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:  

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, counters 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 disproportionally 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,

SIGNATORIES

Dr. Mahfoud Amara, Associate Professor, Sport management & Social Sciences, College of Education,
Qatar University
Dr. Shaun M. Anderson, Associate Professor of Organizational Communication/Faculty Advisor,
Institute for Business Ethics and Sustainability, Loyola Marymount University
David L. Andrews, Ph.D., Professor, University of Maryland
Michael Atkinson, Ph.D., Professor, Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education, The University of
Toronto
Anna Baeth, Ph.D., Director of Research, Athlete Ally
Megan Bartlett, Co-Founder, The Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport
Andrew C. Billings, Ph.D., Ronald Reagan Chair of Broadcasting & Executive Director, Alabama
Program in Sport Communication, The University of Alabama
Dr. Lindsey Blom, Professor, Ball State University
Jules Boykoff, Professor, Department of Politics and Government, Pacific University, USA
Dr. Cheri L. Bradish, Associate Professor, Founder/Managing Director, Future of Sport Lab (FSL), Ted Rogers Director, Sport Business Initiatives, Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson University
Evan Brody, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Kentucky
Scott N. Brooks, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sociology, Director of Research, Global Sport Institute, Arizona State University
Dr. Letisha Engracia Cardoso Brown, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Virginia Polytechnic and State University
David L. Brunsma, Professor of Sociology, Virginia Polytechnic and State University
Laura J. Burton, Ph.D., Department Head, Educational Leadership & Professor, Sport Management, University of Connecticut
Ted Butryn, Ph.D., Professor of Sport Psychology and Sport Sociology, San Jose State University
Michael L. Butterworth, Director, Center for Sports Communication & Media & Governor Ann W. Richards Chair for the Texas Program in Sports and Media, Department of Communication Studies, Moody College of Communication, The University of Texas at Austin
Candace Cable, Human Rights Activist & USOPC Hall of Fame 9 time Paralympian
Akilah Carter- Francique, Ph.D., Executive Director for the Institute for the Study of Sport, Society and Social Change & Associate Professor, Department of African American Studies, San José State University
Dr. Georgia Cervin, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Western Australia
Professor Supriya Chaudhuri, Professor Emerita, Jadavpur University, India
Dr. Megan Chawansky, Assistant Professor, Department of Health & Sport Sciences (HSS), Otterbein University
Jay Coakley, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Sociology Department, University of Colorado
Lindsay Kagawa Colas, EVP Wasserman
Cheryl Cooky, Professor, Purdue University
Joseph N. Cooper, Ph.D., Dr. J. Keith Motley Endowed Chair of Sport Leadership and Administration & Special Assistant to the Chancellor for Black Life & Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts Boston
Dr. Courtney M. Cox, Assistant Professor, Department of Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies, University of Oregon
Lindsay M. Cramer, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Coastal Carolina University
Danny Cullinane, UK Board member, The True Athlete Project
Simon C. Darnell, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Sport for Development & Peace Director, Centre for Sport Policy Studies, University of Toronto
Paulo David, Author, Human Rights in Youth Sports
Mike de la Rocha, Co-Founder, Revolve Impact
Raquel Delgado, Deputy Executive Director, Generation Hip Hop Global
Alison Mariella Désir, Co-Chair, Running Industry Diversity Team
Peter Donnelly, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto
Dr. Brian Dooley, Visiting Scholar, University College London
Laura Douglas, Interim President & CEO, Muhammad Ali Center
Zachary Draves, Program Director for Sexual Assault Prevention Education, Augustana College
Nikki Dryden, OLY, JD, Associate Australian Human Rights Institute
Antoine Duval, Senior Researcher, Asse Institute
Harry Edwards, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, University of California Berkeley
Brenda Elsey, Professor, History/Latin America and Caribbean Studies, Hofstra University
Joanie Evans, Co-President of The Federation of Gay Games
Grant Farred, Professor, Cornell University
Ted Fay, Ph.D., Co-Director, Laboratory for Inclusion & Diversity in Sport, Isenberg School of Management, UMass Amherst & Paralympian - 1980
Mia Fischer, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Communication, University of Colorado Denver
Sean Fitzgerald, Co-President of The Federation of Gay Games
Craig Foster AM, Retired Socceroo, Adjunct Professor, Torrens University
Dr. Evan Frederick, Associate Professor, Sport Administration, University of Louisville
Simone Fullagar, Professor, Sport Management, Griffith University
Linda K. Fuller, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, Communications Department, Worcester State College
Tomika Ferguson, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University
David Flynn, Co-Founder & Executive Director, The Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport
Mara Gubuan, Founder and CEO, Equality League
Dr. Natalie Galea, OLY, Postdoctoral Fellow, Australian Human Rights Institute
David Gallup, President & General Counsel, World Service Authority
Alicia Garza, Principal, Black to the Future Action Fund
Pat Griffin, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Marie Hardin, Ph.D., Professor and Dean, Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, Penn State University
Karen L. Hartman, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Idaho State University & Executive Director, International Association for Communication and Sport
Dr. Damian Haslett, Postdoctoral Research Associate, Loughborough University London
Billy Hawkins, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Health and Human Performance & Associate Dean for Faculty and Student Success, College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences, University of Houston
Tracey Hathaway, Chief Academic and Athletics Office, The athLEDA Foundation
Dr. Daniela Heerdt, Independent Researcher & Consultant for Sport and Human Rights
Erin Herbert, Director of Programming, Muhammad Ali Center
Matthew R. Hodler, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Sport Media & Communication, University of Rhode Island
P. David Howe, Ph.D., Dr Frank Hayden Endowed Chair in Sport and Social Impact, Faculty of Health Sciences, Western University Canada
Mary Hums, Ph.D., Professor, Sport Administration, University of Louisville
Paul Hunt, Senior Project Manager, International Platform on Sport and Development
Darlene Hunter, Ph.D., Assistant Professor in Practice, University of Texas at Arlington
Dr. Satoko Itani, Kansai University, Japan
Terri Jackson, WNBPA Executive Director
Rene Jon-Sandy, CEO, Hip Hop Loves
Janelle Joseph, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Toronto
Nathan Kalmaan-Lamb, Ph.D., Lecturing Fellow, Duke University
Amy Farkas Karageorgos, AFK Inclusive Solutions
Katrina Karkazis, Ph.D., MPH, Professor of Sexuality, Women’s & Gender Studies, Amherst College
Jeffrey W. Kassing, Professor, Communication Studies, School of Social & Behavioral Sciences, Arizona State University
Zak Kaufman, MSc Ph.D., Co-founder, CEO, Vera Solutions & Founding Editor, Journal of Sport for Development
Bruce Kidd, O.C., OLY, Ph.D., LL.D., Professor Emeritus, University of Toronto
David Kiley, Founder of DK3 & 9-time Paralympic Gold Medalist
Yannick Kluch, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Sport Leadership & Director of Outreach and Inclusive Excellence, Center for Sport Leadership, Virginia Commonwealth University
Rob Koehler, Director General, Global Athlete
Karin Korb, Public Health Consultant & Paralympian '00, '04
Johann Olav Koss, OLY, Founder, Right to Play
Phaidra Knight, Athlete/Founder/President, Women’s Sports Foundation
Pierre-Luc Laliberté, President, AthletesCAN
Dr. Richard Lapchick, Chair of DeVos Sport Business Management Program & Director, Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport & President, The Institute for Sport and Social Justice, University of Central Florida

Dr. Jennifer Lape Kaiser, Assistant Professor of Kinesiology, Northern Kentucky University

Dr. Katherine L. Lavelle, Associate Professor, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (USA)

Carrie W. LeCrom, Ph.D., Executive Director, Center for Sport Leadership, Virginia Commonwealth University

Helen Jefferson Lenskyj, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, University of Toronto, Canada

Anne Lieberman, Director of Policy & Programs, Athlete Ally

Philippe Liotard, Professor, Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1

Matthew P. Llewellyn, Ph.D., Professor, Kinesiology & Co-Director, Center for Socio-Cultural Sport and Olympic Research (CSSOR), California State University, Fullerton

Janet E Lord, Senior Fellow, Harvard Law School Project on Disability

Gabriel Mayr, International Sport for Development Consultant

Dr. David McArdle, Head of Stirling Law School, Stirling University, Scotland

Rory Magrath, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sociology, Solent University, Southampton, UK

Eric Martin, Ph.D., Assistant Professor & Co-Director Center for Physical Activity and Sport (CPAS), Boise State University

Ryan Martin, Director of Inclusive Sports, City University of New York (CUNY)

Jennifer McClearen, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Texas at Austin

Jennifer (Bruening) McGarry, Ph.D., Professor & Executive Director, Husky Sport, University of Connecticut

Lindsey Meán, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Arizona State University

Dr. Johanna Mellis, Assistant Professor of World History, Ursinus College & Co-host, End of Sport podcast

E. Nicole Melton, Ph.D., Associate Chair & Associate Professor, UMass Amherst


Laura Misener, Ph.D., Director, School of Kinesiology, Professor and Faculty Scholar, Western University

Glenn Mitoma, Director, Dodd Human Rights Impact, Assistant Professor of Human Rights and Education, University of Connecticut

Payoshni Mitra, Ph.D., Athlete Advocate & Board Member, Centre for Sport and Human Rights

Jeffrey Montez de Oca, Professor of Sociology, University of Colorado Colorado Springs

Anita Moorman, JD, Professor of Sport Law/Administration, University of Louisville

Edwin Moses, OLY, Chairman, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation

Korryn D. Mozisek, Ph.D., Director of Integrative Learning and Special Faculty, Carnegie Mellon University

Dr. Oscar Mwaanga, Associate Professor & Programme Director, International Sports Management & Innovation, University of London Worldwide

Joshua Nadel, Professor, Department of History, North Carolina Central University

Kenneth Noel, Ph.D., Sport Sociologist, Educator, Advocate

Professor Justine Nolan, UNSW Faculty of Law, Director Australian Human Rights Institute

Delise O’Meally, CEO, Institute for Sport and Social Justice

Carole A. Oglesby, Ph.D., Ph.D., Former President, WomenSport International & Former Co-Chair, International Working Group & Professor Emeritus, Temple University

Dr. Aurélie Pankowiak, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University

Sam Parfitt, CEO, The True Athlete Project

Joanne Pasternack, President + Chief Impact Officer, Oliver+Rose & Co-Founder + Chief Strategy Officer, Athletes’ Voices
Dr. Seema Patel, LLB (Hons), LLM, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer in Law, Gender Discrimination in Sport Expert, Nottingham Law School
Dr. Adele Pavlidis, Senior Lecturer, Griffith University
Ann Peel, J.D., Founding Chair, AthletesCAN
Dr. Danielle Peers, Associate Professor, Canada Research Chair in Disability and Movement Cultures, University of Alberta
Carmen Pérez, Associate Professor of Public International Law, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
Dr. Stacey Pope, Associate Professor, Department of Sport and Exercise Sciences, Durham University
Piara Powar, Executive Director, Fare Network
Dr. Arnaud Richard, Associate Professor, University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 (France)
Robert E. Rinehart, Associate Professor (retired), University of Waikato
Prof. Dr. Katia Rubio, Professora Associada, Faculdade de Educação, Departamento de Metodologia do Ensino e Educação Comparada, Universidade de São Paulo
Dr. Ben Sanders, Senior Consultant, The International Platform on Sport and Development
Dr. Samuel H. Schmidt, Assistant Professor - Sport Management, University of Wisconsin - La Crosse
Dr. Debbie Sharnak, Assistant Professor of History and International Studies & Director of Human Rights Initiatives, Rowan Center for the Study of Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights, Rowan University
Professor Emma Sherry, Department of Management and Marketing, Swinburne University
Professor Michael Silk, Director, Sport & Physical Activity Research Centre, Bournemouth University
Sarbjit Singh, Professor, Farmingdale State College
Brett Smith, Professor of Disability and Physical Activity, Durham University
Deloise Smith, Advocate
Marjorie Snyder, Senior Research Advisor, Women's Sports Foundation
Antonio Sotomayor, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Librarian, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Ellen J. Staurowsky, Ed.D., Professor, Sports Media, Roy H. Park School of Communications, Ithaca College
Dr. Ryan Storr, Senior Research Fellow, Swinburne University
Mizuho Takemura, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Faculty of Sport Sciences, Nihon Fukushi University (Japan Welfare University)

Christian Taylor, US Olympian & President of the Athletics Association
Hudson Taylor, Founder & Executive Director, Athlete Ally
Stanley Thangaraj, Associate Professor of Anthropology, Gender Studies, and International Studies, City College of New York
Professor Holly Thorpe, Te Huataki Waiora/School of Health, University of Waikato
Pharlone Toussaint, Director Of External Affairs, The Center for Healing and Justice Through Sport
A. Travers (they/them/their pronouns), Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University & Deputy Editor, Gender and Society
Georgina Truman, Manager, Athlete Relations and Operations, AthletesCAN
Robert Turick, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sport Administration, Ball State University
Khirey Walker, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sport Administration, Ball State University
Dr. Jon Welty Peachey, Associate Professor, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Stephanie Wheeler, Head Coach, Women’s Wheelchair Basketball & Doctoral Candidate, Cultural Kinesiology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Erin Whiteside, Associate Professor of Journalism & Electronic Media, University of Tennessee
Meredith A. Whitley, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Adelphi University
Collin D. Williams Jr, Ph.D., Senior Director, Curriculum, RISE
Eli A. Wolff, Director, Power of Sport Lab, 1996 & 2004 Soccer Paralympian
Erit Yellen, Adjunct Professor, Sports, USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism
Akim Aliu, Pro Hockey Player
Laila Ali, Former 4-Time World Champion Boxer
Anna Bentley-Ward, Olympic athlete
Gwen Berry, Olympic Hammer Thrower
Dr. Cath Bishop, British rowing Olympian 1996, 2000, 2004
Pam Boteler, Elite Canoeist
Dr. Eva Carneiro, Sports doctor
Dr. John Carlos, OLY
Mary Cohen, Fencing GB Team
Gaz Choudry, Paralympic athlete
Ruaraidh Collar, Water polo player
Will Deary, British athlete
Abby Dunkin, US Paralympian
Lauren Flesman, USA Athlete & Athlete Advocate/Oiselle/USATF Registered Coach
Jo Fourtanier, Rower and Performance Coach
Laurence Halsted, Great Britain Olympian, 2012 & 2016
Dr. Clare Halsted, Olympian and International Fencing Federation Medical Commission member
Mark Hawkins, Olympic athlete
Catherine Hearn, Canoe Kayak Olympic Athlete & Coach
Race Imboden, Olympian
Jennifer Kessy, Beach Volleyball
Curtis McDowald, Fencing
Cody Mattern, OLY
Alysia Montaño, USA Olympian/Maternal Rights Advocate/Co-founder of & Mother
Ibtihaj Muhammad, Olympian
Lindsey Napela Berg, Olympic/Pro Volleyball
Greta Neimanas, 2008 & 2012 Paralympian and AAC Vice-Chair, Team USA
Murray Parfitt, British tennis player and coach
Tristan Parris, Olympic coach
Nzingha Prescod, Olympian
Jason Pryor, 2016 Olympian, Team USA
Yeisser Ramirez, Fencing
Goldie Sayers, Olympic athlete and coach
Danielle Scott, Olympian
Etienne Stott MBE, Olympic Gold medalist, Whitewater slalom, London 2012
Tommie Smith, OLY
Kat Smith Taylor, GBR Fencing Team
Zach Steffen, Founder, VOYCE NOW Foundation, Manchester City and the US Men’s National Team
Anna Turney, Paralympian, Alpine Skiing 2010 & 2014
Jahziah Williams, British T38 sprinter
Iris Zimmermann, 2000 Olympian, Team USA
ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORTERS

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CHUS Healing and Justice through Sport

Generation Hip Hop Global

FARE

Hip Hop Loves Foundation

Global Athlete

Federation of Gay Games

Olympism Project Making Ideals Real

The True Athlete Project

Power of Sport
ADDENDUM: ADDITIONAL SIGNATORIES

Kwame Agyemang, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sport Management, Department of Human Sciences, The Ohio State University
Shireen Ahmed, Sports Activist & Journalist, Burn It All Down Podcast
Allison Allouche, Director of Operations, Oakland Lacrosse Club
Mubarak Awad, President, Nonviolence International
Dr. Kathy Babiak, Professor & Director, Michigan Center for Sport and Social Responsibility, University of Michigan
Laura Baldwin, Olympic Coach 2012 & 2016 (Australian Team 2012, Hungarian Team 2016), Sailing, Great Britain
Dr. Amy Bass, Professor, Sport Studies, Manhattanville College
Michael A. Beer, Executive Director, Nonviolence International
Lisa Blumenband, independent/no affiliation
Dr. Lauren E. Brown, Associate Professor, DeSales University
Emma Calow, Bowling Green State University
Vanessa Chakour, Founder, Sacred Warrior
Rebecca A. Clark, Ph.D., CMPC, LCSW, Mental Performance Consultant, US Sports Envoy & Psychotherapist
Jade Coniglio, independent/no affiliation
Chic Dambach, Former President, Pan American Canoe Racing Council
Dr. Amira Rose Davis, Assistant Professor of History and African American Studies, Penn State University
Ines Diaz, independent/no affiliation
Sky Dickinson, Director of Global Sports & Inclusivity, The SpringHill Company
Andy Driska, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Michigan State University
Stanis Elsborg, Senior Analyst, Play the Game
Rich Ferraro, Chief Communications Officer, GLAAD
Simone Fullagar, Ph.D., Professor & Chair, Sport and Gender Equity Research Hub, Griffith University
Daniel Haas, Editor-in-chief, PlayersPrayers
Tim Harper, Executive Director, equitysport
Lyndsay Hayhurst, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, York Research Chair (Tier 2) in Sport, Gender & Development and Digital Participatory Research, School of Kinesiology and Health Science, York University
Dr. Kerri Heffernan, Director, Women's Rugby Coaches Association
Kathryn Henne, Ph.D., Professor, The Australian National University
Mark James, Professor of Sports Law, Manchester Metropolitan University
Valdea D. Jennings, Ed.D., Behavioral Scientist, Retired
Janice John, independent/no affiliation
Shannon Jolly, Ph.D. Student, Sport Management & Policy, University of Georgia
Megan Kahl, independent/no affiliation
Kiki, CEO, Editor-in-Chief, BlackHistoryEveryday.com
Jorge Knijnik, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Western Sydney University
Amanda Koba, Ph.D., Professor, Bowling Green State University
Vikki Krane, Ph.D., Professor, School of Human Movement, Sport, & Leisure Studies, Bowling Green State University
Andrew M. Lindner, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sociology, Skidmore College
Pau Mateu, Ph.D., independent/no affiliation
Robert S. Marshall, independent/no affiliation
Christopher McLeod, Coach, OutCompete
Erin Morris, Ph.D., Associate Professor, State University of New York College at Cortland
Valerie Moyer, Ph.D. Candidate, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Stony Brook University
Mandy Murphy, Founder, MNM Strategy LLC & Strategist, Athletes’ Voices
Kayli Nichols, independent/no affiliation
Christine O’Bonsawin, Ph.D., Associate Professor, University of Victoria
Mary Emily O’Hara, Rapid Response Manager, GLAAD
Maria Papaefstathiou, Ph.D., Independent Researcher
Ann Pegoraro, Ph.D., Lang Chair in Sport Management & Co-Director of E-Alliance, the National Research Network for Gender Equity in Sport, University of Guelph
Marisa Reich, Chairwoman, She Sports Switzerland
Brenda Riemer, Ph.D., Professor, Eastern Michigan University
Martha Saavedra, Ph.D., Associate Director, Center for African Studies, University of California, Berkeley & Board Member, Sports Africa
Katrina Sarkis, independent/no affiliation
Travis R. Scheckler, Ph.D. Student, The Ohio State University
Alex Schmider, Producer, Changing The Game
Jaime Schultz, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Kinesiology, Pennsylvania State University
Jens Sejer Andersen, International Director, Play the Game
Suleman Seidu, Love For All
Nina Siegfried, Ph.D. Candidate, Sport Administration, University of Louisville
Derek Silva, Ph.D., Associate Professor, King’s University College
Joseph Smith, Director of Programs, PeacePlayers International
Lauren Smith, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sports Media, Indiana University
Toni Smith-Thompson, Senior Organizer, New York Civil Liberties Union
Alex Soejarto, Founder, Out Athlete Fund
Joanna Stahl, Founder biz dev, Go2Practice
Mori Taheripour, Legal Studies and Business Ethics Department, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania
Walter Tchougoue, MBA/MS in Sport Management Candidate, Isenberg School of Management, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Enid Trucios-Haynes, Director and Professor of Law, University of Louisville, Muhammad Ali Institute for Peace and Justice
Michele Verroken, Director, Sporting Integrity Ltd.
Nefertiti A. Walker, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sport Management & Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion/Chief Diversity Officer, University of Massachusetts Amherst
Dr. Karen Weaver, Graduate Faculty, University of Pennsylvania
Anthony Weems, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Florida International University
Dr. Indigo Willing, Griffith Sport and Gender Equity Network, Griffith University

ADDENDUM: ADDITIONAL ATHLETE SUPPORTERS

Oonagh Cousins, Athlete, Rowing, Great Britain
Ben Leitch, Athlete, Wheelchair Basketball, Scotland
Sam Mattis, Athlete, 2021 Olympian, Track and Field, USA
Moushaumi Robinson, Athlete, 2004 Olympic Gold Medalist, Track and Field, USA & Chair, Team USA Council on Racial & Social Justice
Raven Saunders, Athlete, 2021 Olympian, Track and Field, USA
Rudy G. Winkler, Athlete, 2016/2021 Olympian, Track and Field, USA
Melissa Wilson, Athlete, GB Rowing Team and Champions for Earth, Rowing, Great Britain
Alex Young, Athlete, 2021 Olympian, Track and Field, US