

Sports: A Universal Language of Cultural Exchange, Brotherhood and Empowerment

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** Vol. 13:4 April 2013

Universality of Sports

- “Sport has a unique and irreplaceable capacity to unite people,
going far beyond ethnic, religious or social differences.
I am convinced that sport can be at the long-term service of peace”
- HSH Prince Albert II of Monaco

Sports is a universal language. At its best it can bring people together, no matter what their origin, background, religious beliefs or economic status are. When young people participate in sports or have access to physical education, they can experience real exhilaration even as they learn the ideals of teamwork and tolerance. That is why sports has always been used as a medium of help in the work for peace, and in the efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of international importance. The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2005 as the International Year of Sport and Physical Education. The United Nations Fund for International Partnerships also merits recognition for the important role it plays in fostering sports-related programmes in developing countries.

Language and Sports – Opposite Ends?

There was once a time when Languages and Sport were viewed as being opposite ends of the vocational spectrum, but with the international nature of sport today, there is now a much greater need for the two skills to exist side by side. The most common, and arguably most necessary reason for a sportsman or woman to learn a foreign language would be if they moved abroad to play for, or to represent a foreign team or organisation. Not only do language skills help when it comes to communicating, and successfully playing with new team mates, but learning about the language and culture is also essential when it comes to settling into the new environment. Getting to grips with a new

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language can be great fun, and learning so much about other people and what makes them tick, and immerse oneself in the culture is critical to making it work abroad.

Sports Rekindle the Desire for Learning a Foreign Language

Another reason for sports stars to learn or re-kindle foreign languages is the international nature of so many of the large sporting events that they participate in. Lots of the meets and tournaments are held abroad, and they attract athletes from all kinds of different countries. Whilst it's not essential to be able to converse in foreign languages, given that the announcements and commentary are often conducted in English, it could help sportsmen communicate with foreign peers that they see on a regular basis, and also to overcome any practical language-related issues that apply to anyone visiting foreign cities and countries. Whilst choosing to learn foreign language skills is often born out of necessity for these sportsmen and women, there is no doubt that they are setting a great example for the young people today.

Language of Sports

Sports are an international language everyone can relate to. This globally shared language of sports allows people of different cultures to interact in a way in which it is difficult to ignore another's hidden culture. The language of sports is like Hall's silent language, as it reveals the internal characteristics of a culture. The universal definition of the game is less important than the specific use of the language of sport that gives it meaning. Moreover, the common language of sports allows "outsiders" an access point to understand one another's local culture, as it provides a way to put local rules into practice in a way the "new" person can understand. Hence Americans can understand China through playing a different style of table tennis because they understand the language of the sport, while at the same time, can learn that a new style is reflective of both Chinese culture, as well as ping pong culture. It is here that language becomes a guide to social reality that conditions all of our thinking about social problems and processes and acts as a self-contained, creative symbolic organization that records experience in the truest sense of the word.

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Characteristics of Sports That Help Language Learning

One must consider how sport takes on these characteristics. In the example of ping pong diplomacy, China and the US were unable to communicate effectively partially because they had never engaged in human interaction. The interaction through sports brought two nations together, both of which were unable to discover common grounds for communication. Since the Cold War, the US has developed an appreciation for the benefits of cultural relations. Since the end of the war, the US has seen the education of students from other countries as an essential element in worldwide ideological struggle against communism, especially the totalitarian system of the Soviet Union. According to the UNESCO statistical yearbook, between 1970 and 1978, the US saw an 82 percent increase in foreign student exchanges and in 1981, the Soviet Union saw a 125 percent increase over a ten year period. Apparently, the need to increase cultural relations was clear and present, and the influence of the ping pong diplomacy was instrumental in bringing this need to the forefront of international relations.

Empowerment through Sports

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' International Visitor Leadership Program led a parallel 10-day international exchange program for six sports management professionals. With an emphasis on the administration of women's and girls' soccer programs, the program allowed the visitors to exchange ideas and best practices in the management of sports and recreational programs with their American counterparts. They examined how athletic programs for women and girls promote leadership, teamwork, respect, self awareness and life skills, and how sports and recreation programs can make a positive impact on at-risk and underserved youth. According to a United Nations' 2007 report entitled "Women2000 — Women, Gender, Equality and Sport"- empowering women and girls through sports is an important social and economic empowerment tool.

- Women and girls acquire new interpersonal networks, develop a sense of identity and access new opportunities, allowing them to become more engaged in school and community life;
- Sports serve as a vehicle to improve women's and girls' leadership roles and participation in decision-making;
- Sports convene people across borders, cultures and belief systems, and can promote greater tolerance and understanding among individuals and communities;
- Girls' participation in sports can challenge gender stereotypes and break down entrenched discriminatory attitudes;
- Sports teams and organizations provide an excellent opportunity to provide information and promote dialogue on the importance of girls' education.
- Studies show a direct correlation between girls' participation in sports and higher education and employment attainment; and that a single year of primary education correlates with a 10 – 20 percent increase in women's wages later in life; a single year of secondary education results in a 15 – 25 percent increase.

Conclusion

It is not that merely winning and losing matter in the objectives of sports, but the inborn credentials that it aims to propagate matters much more. The humane expressions and alarming climax of every international sporting tournament is the living witness of what sports is really all about.

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