

Author: Richard Webber

Diversity among the teams representing “western” teams at the 2012 Olympics

“Multi-culturalism” is one of the key values promoted by the International Olympic Committee. London’s successful bid for the 2012 Olympics relied strongly on the positioning of London as a global city tolerant of diversity and with communities from every country in the world. The favourable coverage of the Games in the British Press focused on the positive attitudes of the crowds towards competitors of every cultural background.

Of the two “faces” of Team GB one was of mixed race. Arguably its most successful competitor arrived in Britain as an eight year old from Somalia.

But how diverse was Team GB? And how did its level of diversity compare with that of teams from other countries which have attracted large communities of economic migrants since 1945? And to what extent do the events in which members from migrant communities competed differ from those from the host communities within which they live? The answers to some of these questions can be found by looking at the names of the athletes who competed during the games.

The file of competitors

The following findings are based on the information contained on a data file containing the names of the 10,881 individuals who competed in the 2012 London Olympics. Other than for a small number of Brazilian competitors the information includes the competitors’ personal and family names, the country they represent and the event or events in which they competed. No information was provided on Paralympic competitors nor is it known whether the competitor won a medal.

Where a competitor entered for two or more events, whether in the same or different sports, only one record is retained. Where the competitor entered for different sports, he or she was coded by the name of the sport coming earliest in alphabetic order.

Using both elements of their name the 10,881 competitors were coded into one of 200 or so Origins categories.

The file of competitors at an Olympic Games is as culturally diverse a list of names as one is ever likely to be able to source. In the case of the 10,881 competitors in London 2012, 98.9 % were could be matched on the basis of either personal or family names and thereby accorded an Origins classification.

How diverse were the teams from “advanced” western countries?

London’s bid for the Olympic Games claimed not just that the city would provide a multi-cultural backdrop to the games but also that Britain would be represented by a multi-cultural team. In the

event was Britain more or less successful than other “advanced” western countries in including members of minority ethnic groups, in particular recent immigrants, in their national teams?

Table xxx shows the make up of teams from a set of countries which, generally speaking, have proved the most popular destination for long-term economic migrants in recent years. These include the European countries west of the former “iron curtain”, the United States and Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Austria is excluded because its names are so similar to those of Germany.

It shows the proportion of each team’s competitors who bear what can be described as Western European names together with the number with names from five principal areas of immigration, Eastern Europe (countries formerly part of the Soviet bloc), Black Africa, the Muslim World, East and South East Asia and South Asia. Eight athletes from the 18 teams had names which could not be assigned to any Origins code.

The 18 teams have then been ordered in descending order according to the proportion of their competitors who bear “Western European” names.

TEAM	COMPETITORS	"WESTERN" EUROPEAN %	Major sources of immigration					
			EASTERN EUROPEAN	BLACK AFRICAN	EAST AND SOUTH EAST ASIAN	MUSLIM	SOUTH ASIAN	UNCLASSIFIED
Finland	56	98.2				1		
Ireland	66	97.0	2					
Belgium	118	96.6	1	1	1	1		
New Zealand	196	95.9	3		4	1		
Italy	281	95.4	8		2	2	1	
Sweden	140	95.0	3	1		3		
Spain	289	94.8	6	2	3	4		
Denmark	115	94.8	2		2	1	1	
Netherlands	182	94.0	3	2	5	1		
Portugal	80	93.8	1	1	3			
Team GB	556	93.5	7	18	4	6	1	
Australia	413	93.2	12	3	7	4	2	
US	531	91.7	22	4	11	6	1	
Norway	65	89.2	5		1	1		
Canada	279	88.9	17	4	7	2	1	
Germany	395	88.9	35	1	4	4		
Switzerland	106	84.0	9	4	1	3		
France	335	82.7	14	18	6	20		
All nations	10,881	56.7	2,134	287	1,219	822	131	8
Importing countries	4,203	92.0	150	59	61	60	7	0
% of Competitors			7.0	20.6	5.0	7.3	5.3	0.0

Table 1: Representation of competitors from “Western” teams according to the Origin of competitors’ names

The most immediately telling implication of these statistics is that it is the French team rather than Team GB that contained the largest proportion of people with non-Western names, somewhat of an irony given that “inclusivity” was believed to be the principal advantage that London’s Olympic bid had over its rival, Paris.

17.3% of the French team’s members have non-Western names, nearly three times the 6.5% achieved by Team GB whose rate is marginally lower than the 8.0 % average for this bloc of countries.

This statistic is doubly ironic in that the success of the Olympic Games coincided with a brief period when the British press was covering instances of civil disturbances in Amiens and elsewhere in France, coverage from which it was popularly inferred that France when compared to Britain other European countries has been particularly ineffective in integrating minority populations.

Though the French team constituted less than 8% of the competitors from “western” countries, it contained over 30% of their Black African athletes and over 30% of the athletes with Muslim names representing a “western” nation.

Whilst Team GB had as large a Black African contingent as France, albeit from a much larger team, Britain has been much less effective than France in developing sporting excellence among its Muslim community.

In all fairness the table ignores the contribution made by Britain’s communities of West Indian origin, most of whom have British names. However today this community represents less than 10% of Britain’s minority population as well as arguably its most socially integrated one.

A second interesting implication of the table is that 45% of all “non-western” competitors from “Western” teams bear names from Eastern Europe. This figure is hugely in excess of the proportion of this set of communities in the west’s immigrant population. The contribution of eastern Europeans to Germany’s team is eight times that of Germany’s population of Muslim origin. This group is also particularly significant in the United States and Canada, in Australia and in Italy.

Given the prominence of Eastern European countries in medals tables over past Olympiads, this may reflect the high status accorded to sports in Eastern European cultures and, who knows, even genetic differences. It may challenge the assumption that current success in sport in Eastern Europe is determined by economic considerations or the importance attached to it by former regimes.

A third interesting finding from the table is the disproportionate number of Black African athletes in the London Olympics who represent “western” teams. Among the other major name groups, i.e. Eastern Europeans, people from the Muslim world, South Asians and South East and East Asians, around 5% represent “western” countries. The comparative figure for Black Africans is 20%. In other words one in five athletes of Black African origin (excluding Afro-Americans or West Indians) was a European immigrant.

It is difficult to believe this reflects differences in the relative size of the indigenous and emigrant Black African communities. Rather, as used to be but is no longer the case with West Indians, it more likely reflects differences between Black Africa and the west in terms of opportunities to train and complete.

The names of Olympic competitors allows us to see the important contribution that the Irish, Scots and Welsh make to the teams not just from Britain and Ireland but also from North America and the Antipodes. It is often supposed that the importance attached to sport in the culture of Australia and

New Zealand originates from the large number of immigrants they received from Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This is reflected in the third of the New Zealand team and just under a quarter of the Australian team whose names betray Celtic ancestry.

These stereotypes are somewhat undermined by the fact that an Australian with an English name is 13% more likely than an average Australian (adult) to have been selected to compete in London Olympic, and more likely than an Australian with an Irish family name, only 8% more likely than an average Australian. The Antipodean immigrants least likely to have made their national Olympic teams and those from places other than the British Isles. These on average are 35% less likely to be Olympic competitors than people with British ancestry.

The distinctiveness of the Celtic diaspora is less in terms of the level of its involvement in sport than in the profile of sports in which its members tend to compete.

TEAM	COMPETITORS	ANGLO-SAXON	CELTIC	CELTIC AS % OF BRITISH ISLES
Team GB	556	346	132	27.6
Australia	413	222	97	30.4
US	531	255	77	23.2
New Zealand	196	96	64	40.0
Canada	279	107	49	31.4
Ireland	66	12	46	79.3

Table 2: Contribution of competitors with Celtic names to various national teams

B: Cultural preferences

There is no contesting the evidence that different national teams have different strengths and weaknesses. The Chinese dominate table tennis, the South East Asians excel at badminton, the Latin Americans succeed at football, competitors from Scandinavia and the Baltic States are disproportionately found in athletic events that involve throwing. Jamaicans run fast and East African run fast further. Turks and Bulgarians lift heavier weights.

There is no shortage of debate and analysis on how likely the origins of these differences are to arise from cultural differences and how far from genetic ones.

The file of competitors can make a useful contribution to this discussion by examining how closely the profile of sports engaged in by immigrants compares with the sporting profile of host population and how far with the profile of the country from which people have emigrated.

Taking just competitors belonging to the teams listed in table xx we can examine the relationship between competitors' cultural origin based on their name and the sports in which they competed.

Here are some of the most interesting findings:

1: Competitors of Celtic origin constitute 22.8% of competitors from these countries. Relative to other members of the teams they are the most likely to compete in the Modern Pentathlon (46.2%),

Canoe Sprint (35.7%) and Triathlon (33.3%). They are also over-represented at Judo and Equestrianism.

2: By contrast no competitor of Celtic origin competed in Archery and only 6 of those who shot had Celtic names. Synchronised swimming is another sport which fails to attract talent from the Celtic diaspora wherever it has settled.

3 : Though people with Eastern Europeans names make up just 3% of these teams, they account for a quarter of the competitors in tennis.

4 : Rowing is a popular choice of sport with both Eastern and Southern Europeans. Numbering less than 5% of the 18 teams they account for more than 10% of the competitors entered by these teams for these sports.

5 : Though fewer than 1% of the competitors in these teams were competing at table tennis, a half of the teams' members with East and South East Asian names were table tennis players.

6 : Hispanics box.

7 : Competitors with Black African names gravitate not just to athletics but also to basketball and volleyball.

Contrary to assumptions among the British media, there is little evidence to suggest that there has been any greater success in Britain in involving minority groups in sport than there has been in other countries with large numbers of economic migrants. If the contribution of minority groups to national teams is to be taken as a reliable indicator of the effectiveness of multi-cultural policies, then it would seem that France has been the most effective western nation in this respect, notwithstanding the adverse impressions given by the British media's coverage of recent events.

France is in a unique position among western nations in having harnessed talent from the Muslim community. This contrasts with the situation in Germany, the multi-cultural nature of whose Olympic team is based on the involvement of Eastern Europeans rather than Germany's large Turkish community as indeed is the case in German football and German tennis.

Both Australia and New Zealand, which pride themselves on the size of the minority ethnic groups, have found it relatively difficult to find competitors of Olympic standard from members of minority groups.

The experience of Germany in particular, and of other "western" nations in general, is that people of Eastern European origin constitute the largest potential group for generating competitors of Olympic standard. It is not evident that this target group has been recognised for its potential in Britain or indeed that it is recognised as a particularly important element in the country's multi-cultural character.

Discussion

Studies which sought to associate different races with different levels of intelligence have now created an environment in which people are highly distrustful of enquiries which seek to explore or highlight physical differences between racial groups. Nevertheless the persistent success of athletes of Black African descent in sprints and of East African descent in long distance running make it difficult to believe there are no material differences in physical aptitude between different racial groups.

Evidence from the names of competitors at the London Olympics reinforce the widespread recognition that most ethnic groups have a number of sports at which they excel, whether it is the Chinese at table tennis, the Slavs at tennis, the South East Asians at Badminton or the Hispanics at Boxing.

What is more difficult to establish is where the source of these different aptitudes lie. To what extent do they result in physical and cognitive skills, such as Black Americans at basketball or Chinese at table tennis, to what extent are they related to climate and conditions, such as the Austrians at skiing, the New Zealanders at sailing, cultural dispositions, the Turks at weightlifting or the Italians at archery or to economic opportunities, Black Africans at football or Russian women at tennis?

When people emigrate, how long does it take the cultural preferences of their new culture to replace the cultural preferences of their former culture? How clearly is sport recognised as a pathway towards social acceptance and, in rare cases, economic success?

Is the inclusion of sportsmen and women in national teams the consequence of general social inclusiveness? Or it is more a result of specific sports programmes designed to broaden the pool of talent in a particular sport?

The examination of the names of the Olympic competitors does seem to suggest that sport is an aspect of their new culture to which immigrants do find it easy to relate to. But it suggests that in the absence of intense talent broadening programmes of the sort probably deployed by the French, most immigrants continue to specialise in those sports which were popular in the culture which they left and which may still be important in the minority cultures they now find themselves living.

Reversion to the sports profile of the destination country does seem to be slow. Differences in both the level of engagement and the form of sport do seem capable of outlasting more obvious sources of minority differentiation. From this one has to wonder whether differences in capability extend beyond the more obvious ones associated with clear physical differences, such as speed and distance running, to other finer differences, for example in throwing and in endurance events, which have less obvious physical manifestations, and indeed even to cognitive as distinct from physical skills, as for instance ball skills and ability to hit a target.

The association of particular groups with particular sports, rather than with sport in general, persists after emigration and, on the basis of evidence of people with Celtic names, for multiple generations of immigrants. This supports the contention that genetic predisposition towards particular sports may be much more nuanced than the simplistic “white-black” differentiation and merely in relation to capability at running.

Within the white populations differences do appear to cluster in relation to persistence and versatility, as with the triathlon, and in relation to ball sense, a skill which according to geographic region may manifest itself in tennis, football or water polo.

On the other hand the persistence of interest in table tennis among immigrants to the United States from East Asia supports the contention that sporting preferences persist notwithstanding social and economic change.

Almost without exception the findings of these provisional analyses provide support to “urban myths”.



For further details contact:

Emily Sparks

Webber Phillips

emily.sparks@webberphillips.com