

Undoubtedly, the role of an athlete at any major sports competition – including the Olympic and Paralympic Games – is to do their very best to excel within their sport, to beat their personal best, set world records, triumph over their adversaries and ultimately win a place on the winners' Podium. However, some people argue that athletes are also role models and that they have a social responsibility too. We consider examples from the recent Vancouver 2010 Games that illustrate how perceived negative behaviours by athletes caused a flurry of press coverage and negative reporting. Clearly, the focus of the world is not only on sport, but on all of the actions of Olympic and Paralympic athletes.

Wearing Fur

Animal rights activists were vocal in their disdain for the decision of American men's figure skater Johnny Weir to wear a costume made partly of animal fur. Specifically, an animal rights group called Friends of Animals issued an open letter that condemned Weir's costume choice.

Weir's involvement in controversy did not end there. Some Olympic commentators made reference to suppositions of the sexuality of the skater, which caused rancour amongst both the skating community and the Quebec Gay and Lesbian Council.

The Platinum Medal

Russian figure skater Evgeni Plushenko was greatly upset at his 2nd place Silver medal in the men's figure skating free programme, finishing behind the US skater Evan Lysacek. Shortly after the awarding of his Silver medal, Plushenko awarded himself a 'platinum' medal on his official website!

He was later forced to issue a statement claiming that it was not he that updated his website with such information. This was not the only moment when consternation arose from the results of different sporting disciplines. The win of Amy Williams in the Skeleton event was contested as a result of her helmet design – although the complaint was not upheld. Canadians were particularly unhappy with their hockey loss to the USA.

Dropping of the F-Bomb

Shaun White won a Gold medal in the half-pipe events. However, his coach appeared to draw just as much attention as White did himself, by using an expletive live on air as he cheered on his athlete. Surely Keene would not be the first or last coach or commentator to be caught out on air in this way, and many commentators before Keene have been criticised for far worse – and by worse, we mean racist, as in the example of Rush Limbaugh in the US or Ron Atkinson on the UK airwaves.

This was also not the end of controversy for the snow events. Compromising photos of American snowboarder Scott Lago, fellow snowboarder Greg Bretz and an unnamed female were published on Twitter soon after Lago won his Bronze medal. Following the emergence of these photos, Lago issued a public apology and left the City early.

The Crash of Kumaritashvili

The terrible death of the Georgian athlete Kumaritashvili is a tragedy that shook the Games and the world. Coverage of the actual crash was not broadcast by NBC News after their President, Steve Capus, decided that the footage was too

graphic to be aired publicly. Following this terribly tragic event, the Olympic Committee stated that the tragedy was likely caused by an operator's error. However, many other people who were in Vancouver at the time of the tragedy voiced their confusion and sadness at the design of the track itself, which appeared dangerous. After Kumaritashvili's father protested at the Olympic Committee's attribution of the accident to an operator's error, the Olympic committee placed pads on the metal girders that Kumaritashvili had crashed into.

Aboriginal Arguments

Russian ice dancers Oksana Domnina and Maxim Shabalin managed to offend Aboriginal groups via their choice of Aboriginal-themed costumes during one of their performances. The folk-dance themed display appeared to be something of an interpretation of Aboriginal dance. The combination of both dance and costume prompted Aboriginal leaders to state their belief that the ice duo had shown ignorance and made a mockery of Aboriginal culture.

No Sighting of the Spirit of Fair Play?

Canadian curling fans reportedly made Danish curler Madeleine Dupont cry while she competed, by distracting her so much with the loud cheers that she missed two potentially game-winning shots.

START THE DISCUSSION

- Research the concept of role models. Why are they purportedly important in sport?

- Why do you think many people look to sports people for role models?
- Who (if any one) is your role model, and why?
- Do you think that athletes have a responsibility to act ethically and responsibly, and to be a role model, or do you think that this is unfair on them?
- Research the Michael Phelps situation and explain how this illustrates the way that deifying our athletes can be dangerous.
- Which other sports person has fallen spectacularly from golfing grace recently? Has his indiscretions affected your view of him as an athlete?
- How effectively does the IOC provide ethical leadership?

FIND OUT MORE

Why We Should Stop Worshipping Athletes- Unless They're on the Field

<http://www.newsweek.com/2010/03/10/they-re-not-role-models.htm>

Bush, A. J., Martin, C. A., Bush, V. Sports Celebrity Influence on the Behavioural Intentions of Generation Y. Journal of Advertising Research (2004), 44: pp. 108-118 Cambridge University Press.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=216393&jid=JAR&volumeId=44&issueId=01&aid=216391>

CREDITS

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