;
3. Mexican soccer fans are just as passionate as Canadian hockey fans;
4. Questions lingered as to why the Mayans disappeared;
5. The cultural experience superseded the competitive experience.

The Excalibur Classic and Japan

Tsukuba University 1998 and 2000

Tsukuba University is a university volleyball power, having captured the Japanese championship numerous times. We had the opportunity to host them twice and were implementing what is considered an appropriate hosting protocol. Athletes would be billeted while the head coach and delegate would be housed in a hotel.

This was a very unique hosting experience as very few in the Japanese delegation spoke English, virtually none of the hosting families spoke Japanese and it became immediately noticeable that our cultures were very different. Discipline coupled with respect was paramount as was a hierarchical order. Bowing was prevalent and certain individuals in the contingent seemed to take on special tasks – especially those related to the well-being and needs of the head coach.

With Tsukuba's first match a different style of play from what we were accustomed to in Ontario was evident. Control, speed of play, outstanding defensive efforts and the constant motion even between rallies was unusual for us. What came as a complete shock was the task assigned to an individual to pick up the coach's seat cushion and quickly transport it to the opposite side when court changes were made between sets.

Tsukuba University dominated play in their first match, winning handily. The strict discipline became further evident. A star player had made a grievous error during the match. Because of this fault, the player was required to do an exhausting individual drill which from a Canadian perspective would appear as a "punishment." Upon completion of the drill, the player ran to face the coach, bowed and appeared to show appreciation to the coach for his assistance in eliminating the fault that had appeared during the match.

The Japanese easily dominated the competition and won the tournament in 1998; however, in 2000 they lost in the championship final.

Outcomes:

1. There is significantly more discipline exhibited in the deportment of the Japanese athletes;
2. A hierarchical order is highly evident;
3. Individuals can communicate even though they do not speak the same language;
4. The first “foreign” team to compete in the tournament generated much interest in the volleyball community.

Budo 2010

Many of the characteristics that were noted in the Tsukuba contingent were evident with the Budo members. One element that was different: the head coach of Budo was considered to be more “fun loving”.

Budo was involved in one of the most controversial situations encountered in any of the international tours. Budo needed to defeat a strong team from the University of Windsor in order to advance to the championship side of the tournament playoffs. This final match was close and the quality of the refereeing was questionable. The fans in the stands (approximately 250) wanted to see a Budo victory and were very adamant with their displeasure with some of the calls that were made by the officials.

Play was in the fifth set and the score tied at 15. The referee made two significant calls against the Budo team. The crowd was furious, as was the tournament director. The Budo team showed some of their displeasure but were able to maintain a high degree of restraint. Budo ended the set losing 17-19.

Budo was disappointed and frustrated; however, any animosities if at all prevalent were quickly extinguished. With the customary shaking of hands amongst the players and with the officials, the discipline within the Budo members prevailed. The members shook hands, bowed and had what appeared to be genuine smiles on their faces.

The Budo team had a significant impact on the volunteers of the tournament. The volunteers were members of the U16 Pakmen Volleyball

Club. The between-rally enthusiasm and running was adopted by the U16 team in their competitions.

The U16 Pakmen team captured the Provincial and National Championships for their age division in 2011. It was interesting to note that their enthusiasm and running between rallies was deemed offensive by parents and coaches of opposition teams. The opposition took this consistent enthusiasm, which is not found in the play of teams in age division, as a sign of disrespect and mockery of the play of the opposition.

The opposition coaches and parents had no understanding of the underlying rationale for what the U16 Pakmen team was doing. Many were discernibly angry and were becoming more aggressive. An air of discomfort was evident. It should also be noted that the Pakmen U16 team and club has a history of success and has the largest membership of visible minorities of any club in Canada.

Outcomes:

1. Controversial situations can elevate emotions;
2. Discipline and control are required in frustrating situations;
3. Popular teams are emulated;
4. Actions can be misinterpreted if not understood.

On international exposure, Tom Traves, President of Dalhousie University, is quoted in the *Globe and Mail* (February 3, 2012), “It exposes you, it transforms you, changes you as a person – you never see the world the same way again.”

The York University men’s team travelled to Japan in August of 2012, hosted by Budo and Tsukuba Universities.

Analysis

George Orwell: “Sport is war without weapons.”

It is undeniable that sport can be a tremendous force for peace, friendship and understanding. The key word here is **sports can be**. Sports have been consistently connected to sport and militarism. In fact, that has

been one of my [Wally Dyba] main criticisms of the institution. However, globalization and the incredible development of relations among nations have created a small village of nations closely associated where the power of sports and the role it can play cannot be ignored.

It would be argued that the friendly character of our experiences has been due mainly to the type of sport we represent and the lack of spectators except one instance (Holland's men's team). All the games in these experiences were played with no spectators and in a non-contact sport.

Conditions

- Competition must be friendly and relatively meaningless;
- If the sport is non-contact and separated by a net, even better;
- Coaches must actively foster an educational character to the exchange experience where "friendship is first and competition second" (famous Chinese motto of their sport system in the 70's).

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