To International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach
and Members of the IOC Executive Board:
To International Paralympic Committee (IPC) President Andrew Parsons
and Members of the IPC Governing Board:
To IOC Athletes’ Commission President Kirsty Coventry and Members of the IOC Athletes’ Commission:
To IPC Athletes’ Council President Chelsey Gotell and Members of the IPC Athletes’ Council:

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We, the undersigned, write to you in regards to IOC Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter and IPC Section 2.2
of the IPC Handbook, respectively, as well as the IOC Athletes’ Commission Athlete Expression
Consultation Report released on April 21, 2021, and the IOC 50.2 Guidelines for Tokyo 2020 released on
July 2, 2021. Our letter adds to global collective efforts calling for amendments to IOC Rule 50/IPC
Section 2.2 to communicate a commitment to human rights, racial justice, and social inclusion in the
Olympic and Paralympic Movements.

The aforementioned Rules state the following:

“No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in
any Olympic sites, venues or other areas.” (IOC Rule 50)

“No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in
any Paralympic venues or other areas related to the Paralympic games.” (IPC
Section 2.2)

We want to start by acknowledging the IOC’s continued engagement on IOC Rule 50, most notably
through the IOC’s consultation with athletes across the globe. We recognize the changes made to athlete
expression at the Tokyo Games, as released on July 2, 2021. The changes signal that the IOC is open to
continued engagement on IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2 with stakeholders in the Olympic and Paralympic
Movements. While we appreciate the strides the IOC/IPC made in promoting athlete expression, we do
not believe the changes made reflect a commitment to freedom of expression as a fundamental human
right nor to racial and social justice in global sport.

Therefore, with this letter we add a collective voice – representing academic experts, educators and
advocates on the intersection of sport, human rights, and racial/social justice in global society – to call for
amendments to the IOC’s and IPC’s approach to athlete expression generally, and IOC Rule 50.2/IPC
Section 2.2 specifically, while reaffirming a commitment to human rights and racial/social justice in the
Olympic and Paralympic Movements. We believe the global sport community is at a turning point in
matters of racial and social justice, and we call on you as leaders in the Olympic and Paralympic
Movements to make a stronger commitment to human rights, racial/social justice, and social inclusion.

We also write this letter to make clear that the perspective of human rights experts has not been
adequately represented in the documents mentioned above, most notably the IOC Athletes’ Commission
Athlete Expression Consultation Report. We see it as our duty as academic experts, educators, and advocates for global justice as well as advocates for athlete expression as a fundamental human right to strongly disagree with the IOC’s/IPC’s line of argument aimed at maintaining a set of rules that oppresses athlete expression, systemically targets athletes from minoritized communities, counteracts internationally-recognized commitments to freedom of speech, and violates key principles of Olympism, Olympic values, and Paralympic values, most notably those aimed at utilizing sport as a platform for the “harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity” (Fundamental Principle 2, Olympic Charter).

IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2 in their current form and a commitment to the preservation of human dignity are mutually exclusive. The IOC/IPC cannot be committed to the preservation of human dignity while silencing the most vulnerable voices within the Olympic and Paralympic community – as do IOC Rule 50 and IPC Section 2.2. The rules systemically target athletes from minoritized and marginalized communities who often view their time in the Olympic and Paralympic spotlight as a platform to call attention to injustices faced in their home countries and globally. A commitment to human dignity must provide a magnifying glass to athletes calling attention to instances where that dignity is being stripped away.

We join the growing number of voices calling on the IOC and IPC to align IOC Rule 50 and IPC Section 2.2 with the international human rights frameworks outlined by the United Nations. We emphasize that IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2 contradict internationally-recognized commitments to human rights, most notably the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (Article 19). The Declaration guarantees freedom of expression as a fundamental human right that is crucial to the well-being of both individual citizens and societies at large. Freedom of expression was also included as a fundamental right of athletes in the Athletes’ Rights and Responsibilities Declaration presented to and adopted by the 133rd IOC Session in Buenos Aires on behalf of the Olympic Movement, despite the fact that the “Responsibilities” section of the Declaration significantly limited basic human rights.

We recognize that the right to freedom of expression, as most human rights, is not absolute. In fact, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, determined that “everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice” (Article 19, Paragraph 2). The ICCPR makes explicit that “the exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; (b) For the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals.”

Protests and demonstrations in support of human rights and racial and social justice in particular are rooted in a desire to provide vulnerable members of our global community, particularly those who belong
to groups that have historically been excluded, marginalized, or minoritized, with the human dignity that must be at the heart of international sport governance. As such, athlete expression on matters of human rights and racial/social injustice reflects a strong commitment to the rights of others and demonstrates a foundational morality rooted in respect for one another.

We agree with Global Athlete that “the Olympic [and Paralympic] podium is a media of communication to the world, and the Olympic [and Paralympic] frontier cannot be a barrier to human rights.”

We agree with the Australian Human Rights Institute that “freedom of expression is an enabling right, facilitating the exercise of other human rights. For women and minority Olympians, the IOC [and IPC] has additional positive obligations to ensure their voices and opinions are heard. Once they have earned their Olympic [and Paralympic] power on the field, there is a lot to gain from the international spotlight provided during the medal ceremony.”

We agree with the Centre for Sport and Human Rights that “the right to freedom of expression as set out in international human rights standards must be exercised responsibly. In essence, this means it does not permit expression that incites hate or violence or that is intolerant of other individuals or groups. … it is important to emphasise that in the context of human rights, all positions, not just the majority, must be given voice, especially those of more marginalised or minority views.”

We agree with the athlete groups and National Olympic and Paralympic Committees across the globe that have called for amendments to the rule to center a commitment to human rights and racial/social justice.

We agree with the Team USA Council on Racial and Social Justice that “human rights are not political; yet, they have been politicized both in the U.S. and globally to perpetuate the wrongful and dehumanizing myth of sport as an inherently neutral domain. We call on the IOC and IPC to recognize how the myth of the neutrality of sport in general, and the wording of IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2 as well as the IOC AC recommendations specifically, work to reinforce unjust power relations in global sport. They target historically marginalized and minoritized populations within the Olympic and Paralympic community, most notably Black athletes and athletes of color, who have competed and excelled in Olympic and Paralympic Games against the backdrop of various social injustices and turmoil. … Therefore, the ability to stay neutral in times of oppression is an expression of privilege that is granted only to those in whose image the Games were created.”

We agree with the DOSB Athletes’ Commission and Athleten Deutschland e.V. that “athletes have great inspirational power and can be important drivers of social change” and “athletes must be able to use their public visibility for statements of social relevance in recourse to their own freedom of expression.”

We agree with the New Zealand Olympic Committee Athletes’ Commission that “believes a framework that permits free speech within Olympic Venues be developed. The framework should ensure any element of free speech does not incite, hate, violence or is intolerant of minorities and its expression aligns with the Olympic Values of excellence, friendship, and respect.”
Responses to these calls from the IOC/IPC and IOC Athletes Commission have rested on two main arguments: (a) IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2 must stay intact to preserve the neutrality of the Games, and (b) the majority of athletes support IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2 and do not view specific spaces—such as the podium or field of play—as appropriate avenues for social commentary and protests or demonstrations. Neither of these lines of argumentation demonstrate a commitment to (or understanding of) human rights violations and, in extension, the perseverance of the human dignity of athletes.

In regards to the first argument, we emphasize that neutrality is never neutral. As a reflection of society at large, sport is not immune to the social ills—white supremacy and racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and xenophobia to name a few—that have created global inequities. Systemic injustices are implemented into every fabric of the institutions governing global sport, including the IOC and IPC. To eradicate them from global sport, these institutions of sport governance must proactively review the policies, practices, and procedures that make up their existence and reinforce systemic inequities and injustices. Staying neutral means staying silent, and staying silent means supporting ongoing injustice.

In regards to the second argument, we must call into question some of the empirical data used to represent a collective athlete voice opposed to amending IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2. On April 21, 2021, the IOC Athletes’ Commission, led by Kirsty Coventry, published the results of a year-long consultation process with athletes across the globe regarding their opinions about IOC Rule 50 broadly and athlete protests and demonstrations specifically. Drawing from responses from 3,547 Olympians representing 185 National Olympic Committees (NOCs), the report stated that “it was apparent that the majority of athletes did not deem it appropriate for athletes to express individual views during the Opening Ceremony, on the podium or on the field of play.” However, the report provides no information on racial/ethnic demographics or insights into the research instrument used and steps taken to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the data. Athletes have shared with us that the questions in the survey were leading. As a result, we call into question that the consultation, as stated, adheres “to the most rigorous scientific standard.” In addition, the consultation stated it received “feedback from human rights experts” and “the IOC AC has consulted with respected experts in the field of human rights to gain their perspectives on freedom of expression and Rule 50.2”—yet the IOC AC fails to articulate clearly enough (a) whom the IOC AC consulted specifically, (b) what qualified them to speak as experts on human rights, and (c) how the human rights expertise from the person(s) consulted impacted the final report. As internationally recognized experts on the intersection of sport, human rights, racial/social justice, and society, we do not believe that any human rights expert would support IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2. Further information is needed on how the IOC AC utilized the expertise of human rights experts to come to the recommendations outlined in the consultation report. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, solutions to the violation of human rights and jeopardization of human dignity must center the voices of those affected disproportionately by such violations: that is, members of groups that have historically been excluded, marginalized, or minoritized. Their voices seem absent in the consultation report, further calling into question the rigor and validity of the report.

We believe our collective expertise adds value to the ongoing conversation about the restrictions imposed by IOC Rule 50.2/IPC Section 2.2. Therefore, we strongly call on the IOC/IPC, IOC Athletes Commission, and IPC Athletes Council to do the following:
1. For the Tokyo and Beijing Games, refrain from imposing sanctions on athletes protesting and demonstrating in accordance with internationally-recognized human rights frameworks, as outlined above, in any Olympic/Paralympic sites, venues or other areas – including the podium. These frameworks protect protests in support of racial and social justice (e.g., kneeling, raising one’s fist). They do not protect hate speech or protests/demonstrations discriminatory in nature.

2. Upon conclusion of the Beijing Games, commit to a comprehensive review of IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2 in collaboration with the IOC Advisory Committee on Human Rights and independent human rights experts to align the rule with internationally-recognized human rights frameworks, as outlined above. This review should pay close attention to the wording used in IOC Rule 50/IPC Section 2.2, particularly to the use of “racial propaganda” in this context. We recommend removing this language from the rules.

3. Amend the Athletes’ Rights & Responsibilities Declaration in accordance with internationally-recognized human rights frameworks, as outlined above.

4. Adopt an Eighth Principle of Olympism focused specifically on human rights (see the October 2019 proposal of Athletes CAN, Athletes Germany, Global Athlete, the New Zealand Athletes Federation, and the United States Olympic & Paralympic Athletes Advisory Council; access here).

In a fall 2018 press release, IOC President Bach was quoted saying that “our mission, to put sport at the service of humanity, goes hand-in-hand with human rights, which is part of our DNA.” We call on President Bach and the IOC Executive Board, President Parsons and the IPC Governing Board, as well as the IOC Athletes’ Commission and IPC Athletes’ Council to heed this call for leadership that centers a commitment to human rights and join us in fighting for a world in which all athletes are provided with human dignity and fundamental human rights.

Sincerely,

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