Case Study

**Ramadan and the Games**

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The Olympic Games is the largest sports event in the world. There are 204 National Olympic Committees that cross 5 continents. Athletes compete in 35 sports, with a combined total of 26, 513 Olympic medallists among their ranks[[1]](#footnote-1). Islam is the second largest religion in the world with over 1 billion followers.

Given the global focus of the Games, and the global presence of Islam, it is interesting that the International Olympic Committee approved the London 2012 Games to run during Ramadan, the holiest month of the Islamic calendar.

During Ramadan, Muslims are expected to abstain from food and drink during daylight hours, which raise potential concerns around the issue of fairness and equality for the 3,000 Muslim athletes that are expected to compete at the 2012 Games. Many Muslim individuals who have applied successfully for volunteer positions will also face difficulties, as will coaches, administrators, and other individuals of Muslim faith who are associated with the Games.

**Fasting During Ramadan**

During the month of Ramadan - the ninth month of the

Islamic calendar - eating and drinking is not allowed during the day. Subsequently, those who fast will typically eat two meals a day; a meal immediately preceding dawn, and a meal immediately following sunset. The duration of the fasting period will depend on the geographical location within which the faster is

located, and the season of the year. A fast can be as long as 18hours a day, depending on these aforementioned factors.

**Managing the Clash**

The clash rests with both the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and LOCOG. The IOC gave bid cities a 7 week window within which they could bid to host the Games (between 15th July and 20th August). Ramadan 2012 takes place from 21st July to 20th August, so there is significant overlap. Part of the rationale for holding the Games during this period was to maximise the opportunity of taking advantage of the school holiday period. Many volunteers were expected to derive from the schools and colleges sector. With London the birthplace of volunteering (a concept that allowed the London

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Games to take place in 1948 in a post-Blitz WWII London), the consideration of volunteerism always remained high on the agenda.

LOCOG employed the Reverend Canon Duncan Green to lead its’ ‘Faith Services’. His remit involved liaising with the leaders of the nine largest religions in London, including leaders of the Muslim religion. LOCOG were not able to resolve the situation of the clash with Ramadan, as the Games could not be moved. However, a number of positive decisions were made to accommodate those of the Muslim faith during the fasting season. Firstly, prayer rooms were installed at each Olympic venue, and the Olympic Village has been designed to include a large multi-faith centre. The

centre will include an area specifically for the use of Muslims. LOCOG also ensured that provision of meals for Muslim participants at the Games be timed to

ensure that adequate food is provided at appropriate times (i.e. when fasting can be broken).

Whilst such arrangements are useful, there have not been adaptations made to the competition schedule, in order to best suit the needs of fasting athletes (for example, the blood sugar of Muslim athletes may be significantly lower later in the day, due to the effects of fasting, which would be likely to exert a detrimental

effect on performance). However, there appear to be difficulties in fast-related performance no matter what time of day events occur. It is also difficult for LOCOG to predict which athletes or teams will compete in which event until the competition takes place.

**The Science of Sport & Fasting**

Some scientists argue that the short-term effects of fasting are potentially minimal, but only if an athlete optimises their nutritional intake between fasting periods. Others report an increase in serum urea and uric acid, attributable to dehydration.

In a paper published in the Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine[[2]](#footnote-2), the effect of intermittent fasting during Ramadan on 5000m running performance in 18 well-trained middle-distance runners was studied. Results concluded that changes in muscular performance and

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oxygen kinetics during Ramadan were likely to adversely affect performance during middle-distance events. During the 2012 Games, many elite middle and long-distance runners will come from Muslim nations in North Africa, meaning that there is a risk of underperformance for these athletes.

It is likely that the performance ability of the individual will be lowered as a result of fasting. The individual may also be more at risk of muscular injury. These issues are exacerbated for any athlete that will be required to compete multiple times within a day or concurrent series of days.

**Learning from the Youth Olympic Games**

The Youth Olympic Games of 2010 also took place during Ramadan. LOCOG have no doubt taken notice of the lessons learned during this event.

The subject of fasting during the holy period of Ramadan during the Youth Games formed the focus of a special edition of the British Journal of Sports Medicine. Articles in this Special Edition highlighted the adverse effects of fasting including disruption to sleep patterns, disruptions to the circadian rhythm, potential heightened risk of injury, and a compromised ability to recover between events.

It remains to be seen whether performance of Muslim athletes will be compromised as a result of the Games being held during Ramadan (NB this will not affect the Paralympic Games). No doubt potential clashes with religious events such as Ramadan will continue to form the focus of many debates over the forthcoming years.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

**British Journal of Sports Medicine, June 2010, Volume 44, Issue 7.**

**Brisswater, J., Bouhlel, E., Falola, J., Abbiss, C.R., Vallier, J., Hauswirth, C.** **(2011).** Effects of Ramadan Intermittent Fasting on Middle-Distance Running Performance in Well-Trained Runners**. *Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine.* Sept 2011, 21 (5) 422-427.**

**Meckel, Y., Ismaeel, A., Eliakim, A. (2008). The effect of the Ramadan fast on the physical performance and dietary habits in adolescent soccer players.**

http://football.org.il/Association/ResearchUnit/ResearchFiles/Ramadan.pdf

**DISCUSSION**

* Do you feel that it is the responsibility of the IOC to cater for the needs of different religions during the Games?
* One of the reasons to hold the Games during the Ramadan period was to take advantage of the school holiday break, partly as a means of maximising volunteering opportunities for young people. Do you feel that the right choice was made?
* With reference to the documents listed in the ‘Further Information’ section, can you identify possible means of managing the problems that Muslim athletes might face during competition?
* Do you feel that medal performances might be compromised as a result of some athletes competing whilst fasting?

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1. *Data taken from the Olympics.org website* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ##  Brisswater, J., Bouhlel, E., Falola, J., Abbiss, C.R., Vallier, J., Hauswirth, C. (2011). Effects of Ramadan Intermittent Fasting on Middle-Distance Running Performance in Well-Trained Runners. *Clinical Journal of Sports Medicine.* Sept 2011, 21 (5) 422-427.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)