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**Book**

## Action Sports and the Olympic Games: Past, Present, Future

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*Routledge Critical Studies in Sport*

# **ACTION SPORTS AND THE OLYMPIC GAMES**

## **PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE**

Belinda Wheaton and Holly Thorpe



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# Action Sports and the Olympic Games

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Based on a decade of research by two leading action sports scholars, this book maps the relationship between action sports and the Olympic Movement, from the inclusion of the first action sports to those featuring for the first time in the Tokyo Olympic Games and beyond.

In an effort to remain relevant to younger audiences, four new action sports, surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, and BMX freestyle were included in the Tokyo Olympic program. Drawing upon interviews with Olympic insiders, as well as leaders, athletes and participants in these action sports communities, the book details the impacts on the action sports industry and cultures, and offers national comparisons to show the uneven effects resulting from Olympic inclusion. It reveals the intricate workings of power and politics in contemporary sports organisations, and maps key trends in this changing sporting landscape.

*Action Sports and the Olympic Games* is a fascinating read for anybody studying the Olympics, the sociology of sport, action sports, or sport policy.

**Belinda Wheaton** is Professor of Sociology of Sport at the University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand.

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# Action Sports and the Olympic Games

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Past, Present, Future

Belinda Wheaton and Holly Thorpe

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# Introducing action sports and the Olympic Games

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It is December 2020, the end of a very challenging year for most, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has just made the official announcement that breaking (also known as breakdancing), alongside surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing, will be included in the Paris 2024 Olympics (IOC, 2020). The inclusion of these four new sports has come at the expense of reducing existing events, with weightlifting and boxing taking the biggest hit in numbers. For those of us who have been observing and researching the Olympic Games inclusion of such new “sports” for many years, the announcement was no surprise. The processes behind this decision have been underway for over 20 years. However, for many around the world, this announcement was shocking. As Nicholas Rowe wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper about the inclusion of breaking, people “are baffled as to how this underground, urban, rabble-rousing past-time dared to bounce its way across the marbled pantheon of Mt Olympus” (Rowe, 2020). In media commentaries it was argued that this is not the Olympics people have known and loved, provoking questions such as: where are the Olympics going? What is the IOC doing? How has this happened? Are these activities really “sports” worthy of Olympic inclusion? For example, an Australian squash champion quoted in another *Guardian* article argued:

The Olympics was all about a score, or it was a running race. There was a definitive answer and results to sports. You bring in all these judging things and it just gets so corrupt and so out of control. I just don't get it anymore.... The Olympics has lost what it was. Yes they're trying to move with the times but it's creating a mockery of the thing.

(Olympic branded a ‘mockery’, 2020)

The Paris 2024 organisers said their aim was to include “sports that can be shared on social media, sports that are a means of getting around, forms of expression, lifestyles in their own right, sports that are practiced every day, in the street and elsewhere” (Keh, 2019). This rhetoric, as explained by the IOC President Thomas Bach, is “the result of the Olympic Agenda 2020... We had a clear priority to introduce sports (that are) particularly popular among the younger generation and

taking into consideration the urbanisation of sport” (World reacts, 2020). In other words, the IOC is responding to a quickly changing sporting and sport-media landscape, and the future relevance of the Olympic Games depends on it. In this book we reveal the multi-layered and complex processes and politics that have led to this moment. Drawing upon a decade of collaborative research, we illustrate the development of the relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games, and the significant changes that have occurred since the inclusion of the first action sports in the 1980s and 1990s (i.e., windsurfing, snowboarding, mountain biking) to those featuring for the first time in Tokyo 2020 (i.e., surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, BMX freestyle), to the contemporary moment of the Paris 2024 decision and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

### **The IOC: seeking youth in a changing sporting landscape**

An important and mounting issue for the contemporary Olympic Movement is how to remain relevant to younger generations. While the Summer Olympics are considered the most watched sporting spectacle in the world, and the pinnacle in the careers of many athletes (Horne & Whannel, 2020; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011), the continuing relevance of the Olympics in the contemporary mediascape has been questioned (Horne & Whannel, 2020). Significantly, the numbers of young Olympic viewers have been diminishing, particularly in core consumer markets such as the USA. The median age of US viewers for the 2008 Beijing Olympics was 47, rising to 48 for the 2012 London Games, and 53 for the 2016 Rio Games (Chang, 2016; Lombardo & Broughton, 2017). Another study showed that between London and Rio there was a 30% drop in TV viewers between the ages of 18 and 34 (Flint & Vranica, 2016).

There are many potential factors contributing to this aging demographic. On one hand sports consumption patterns are changing, with new media technologies providing multiple different ways to consume sport beyond television. Younger viewers’ media consumption practices have long differed from previous generations (Lines, 2000). Television-based sports are increasingly competing for the attention of young people, particularly teenage boys, with a broad range of popular leisure activities including the internet, music, video games, and e-sports (Brian et al., 2020; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012; Singer, 2017; Yim et al., 2020). These trends have also impacted the audiences for previously popular national team sports such as basketball and baseball in the USA, which have been decreasing, along with participation figures (Kellett & Russell, 2009; Ourand & Karp, 2012). Similar trends have been documented across many national contexts (e.g. Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017; Hajkowitz et al., 2013; Jeanes et al., 2019).

The aging demographics of Olympic viewers is a key concern for the Olympic Movement (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b). In sports marketing terms so called Z and Y consumers are highly desirable targets for corporations with power and influence (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). Yet, as Bennett and Lachowetz (2004)

discuss, while the youth or Gen Y market is highly coveted, it is also one that is considered “difficult to reach and to influence” (p. 239). The action sport “genre” was a consistently growing section of the sports industry through the 1990s and 2000s, widely linked with “elusive Generation Y market” in the USA (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004, p. 239; Bennett, Sagas, & Dees, 2006; Kellett & Russell, 2009). The growth from the late 1990s of action sports events such as the X Games and the Gravity Games can be seen as attempts by broadcasters, marketers, and advertisers to actively commodify action sports into a package to reach the Gen Y market (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004; Kusz, 2004; Rinehart, 1998; Thorpe, 2014). In contrast to the Olympics, the median audience for the X Games during this period was aged 20 (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, p. 833). According to Giannoulakis and Krol Pursglove (2017), members of Gen Y continue to “consume action sports more than any preceding generation, leading some to label action sports as ‘Gen-Y sports’” (p. 141). Furthermore, the action sport industry itself has been a willing partner in this process. Despite being initially characterised as countercultural and niche, the action sport industry has long been profit-driven, with entrepreneurial individuals creating opportunities to sustain their lifestyles and benefit financially (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Kusz, 2004; Rinehart, 2008; Rinehart & Sydor, 2003).

Acknowledging the challenges of appealing to contemporary youth, and recognising many of whom are practicing and consuming sport differently to previous generations (see Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018), the IOC has made various efforts to attract younger audiences including the incorporation of a range of individualistic, youth-focused action sports into both the Summer (i.e. windsurfing [1984], mountain biking [1996], snowboarding [1998], BMX racing [2000]) and the Winter (e.g. snowboarding [1998], skier cross [2010]) Olympic Programmes (see Chapter 4). Other key initiatives were The Youth Olympics (YOG) (inaugural held in Singapore in 2010) and the Olympic internet TV channel (launched in 2016). Since 2010, the YOG have continued to become an important “testing ground” for trialling new sports (i.e., kiteboarding, breaking, parkour, skateboarding, basketball 3x3), new modes of representation (i.e., more social media innovations), and new concepts (i.e., The Sports Lab in Nanjing in 2014, and The Urban Park in Buenos Aires in 2018, see Chapter 8 for a more detailed discussion of the latter). Not all such experiments have resulted in future Olympic inclusion, but many do. In this way, the YOG has played a key role in convincing members of the broader IOC community of the value action sports bring to the Games, and thus preparing them for future developments in the Olympic Programme.

While the YOG has been a key tactic for experimenting with and implementing change, such innovations are on a considerably smaller scale than at the level of the Olympic Games mega-event. Thus, prior to Agenda 2020 and the inauguration of President Bach, the most significant efforts by the IOC to try and reverse their aging viewership were their decisions to incorporate youth-focused sports (and new events) into the Summer and Winter Olympic Programmes (see above). In the Winter Games, snowboarding has been a particularly successful addition

(Dillman, 2010), credited for the 48% increase in 18–24-year-old viewers at the 2010 Winter Olympics (Bauder, 2010; see Chapter 4). With the success of freestyle snowboarding and skiing events in the Winter Olympic Games, the IOC and FIS have continued to add a range of new events over subsequent years (i.e., slopestyle, big air). The IOC has also drawn inspiration from successful action sport-media events such as the X Games and the ways in which they have worked to capture “the imagination” of these youth markets (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2017, p. 249). For example, the representational styles developed by the X Games with their fusion of Gen Y lifestyle activities—action sports, music, computer gaming, social media, apps, and new technologies (i.e., drones)—are increasingly evident in Olympic action sport events and programming (see Chapter 7). While X Games television audiences have also changed (Ourand & Karp, 2012), the demographic continues to be younger than most other sporting mega-events (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2017) and are also increasing in popularity in key regions, such as Asia (Thorpe, 2014). The IOC has long been observing the innovative approaches and successes of various action sports events and festivals in attracting younger audiences, and set out to develop their own strategies to bring some such elements into the Olympic Games.

The arrival of President Bach in 2013 and the Agenda 2020 policy (20 + 20 key initiatives for significant change) the following year ushered in a much greater and urgent emphasis on responding to these trends. In 2015, the IOC announced the shortlisting of five new sports, including karate, baseball/karate, surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing, for possible inclusion in the Tokyo 2020 Summer Games. The following year it was announced that all five would feature as events in Tokyo. This decision was part of IOC President Bach’s Agenda 2020 reforms for the Olympic Movement: “We want to take sport to the youth” said Bach, “with the many options that young people have, we cannot expect any more that they will come automatically to us—we have to go to them” (cited in Jones, 2016). This inclusion of these three youth-focused sports (surfing, skateboarding and sport climbing), along with karate and baseball/softball, has been described by the IOC as “the most comprehensive evolution of the Olympic Programme in modern history” (Jones, 2016, p. 5). As this book details, this is the most significant attempt yet to use action sports to entice youth consumers to the Summer Games. Subsequently, following a new review process that commenced in Rio, designed to measure the overall performance of all sports, existing disciplines have recognised the importance of changing their sporting disciplines and events to be more youth-friendly. As a result, the International Cycling Union (UCI) approved BMX freestyle, and the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) added basketball 3x3 to their offerings for Tokyo 2020. Likewise, in 2018, World Sailing selected kiteboarding, alongside windsurfing as one of its ten sailing events for Paris 2024. This decision was ratified by the IOC in December 2020 (IOC, 2020). Each of these decisions by the International Federations is the result of strong encouragement by the IOC to respond to changing sport participation and consumption trends, and to revise their programme to be more attractive to youth.

Somewhat inevitably, these decisions have been highly controversial within their sporting communities.

Under the framework of Agenda 2020 and strong messaging from President Bach, many other International Federations (IF) are looking to revise their programmes and to introduce more youth-friendly sports. For example, the urban youth activity of parkour is firmly on the IOC radar, featuring as a YOG invitational event. Much to the outrage of many in the parkour community, the World Gymnastics Federation (FIG) has been attempting to appropriate parkour to include under its remit (see Chapter 6). Such processes are likely to continue as the IOC strongly encourages Host Cities and IFs to do everything they can to attract younger audiences, as well as respond to broader trends in urbanisation. With the United Nations predicting 68% of the world population to be living in urban areas (cities and mega-cities) by 2050 (United Nations, 2018), the IOC is trying to get ahead of such trends and ensure future Olympic Games are reflective of broader social and economic trends. The inclusion of BMX freestyle, basketball 3x3, skateboarding, sport climbing, and breaking are all examples of the IOC's efforts to respond to the urbanisation of sports.

### **Action sports and the Olympic Games: researching a fraught relationship**

Despite many years of efforts by the IOC to respond to this changing sporting landscape and to reconnect with youth, the marriage between “alternative” action sports and the Olympics has not been straight-forward. Reflecting action sports' countercultural heritage, many participants continue to view these activities as alternative lifestyles rather than as sports, and celebrate value systems that are often incompatible with the disciplinary, hierarchical, nationalistic Olympic regime (see Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b). In this book we explain how attempts to modernise the Olympic Games via the incorporation of action sports has involved a range of complex power struggles. We also explore the effectiveness of these innovations to attract younger viewers, and the impacts such decisions are having on the action sports cultures and industries and wider sporting landscapes (i.e., national and international governance and policy developments).

This book therefore offers the first in-depth sociological investigation of the unlikely marriage between action sport cultures and the Olympic Games. Drawing on ten years of extensive empirical research, it reveals how these decisions by the IOC to include new action sports have been received by action sports participants and consumers, and how action sport cultures and industries have responded to the inclusion of their sports into the Tokyo Olympic Games and beyond. Adopting a longitudinal and mixed-methods approach, we conducted interviews with those directly involved in the processes of inclusion (i.e., IF Presidents and staff; members of national sporting bodies; IOC members and staff) and those directly affected by the decisions (i.e., athletes, parents, coaches). We also conducted interviews and focus groups with those in the action sports communities (i.e., core

and recreational participants) and an international survey that was offered in nine languages and recruited participants from five continents. Our methods also involved extensive media analysis of both mainstream media and niche cultural media (including social media), and fieldwork at a range of Olympic (i.e., Olympic Games, Youth Olympic Games, IOC meetings) and action sports (i.e., local, national and international competitions) events. Our methodology was designed with the aim to create space for the voices and opinions of those involved and impacted by processes of Olympic inclusion of action sports.

Our sociological analysis seeks to provide a nuanced discussion recognising that action sports consumers and participants are not a homogenous group. As sociological literature on action sport cultures has revealed, these cultures are highly fragmented and fast changing, with considerable differences in participation and consumption across generations, demographics, and countries (Thorpe & Olive, 2016; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2017; Wheaton, 2013). We also explore how different action sport industries have responded, and the role and motivations of the different power brokers including the IOC, the media, and the action sports companies and organisations. Critical insights from key stakeholders, influencers, and cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984) within action sports cultures, media, and industries and those in national and international federations, reveal the changing attitudes, tensions, policies, and cultural politics within action sport cultures that are influencing current and future participation in, and consumption of, the Olympic Games.

With an IOC Advanced Research Programme Grant, our early research became part of the decision-making process. We presented our early findings to an IOC Executive Board meeting (2016) before the decision had been ratified, gave presentations to various committees, attended various IOC events, and held discussions with several IOC departments. As a result of this initially positive working relationship, we were also able to interview members of the IOC summer programme commission. These insights obtained through working with and “for” the IOC provided revealing insights into the decision-making processes of Olympic inclusion. Through such interactions, we came to understand the IOC as not a monolith as often characterised in critical Olympic scholarship; rather, there are various factions within the IOC who are supporting and challenging these processes.

This book contributes to the extensive body of literature that has examined the various, different, and ever-changing layers of power and politics in the IOC (e.g., Boykoff, 2014, 2016; Guttman, 2002; Horne & Whannel, 2020; Lenskyj, 2000; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011; Young & Wamsley, 2005). Over the past three decades, scholars have produced an enormous body of socio-cultural and historical literature on the Olympics, ranging from politics and corruption (e.g., Goldblatt, 2016; Lenskyj, 2000, 2008; Tomlinson & Whannel, 1984) to media coverage and women’s participation in the Games (e.g., Fuller, 2016; Lenskyj, 2013; Markula, 2009) to environmental impacts of such mega-events, to the legacies for host cities and their peoples (Bale & Christensen, 2004; Boykoff, 2016; Lenskyj & Wagg, 2012;



Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011). Throughout this book we engage such arguments in relation to the political, economic, cultural, and ideological processes of action sports inclusion into the Olympic Games. Ultimately, this book works at the intersection of the sociology of action sports and critical Olympic studies, with the aim of making contributions to both.

## Structure of the book

This book consists of 12 chapters. In Chapters 2 and 3 we explain the theoretical and methodological approaches that have informed our work over the past decade and give detail of the empirical projects between 2015 and 2020 that have shaped this book. The remainder of the book is then organised into two main sections. The first section (Chapters 4–7) provides the context needed to understand the relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games. In these chapters we map key changes across the sports and over time, with a focus on historical relationships between action sports and the Olympic Games, Agenda 2020 and the response to Olympic inclusion from the action sports communities, industries, and across issues of governance. The second section (Chapters 8–11) adopts case study approaches to explore specific issues within two sports (skateboarding and surfing), and then key themes emerging across the sports (national differences and gender and diversity issues) with a more detailed focus on how these changes are playing out within particular sports and countries. Across the chapters, key issues are addressed both as thematic issues or “case studies”.

In Chapter 4 we explore the historical relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games. It offers three case studies of the historical inclusion of windsurfing, snowboarding, and BMX, respectively, into the Olympic Games, and reveals the nuanced power relations within and between these groups and organisations. We illustrate that, while there are patterns across various action sports and their relationship with the Olympic Movement, there were also unique differences based on the distinctive history, environments, geographies, identities, and development patterns of each action sport, as well as the broader socio-cultural-political context. Importantly, this chapter offers the contextual background necessary for understanding the ever-changing power struggles involved in more recent attempts to modernise the Olympic Games via the incorporation of more action sports.

Chapter 5 focuses on the shortlisting and inclusion of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing into the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. We contextualise our discussion with some background information on Agenda 2020 and Olympic-led change initiatives. We then turn to the responses from the action sport communities to the shortlisting (2015), and subsequent inclusion (2016), of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing into the Tokyo 2020 Games. Our discussion explores both the attitudes from those within the broader cultures (i.e., recreational participants) and those at the core of these cultures, detailing the nuances, contradictions, and shifting debates across sports, different groups of consumers,

and across generations. We then focus on some of the key debates in the core of the action sport cultures at the time of action sport shortlisting and then confirmation (2015–2016) including: concerns about the “styles” of the sports that would be included in the Olympic Games; the clash between the do-it-yourself (DIY) mentality and issues of leadership; governance, rules, and regulations; and environmental concerns as a result of anticipated growth in their sports. Across these topics we see the perceived incompatibility of the countercultural tradition of action sports and Olympic ideology. In such concerns, we see core participants anticipating problematic consequences from the merging of two very distinct cultures—the Olympic/elite sporting culture and alternative/action sport cultures.

Chapter 6 examines issues of governance across action sports during the processes of inclusion into the Tokyo Olympic Programme, and the complex relations of power between the IOC and other key agents in this process. Engaging interviews in dialogue with literature on the sociology of sports organisations and governance, this chapter reveals the complex negotiations and tensions within surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing leading up to and beyond the announcement (August 2016) of their inclusion in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Programme, and then the inclusion of additional sports (i.e., BMX freestyle, parkour, and kite-surfing) in Tokyo and beyond. In the first examples we see the IOC working to support surfing and sport climbing towards models of self-governance. In the later (particularly skateboarding and BMX freestyle) we see a modified version of Olympic inclusion developing that incorporates these sports under existing IFs but with key allegiances in the action sports industry. Agenda 2020 enabled such strategic relationships and partnerships, with a growing recognition by the IOC of the value in working with existing organisations and businesses’ outside the ‘Olympic family’. Examining the differences and similarities across these various sports, we consider the promise and possibility of new models of governance within the Olympic Games, as well as analysing the various layers of power operating within such organisational changes.

Olympic inclusion has caused ripple effects of change across the action sports industry. In Chapter 7, we consider key transformations being prompted by Olympic inclusion, focusing particularly on the action sports industry, media, and athletes, and new career pathways for coaches, agents, and other key agents. Olympic inclusion promises to offer more opportunities for businesses, athletes, and others pursuing careers in these sports (i.e., coaches, agents, journalists, event organisers, commentators), but such changes also prompt new tensions and debates within the action sports industry. As international sports organisations such as the IOC seek to incorporate more action sports under their own structures for the primary purposes of audience building and wooing corporate sponsors, the axes of power are shifting within the action sports landscape.

In Chapter 8 we focus on the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympic Games. The chapter begins with an overview of why skateboarding was so attractive to the IOC, despite the many challenges it posed as an Olympic sport. Herein we discuss the concept of the “Urban Park” as an important development

for the Tokyo Olympics and beyond, and recent efforts by the IOC to “bring sport to the people”. Drawing upon our longitudinal research, we then illustrate how the skateboarding culture has responded over time to Olympic inclusion, with attitudes shifting quickly, in some instances as a result of strategic collaborations within and across the skateboarding industry. We discuss the concerns among skateboarders about the compromises that had to be made for them to “fit” within the highly regulated and rule-bound structures of organised, elite, competitive sport, with a particular focus on how attitudes have evolved over time in relation to key issues: uniforms; organisation and qualification; and drugs. Ultimately, this chapter reveals the relationship between skateboarding and the Olympic Movement as one of flexible *and* forgetful opposition, with much contradiction (at times) and a rather short cultural memory.

Chapter 9 explores surfing’s paradoxical journey from alternative lifestyle to Olympic sport, showing that the IOC has embraced surfing’s dominant populist discourse to symbolise youthful, “cool” and adrenalin-fuelled lifestyles. We map tensions in both the cultural and economic realms showing how different interest groups within the surfing industry and wider Olympic stakeholders were seeking control and ownership of surfing’s cultural, physical, and economic capital. The emergence of the artificial wave pool as a potential venue for Olympic surfing is used as a case study to reveal these intertwined interests in the run up to Tokyo, and to Paris and beyond. While this new technology was highly contested among surfers centred on debates about “authentic surfing”, for the surfing industry it provided opportunities to solidify power in this rapidly expanding market. Yet for Tokyo, surfing was important in creating a particular Olympic legacy centred on “re-connecting” the Japanese people with the coast and life by the sea in the aftermath of the “triple disaster” of the earthquake, tsunami, and Fukushima nuclear plant meltdown in 2011. Lastly, we unpack the claims made by the International Surfing Association (ISA) and IOC about surfing’s potential impact for implementing aspects of Agenda 2020 such as diversity and universality, showing competitive surfing is an increasingly elitist sport, with limited geographic and demographic reach.

Research to date on the impact of Olympic inclusion on action sports in national settings is limited, and most has focused on sports which have been subsumed under existing National Sport Organisations (NSOs) such as BMX and snowboarding. In Chapter 10 we explore the challenges at the national level for the athletes, self-governing national organisations, and the wider national sports systems in which they are now embedded. Focusing on multiple-cases, we offer a detailed comparison across sports and countries to show responses to the multiple and different challenges, and opportunities in adapting to becoming Olympic sports. Our case studies reveal vastly different statuses and funding, and levels of professionalisation across these action sports and countries (i.e., Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, China, USA), impacting how the NSOs have been able to manage the transition to being an Olympic sport and the opportunities for athletes. They also highlight that rather than increasing diversity and opportunities across nations, Olympic inclusion may indeed be having the opposite impact.

While the desire of the IOC to include new action sports appears to be driven by the need to engage youth, demonstrating gender equity is also important. Chapter 11 explores action sports and the opportunities and challenges for gender equity, exploring whether Olympic inclusion has challenged the male dominance and masculine culture of each of these three action sports cultures and industries, and if women have created and negotiated more visibility and status, including as leaders within new and existing sports institutions. While there are contradictions and differences in the impact of the commitment to gender equity as expressed in the Olympic charter across these sports, Olympic inclusion has been significant in putting gender equity—to different degrees—onto the agenda of these action sport cultures and industries. We show how a range of stakeholders, including fans, athletes, sponsors, sport industry, and external organisations have been influential in both creating, and resisting change. We also highlight how women, working both informally and in leadership roles, have influenced advances in gender equity. More widely, we contribute to the body of literature critically assessing the IOC's claims to provide opportunities and effective policies and practices for addressing gender equity for diverse groups of women.

Finally, in Chapter 12 we offer a brief conclusion, summarising some of our key findings and reflections on this decade long research and the implications for the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage as we move towards Tokyo and beyond.

## Note

- 1 Tokyo 2020 was postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this book we continue to refer to Tokyo 2020, rather than Tokyo 2021, because much of our research was focused on the developments prior to and towards Tokyo 2020. It has also been announced that the Tokyo Games will continue to use the Tokyo 2020 branding despite the postponement. Thus, our usage of Tokyo 2020 (rather than Tokyo 2021) takes these issues into consideration, and refers to the phenomenon of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, regardless of the year that it is held.

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# Mapping action sports and the Olympic Games

## Theoretical and conceptual considerations

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Our work on action sports and the Olympic Games has been informed by a range of theoretical approaches over the years, most of which fall under the umbrella of critical theories. As feminist sociologists, understandings of power and how it is contested, has been central to our research. In our research on action sports and the Olympics specifically, we have used CCCS (The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) and post-CCCS approaches (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b), feminist theory (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018), theories of organisational change (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019), and critical media studies (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2019). Our research in this book continues to recognise the centrality of the political economy driving both the Olympic spectacle and action sport industries and their cultural practices. However, we also recognise that the power relationships between action sport participants, industry members, sports leaders, consumers, and sports mega-events (such as the Olympics) are never stable, but in a “constant state of re-articulation” amid various “contextual forces at play” (Bélanger, 2009, p. 62).

In this chapter we locate our research within these two bodies of scholarship—action sport studies and critical sociological theorising of the contemporary Olympic Movement, International Olympic Committee (IOC), and Olympic Games (e.g., Boykoff, 2013, 2016, 2020; Horne & Whannel, 2020; Lenskyj, 2000; Lenskyj & Wagg, 2012; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011). The first section of the discussion overviews the theoretical frameworks that have informed our own scholarship and many others working in action sports studies (i.e., Bourdieu, Foucault, hegemony, and from within cultural and youth studies via CCCS and post-CCCS). This literature is the *terra firma* of our individual and collaborative scholarship over the past two decades, and it inevitably weaves (both implicitly and explicitly) throughout many of the chapters. The second section provides a summary of key Olympic studies scholarship that informs this book, as well as a discussion of the IOC as a global sports organisation. Locating our work at the intersection of these bodies of literature, we argue that both action sport studies focused on processes of incorporation and sportisation, and critical Olympic Studies, are often underpinned by hegemonic understandings of power, with the IOC (and other powerful sporting bodies) presented as all-dominating monolith



against which some groups (i.e., activists, athletes, action sport participants) resist, with varying levels of success. We conclude with a discussion of Actor Network Theory (ANT) as an alternative approach to thinking about and studying the complex relationships and workings of power between and within action sport cultures and the Olympic Games.

## Identity politics in action sport cultures

Since the mid-1990s, scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds, including anthropology, cultural geography, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and youth studies, have employed an array of methodological and theoretical approaches in order to understand and explain the experiences of action sport cultures within local, national, global, and virtual contexts in historical and contemporary conditions (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2013). In this section we provide a brief overview of key theoretical frameworks that have been used in action sports research over the past (almost) three decades, with a focus on theorising of gender, the body and embodiment, cultural capital, and spatial politics. We then focus on the important contributions of cultural studies approaches for understanding the workings of power in action sport cultures, with a focus on processes of, and responses to, incorporation and commodification (also see Chapters 6 and 7).

Questions of power, inequality, and identity feature strongly in research on action sport cultures. Researchers have examined the hypermasculinity celebrated among young men within a range of action sports, including climbing (Robinson, 2008), snowboarding (Anderson, 1999; Thorpe, 2011), surfing (Evers, 2004), and windsurfing (Wheaton, 2000). Many have also investigated the multiple (and often contradictory) ways that women and girls negotiate space within male-dominated action sports cultures (e.g., Fok & O'Connor, 2020; Kay & Laberge, 2002; Knijnik, Horton & Cruz 2010; Olive, McCuaig & Phillips, 2015; Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly, 2004; Spowart, Hughson & Shaw, 2008; Thorpe, 2008; Young & Dallaire, 2008; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998). To facilitate their analyses of the complex gender practices, performances, and identity politics operating within action sports cultures, researchers have engaged theoretical perspectives, including hegemonic masculinity, various strands of feminism (i.e., liberal, radical, and third-wave feminism), and post-structural feminist engagements in the work of Bourdieu, Deleuze and Guattari, and Foucault (see Thorpe, 2018 for an overview of feminist theorising in action sports). While intersectional research has been slower to emerge, scholars are increasingly acknowledging the multiplicities of action sport participant identities, and how gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, age, religion, and/or socio-economic variables may impact participant experiences differently (e.g., Fok and O'Connor, 2020; Gilio-Whitaker, 2017; Lisa-hunter, 2018; Nemani & Thorpe, 2016; Roy & Caudwell, 2014; Waiti & Awatere, 2019; Wheaton, 2017a, 2017b).

The cultural politics within action sport communities—based on cultural commitment (i.e., the long-term adoption of a lifestyle that revolves around the

requirements of the sport, such as weather, seasons, cultural events), physical prowess, or styles of participation—as well as among “outsider” groups and other sporting cultures, have gained considerable academic attention. Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital, practice, and habitus, have been particularly popular among action sports scholars. Bourdieu’s concepts have been taken up by those seeking to explain how distinctions among individuals and groups are expressed as differences in embodied tastes and styles, and how the usage of cultural products and commodities is practiced, performed, and regulated in various locations (e.g., skate parks, waves, mountains) (see Atencio, Beal & Wilson 2009; Ford & Brown, 2006; Thorpe, 2011; Uekusa, 2019). Some scholars have also taken up Thornton’s Bourdieuan-inspired concept of subcultural capital to explain embodied dress and language practices, as well as displays of cultural commitment, physical prowess, and risk-taking, as contributing to the social construction and classification of group identities within action sport fields (e.g., Beal & Wilson, 2004; Robinson, 2008; Wheaton, 2003). These ideas have also been extended to understand how cultural and symbolic capital within action sport industries leads (for some) to access economic capital in action sport careers, as sponsored athletes (Kay & Laberge, 2002; Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2014; Williams, 2020).

The cultural politics involved in negotiating space and access to physical, social, and economic resources within hierarchically organised sporting, cultural, or industry contexts has been well documented across different sports. Interdisciplinary approaches (including cultural geography, architecture, urban studies) have effectively shown the spatial politics practiced by action sports participants in urban environments, especially how skateboarders and parkour practitioners challenge dominant meanings ascribed to public spaces (e.g., Atkinson, 2009; Borden, 2003, 2019; Jones & Graves, 2000; Kidder, 2017; Stratford, 2002). In surfing cultures, the struggles to access precious and limited resources (waves) have garnered ongoing attention (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Ford & Brown, 2006; Olive, 2019; Olivier, 2010; Uekusa, 2019; Usher & Kerstetter, 2015), revealing contestation around different types of wave users (i.e., shortboard surfers, body-boarders, longboarders, Stand Up Paddleboard (SUP) riders and windsurfers) (e.g. Nemani & Thorpe, 2016; Waitt & Frazer, 2012; Wheaton, 2004). However, as Olive’s work (2019) on the gendered politics of localism in surfing located in “the settler politics of place in Australia” (p. 39) show, place, identity, belonging, and community, are also interconnected with contested histories around the past and present usage of natural environments (i.e., beaches) for sport and leisure (see also Walker, 2017; Wheaton et al., 2021).

### **Action sport cultures, power, and resistance: subcultural studies**

Since the 1970s, the stylistic practices of youth have been an important theme in works emerging from Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) tradition. Early subcultural theorists associated with the

CCCS focused on youth style as symbolic resistance to mainstream or “hegemonic” society. They examined symbolic cultural aspects of youth subcultures, such as music, language, and, especially, dress. Hebdige (1979), for example, argued that subcultural youths engage in “semiotic guerrilla warfare” (p. 105) through their construction of style. Early subcultural theorists described subcultures emerging in resistance to dominant culture, and particularly against a sense of blocked economic opportunities, lack of social mobility, alienation, adult authority, and the “banality of suburban life” (Wooden & Blazak, 2001, p. 20). A variety of spectacular post-war subcultures such as Teddy boys, Mods, punks, and skinheads, provided CCCS theorists with evidence of youth styles challenging the dominant order. Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony was adopted to explain this cultural contestation, how subordinate classes operate, “winning space” through their modes of presentation and apparently antisocial behaviours.

Some of the pioneering work on action sport cultures drew inspiration from these theoretical approaches developed by the CCCS tradition, as well as methodological approaches employed by the more ethnographically oriented Chicago School (see Wheaton, 2007). For example, Donnelly and colleagues developed the concept of sport subculture, which they applied to climbing communities (Donnelly & Young, 1988; Williams & Donnelly, 1985), and in her early ethnographic work on a local skateboarding culture in Colorado, Beal (1995, 1996) described a group of young male skateboarders practicing and performing an alternative form of masculinity. According to Beal (1995), this group of skateboarders distinguished their subculture from traditional sport and hegemonic masculinity using various symbolic (e.g., dress, language) and physical practices (e.g., embracing styles of participation that deemphasised competition and embraced individual expression). But she also observed contradictions within the local skateboarding culture under investigation. She explained that while the young male skateboarders overtly resisted the hypermasculine “jock” identities of male athletes in more traditional sports (e.g., football) and embraced skateboarding as an alternative to the dominant sports culture, they simultaneously reproduced patriarchal relations via the exclusion and marginalisation of female participants (Beal, 1996).

The influence of the Birmingham School approach to subculture and style on the sociology of action sports cultures has been profound, yet the hegemonic understandings of power and resistance inherent in this approach, like all concepts and theories, were a product of its time. Hegemony theory, as advocated by the CCCS subcultural studies theorists, has drawn substantial criticism for ignoring participants’ subjectivity, failing to study subcultural groups empirically, focusing too much on Marxist/class-based explanations and grand theories, reifying the concept of subculture, overemphasising style, and over-politicising youthful leisure (e.g., Haenfler, 2004; Muggleton, 2000). There was also an “uncomfortable absence” in the early literature of how subcultures are “sustained, transformed, appropriated, disfigured or destroyed” (Clarke, 1982, p. 8) and what the consequences of those processes might be. In short, CCCS subcultural analysis omitted the “whole dimension of change” (Muggleton, 2000, p. 22). As we have explained

elsewhere, there has been a similar tendency in some ethnographic studies of action sport cultures which focus on the micropolitics within particular locations, often to the exclusion of the broader social and historical context (Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2007). Moreover, by focusing on single groups, such as snowboarders, skateboarders, surfers, or climbers in “one quantum of time” (Willis, 1978, p. 191), such accounts ignored dimensions of cultural change and development, and synergies across and between these cultural groups. As our current project reveals, temporal approaches are necessary for understanding the relationship between action sport cultures and the Olympic Games, and explaining how signs, practices, and politics change along with the cultural, social, and national context.

### **The politics of incorporation: post-CCCS and sportisation**

Cultural incorporation was an important theme emerging from the CCCS tradition of subcultural research. Much of this research focused on the power of commercial agents to define and co-opt youth cultures. “Authentic” youth cultures were characterised as distinct from mass-produced, commercial, or mainstream culture, that is, until the commercial sphere appropriated the alternative images of the subculture as a means of making money. For many CCCS scholars, opposition to mainstream politics and philosophies evaporated in the processes of incorporation and the appropriation of these groups who subsequently forfeited their subcultural status (Barker, 2000). While alternative or lifestyle sporting subcultures have received less attention in the mainstream sociological literature (see Wheaton, 2007), similar debates about their commercial or mainstream inclusion, particularly the lamented shift from “alternative” to “mainstream” sports, were also prevalent in the sport sociology literature (e.g., Beal & Weidman, 2003; Beal & Wilson, 2004; Donnelly, 1993; Humphreys, 2003; Rinehart, 2005; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2004). In one of the first in-depth investigations of the commodification of action sports in the post-Fordist culture and economy, Duncan Humphreys (1996, 1997) examined the processes by which “alternative sports”, such as skateboarding and snowboarding increasingly became controlled and defined by transnational corporations seeking to tap into the highly lucrative youth market.

Growing critiques of CCCS in the 2000s led to the development of “post-subcultural studies” (post-CCCS) (Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003; Wheaton, 2007). One of the key arguments put forward by proponents of post-CCCS was that scholars typically paid little systematic attention to the role of media and commerce in youths’ cultural formations, and rarely provided an explanation of what occurs “after the subculture has surfaced and become publicized” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 122). Drawing on, and reflecting theorisations of youth subcultures influenced by the CCCS, much of the early research on the institutionalisation and commercialisation of action sports tended to focus on the negative effects of these processes, seeing incorporation as a process that undermined the “authentic” oppositional or resistant character of the alternative

sports, and typically conceptualising commercialisation as “a top-down process of corporate exploitation and commodification” (Edwards & Corte, 2010, p. 1137). However, much of this overlooked the potential for participants to practice agency or resistance within these processes, or acknowledged the multiple perspectives within these sporting cultures (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2013; Wheaton, 2007). For Humphreys (1996, 1997, 2003), for example, the radical potential of snowboarding largely evaporated once the sport became incorporated into the Olympic juggernaut.

Recognising the complex politics involved in the commercialisation and incorporation of action sports in the early 21st century, a number of action sports scholars began working within the post-subcultural studies framework. Wheaton and Beal (2003) explained that, while participants in contemporary action sport cultures may not resist market incorporation, many contest the discourses about commercialism, regulation, and control, and importantly, raise the question, who defines and shapes sport? Revisiting Beal’s earlier research on skateboarding culture, Beal and Wilson (2004) explained that “internal contradictions are more common than a clear-cut sense of social resistance” (p. 32) in contemporary skateboarding culture. They describe the commercialisation process in skateboarding culture as a set of contingent negotiations between “youths cultural expression, the cultural industry and mass media representations” (p. 33). Similarly, Wheaton (2004) observes that contemporary action sports participants are not simply victims of commercialisation, but active agents who continue to “shape and ‘reshape’ the images and meanings circulated in and by global consumer culture” (p. 14). In his analysis of the continuing and multiple forms of contestation around the X Games, Rinehart (2008) argues that there is “no simplistic dichotomy for resistance and co-optation in the alternative sport world” and thus we need to “move beyond constraining binaries – e.g., resistance vs. co-optation, mainstream vs. emergent, traditional vs. new” (p. 192; also see Edwards & Corte, 2010; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2004). Such arguments are particularly important when considering the complex relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games, and processes of sportisation.

## **Action sport cultures and sportisation**

Although sportisation is a term frequently used in relation to the processes of incorporation and professionalisation within action sports, few acknowledge the origins of the concept. As Wheaton and O’Loughlin (2017) explain in their research on the institutionalisation of parkour in England, sportisation is a concept that is informed by post-CCCS approaches, but was initially developed in the context of Elias and Dunning’s (1986) theory of the civilisation process and its impact on modern sports processes particularly from the 18th to 20th centuries (Maguire, 2007). According to Elias, the “sportisation of our pastimes” refers to the emergence of new forms of moral values that were driving the organisation of sport as a “ritualised, organised, and non-violent activity” particularly through the

17th to 19th centuries (Crawford, 2009). Subsequently, Maguire (1999) developed sportisation in his discussion of the development and globalisation of more traditional “achievement sports”, explaining that the sportisation process involved a shift towards the “competitive, regularised, and rationalized”, and the development of “formalised sets of rules and governing bodies” (p. 47). He suggests five stages in the processes of global sportisation, with the most recent phase (1960s–1990)—the *uncertainty phase*—characterised by two seemingly contradictory features (Maguire, 2007). On the one hand is the drive to standardise what counts as “sport” with the media and Olympic Movement playing central roles. Concurrently, however, a range of new body cultures was emerging that challenged the cultural hegemony of achievement sport (Maguire, 1999). Lifestyle-based action sports, which have evolved in a unique historical conjuncture—global communication, corporate sponsorship, entertainment industries, and a growing global young, affluent demographic—and have spread around the world far faster than most established sports (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a), exemplify the complexities of this sportisation process in the contemporary moment (see also Sterchele, 2015). The inclusion of these sports into the Olympic Games is a contemporary example of the *uncertainty phase* in global sportisation.

In some action sports (e.g. surfing, snowboarding, sport climbing), international sporting rules and organisations have been established (Booth, 1995; Humphreys, 2003). In some cases, competition between “national teams” has evolved and grown, including being incorporated into the Olympic Movement (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2016). Yet as Maguire (2007) suggests, “resistance to and reinterpretations” of these body cultures have been evident throughout the ongoing sportisation process. In contrast to most achievement sports, formal clubs and organisations have tended only to be formed in action sports where required, for example, to assist in access to facilities or spaces (see e.g., Gilchrist & Ravenscroft, 2008, Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Wheaton, 2013). Despite the increasing professionalisation at the elite levels (Thorpe & Dumont, 2019), recreational participants continue to embrace do-it-yourself (DIY) culture and are often hostile to rules and regulations, especially those that are externally driven, which have often been understood as a form of “selling-out” of their sport’s “alternative” values and ideologies (Beal & Wilson, 2004; Humphreys, 2003; Rinehart, 2008; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2013; Wheaton, 2007).

Drawing upon post-CCCS arguments, recent research reveals contemporary action sport cultures as highly fragmented and in a constant state of flux, such that myriad types of sportisation, cultural production, consumption, and contestation are occurring, often simultaneously. As Wheaton (2010) explains, in this context, “resistance is not a struggle with dominant hegemonic culture but is more multifaceted, located at the levels of the everyday and in the body” (p. 1063). Many others have explored the complex, nuanced, and, at times, contradictory relationships between action sports and processes of sportisation (with other inter-related processes of incorporation, commodification, commercialisation,

and professionalisation) across a range of sports and different national contexts (Coates, Clayton & Humberstone, 2010; Dinces, 2011; Edwards & Corte, 2010; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011; Stranger, 2011; Thorpe, 2011, 2014; Wheaton & O'Loughlin, 2017). Building upon this scholarship, in Chapter 8 we take up Dince's (2011) concept of "flexible opposition" to explore these contradictions in the relationship between skateboarding and the Olympic Games.

To date, socio-historical and contemporary analyses of the relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games have typically focused on the cultural tensions and politics that have emerged as these "lifestyle" sports are incorporated into more traditional, organised sporting models. Scholars have explored these processes occurring at different stages in the development of Olympic snowboarding (i.e., Barjolin-Smith, 2020; Popovic & Morrow, 2008; Strittmatter et al., 2019; Thorpe, 2011), skateboarding (Batuev & Robinson, 2017; Kilberth & Schwier, 2019) and climbing (Batuev & Robinson, 2018). In so doing, much of this research has adopted an oppositional approach, exploring the dynamics within and between the action sport culture of focus (i.e., snowboarding, skateboarding, sport climbing) and the IOC. To date, few have explored commonalities or differences across action sports, or broader trends in the inclusion process. Furthermore, the IOC is typically discussed as a monolith against which action sports rally and respond in a range of ways reflective of the fragmentation within these cultures. While there is much value in these more micro-level analyses (focused on one action sport in one moment in time), such approaches risk broader socio-economic factors and the multi-layered workings of power within and between the IOC and other key agents being overlooked.

In our early research on action sport and the Olympic Games, we employed a post-CCCS theoretical approach to examine the cultural politics surrounding the incorporation of action sports into the Olympic Programme via case studies of windsurfing, snowboarding, and bicycle motocross racing (BMX) (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b). Analysing patterns across sports and different socio-historical contexts, our analysis revealed that

the incorporation processes, and forms of (sub)cultural contestation, are in each case unique, based on a complex and shifting set of intra- and inter-politics between key agents, namely the IOC and associated sporting bodies, media conglomerates, and the action sports cultures and industries.

(Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011b, p. 830)

Post-CCCS approaches have clear value for understanding the forms of cultural reproduction and contestation in Olympic inclusion, and within and between action sport cultures, and threads of post-CCCS-inspired analysis weave throughout this book. However, we found it less useful for understanding the forms of power operating across sports organisations, sport industries, the IOC, and within these organisational networks.

## **Global sports organisations, power, and the Olympic Games**

Since their modern revival in 1896, the historical development of the Olympic Games and the elitist *modus operandi* of the IOC (Allison & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 112) have garnered widespread and sustained academic attention. A plethora of insightful analyses from historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists have documented the various stages in the development and growth of the Olympic Games as global cultural, economic, and political phenomena. As Allison and Tomlinson (2017) outline, the growth and expansion of the Summer Olympic Games can be identified in three temporal phases, each represented by a shifting balance between the cultural, the economic, and the political. Many more have interrogated the powerful role of the IOC and their economic and political relationships with host nations, International Federations (IFs), sponsors, media, and other key stakeholders. As Bairner and Molnar (2010) show, “politics are integral to the Olympics, whether this is a case of the Games influencing external political developments or of political incidents having an impact on the Games” (p. 10). These complex but shifting workings of power that continue to shape the IOC, Olympic Movement and Olympic spectacle, as well as the multitude of political crises, from boycotts and symbolic political contestation, to the internal organisational politics, have been extremely well researched and documented (see especially; Boykoff, 2016; Guttmann, 2002; Horne & Whannel, 2020; Lenskyj, 2008, 2010, 2013; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011).

Our research is situated in the third and most recent phase of Allison and Tomlinson’s (2017) model of the growth and expansion of the Summer Olympic Games. Dating between 1984 and 2016, the third phase is defined as the “commodification of the Olympic brand and media product through the global reach of capital” (p. 122), with the 1984 Los Angeles Games widely acknowledged as a “tipping point” in this shift (Horne & Whannel, 2020, p. 147). The Olympic Games have become the “world’s greatest media and marketing event” (Boykoff, 2013, p. 2), “a global spectacle attracting vast audiences” (Horne & Whannel, 2020, p. 151) sitting at the “apex of a multi-billion dollar global sport political economy” (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2002, p. 13). As has widely been argued, this phase of development can be seen as a neoliberalisation of the Games, characterised by contradictory and paradoxical relationships between the IOC and processes of globalisation, neoliberalism, and capitalism that drive the Olympic spectacle (Boykoff, 2013; Horne & Whannel, 2016; Lenskyj, 2000; Roche, 2000; Silk, 2011; Tomlinson, 1996). However, in his extensive work on the relationship between the Olympics, capitalism, and neoliberalism, Boykoff (2013) argues that the Olympics are less about “neoliberalism and more about the dynamics of capitalism in general” (p. 3). The political economy of the Olympic spectacle “is more about economic benefit for the few than economic prosperity for the many” (Boykoff, 2013, p. 2). He outlines a specific “formation of capitalism” he calls “celebratory capitalism” (2013), a concept he develops in dialogue with Naomi Klein’s



“disaster capitalism”. Boykoff (2013) proffers “celebratory capitalism” as a framework to enable better understandings of “the economics behind the Olympics, and, more broadly, the economic system’s nimbleness in the modern era” (p. 3). As we show in this book, from a political economy perspective, the IOC’s incorporation of youth-focused action sports is an exemplar of “celebratory capitalism”, or what we refer to as the celebratory capitalism of youthful “cool”. The incorporation of more action sports into the Olympic Games is a desperate bid by the IOC to claw back younger viewers and to perform their “nimbleness” to respond to changing trends in sporting participation and consumption, and ultimately to build global audiences and associated sponsorship dollars.

Each Olympic Games over the past decade has received a host of scholarly attention from an array of disciplines (i.e., media studies, sociology, history, politics, economics). Research focused on the economic, organisational, cultural, gendered, and, more recently environmental politics, associated with particular Olympic events, has shown it remains a “deeply political phenomena” (Horne & Whannel, 2020, p. 151). Areas that continue to garner sustained sociological attention include the complex, power-laden, and controversial processes of winning the Games, and how host nations use the Olympics to showcase the nation, and the “legacies” hosts use to justify their excessive use of public funding (Grix, 2013; Silk, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014). Feminist scholars also continue to make important contributions to Olympic scholarship in their critique of the gendered politics of the “Olympic industry” (Lenskyj, 2013). The increasing diversity of feminist contributions to Olympic studies showcase the

importance of a dual interrogation of macro systems and structures that contribute to the marginalisation and oppression of women and minority groups and the localised and specific micro processes of lived embodiment, gender interactions and discourses that shape the lived realities and experiences of sporting bodies.

(Toffoletti, 2010, p. 2)

Feminist scholars continue to challenge the multiple ways in which women face inequalities in the Olympic Movement including their ongoing exclusion from resources and control (Donnelly & Donnelly, 2013; Lenskyj, 2013), via media coverage (Markula, 2009), and events such as ski jumping and boxing (Anderson & Loland, 2016; Laurendeau & Adams, 2010; Travers, 2011; Vertinsky, Jette & Hofman, 2009). Policies on gender verification, hypoandrogenism, and Differences of Sexual Development (DSD) (Pape, 2019) and transgender athletes (Anderson & Travers, 2017; Cavanagh & Sykes, 2006; Sykes, 2017), continue to reinforce gender binaries and regulate ideals of appropriate femininity, perpetuating multiple forms of discrimination (c.f. Caudwell, 2012; Lenskyj, 2013; Pape, 2019; Sykes, 2017; Travers, 2017).

Exploring the sexual and gender politics of the Olympics, and working at the intersection of celebration capitalism (Boykoff, 2013) and queer theory, Travers

and Shearman (2017) reveal how US and Canadian governments were complicit in the promotion of homonationalist pride around the Sochi Olympics, contributing to the silencing of racist and ethnic violence, as well as undermining LGBT rights. Sykes (2017) and co-authors are also among critics who have revealed the “hidden racial and colonial logics of current mega-sports” (p. 1), identifying the Olympics as a key proponent of “roving colonialism” which leads to “the displacement of poor communities”:

Huge profits are made by land and property developers. Ruling elites use the mega-events for geopolitical gain. The forced removal of local people, stealing of land to make profit and broken agreements between governments about benefits and legacies are all forms of ongoing colonisation.

(p. 2)

Such insights have fuelled growing dissent, including among publics in host nations and cities concerned about the use of public funds for mega-sporting events that benefit just a select few. Boykoff’s research (2013) has documented this dissent among those in host nations and cities leading up to and during the Vancouver (2010), London (2012), and, most recently, Tokyo Olympic Games. He also shows the increasingly prevalent and diverse forms of anti-Olympic activism and resistance (e.g. Boykoff, 2011, 2017, 2020; Lenskyj, 2000, 2008, 2020). These powerful community-based, digital, and social movements contest issues including human rights and social justice issues, environmental degradation, Indigenous rights (O’Bonsawin, 2010) and anti-colonial activism (Sykes, 2017). As Sykes’s research also reveals, activism often takes a unique local flavour. Thus, as Boykoff (2013), Lenskyj (2020), Sykes (2017), and others demonstrate so well, the growth of the “anti-Olympic” movement is posing significant challenges to the IOC, with fewer and fewer applications to host the Olympics, and increasing public awareness and critique of the Olympic Games as a mega-event (Horne & Whannel, 2020).

### **The IOC as global sports organisation**

As the IOC is a key focus of this book, it is important to also locate our analysis within a robust and extensive body of literature that examines the various layers of power and politics in Global Sporting Organisations (GSOs), particularly the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (Giulianotti, 1999; Sugden & Tomlinson, 1998, 2016) and the IOC (e.g., Boykoff, 2016; Horne & Whannel, 2020; Lenskyj, 2000; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011; Young & Wamsley, 2005). Issues of governance and organisational politics have been a focus of much of this literature, particularly the problematic roles played by the various presidents and their relationships with other key stakeholders (Guttmann, 1992, 2002; MacAloon, 2011). Allison and Tomlinson’s (2017) recent oeuvre adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore the principles, power, and possibilities in what

they term “sporting international non-governmental organisations” (SINGOs) such as the IOC. They too express concerns about the “widespread and systematic lack of accountability” (p. xii), and the “inevitably problematic” nature (p. 215), of such organisations. To contextualise our own project, we outline “who and what is the IOC?” (Allison & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 112), that is the nature of the IOC leadership, and how it operates institutionally and organisationally. In so doing, we show the range of actors that constitute the contemporary “Olympic Movement” and which, as we show in the book also contribute to the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage.

The composition of the IOC has garnered much attention and critique, which as Lenskyj (2010) argues, “resembles a private club in terms of its internal operations and the rules governing eligibility” (p. 16), and Roche (2000) describes as “under siege since the 1990s over its undemocratic procedures” (p. 207). IOC representatives are not elected by countries, but rather individuals are chosen to serve as “ambassadors” for countries (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 16). Claims of corruption prompted the IOC to initiate an internal Ethics Commission (1999–2020) leading to some reforms. These set new terms of office included age limits (i.e. retirement age reduced to 70) and membership expanded to include 15 representatives of IFs, 15 active athletes and 15 representatives of National Olympic Committees (NOC). However, these roles continue to be “far outweighed” by “private individuals” (men) on the committee (Allison & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 117), who are still appointed through “grace-and-favour membership” (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 21). Given the male-dominated “old boys network” that has characterised most IF leaders, it is unsurprising that women have been vastly under-represented (Lenskyj, 2020, p. 21). While the IOC has worked to increase female membership over the past decade (see Horne & Whannel, 2020), with female IOC membership at 37.5% up from 21% at the start of the Agenda 2020 reforms (IOC, Dec. 2020), women still remain under-represented as in most GSOs and IFs (Houghton et al., 2017). Furthermore as “a not-for-profit independent international organisation made up of volunteers” ([www.olympic.org](http://www.olympic.org)), the IOC has an unprecedented degree of autotomy of its internal affairs (Boykoff, 2013; Roche, 2000; Allison & Tomlinson, 2017). It remains immune from government intervention (Lenskyj, 2010), and like many IFs is legally “free to determine its own governance practices” with “few legal obligations”. Located in Lausanne, Switzerland, an agreement with the Swiss Government signed in 2000 (Shaw, 2008) has allowed the IOC to be exempt from many taxes (Boykoff, 2013), including federal, cantonal, communal, and wealth taxes, and also has legal immunity (Lenskyj, 2010). As Lenskyj surmises, “the IOC structure virtually guarantees maintenance of the status quo, with members’ profound sense of entitlement largely unchallenged” (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 16). Such governance issues are not unique to the IOC, but well documented across international sport federations.

Issues of governance and organisational politics have been a key focus of the literature focused on the power, politics, and organisational arrangements of GSOs. However, less attention has been given to the power relations within the

overarching IOC structures and actors, and the shifting relationships between these international sporting bodies. Increasingly, a complex web of power exists both within and between GSOs (Forster & Pope, 2004), which is “constantly and recurrently reconstituted” (Allison & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 116). As Geeraert, Alm, and Groll (2014) show based on examining 35 international Olympic sporting governing bodies, their lack of accountability arrangements, general absence of objective criteria and transparency in the distribution of funding to members, complete lack of independent ethics committees, the dominance of European men on executive committees, and the exclusion of athletes from formal decision-making processes, are all issues deserving ongoing interrogation and critique.

In this context, Allison and Tomlinson (2017) suggest that, rather than descriptive understandings of the “Olympic Family/Movement” as a system, it is more instructive to consider the “networks of elites and powerbrokers” that constitute the Olympic Movement (p. 116). They advocate Chappelet and Kübler-Mabbott’s (2008) model which understands the “classical Olympic system” of the Olympic Movement as comprising “five key related actors...within a robust structure” (p. 166), but which have a history of conflict (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 20). The IOC sits at the summit of this system, with direct relationships to NOCs, IFs, and the organising committees (OCs) of each summer (or Winter) Games. The fifth institutional actor is the national federations (NFs/NSOs/NGBs) and their athletes and clubs, which associate with both the NOCs and the relevant IFs. Critical to this model is the identification that these five actors are all “non-profit organisations” (Allison & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 116).

However, as many commentators have shown, the changing political, economic, and social climate associated with the neoliberalisation of the Games has led to “economic alliances transcending national borders and interests” (Allison & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 116). Therefore, new actors have become increasingly important in the Olympic system including governments and inter-governmental organisations, multinational corporate sponsors, national sponsors (often working with the NFs, OCs and NOCs), and professional teams and athletes (Allison & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 116). Such “distinct hybrid arrangements” are also increasingly common in GSOs as they seek to respond to sporting landscapes evolving under capitalism (Henne, 2015). Indeed, increasingly the IOC “sit somewhere between multinational corporation and global institution” at the “heart of a vast interlocking structure” of actors (Boykoff, 2013, p. 2).

The IOC is a lucrative modern business, and its main revenue streams are sales of television rights (over 70%), sponsorship, ticket sales, and licensing and merchandising (Horne & Whannel, 2020). These institutional actors (the IOC, NOCs, IFs, host cities, government officials, and corporate partners) are all “promoters of celebration capitalism” working assiduously “to keep the celebratory dream alive” (Boykoff, 2013, p. 6). Yet, many characteristics also distinguish the IOC from traditional corporations (Lenskyj, 2010). To retain its “not-for-profit status”, the IOC distributes 90% of its income to the Olympic “family” (i.e. organising committee, NOCs, IFs operation) retaining around 10% to cover its own

administrative costs (and “expenses” of the IOC members) (Horne & Whannel, 2020). “This dynamic has become the *modus operandi* of Olympic financing”, but despite optimistic promises, the trend is that “the Games lose large amounts of public money and add to public sector debt” (Boykoff, 2013, p. 17). The IOC’s “locally incorporated subsidiaries” (i.e., NOCs and OCs) however, often receive government funding (Lenskyj, 2010). These “public–private partnerships” are increasingly characterising this shifting economic model (Boykoff, 2013). Yet, these are uneven partnerships; while the IOC has “supreme authority” over the Games, it is the local OCOG and the host city/nation who shoulder complete financial responsibility, with financial guarantees often provided by national/local government (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 21). Therefore, as Boykoff (2013) also argues, as in most cases “the public pays and the private profit”, which creates an uneven partnership with the IOC “manipulating state actors as partners” (p. 3). Boykoff (2013) suggests these commercial arrangements under celebration capitalism distinguish the IOC from other business corporations; they see state and non-profits as “teammates to be exploited” (p. 4). Non-profit GSOs and IFs operating in this commercial environment are thus “caught in a web of contradictions that they struggle to resolve” (Forster & Pope, 2004, p. 5).

The last set of actors to consider in understanding this Olympics system (or assemblage) is the staff (administrators) who work for the IOC. The administration of the IOC is “under the responsibility of the Director General who, under the authority of the President, runs it with the assistance of the directors” (heads of units) from Olympic broadcasting to human resources (Olympic.org). The IOC staff have grown quickly over past decades; in 2007 there were over 400 staff, out-numbering IOC members by four to one (Allison & Tomlinson, 2017, p. 117). Our own dealing with the IOC as an organisation was often via these staff, including the Head of Summer Sports, various members of the Sport Department, and those administrators responsible for various working groups such as the YOG. However, our research suggests, rather than being simply “administrators”, these staff also hold considerable influence. Therefore, while the IOC is often understood as a united organisation, a single monolithic global power structure, there are also multiple internal layers that have impact.

Our analysis of the inclusion of action sports into the Olympic Games must be understood in this broader context of growing public criticisms of GSOs and the IOC in particular. We argue any claims of reform must be understood within broader trends of GSOs responding to critique with an array of strategic efforts—“spectacles”, “hybrid arrangements”, and performances of cultural change and reform (i.e., Agenda 2020)—to maintain their dominant position in the global sports mega-event industry. As we show in this book, claims that the IOC is changing as a result of new policy initiatives (i.e., Agenda 2020) and responding more nimbly to new trends in sporting participation and consumption patterns, and in their relationships with action sports cultures, must be tempered within these broader analyses of organisational performances of change in a context of growing critique and activism (see Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019).

As our research progressed, wide-ranging voices and opinions were captured including those from positions within action sports cultures and industries, staff and members of the IOC, the Tokyo Organizing Committee, as well as other event organisers and sponsors. These varied perspectives revealed the complexities in the flows of power across and within different groups, and the paradoxes and ambiguities in these relationships. We came to recognise the operations of power between these actors as fluid, non-linear, and not always predictable. We therefore explored a range of theoretical concepts to help explore the various workings of power—from the micro level to the macro—from the body to broader economic structures. In this process we came to Actor Network Theory (ANT), which we found to be a useful approach to help map the various actants involved in the dynamic and evolving relationships between action sport cultures and the IOC.

### **Actor Network Theory: rethinking action sports and the Olympic Games**

To date, most scholarship on action sports and the Olympic Games has focused on the micro-level cultural politics within and between action sport cultures (with do-it-yourself (DIY) and anti-establishment values) and their contestation with, and incorporation into, the IOC at one moment (or period) of time. In this research, particular individuals and groups are given voice, whereas others (often recreational, everyday participants, and consumers) are rarely considered. Few have explored trends across sports or contextualised Olympic inclusion within broader socio-economic and political processes. Furthermore, the voices of decision makers, including those within the IOC have yet to be captured. While the extensive body of scholarship on the political economy of the IOC and Olympic Movement shows how the workings of power are constantly shifting in response to new challenges and contestation, the IOC as an organisation is often represented as a powerful monolith. Few have had access to the inner dealing and voices in this organisation that has historically been so secretive and lacking in transparency. Therefore, what has emerged is “only a partial picture of the internal political processes” (Lenskyj, 2010, p. 25), and one that has often understood it as a unified organisation with a single voice.

Through our interactions with both IOC members and staff within the IOC, we came to understand that many different individuals and groups work within this powerful organisation, with different motivations and at times competing agendas. As such, the relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games is more nuanced than much of the previous action sports or Olympic studies scholarship might recognise. Our research revealed that many different individuals, groups, and organisations hold various forms of power (i.e., economic, cultural, symbolic, embodied) at different stages in the process, and across different sports, as well as national, socio-cultural, and temporal contexts. As the research progressed, we therefore needed to consider analytical

tools that might help us understand how to make meaning of these dynamics and multiple forms of power emerging from our data, and to capture the multiplicities of different voices and experiences within the processes of Olympic inclusion over time and space. In so doing, we explored Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a set of methodological and analytical tools to make meaning of these complex relations of power operating from the micro to the macro levels, from the body to global organisational and economic structures, from resistance to celebration, and the contradictory processes (see Chapter 3). ANT offered us a way of thinking about the multiple actants involved in the ongoing and dynamic relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games, and the various forms of agency emerging across sporting cultures, from local to global scales, and past-present-futures.

Emerging in the 1980s through sociological studies of scientific practice, ANT is typically associated with the writings of Bruno Latour (1996, 2005), and others, including Michel Callon, John Law, and Steve Woolger (Cressman, 2009; Law & Lodge, 1984). While ANT has most often been taken up in science and technology studies, it is “versatile enough to have been used across the social sciences” (Darnell, 2020, p. 233). Rather than a “theory” per se, ANT is better described as a methodological approach to ways of knowing the social world:

Actor-network theory is a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located.

(Law, 2009, p. 141)

Put differently, ANT is less focused on studying social phenomena as they exist, and more focused on the “process of its construction, organisation, and stability, or its “becoming”” (Darnell, 2020, p. 234). In this way, ANT draws attention to the “intensity” of the connections that construct and organise networks. Rather than assuming connections and workings of power *a priori*, ANT prompts us to consider what is a network, or an actor-network, and also how we can trace actors and networks as “overlapping and connected by their abilities to produce and stabilize” (Darnell, 2020, p. 235). Furthermore, ANT recognises social stability as rare, and thus we are encouraged to explore how actor-networks come together to produce, at least a temporary state, of stability.

Sociologists of sport are increasingly taking up ANT in their efforts to understand the complex workings of power within and across sports organisations, bodies, and objects (Darnell, 2020; Darnell et al., 2018; Dawson & Jöns, 2018; Kerr, 2010, 2014, 2020; Müller, 2014). Taking up ANT as methodology and/or a treatise on ontology, Darnell (2020) considers the actor-networks in the field of Sport for Development and Peace (SDP). He describes ANT as a “qualitatively different approach” one that would be less concerned with “revealing forms of subjectivity and power that are presumed to exist and more interested in explaining the

conditions by and through which such social effects are achieved” (Darnell, 2020, p. 238). Continuing, he explains:

...while it may remain useful to think of SDP as “socially constructed” (i.e., the extent to which the notion of sport’s development utility is a social construct), this approach is insufficient from the perspective of ANT. What is needed is an analysis that reveals the various mechanisms by which the social construction of SDP is in fact accomplished. Specifically, this means embracing the range of actants implicated in SDP and examining the ways in which these actants constitute SDP’s formation.

(p. 239)

Darnell and colleagues (2018) further engage these ideas in their fieldwork using ANT to ‘re-assemble’ their understanding of SDP programmes by “examining their constitutive elements”. They illustrate the many “connections necessary for SDP to cohere, and the range of actors in the field, including international funders, funds themselves, and concepts regarding sport’s development utility” (p. 89). They conclude that investigating the assemblages of SDP enabled a “non-deterministic understanding of the ways in which sport is mobilised in the service of development and peace, while allowing for a nuanced and empirically sound assessment of power and agency” (p. 89).

Other productive examples of the use of ANT for understanding sporting organisations and mega-events include the assembling of high performance gymnastics in Aotearoa New Zealand (Kerr, 2010) and mega-events such as the Olympic Games (Dawson & Jöns, 2018; Müller, 2014). For example, Dawson and Jöns (2018) use the case of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, the main legacy of the London 2012 Olympic Games, to explore the “multi-scalar outcomes of mega-events” (p. 43). Adopting a different approach to thinking about the workings of Olympic power, Müller (2014) engages with ANT to explore the “topological multiplicities of power” and sociomaterial networks that “allow the International Olympic Committee to coordinate the organisation of the event” (p. 321). Drawing specifically on Latour’s concept of oligopticon (a post-panoptic view of surveillance with power, control and order more dispersed and flexible), Müller (2014) developed a “sociomaterial notion of power to govern at a distance” (p. 321). Such workings of Olympic power emerge through “the triple movement of collecting and mobilizing information, casting it into stable intermediaries, and recirculating knowledge” (p. 321). Importantly, however, Müller (2014) suggests this power and its spatial reach “remain always partial and are transformed by overflows as elements move in and out of networks and how forces outside the network bear on it, creating ‘absent presences’” (p. 321).

In our research on action sports and the Olympic Games, the relationships between the alternative sporting cultures and the IOC have continued to change over time, but the actor-networks have come together in new and old “webs of relations” to produce action sports-Olympic Games as a relatively “stable” global



assemblage. In this book, we explore the ongoing processes of the construction, organisation, and (in)stability of the action sports-Olympic Games actor-network. In other words, we focus on the conditions through which action sports at the Olympic Games have come to exist and the key actants in the process. We traced the influences of the Olympics from economic structures to the body, across global and local scales, and observed the “overflows” with cultural forces outside the familiar Olympic networks “bearing on it”, prompting and creating change, if only temporarily or in symbolic ways.

In contrast to many critical theories used to understand action sport cultures and/or the Olympic Games, ANT does not presume to know the outcome of any analysis but, instead, “places the burden of theory on the *recording*, not on the specific shape that is recorded” (Latour, 1996, p. 374; emphasis added; Darnell, 2020, p. 236). In this way, our approach shares some of the objectives of ANT. We sought to avoid *a priori* binaried thinking in previous work on action sports and the Olympics, such as small scale/large scale, local/global, Olympics bad/alternative cultures good, appropriation/resistance. We approached this project with an open curiosity to trace the relationships—connections, networks, and intensities—between action sports and the Olympic Games, while also being attentive to the inter- and intra-power relations (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011b). In other words, rather than assuming this relationship—with the IOC as a powerful economic force appropriating variously motivated and resistant action sport cultures—we set out to map the key actants and the intensities involved in constituting action sports and the Olympic Games as an assemblage.

Our approach also shares some of the methodological and theoretical considerations that Green and Houlihan (2005) outline in discussing their approach to understanding how policy processes change across time and different nations. They call for a theoretical framework that identifies the key policy communities and coalitions (i.e., networks), and the influence of the different actors, while also paying attention to the structural contexts in which they operate, and economic, political, and ideological factors that explain change. Methodologically, they show the importance of a historical perspective and longitudinal analysis that considers change over time (Green & Houlihan, 2005). Similarly, we adopted a longitudinal and multi-method approach within a broadly interpretivist epistemology which allowed us to trace actors and actions through various processes of action sports-Olympic Games network formation. The range of actors within these networks included athletes, media workers, event organisers, sponsors, coaches, parents, recreational participants, members of International Federations (IFs), National Sporting Organizations (NSOs)/National Governing Bodies (NGBs), the IOC members/executives, and those who work for the organisation, as well as things (i.e., money, policy documents, clothing, equipment, drugs), cultures (i.e., surfing, skateboarding, climbing communities), institutions (i.e., NGOs, NGBs, the IOC, IFs, regional/local sports organisations, international sporting events, niche, and mass media), and even ideas themselves (i.e., DIY values, anti-establishment, neoliberalism, Olympism). We tried not to assume the intensity of

the various actants or their role in the process of becoming, and instead worked to trace the connections, networks, and relationships as they evolved and changed over time. In so doing, we found that the power relations between, and agency of, different actants, varied considerably in different temporal contexts and across different sports, countries, and locations (geographic and mediated). We have structured this book with the aim of illustrating the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage as constituted through these various actants. In the following chapter we continue this discussion, explaining how our longitudinal and multi-method approach aligned with the aims of Actor Network Theory.

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# **Researching the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage**

## **A longitudinal and multi-method approach**

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We come to this project with decades of research focused on the power, cultural politics, and embodied experiences within and across a range of action sport cultures including windsurfing, surfing, snowboarding, skateboarding, and parkour. However, this collaborative project is our longest-running and most multi-dimensional project to date. Building upon the previous chapter (see Chapter 2), herein we detail the methodological processes that underpin the subsequent analyses. As noted, Actor Network Theory helped us make meaning of the involvement of various actants in the processes of Olympic inclusion—from the everyday recreational action sport participant, to athletes and their families, to key industry members, to the International Olympic Committee (IOC)—and to understand the shifting and fluid workings of power. In this chapter, we detail the longitudinal methodology that spans over a decade of empirical research, including interviews, focus groups, an international survey, archival work, and extensive media analysis, in our efforts to capture the diverse perspectives and experiences of those involved and impacted by Olympic inclusion, and processes of change over time and place.

### **A longitudinal methodology: tracing the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage**

The longitudinal research that underpins this book spans a ten-year period (2010–2020), and includes multiple projects in four distinct phases (Table 3.1) each interpretative in approach, and adopting a range of predominantly qualitative methods (i.e., interviews, focus groups, media analysis, archival research, online survey). Collectively, these projects document the various stages of action sports incorporation into the Olympic Games, from the early inclusion of action sports (i.e., windsurfing, snowboarding, BMX racing), through the period when surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing were lobbying for inclusion in Tokyo 2020, through to the postponed Tokyo Games. Our discussion through the subsequent chapters of the book is organised thematically, synthesizing and drawing on data from across these different phases of the research activities. Our intention in this chapter is to give some detail about the objectives and methods of each of these

Table 3.1 New Research Activities in Chronological Order

<i>Phase and dates</i>	<i>Key projects</i>
<p><b>Pre-2015</b></p> <p><b>Phase 1: [2015–2016]</b> From before the shortlisting of skateboarding, surfing, and sport climbing for Tokyo 2020 inclusion, to six months after the IOC's announcements of inclusion.</p> <p><b>Phase 2: [2016]</b> Short-term impact of the IOC's decision to include surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing into Tokyo 2020 Programme.</p> <p><b>Phase 3: [2018–2020]</b> Preparing for Tokyo and beyond.</p>	<p>Thorpe &amp; Wheaton (2011a, 2011b)</p> <p><b>Project 1:</b> IOC Advanced Research Grant: Multi-methodology to examine youth perceptions of the relevance and significance of the Olympic Games, and the Youth Olympic Games [YOG].</p> <p><b>Project 2:</b> Media analysis following announcement of the inclusion of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing in Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games (i.e., August 3, 2016).</p> <p><b>Project 3:</b> Focus groups with action sport participants in Aotearoa New Zealand.</p> <p><b>Project 4:</b> The Impact of Olympic Inclusion in different National contexts.</p> <p><b>Project 5:</b> The impact on athletes.</p>

empirical projects conducted between 2015 and 2020; we organise our discussion of these below chronologically. In addition to these formal projects, a range of events and activities provided important fieldwork opportunities, including the two national stakeholder symposia we organised in Aotearoa New Zealand, visits to the IOC in Lausanne and a meeting with the organising committee in Tokyo (see Table 3.2 and discussion below). Our various forms of interaction with IOC staff included visits to Lausanne, events we attended, informal conversations with various staff members of the IOC by phone, email, and in-person, and one formal interview with an IOC staff member (programme head) with influence across several divisions.

Lastly, we briefly highlight some of the methodological challenges we encountered in conducting this research.

### **Phase 1: 2015–2016 from Tokyo shortlisting to decision making**

This phase of research was funded by an IOC Advanced Research Grant (2015–2016) with a focus on youth perceptions of the relevance and significance of the Olympic Games and the Youth Olympic Games (YOG). Initially our research explored the attitudes of participants across action sports (i.e., skateboarding, surfing, BMX, snowboarding, parkour, and kiteboarding [also known as kitesurfing]) and investigated a range of issues, including action sport participants' perceptions of

Table 3.2 Activities in Chronological Order

Year	Activity
2014	Invited visit to IOC Lausanne (December) to discuss potential research on urban and action sports
2016	Presented our findings to the <i>Olympic Programmes Commission</i> meeting (March 2016), where the initial decision about the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Programme was made. Meetings with various IOC groups including YOG and gender equity. Research in the Olympics Study Centre Archive (including historical materials dating back to the 1960s)
2016	Organised Symposium in New Zealand: Agenda 2020: Action Sports and the Olympic Games: New Zealand Stakeholders Symposium.
2018	Attended <i>Olympism in Action Forum</i> , initiative launched by the IOC, in Buenos Aires, Argentina (October 5–6, 2018) alongside the 2018 YOG. Attended Urban Park Tour with strategic guests (i.e., athletes [Tony Hawk], sponsors [Panasonic], and future organizing committees [Paris and LA])
2018	2nd <i>Stakeholder Symposium</i> in Aotearoa New Zealand (October 2018)
2017	Attendance at National Scholastics Surfing Competition, Aotearoa New Zealand (October)
2018	Visit to Australian High-Performance Surfing Centre, Queensland
2018	Visit to Tokyo in December. Interviews with three members of the Tokyo organizing committee, including Sports Director (Koji Murofushi)
2019	Participation in IOC Think Tank on the <i>Future of the Olympic Games</i> , with IOC Sports Director (Christophe Dubi), President Thomas Bach, and 10 other invited participants

the relevance and significance of the Olympic Games and the YOG. Fortuitously, during this time-period, the announcement that skateboarding, surfing and sport climbing had been shortlisting for Tokyo 2020 inclusion was announced (September 2015). We therefore shifted our focus to these three sports, and explored how these action sport cultures and industries had responded to their shortlisting for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.

The research adopted a multi-method approach, including an online survey (in nine languages), extensive media analysis, and 25 interviews with key individuals/stakeholders from action sport cultures, media, industries, and International Federations (IFs). As explained above, our methodology sought to pay attention to the many and multiple (and often unexpected) actants involved in the processes of action sports becoming Olympic sports. This multi-method approach also enabled us to reveal the roles and motivations of these different actors including the IOC, the media, and the action sports industries. We obtained ethical approval through our University in 2015. This research is available as a report (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2016) on the IOC online library. Here we briefly outline the methodological rationale and give detail about each of these methods.

## Media analysis

English-language media sources including “mainstream” magazines, newspapers, websites, blogs, and social media were initially collated focusing on the possible or past inclusion of action sports into the Olympics in 2015. Over the course of the 12 months a total of 655 articles were collated primarily relating to surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, parkour, BMX, and kiteboarding’s relationship with the Olympic Games, and also discussions relating to previously included action sports of snowboarding and windsurfing (see Table 3.3).

We found the majority of the mass media coverage (e.g. newspapers) focused on the announcement of shortlisting for Tokyo 2020 rather than offering any commentary. In contrast, articles published in online action niche media, along with the extensive dialogue among readers in action sport-related online forums, provided insights into the perspectives of the core participants and the industry. Cultural media, such as niche magazines and websites, have been identified as influential in communicating attitudes and value systems within and across action sport cultures (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; Thorpe, 2017; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Therefore, these niche media sources were important in illustrating some of the ongoing concerns held by core action sport participants about possible action sport inclusion. We organised and analysed these articles thematically to identify themes and debates both within and across sports. The media analysis also helped to contextualise and understand themes emerging in the surveys and informed our interviews and overall thematic analysis.

## Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 key individuals in the action sport industries (Table 3.4). The interviews were conducted with the aim of understanding the nuanced attitudes and debates within each sporting culture, and the processes involved in preparing these particular action sports for possible Olympic inclusion. Interviews focused on the sports shortlisted for Tokyo 2020 (surfing, skateboarding and sport climbing) and kiteboarding for the YOG 2018.

Table 3.3 Media Analysis, Phase I

<i>Sport</i>	<i>Total referenced articles</i>	<i>Mass media</i>	<i>Niche media</i>	<i>Social media</i>	<i>websites</i>	<i>other</i>
Surfing	130	63	43	8	8	8
Skate	180	68	48	24	35	5
Sport climbing	91	35	28	12	14	
Kiteboarding/kitesurfing	95	16	32	18	29	
Parkour	40	5	10	7	18	

With the announcement of the shortlisting of surfing, skateboarding and sport climbing for Tokyo 2020 during this phase of research, we used the interviews as an opportunity to understand the perspectives of those in these sporting industries and those directly involved (or implicated) in the processes, including: Sport Federation members (national and international); action sport media representatives (editors, journalists, photographers); sport agents and event organisers; past and present elite athletes; and national coaches.

Both researchers had developed a broad range of contacts within national and international action sport cultures and industries as a result of their research and past and present involvement in various action sports. We initially drew upon our existing contacts and cultural knowledge, as well as snowball sampling to ensure multiple perspectives were obtained. Key individuals not known to us were contacted via email and/or phone, and invited to participate in this study.

To minimise costs most interviews were conducted via Skype video. Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 3 hours, and were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed. Interviewees were sent their transcripts, and many responded quickly with points of clarification. The interviews provided rich insights into the different opinions, attitudes, experiences, and politics surrounding the inclusion of these action sports into the Olympic Games. They were analysed thematically and trends across sports also identified (see Wheaton & Thorpe, 2016). Our sample included representatives from multiple regions (including Australasia, Europe, North America, Asia), men and some women (see Table 3.4), and included representatives from International Governing Bodies of each sport, or in the case of skateboarding, representatives of the three organisations that were vying for this status in skateboarding at that time (see Chapters 6 and 8).

### **Online questionnaire**

Recognizing that most research looking at action sport consumption has focused on English-speaking participants, and particularly for the North American demographic, an online questionnaire was used to reach an international audience across different regions of the world (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). This enabled us to access a broad geographic sample and participants in different action sports.

The survey included 14 closed and open questions in sections that explored: attitudes about the Olympic Games in general; media consumption of the Olympics (and the YOG); attitudes towards the inclusion of actions sport into the Olympics; and broader sport preferences and consumption trends. To ensure a wide geographic reach we had the survey translated into nine languages: Arabic, English, Portuguese, French, German, Chinese (simplified Chinese and Mandarin), Spanish, and Japanese.

Online surveys work best when the target audience is technically savvy and utilise emails (Olberding & Cobb, 2007). As action sport participants are avid users of electronic media (Thorpe, 2017), the online format was considered appropriate. We had assistance from researchers with extensive experience in online surveys in

Table 3.4 Interviews

<i>Action sport</i>	<i>Number of interviews completed</i>	<i>Key roles of cultural intermediaries interviewed</i>
Skateboarding	9 (7 male, 2 female)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• two Presidents of international skateboarding federations;</li> <li>• one Chairperson of an international skateboarding-related organisation;</li> <li>• one skateboarding agent;</li> <li>• one industry organisation key member;</li> <li>• one event organiser and skateboarding commentator;</li> <li>• one skateboarding photographer and journalist;</li> <li>• one ex-professional skateboarder;</li> <li>• skateboarding company owner;</li> <li>• an ex-professional skateboarder;</li> <li>• key member of the Women's Skateboarding Alliance.</li> </ul>
Surfing	6 (5 male, 1 female)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The President of International Surfing Association [ISA];</li> <li>• three industry and media commentators (e.g. Surf Magazine editors) from Australia and the USA;</li> <li>• two ex-world champions (USA and Australia);</li> <li>• Head of a National Surfing federation (Europe);</li> <li>• a wave pool developer;</li> <li>• two with involvement in organising professional surfing competitions over the past decades;</li> <li>• one coaching nationally and internationally;</li> <li>• involvement shortboard, longboard, and Stand Up Paddleboard [SUP].</li> </ul>
Sport-climbing	5 (4 male, 1 female)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The President and a key member of the international federation (IFSC);</li> <li>• the CEO of a national climbing federation;</li> <li>• a director of a leading climbing company;</li> <li>• a climbing athlete.</li> </ul>
Kiteboarding	4 (3 male, 1 female)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Head of a National federation (Europe);</li> <li>• two contest organisers;</li> <li>• two international athletes;</li> <li>• Head of International Kites Surfing Federation;</li> <li>• parent of international athlete.</li> </ul>
Industry	1 (male)	Action sport agent and active participant in surfing and skateboarding.
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	

designing the tool, ensuring the questions were clear, and that it worked across different browsers including on tablets and iPads. We piloted the survey across different groups of consumers (ages and languages) and amended questions that were ambiguous. Our key form of dissemination was via action sport websites, social media,

and our own action sport industry contacts. As our sample was self-selecting, we included a range of questions about their demographics (e.g. age, nationally, gender) and their sports participation and consumption to ensure we understood who the sample was and that it represented our targeted audience. Most questions offered a range of comprehensive responses or used Likert type scales. Survey participants could also write comments to express their opinions, attitudes, and perceptions. These were quite extensive ranging from a sentence to short paragraphs; we were able to analyse the text from the 66 participants who wrote comments in English.

The survey was planned, piloted, and then put on line on August 21, 2015. It was closed in January 2016, a five-month window during which 820 participants completed the survey (although not all in its entirety). We worked with various stakeholders to disseminate the survey as widely as possible, and made particular efforts to increase completions in geographic areas where participation was initially low. Word of mouth seems to have been the most effective way of disseminating the survey, with Facebook and friends accounting for over 70% of responses.

The survey had a wide reach with participants from all continents, and 51 different countries. The sample represented both core and marginal participants across a wide range of action sports, the most popular activities being skateboarding (276 participants; 33% of sample), parkour/free running (202 participants), mountain biking (194), climbing (191 participants), surfing (178 participants), snowboarding, skiing, and BMX (111 participants). Around half of our sample classified themselves as “regular participants” and half “occasional participants”; a smaller group (187 people) declared they did not participate in action sports. Under 20-year-olds constituted 19%, and those 20–30 years constituted 63%; 72% of those who answered the gender question were male. Therefore, our sample broadly reflected the demographic audience that the IOC are hoping to target with the inclusion of action sports, and that have been seen as the “typical” action sport participant (i.e. young males) (Kusz, 2004; Thorpe, 2014; Wheaton, 2013). We were not able to accurately ascertain ethnicity due to a recording error.

As researchers working within a broadly interpretivist paradigm, we recognise the limitations of such survey-based methodologies, and of this tool specifically (see also Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). In particular self-selecting samples are prone to errors due to the “characteristics of the sample population” being “different from the population of interest” (Olberding & Cobb, 2007, p. 27). For this reason, we do not make any statistical claims from the survey, particularly about participants’ enthusiasm for the inclusion of action sports in the Olympics. Our intention was not to gain statistically-verifiable generalisations across populations, but to map socio-cultural, sport-based, and demographic trends in action sport media consumption. The survey results were useful in revealing differences between generations, gender, different national contexts, and across sports. It also revealed a broad range of often contradictory views; indeed, the survey included both the dominant views being expressed in the niche media at that time, and some polar opposite views to both attitudes to action sports media consumption generally, and the Olympics specifically (outlined in Chapter 5).



## **Phase 2: post Tokyo announcement**

Following the IOC's announcement (August 3, 2016) that surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing were to be included in Tokyo 2020 our research moved into Phase 2. We conducted a second phase of the media analysis between August and December 2016, focusing on the ways in which the decision was made sense of by the action sports communities in the following weeks and months. Sources were identified across print and electronic/online media in English, but focused on articles published in online action sport magazines, as well as the dialogue among readers in action sport-related online forums (e.g. Twitter feeds, Instagram). We looked for any new themes or issues emerging, and identified these under "changing attitudes". A total of 198 articles were collated and then analysed as follows: Surfing (53); Skateboarding (43); Sport climbing (30); All sport/combination (29). Of these articles, 26 were in mainstream media, 36 in niche media, 85 on websites, 44 in social media, and 2 were commentary articles (i.e., *The Conversation*, *Huck*).

### ***Project 3: action sport participant focus groups in Aotearoa New Zealand***

Focus groups were held with two groups of action sport participants in Aotearoa New Zealand to understand the views of regular recreational action sport participants about surfing and skateboarding being included in the Tokyo Olympics. Our intention was to have six discussion groups, including targeting under 18s. Despite publicising these using a range of methods including posters at our University, social media, word of mouth, at local skateparks, climbing-walls, and surf shops, interest in participating was low. From our conversations with potential participants, we interpreted this lack of engagement as being symptomatic of both a lack of interest in the research project (i.e. the Olympics) and also of engaging in this type of forum.

Group 1 (December 15, 2016) included four men and two women who were all surfers from intermediate to advanced levels, with ages ranging from late 20s to early 50s. Many also participated in other action sports including kiteboarding, windsurfing, skateboarding, snowboarding, Stand Up Paddleboard (SUP). Several had children (aged 8–15) who were regular action sport participants. Although all six were living in Aotearoa New Zealand their nationalities included New Zealanders, as well as one each from Scandinavia, Brazil, and England. The two facilitators were both female and active action sport participants. Group 2 (January 27, 2017) involved five skateboarders aged 18–35, four males and one female, all of whom were regular local skateboarders in the Waikato region (central North Island). The two facilitators included a female action sport participant and an elite male skateboarder. Both focus groups were around two hours in length, and despite some initial hesitancy, the conversations gained momentum and continued to flow well. The focus groups were also professionally transcribed.

### **Phase 3: the impact of Olympic inclusion on action sport athletes, cultures, and industries in the run-up to Tokyo**

Building upon the findings to date, Phase 3 examined the impact of Olympic inclusion on action sport athletes, cultures, and industries in the run-up to Tokyo. Our objective was to identify changes and challenges for the action sports cultures and industries, and the broader changing landscape of Olympic sport at national and international levels. We were particularly interested in exploring the strategies and struggles of National Sporting Organisations (NSO) and National Governing Bodies (NGB), the new roles and opportunities being created (e.g. in coaching, management, leadership, funding, and facilities), and the impacts on athletes, and any evidence of exclusion, particularly any differences for women and men.

#### ***Project 4: the impact of Olympic inclusion in national contexts***

The first Olympic Stakeholder Symposium (2016) had illustrated a patchy and uneven funding landscape, a lack of information, and different patterns and priorities across sports and national contexts. We therefore conducted research across different national contexts (focusing on Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, USA, and England) to compare investment strategies and impact. Within these contexts we explored the views of NGBs/NSOs and/or other relevant organisations, and athletes and their support teams (i.e. parents, coaches, managers, sponsors). Our methodology included semi-structured interviews, including five in Aotearoa New Zealand, three in Australia, and one each in the UK and the USA (conducted between 2017 and 2019). Additionally, we collated context-specific policy and media documents (2018–2020). The interviewees focused on skateboarding, surfing, and sport climbing; however we also included other action sports that were making a debut in Tokyo (or beyond) under existing IFs. These included BMX freestyle (under international cycling) and kiteboarding, which was in the YOG Programme in (2018) and to be included in Paris (under yachting). We also included parkour, which the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) was attempting to appropriate. We anticipated that the politics of inclusion were likely to be different in these contexts where action sports are being willingly (BMX freestyle) or unwillingly (parkour) incorporated. Ten interviews were conducted across Kiteboarding (2); Surfing (3); BMX (2); Skateboarding (2) and Sport climbing (1). Some interviews were conducted face-to-face, including a visit to the Australian High-Performance surfing centre (see Chapter 9); however the majority were conducted via Skype.

#### ***Project 5: the impact of Olympic inclusion on female surfers in Aotearoa New Zealand***

Our second aim in Phase 3 was to understand how Olympic inclusion was impacting the experiences of young action sport athletes (12–21 years old), and particularly to understand any changes to available training, funding, and support

structures. Our earlier research (2016) suggested that this younger generation of action sport athletes was imagining their careers and training in different ways to their predecessors (e.g. professionalisation of approach to training, coaching structures, more parental pressure) with Olympic inclusion having a role in this shift. We focused our empirical research on female surfers in Aotearoa New Zealand as we had access to participants in a group of emerging and international athletes, and improving opportunities for women and girls was a focus of Agenda 2020. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven girls and women aged 13 to early 30s who were all competing at national or international levels (October 2018–early 2019). Over half of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and either in their homes or during national surfing competitions; all were professionally transcribed. Some of these interviews had the parents/guardians present, who also contributed to the discussion. We also interviewed two parents and a representative of the NGB (Surfing NZ). The interviews were further contextualised through fieldwork at key surfing events including regional and national surfing contests and youth training camps.

## Events and symposia

As listed in Table 3.2, we organised two symposia in Aotearoa New Zealand. First in 2016 (21 September) a one-day symposium *Agenda 2020: Action Sports and the Olympic Games: New Zealand Stakeholders Symposium* was held at the University of Waikato. We invited representatives from each action sport that had: (a) already been included in the Olympics (i.e. snowboard, BMX racing, mountain biking, windsurfing); (b) were being included in Tokyo 2020 (surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing); or (c) were part of the YOG or Olympic conversations (kiteboarding, SUP, and parkour). These included NGB or NSO representatives if a NGO/NSO existed, national coaches, athletes, and/or key action sport industry members. Most of the sports organisations invited attended. Additionally, we had representatives from the International Olympic Committee (member Barry Maister), New Zealand Olympic Committee (Jake Wilkins), key members from High Performance Sport NZ, Sport New Zealand, the National Youth Sports Institute of Singapore, Sport Waikato, Unitec, and Sport Bay of Plenty.

The event format included short presentations from each action sport and from the facilitators based on our research findings to date (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2016), with each presentation focused on the implications for these sporting cultures and industries. The event stimulated excellent discussions (which were recorded) about the opportunities and challenges facing new sports being included in the Tokyo Olympics and the effects of such changes on the future of sport in Aotearoa New Zealand. We reviewed lessons learned from action sports included in past Olympic Games, and the group devised some key strategies to help support new sports such as surfing, skateboarding and sport climbing in their preparations for Olympic inclusion.

A second *Action Sport and the Olympics* symposium was held in October 2018. This forum attracted speakers and participants from both action sports

(e.g., representatives of NZ parkour, windsurfing, BMX, skateboarding, cycling, climbing, sailing) and more traditional sports (NZ cycling and NZ football). The attendance by representatives of regional sports organisations (e.g. Sport Waikato, Sport Bay of Plenty) in roles such as regional coaching, talent development, youth sports system advisors, seemed to be symptomatic of the shift in public perceptions of these activities. Discussion and debate focused on a range of issues including; resources and facilities (challenges and opportunities); athlete development—selection, strength, and conditioning; action sports science; athlete life and welfare; global issues in action sports and implications for Aotearoa New Zealand; and gender equity, including development and support of female athletes and women in leadership. Also presenting at the event were three of our PhD students who were conducting relevant research on action sports at the time: Damien Puddle (on parkour in Aotearoa New Zealand and globally), Neftalie Williams (skateboarding in the USA), and John MacFarlane (skateboarding in Aotearoa). Their projects have informed this book in multiple ways and each has contributed a short case study in this book. Our understandings of action sports and the Olympic Games have been greatly informed by our ongoing conversations with Puddle, Williams, and MacFarlane who are each working closely with those in the national and international parkour and skateboarding communities, respectively.

### **The research process**

In the last section we briefly discuss aspects of the research process, highlighting some of the key challenges working “with” the IOC and how this informed our thinking on the politics of incorporation (with further insights offered in our final chapter).

As feminist researchers, we have both written about the various challenges of conducting action sports research, particularly our positionality as white heterosexual women in what are often male-dominated spaces (e.g. Olive & Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 1997, 2002, 2013). However, much of our research has been in sport communities, where to some extent our access has been facilitated by our status as active participants, or even as journalists. Neither of us had conducted research on powerful and guarded organisations such as the IOC or International Sport Federations, which, as other researchers have shown, can pose a very different set of challenges including access, ethics and interpretation (Boykoff, 2016; Lenskyj, 2010; Sugden & Tomlinson, 1999). As much of the investigative research on global sports organisations, including the IOC, has shown, these organisations have “much to show off, but even more to hide” (Sugden & Tomlinson, 1999, p. 4). Therefore, to provide an analysis that can penetrate beneath the “surface and rhetoric” requires methods that go beyond secondary sources and “institutionally generated” accounts (Jennings, 2011; Sugden & Tomlinson, 1999, p. 4). Here we detail how we managed to gain some access to the IOC, which provided us with a different and useful vantage point for understanding some of the internal political processes and the shifting action sports-Olympic Games assemblage.

### ***Developing relationships and gaining access to institutional actors***

In the first phase of our research, our access to the key individuals in IFs and action sports industry was largely facilitated by the fact that shortlisting of the new action sports had not yet happened. Therefore, those who had a stake in this process or held strong views (both for and against their sports inclusion in the Olympics) wanted to have their voice heard. Furthermore, our access to the IFs was facilitated by our project being funded by an Advanced Olympic Research Grant. While as we outline below, these grants are separate to the operations of the IOC's Sport Department, it was not necessarily seen in this way, and the IOC "badge" undoubtedly helped in securing interviews. For example, our contacts in the IOC staff helped us to secure interviews with the IF members, and also to distribute the survey by using their contact at FISE (International Extreme Sports Festival) to promote our survey at one of their major events in China.

We found those who were involved in those action sports that were shortlisted most eager to be interviewed and further express their support for inclusion (see discussion in last section). Throughout the project, we were careful to emphasise that we were not "working for" the IOC and that we had no particular agenda in terms of wanting (or not) particular sports to be included in the Olympics. Nonetheless, those who were critical of the Olympic Games or action sports inclusion seemed less willing to be interviewed, unless we had some connection (such as being recommended by another cultural intermediary). There were a number of people who did not respond to our emails (particularly in the case of surfing) and others who only agreed to be interviewed after a more informal telephone conversation or set of email discussions. We reasoned that this may have been due to the highly political and contested nature of the process at this time. In contrast, the action sport media we approached to distribute our survey largely ignored our email requests to post a link to our survey. We also found it much harder to secure interviews for our third phase of research (project 5). Our research targeted over 20 individuals world-wide, particularly in National Federations, but many did not reply to repeated requests; others stated they were "too busy", or unable to participate. Our sense was that now that these sports were included in the Olympics, it was less important to engage in research. Again, using our contact networks developed over some years proved most fruitful, and we therefore focused our national case studies on Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and the UK, where we had existing relationships.

### ***Shifting relationships with IOC staff***

The politics and ethics of doing research on the Olympic Movement, particularly whilst funded by an IOC grant, needs reflection. Here we recount the development of this relationship, how relationships evolved over the course of the project, and trust developed, and also the compromises we made. In so doing we

also show the ways in which the IOC staff with whom we developed relationships also have influence in the action sports-Olympic assemblage and impacted the IOC's decision-making process. As our experiences also reveal, the IOC itself is a complex organisation with its own internal power struggles, and a new generation working towards a different agenda.

Our first meeting with the IOC was in 2014 when Belinda visited Lausanne based on an invite from the then Head of the Sport Department responsible for many aspects of the Olympic programme (whom we will call John). 'John' and his team had come across our previous research on action sports and the Olympic Games (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b) through a contact, and invited us to meet in Lausanne. In this first meeting, Belinda was struck by the contrast between the informal atmosphere of the Sport Department and staff, and the formalities of arriving at the IOC headquarters with rigorous checks, and an imposing but modern building, filled with signifiers of the Olympic Movements history such as statues, paintings, and photographs. In contrast, the Sport Department offices were open plan, a hub of activity with the staff (estimated aged 20s to 40s men and women), all of whom were dressed quite informally. Through conversations, it became apparent that many had degrees in sports management and similar sport-related studies, and were cognisant of academic literature on the Olympics and action sports. Many of this group were passionate about their jobs, which at that point involved collating evidence about the benefits of action sports. This was something their team had been interested in for some time, with the success of snowboarding in the Winter Olympic noted:

On a daily basis we've always tried to take the pulse of the [action] sports industry ... This is an ongoing movement that we're following very closely, of course becoming more important these days following the proposal from Tokyo, but I think it's definitely a constant flow and it is part on ongoing monitoring of the world of sport.

(interview, 2016)

Following this meeting we were encouraged to apply for an Olympic Study Centre (OSC) grant with a focus on youth action sports in both the Olympics and the YOG. While the OSC research grant programmes have clear decision-making rules and procedures (see <https://www.olympic.org/olympic-studies-centre/research-grant-programmes>), and it was clear that our project would not "be prioritised", IOC departments are one of four groups who assess the proposals. Our application was successful and we began our research in early 2015. Over the next six months, we received regular emails and occasionally phone calls from 'John' and members of his team. They were keen for updates on our progress, notifications about key action sport events, and also shared their ongoing research with us, for example, media and audience statistics for action sport events, or notice of key meetings. We also provided initial findings and requested reports to

support their understandings and developments, such that the relationship was reciprocal in a sharing of knowledge. Their emails continued to endorse our work and its value to them. For example, “the work you are doing on action sports and Olympic Agenda 2020 will be of great value to the Olympic Movement and, more importantly perhaps, to the sports and disciplines themselves as well as their governing bodies / groups” (2016).

From these multiple interactions, and the one formal interview (in 2016) with the then Head of the Sport Department, it was apparent that the Sport Department, as well as the YOG, and Summer programme teams, were all convinced of the value of action sports in the Olympics. The rigorous research they were conducting was certainly comprehensive, but it seemed that their primary motivation was to provide evidence to the Executive Board—the decision makers—that would convince them these sports would fit within their requirements (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of this process). As the IOC executive meeting 2015 (May) approached, John requested that our research be used as part of their evidence to the Executive Board. We were subsequently invited to attend the meeting (in Lausanne) and present our initial findings. As we were told later, this was highly unusual, indeed “the first time that we’ve had an academic come into the Olympic Commission” (email correspondence). We took time to consider this request, recognising that to some extent we were being used by the Sport Department to further their own agenda. However, we came to the decision that being able to witness the decision-making process (held behind closed doors) was highly beneficial and as individuals (researchers and action sport participants) we did not hold strong views for or against Olympic inclusion. Our focus was on the process not the outcome of these decisions. Due to some personal circumstances Belinda was unable to travel, so Holly attended this meeting alone (while we kept in close contact with daily discussions). During this visit, Holly also had meetings scheduled with members of the YOG and Women’s Sport and Development working groups. Indeed, before these meetings we had been asked to provide executive summaries of research (in progress) that was relevant for each special interest group Holly would meet. The presentation to the IOC executive was an exciting but challenging experience; the PowerPoint that we had prepared was “checked over” several times by John and junior colleagues, and we were “asked” to remove specific slides the day prior to the presentation. Our interpretation of this was they did not want us to discuss the parts of the research that might emphasise the degree of cultural resistance that existed, or that the IOC might interpret as “political”. We were unable to challenge this “interference”. However, in the question-and-answer session with the Executive members Holly was able to speak to some of the issues that had been censured in the formal presentation. In summary, we both felt uncomfortable, to some extent we were being manipulated, yet, felt confident in the content of the findings we had presented. Overall, the insights behind the scenes were worth the partial compromises that we tried to navigate through building relationships and personal interactions and conversations with various members of the IOC executive committee and staff.

Our relationship following the 2015 meeting continued to be fruitful. The IOC (Sport Department) partly funded our first stakeholder symposium in Aotearoa New Zealand, and considered funding further research. At one point we were asked to consider becoming formal consultants in the process. However, in July 2017 Belinda was approached to serve on the Board of a new parkour organisation (Parkour Earth). One of the organisation's key aims was to provide a legitimate IF that could challenge the FIG who, to the consternation of the parkour community, was attempting to claim parkour as a gymnastics discipline (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of this process). Our research at that point did not include parkour, although Damien Puddle, CEO of Parkour NZ, was working on his doctorate with us at that time. However, through a series of email interactions it became clear that Belinda's role posed a "problem" for our relationship with the IOC. As one email explained, the ongoing discussions between Parkour Earth and FIG had been flagged, and their team had been asked for reassurance that this did not constitute a conflict of interest. It continued to state that, while they felt comfortable with this and had given their reassurance, it would nonetheless need to be passed on to the IOC Ethics team. Then in a later email, it was communicated to Belinda that the IOC staff members had been 'unfortunately' advised that while there were ongoing Parkour governance discussions that she was a part of, they should not engage with her in any official capacity. Although we cannot know who deemed this "a conflict", we found this surprising given that, at this particular time, disputes about parkour were in international governance (i.e. the realm of IFs), and, therefore, unrelated to the IOC other than FIG being one of the oldest Olympic federations. We also got the impression that the Sport Department was also bemused. They communicated with us to say it had been a pleasure to work with us who they saw as experts in this area. For our purposes here, however, these incidents reveal the complex webs of power between the IOC members, international sport federations (i.e. FIG), and IOC staff working behind the scenes in important ways. Following this, the Sport Department staff stopped corresponding with Belinda, yet continued to correspond with Holly, including inviting her to speak at several "flagship" events and attend the YOG in Buenos Aires (see Table 3.2). Given our ongoing collaborative work, we found this odd, and raised this point making it clear that her attendance at these events would contribute to our research. The IOC staff did not seem to be concerned by this, and to some extent it is further evidence that the interpretation of Belinda's role as a "conflict of interest" was not necessarily held by those we had engaged with in the IOC staff.

We also found that these webs of influence extended beyond the IOC staff to other key individuals we were introduced to, or who sought us out: sport consultants for example, who were keen for particular action sports to feature in the Olympics, and others who clearly had the "ear" of the IOC staff. For example, one of these individuals emailed us, stating; "I saw [person] last week and he spoke of continuing your support to the Programme Commission and the wider IOC". Another example was an email introduction to the Paris 2024 Olympic



and Paralympic bid organising committee, requesting we meet with them. Paraphrasing, the email said that the Paris bid team were aware of our work for the Programme Commission, and that given the likelihood of Paris 2024 having to deliver a mix of traditional and contemporary sports, they would very much like to meet.

In the IOC events Holly attended between 2016 and 2019 (including the 2018 YOG Urban Park Tour and Olympism in Action Forum in Buenos Aires, and a Think Tank in Lausanne exploring key learnings from the YOG for future Olympics), we gained insights into the vast differences in view between the IOC staff working behind the scene and those “visible” members of the IOC and IFs. For example, during her first visit to Lausanne Holly recounted how resistant some of the older male members were to the alternative cultures of action sports. In subsequent visits, some older male members questioned the value add of action sports to the Olympic Games, and continued to view the Olympic Games as the pinnacle sporting event—the largest sporting spectacle in the world—such that any new sport should be wholly grateful for being included in the “Olympic Family”. In contrast, some of the members of the sport department and junior staff were convinced of the value of action sports and were warm, collegial, and highly supportive of our research. Throughout these discussions Holly worked to maintain her critical positioning and to speak to issues of power and politics in her contributions to the dialogue. As a (relatively) young woman speaking in meetings dominated by powerful older men, this was not always easy. Whereas some older, male members (including President Bach at one point) seemed disturbed by her willingness to critique the IOC and raise challenging questions, the members of the Sports Department continued to encourage her to speak into these conversations. It is however also important to note that once the IOC had ratified the decision for surfing, sport climbing, and skateboarding, to some extent agendas within and across the IOC seemed to change. As Holly observed, in Buenos Aires and the subsequent Think Tank in Lausanne (chaired by IOC Sports Director Christophe Dubi and attended by President Bach), the IOC’s new focus was youth and trends in the urbanisation of sport, including the growth of e-sports. In the final chapter we revisit some of these experiences to show the changing roles of different actors in the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage, and how, some of those working for the IOC have been contributing in important ways. As our experiences reveal, the IOC itself is a complex organisation with its own internal power struggles, and a new generation working strategically towards a different agenda.

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# The history of action sports and the Olympic Games

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While the incorporation of surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, and BMX freestyle into the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games has garnered considerable media coverage and cultural controversy over recent years, it is important to acknowledge and understand the much longer historical relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games. From the 1980s and 1990s, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was aware of and observing new trends in youth sport participation and consumption. During the 1990s, the IOC was becoming increasingly cognisant of the growing success of the X Games, alongside diminishing numbers of young Olympic viewers. It was in this context that the IOC set about incorporating a selection of youth-oriented sports into the Olympic Programme (i.e., windsurfing, mountain biking, snowboarding, bicycle motocross [BMX]). The incorporation process, however, was far from simple. The power relationships between various key agents (i.e., the IOC and associated sporting bodies, media conglomerates, and action sport cultures and industries) were highly complex, political, and context-specific (see Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b).

In this chapter we offer three case studies of the historical inclusion of windsurfing, snowboarding, and BMX, respectively, into the Olympic Games, and reveal some of the nuanced power relations within and between these groups and organisations. In so doing, we illustrate that, while there are patterns across various action sports and their relationship with the Olympic Movement, there were also unique differences based on the distinctive history, environments, geographies, identities, and development patterns of each action sport, as well as the broader socio-cultural-political context at the time. To note, the snowboarding case is the longest of the three because of the significant role it has played in demonstrating to the IOC the value of action sports inclusion, and the common themes (i.e., cultural contestation) that emerged in subsequent action sports inclusion (i.e., skateboarding, surfing). Importantly, this chapter offers important contextual background necessary for understanding the ever-changing power struggles involved in more recent attempts to modernise the Olympic Games via the incorporation of more action sports.

## **An Olympic first: windsurfing enters the 1984 Summer Games**

Originating during the mid-1960s, boardsailing, or windsurfing as it is more popularly known, is a hybrid sport drawing on technologies adapted from boat-sailing and surfing. In the 1980s windsurfing was recognised as Europe's fastest growing sport, with professional events attracting large numbers of spectators (Turner, 1983; Wheaton, 1997), and thus held much appeal for the IOC at this particular historical moment. Windsurfing was included in the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles as a new Olympic "boat" (the Windglider one-design) in the pre-existing yachting regatta. Initially there was only a male division, but a women's event was introduced at the 1992 Barcelona Games. Some championed windsurfing as providing the Olympics with a more exciting, youthful, media-friendly, and athletic form of sailing (Newsletter, 2008). Many members of the yachting fraternity, however, did not welcome this new addition to its programme. According to multiple Olympic windsurf medallist, Barbara Kendall, the old guard of yachting saw it as "too radical" and "didn't understand or want anything to do with us" (interview, 2010). Indeed, few attempts were made to accommodate the unique cultural values or ideologies, or physical requirements, of windsurfers. At this particular historical conjuncture—ten years before the first X Games, and long before extreme sports captured the imagination of mainstream audiences—windsurfers entering the Games were largely unaware of their (potential) commodity value for the Olympic Movement, and as such failed to exercise their agency within the Olympic model. As with all Olympic athletes, windsurfers interested in attending the Games were expected to conform to the rules and regulations set by the IOC and their national and Olympic governing sporting bodies (e.g., International Sailing Federation [ISAF]).

Ultimately, windsurfing did not have a particularly profound impact on the Olympic Games for a number of reasons. First, the format for Olympic windsurfing was course-racing rather than the more popular, spectacular, youthful, and media-friendly activities of wave sailing, slalom-racing, and freestyle preferred by many contemporary professional windsurfing competitors. In contrast, Olympic windsurf course-racing was not a good spectator sport, and did not make good television. Racing was conducted offshore making both live spectatorship and filming difficult. Indeed, even for those who understood the tactics, it was hard to clearly identify who was winning. Second, the long time-frames and strict rules regarding the technological developments and equipment specified for competition made the Olympic windsurfing events seem archaic in comparison to more popular forms of participation. As one industry insider explained:

Because in windsurfing the kind of equipment they are using in the Olympics almost nobody is using because it's not fun, they cannot have fun with this kind of board. ... There are millions of windsurfers, and how many are actually doing competition? And no windsurfer in the world who is just

windsurfing for fun is a member of a sailing club. So, it's only for the ones that are competing. ... That was always my biggest problem with Olympic windsurfing and if you talk to every windsurfer on the beach, they say it's not representing my sport.

(interview, 2015)

While the one-design craft selected for each Olympic event has been updated several times, in each era the Olympic craft design lagged behind the boards being used in professional windsurfing or among many recreational participants.

In contrast to Olympic windsurfing events, the most popular and highly-valued styles of windsurfing (e.g., wave sailing, freestyle) focus on the more aesthetic, creative, and spectacular aspects of the sport. In wave sailing competitions, for example, athletes are judged on both their aerial manoeuvres and their ability to ride waves much like surfers. Wave sailing continues to hold high subcultural capital and garners the most mass and niche media coverage and industry support, fuelled by the dramatic visual spectacle and alluring locations like Hawaii. In comparison to wave sailors, even the most successful Olympic windsurfers received negligible niche media coverage and cultural status. Paradoxically then, the development of Olympic windsurfing did not represent a threat to the sport or its subcultural ethos. Rather, the Olympic windsurfers were marginalised within the broader windsurfing culture, and subsumed within the sport of sailing, perceived to be old-fashioned, traditional, and elitist. Despite attempts by some Olympic windsurfers and members of the industry to modernise the equipment (with the RS:X Class, which was seen as a compromise between traditional raceboards, and the more popular Formula Windsurfing boards featuring in Beijing 2008) and also to attract competitors from the Professional Windsurfing Association (PWA) tour (many of whom are the sport's main celebrities and ambassadors), Olympic windsurfing did not gain the support from core windsurfers or significantly increase viewers for the sailing programmes.

When windsurfing was incorporated into the Olympic Games in the 1980s it was a fast growing leisure activity, perceived as a youthful and "extreme" sport. But, by the early 21st century, the Olympic version of the sport had become a lack-lustre, marginalised form of windsurfing, attracting little interest from either the windsurfing culture or mainstream media, while continuing to be seen as an imposter by the ISAF. In May 2012, when the ISAF voted on the ten yachting events for the Rio 2016 Games, windsurfing was left out, replaced by the "new kid on the block", kiteboarding (also known as kitesurfing and discussed in Chapter 6). While this controversial decision was subsequently overturned (see Chapter 6), it provoked widespread anger in the international windsurfing community including a petition "Keep Windsurfing as a Olympic Discipline". As one interviewee from the kiteboarding International Federation (IF) argued, "Windsurfing is certainly better in many ways as a current Olympic sport than

many of the other sailing classes". There was also misunderstanding about the process, believing it was the "IOC who decided between windsurfing and kite-surfing" (interview, 2015), a position fuelled in the niche media that pitted windsurfers against kiteboarders. However, our kiteboarding interviewees (2015), all of whom had previously been windsurfers, recognised that windsurfing's lack of "success" as an Olympic sport was largely because of international sailing's attitudes and failure to modernise:

Already from the first Olympics they make the wrong choice. So, that's a part of history. They did always the wrong choice of the discipline to be in the Olympics, that was not representative of the community of windsurfing around the world.

(interview, 2015)

Traditional sailors resent losing two of sailing's 10 Olympic medals to these "new-fangled" classes.

(social media post, 2012)

Among the many arguments being made for windsurfing to continue to be included in the Olympics was that it remained an internationally popular form of water sport, and the least expensive route into the Olympic Regatta for small and emerging sailing nations. Indeed, windsurfing was the most diverse of all the sailing events, with medals in the last seven Olympiads won by windsurfing athletes from five continents. Some media and industry commentators in windsurfing and kiteboarding were calling for the two sports to move beyond this "them and us attitude" between "windies and danglers" (Plavenieks, 2012) and form a coalition to challenge sailing's Olympic hegemony:

I think it's preposterous that anyone would really think ISAF would go without its bread and butter for some of the moment, special edition jam? The kities need to approach the IOC directly, and I agree, engaging some support from slalom or freestyle windsurfing would be a good way of doing this as they would have strength in numbers with allied disciplines. If that means the IOC do cut the ISAF medal count, well so be it. But expecting ISAF to genuinely represent the interests of windsurfing and kitesurfing [is] just mad.

(social media post, 2012)

They should have been lobbying together against the ISAF, to say we are two modern sports that can represent the modern face of sailing... they were not willing to make any compromises and to work together. It was very disappointing, and there has been quite a strong polarity of kite surfers against windsurfers and vice versa for some time. It's not right.

(interview, 2015)

However, despite windsurfing's marginalisation by ISAF, the IOC has continued to see windsurfing (and subsequently kiteboarding, see Chapters 4 and 6) as having a place in the Olympic Movement.

In the Nanjing 2014 Youth Olympic Games (YOG), windsurfing was selected as one of only two sailing events. The selected craft (Bic Techno) is cheap and popular around the world in youth events with a large following. As one YOG observer commented, in contrast to the elitism of "senior Olympic classes in its current format" the Techno was the highlight of the Nanjing event with competitors "coming from countries that we've never heard of before" (interview, 2015):

The Youth Olympics was the first time I'd actually been to an international yachting event where I've thought, hey, this is really cool. It's the first time I've seen smaller and developing nations being quite competitive. Because the classes were affordable and accessible for the kids to get into the sport and there were large numbers globally doing the sport at a high level and everything was provided for the event.

The Bic Techno retained its place in the 2018 Summer YOG in Buenos Aires for boys and girls alongside the new addition of kiteboarding and the Nacra boat (mixed gender). That four of the five sailing events were not in boats suggests that the IOC continues to be aware that both windsurfing and kiteboarding are cheaper and more accessible forms of sailing sports, popular with youth audiences and attracting younger competitors. While windsurfing in Tokyo will be its last outing on the very outdated RS:X board, a radical change has been proposed for Paris 2024, with the iQFoil as the official Olympic windsurfing equipment. As we discuss in Chapter 6, the hydrofoil (also popularised in the America's Cup 2021) has the potential to radically change the face of Olympic sailing events and the elitist operations of ISAF.

The IOC continued to look elsewhere for other action sports that would further appeal to younger audiences; mountain biking and canoe slalom (also known as white-water kayaking) events were both added to the Summer Olympic Programme in 1996. However, it has been the inclusion of action sports in the Winter Olympics, particularly snowboarding, that ended up being most successful in attracting younger audiences.

## **Nagano and beyond: snowboarding and the Winter Olympics**

Snowboarding, as we understand the activity today, emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in North America. Most of the early pioneers of the activity embodied the idealism of the by-gone counterculture and, in direct contrast to skiing (which was an expensive and bourgeois sport framed by a strong set of rules of conduct), embraced snowboarding as a free, fun, cooperative, and individualistic activity (Humphreys, 1997). Summarising the cultural differences between skiers

and snowboarders during this period, Humphreys (1996) wrote that whereas “skiing embodied technical discipline and control”, snowboarding “embodied freedom, hedonism and irresponsibility” (p. 9). Another study comparing the demographics of these two groups showed snowboarders to be typically younger, less educated, single, male, earning lower incomes, or students (Williams, Dossa & Fulton, 1994). Significant change, however, occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The convergence of several factors contributed to the escalating number of snowboarders. More ski resorts in many parts of the world officially opened their pistes to snowboarders, the mainstream media started reporting favourably on snowboarding culture, and snowboarding magazines communicated images, attitudes, and styles to snowboarding cultures around the world. During this period the snowboarding economy developed from a few backyard companies to a cohesive industry complete with its own media, international events and competitions, trade-shows, fashions, and professional and amateur athletes (Thorpe, 2011).

During the mid and late 1990s, television and corporate sponsors also identified the huge potential in snowboarding as a way to tap into the highly elusive young-male market, and mainstream companies began appropriating the alternative, hedonistic, and youthful image of the snowboarder to sell products ranging from chewing gum to vehicles. During this period, snowboarding increasingly became controlled and defined by transnational media corporations like ESPN and NBC via events such as the X Games and Gravity Games. According to professional US snowboarder Todd Richards (2003):

The X Games marked the end of one era but simultaneously gave birth to a whole new world of possibilities. It was sort of sad to say good-bye to being a bunch of misunderstood outcasts. A lot of joy was derived from the punk-rock-spirit, and once the masses join your ranks...it's over. The image had already begun to change but the X Games put the icing on the mainstream cake.

(p. 182)

In 1998, ESPN's different sport channels beamed the X Games to 198 countries in 21 languages (Rinehart, 2000). The mainstream exposure of snowboarding had a significant influence on cultural demographics. Snowboarding attracted an influx of participants from around the world, from different social classes and age groups, and was identified as one of America's fastest growing sports during this period (Select Snow, 2004).

Recognizing the rapid growth of the sport, and the huge success of snowboarding in the X Games, the IOC decided to include snowboarding into the 1998 Nagano (Japan) Winter Olympic Programme as a discipline of skiing and under the governance of the International Ski Federation (FIS). The IOC's decision to include snowboarding under the FIS rather than the International Snowboard Federation (ISF) infuriated many snowboarders (see Humphreys, 2003). The



world's best half-pipe rider at the time, Terje Haakonsen, was particularly vocal in his criticism of the IOC's lack of understanding of snowboarding's unique history and culture and consideration of snowboarders' needs. While Haakonsen was the most out-spoken in his refusal to be turned into a "uniform-wearing, flag-bearing, walking logo" (Mellegren, 1998, para. 8), other snowboarders expressed similar sentiments:

The Olympics will change the sport altogether. I didn't get into snowboarding to go to the Olympics. I don't think it sounds so great. Snowboarding is great because it's so different from other sports. Now it will get too serious, training, competing, working out in gyms. There's nothing wrong with that but snowboarding isn't like that, and it'll be sad when it becomes like that.

(Cara Beth Burnside, cited in Howe, 1998, p. 151)

I think the Olympics are way too big and are going to change snowboarding. They are going to make us fit their mould. They aren't fitting into our mould... it will create a reality for snowboarding that millions will swallow and accept.

(Morgan Lafonte, cited in Howe, 1998, p. 151)

*Flakezine* magazine was also concerned that the inclusion of snowboarding into the Olympic Programme would restrict the expressive and creative potential of the athletes themselves, such that snowboarding would become "exactly like golf or tennis...boring, dull, and staid. Sure, snowboarders, snowboard companies, and the snowboard media will make a lot more money (yippee) but it will be in exchange for their souls, creativity and individuality" (cited in Baccigaluppi, Mayugba, & Cernel, 2001, p. 145). Some snowboarders, however, embraced these changes; "I want to go to the Olympics...be the first snowboarder to win a gold medal and be written into the history books" (Jimi Scott, cited in Howe, 1998, p. 151). In his autobiography, professional snowboarder Todd Richards (2003) also revealed,

I'd be a liar if I said the thought of being on the first U.S Olympic Snowboard team didn't fire me up. Wheaties boxes, international prestige, the best half-pipe in the world – and let's not forget the cold hard cash that goes with it all.

(p. 185)

Debates among snowboarders over the inclusion of snowboarding into the 1998 Winter Olympics are illustrative of the growing divisions and cultural fragmentation within the broader snowboarding culture during this period (see Coates, Clayton, & Humberstone, 2010; Heino, 2000; Humphreys, 2007; Popovic & Morrow, 2008; Thorpe, 2007). While "half of the companies and riders were looking forward to the Olympics as the ultimate forum that would legitimise the sport", the other half "didn't give a damn about the Olympics because it reeked of skiing – a

stuff by-the-books sport with an attitude that was the kiss of death for snowboarding's irreverent spirit" (Richards, 2003, p. 135). Inevitably, incorporation continued regardless of conflicting philosophies and riders' contrasting viewpoints. But, when snowboarding finally debuted at the 1998 Winter Olympic Games, it was treated as a "side show" event and athletes were largely perceived as "intruders" in the Olympic Programme. As one reporter explained, snowboarders are "the official curiosity of the Nagano Winter Games. They're totally new to the Olympics. They look different, they sound different, they are different" (Wilbon, 1998, p. A01).

Snowboarding at the 1998 Winter Olympic Games was also shrouded in controversy. When Canadian snowboarder Ross Rebagliati tested positive for marijuana after winning the first Olympic snowboarding gold medal in Nagano, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (temporarily) revoked his medal. Rebagliati argued that he must have inhaled second-hand smoke at a pre-Olympic Games party in Whistler. The IOC was unsympathetic to Rebagliati's explanation and only returned his medal when his lawyers found a loophole—marijuana was not on the IOC's list of banned substances. Not surprisingly, the incident grabbed headlines around the world. For many, the scandal was the source of much humour, for others it confirmed the sport's anti-authoritarian and counter-cultural roots and offered support for arguments—from snowboarders as well as many mainstream commentators—that snowboarding was not ready to become an Olympic sport (see Thorpe, 2012a; Thorpe, 2012b). While many core snowboarders celebrated the incident as evidence of the sport's unsuitability for the Olympic Games, the IOC and television networks responded by cancelling much of the previously programmed coverage of snowboarding events which negatively impacted the industry. Reflecting on this period, Richards (2003) writes: "The Olympics were supposed to ignite a growth expansion for the snowboard industry but the lack of coverage was more a fizzle than a bomb [and] the snowboarding industry suffered a brief dark period [after the Olympics]" (p. 217). Nonetheless, the industry recovered quickly and the number of snowboarders continued to grow during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Thorpe, 2007).

The key point here, however, is that over time, snowboarders either opted into or out of the Olympic model, and the pathway to the Olympics became much clearer. It is now widely understood that those snowboarders striving for the Olympics know the rules and regulations, and have been educated by their national organizing bodies. As Bob Klein, a former professional snowboarder and snowboard agent, observes, when huge corporate sponsorships were on offer, many competitive snowboarders began adopting more professional approaches: "it's gotten a lot more serious in recent years... there's a lot less [athletes] smoking weed" (cited in Thorpe, 2012a, p. 92). The coach of the British Olympic Snowboarding Team concurred: "People think snowboarder's [sic] smoke a lot of dope, party all the time and are always drinking in bars. But the actual professionals aren't doing that at all" (cited in Thompson, 2006, para. 6).

While those elite snowboarders pursuing the Olympic Games have become increasingly professional in their approach, the sportisation of snowboarding has

not been a simple process. The institutionalisation of snowboarding has continued to evolve as industry and (increasingly) nation-based organisations seek to work alongside the rules and regulations of the Olympic Games without compromising the industry-based models that continue to play a dominant role. In their analysis of the three phases of institutionalisation within professional snowboarding, Strittmatter and colleagues (2019) identify the third and most recent stage as dating from the inclusion in the Olympic Games and the shift in governance from the FIS towards more nation-based sports systems. In their analysis of this third phase of institutionalisation, they reveal “two dominant and contradicting logics of competitive snowboarding... forming a fragmented, dual institutional structure” that they call the “industry-based and nation-based governance model” (p. 1655). With ongoing fragmentation and conflict between three key organizing bodies and key actors in freestyle snowboarding (FIS, World Snowboarding Federation [WSF], and Ticket to Ride Tour [TTR]), Strittmatter and colleagues (2019) document a shift away from industry-based organisations and towards a nation-based governance focus over the past decade. They explain this transition as being spurred by both organisational problems and economic motives: “Defragmentation efforts had been triggered due to inefficiency within the governance structure but also due to financial instability at the industry-based side, which made industry-based key actors more willing to collaborate” (p. 1670).

From the inaugural “flop” at the 1998 Winter Olympics, the IOC, FIS, and television agencies set about developing more effective strategies for representing snowboarding events and athletes (i.e., allowing athletes to choose their own music during their runs, snowboarders as commentators, some flexibility in uniforms, and presentational styles), such that the coverage of snowboarding at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City (US) was deemed a resounding success. According to a Leisure Trends survey, 32% (nearly 92 million people) of the US population watched the 2002 Olympic snowboarding half-pipe competition in which Americans won gold, silver, and bronze in the men’s event (this was the first US winter Olympic medal sweep since 1956) and gold in the women’s event. Of those viewers, 18.6 million Americans said they wanted to try snowboarding (see Thorpe, 2011). A report released by the US-based National Broadcasting Company (NBC) after the 2002 Games revealed a 23% increase in ratings among 18–34-year-old viewers (Berra, 2006). Snowboarding also brought new forms of youthful “cool” sporting celebrity to Olympic audiences. US snowboarder Shaun White was identified as the “most popular” and “recognisable athlete” attending the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver (Ebner, 2009). Analysing online discussions during the Vancouver Olympics, US media analysis firm Nielsen Company also revealed White as the second most “buzzed about” athlete at the Games; two other snowboarders—Seth Wescott and Gretchen Bleiler—were also included in the top ten list. The compromises made by the IOC and media partners (i.e., NBC) that enabled snowboarders to bring some of their cultural flare and personalities to the Games appear to have been successful; it is claimed that audience figures for the 2010 Winter Olympics increased by 48% increase

among 18–24-year-old viewers, with snowboarding playing a key role in this boost (Bauder, 2010).

Further highlighting the status of snowboarding in the Winter Olympics Programme, the Vancouver Opening Ceremony began with a snowboarder performing a spectacular jump through the Olympic rings, and later in the ceremony many snowboarders were seen carrying the flags for their countries (i.e., Andorra, Australia, Brazil, Bulgaria, and Aotearoa New Zealand). As a half-pipe judge at both the 2002 and 2010 Winter Olympics observed: “I think it was pretty clear at the Vancouver Olympics, more so than ever before, how much of a draw card snowboarding is for pulling the numbers (viewers)” (interview, 2010). More recently, coverage of Shaun White winning his third gold medal in Men’s Snowboard Half Pipe at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games attracted a record 22.6 million viewers on NBC and NBC Sports Network in the US alone (de Moraes, 2018).

In contrast to snowboarders from earlier generations (e.g., Haakonsen), many of subsequent generations embraced new opportunities for increased media exposure and celebrity offered by the Olympic Games. A handful of these men and women achieved superstar status, earning seven figure salaries with transnational corporate sponsorship (from PlayStation to Visa). A report by Forbes’ identified Shaun White as the most highly paid athlete entering the 2010 Winter Olympics with an annual salary of more than US\$8 million; Bleiler and Teter were seventh equal on the Forbes’ list, each netting more than US\$1 million per year (Settimi, 2010). In this hyper-commercial context, many athletes began embracing individualistic and professional approaches to training and competition. The Red Bull corporation paid an estimated US\$500,000 towards the construction of an Olympic-sized half-pipe, accessible only by helicopter, for Shaun White’s exclusive use during his preparation for the Vancouver Olympics. Not surprisingly, this evoked much debate among many of White’s US teammates and fellow competitors without access to such facilities.

While some snowboarders lamented such trends, a general agreement emerged among Olympic snowboarders and industry members that the relationship between snowboarding and the Olympics was a mutually beneficial one, particularly during times of economic downturn. According to one *Transworld Business* journalist:

Gear sales over the last two years have been meagre to say the least—the sport is aging, and haemorrhaging riders to free-skiing and other pursuits.... [but] with the level of airplay that snowboarding has received during the 2010 Games and the emergence of Shaun White as the poster child for the NBC media juggernaut in a vacuum of figure skating stars (a vacuum clogged with tights, rayon, and rhinestones that is), it’s hard to imagine that the sport will not receive a spike in sales this spring and next season.

(Lewis, 2010, paras. 1–2)

Many snowboarders, however, remained adamant that the Olympics “need snowboarding more than snowboarding needs the Olympics” (Todd Richards,

cited in Lipton, 2010, para. 2). Such arguments were repeated almost a decade later by Tony Hawk in his comments about the relationship between skateboarding and the Olympic Games: “The Olympics needs this youth cool factor in their programming and they’re going to get it with skateboarding in the summer games the way that they got it with snowboarding in the winter games” (cited in Licata, 2019).

The marriage between the Olympic Movement and snowboarding is based on compromise by both parties. Despite the increasing professionalism at the elite level, residual traces of snowboarding’s countercultural past remain. Professional and amateur snowboarders alike continued to embrace the somewhat idealistic philosophy that snowboarding is about “fun, self-expression, and getting back to nature, not making money” (Humphreys, 2003, p. 416). There continues to be instances where the anti-establishment and hedonistic ethos inherent at the core of some action sport cultures conflict with the strict, hierarchical, and disciplinary regimes of the IOC (see Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b). For example, when Japanese snowboarder Kazuhiro Kokubo transformed his official Winter Olympic team suit into a “hip hop fashion statement”, the Japanese public decried his behaviour as unpatriotic and disrespectful. The Japanese Ski Association responded by banning Kokubo, the team manager and two coaches, from the Olympic opening ceremony, and demanding a public apology. While the general public and mass media criticised Kokubo (and others) actions as unprofessional and decidedly un-Olympic, many core snowboarders celebrated such behaviour as evidence of the sports continued connection with its countercultural and anti-authoritarian roots. Commenting on such incidents, one snowboard journalist proclaimed: “If you invite the naughty kids to the party don’t be shocked when someone pisses in the punch. Snowboarders are not the typical Olympians, for better or worse” (Richards cited in Lipton, 2010, para. 2). In contrast to the inclusion of windsurfing in the 1980s, or snowboarding during the late 1990s, during the 2010s the IOC began to realise the valuable contribution of snowboarding in the Winter Programme, and thus increasingly attempted to accommodate snowboarder’s unique cultural values and needs as much as possible within the existing Olympic model.

In the contemporary context, snowboarders are not simply victims to the IOC’s processes of incorporation, rather they are active agents who recognise their value and unique contributions to the Olympic Movement and continue to negotiate new space and agency. While the strategies employed by contemporary snowboarders may be subtler and less political than those of previous generations (e.g., Haakonsen), they point to an important shift in the Olympic Movement in the early 21st century. The IOC continued to hold strong on some rules and regulations (e.g., no stickers on snowboards, no large corporate logos on clothing or equipment), yet they were increasingly willing to negotiate space for snowboarders’ expressions of creativity and individuality (e.g., self-selected music played during half-pipe runs, some choice in clothing apparel). Indeed, when presented with their training and competition uniforms, the US Olympic snowboardcross team

refused to wear the competition outfit, opting instead for the waterproof blue jeans allocated to the training uniform:

Snowboarding is the cool factor, that's what the sport is all about, so why not embellish it to its limit. To wear jeans in the Olympics? I don't think you can get any cooler than that. [So] we told 'em 'We're wearing these jeans, and there's nothing you can say about it'

(Ski Jeans, 2010)

The blue jeans were featured on the podium days later, and quickly became a hot commodity sought by snowboarders around the world.

The inclusion in the Olympic Programme exposed snowboarding to broader audiences and prompted economic growth in the sport and industry, at least for a period. While snowboarding at the Olympics remains popular among mainstream audiences, it has lost much of its “cool” appeal with numbers of participants declining over the past five years. Documenting these trends, a *The New York Times* headline proclaimed, “snowboarding, once a high-flying sport, crashes to earth” (Higgins, 2016). Such trends can be partially explained by the resurgence of skiing in the various freestyle skiing disciplines which had been incorporated into subsequent Winter Olympics (i.e., ski cross (2010), ski slopestyle and ski half-pipe (2014)). Ex-professional snowboarder and action sports agent, Circe Wallace has repeatedly expressed remorse and dismay at the processes of commodification, institutionalisation (including inclusion in the Olympics), and corporate conglomeration that were “the death nail of the unique culture and beauty of snowboarding” (Traulsen, 2018; see Booth & Thorpe, 2019). While the popularity of snowboarding has declined among participants, its inclusion into the Olympic Games greatly facilitated the IOC's goal of modernizing the Winter Games and making the Olympics relevant to younger generations. Even more so, snowboarding at the Olympics helped the Olympic Games tap into American youth cultural “cool” (Barjolin-Smith, 2020). In her valuable analysis of the relationship between Olympic snowboarding and American youth culture, Barjolin-Smith (2020) states:

On the global stage, snowboarding has become a form of American youth culture without borders, which brings about the question of sports as soft power resources. The inclusion of snowboarding as an American-made lifestyle sport, a youth culture, and a performance has had an impact on the Winter Olympics and, ultimately, on the Summer Olympics.

(p. 1)

Indeed, the success of snowboarding at the Winter Olympics helped create new space for more action sports (e.g., BMX, freestyle skiing, surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing) in the Olympic Programme. As we explain in Chapters 6 and 10, despite the dominance of the American action sports industry in defining the

styles of surfing, skateboarding, and climbing around the world, the inclusion of these sports into the Olympic Games brings issues of the nation even more to the forefront.

### **“Olympic cycling needed some pizzazz”: BMX debuts in Beijing**

Emerging in the late 1960s in California, the early bicycle motocross (BMX) participants were mostly children and teenage boys. Inspired by the popularisation of motocross (racing motorcycles on dirt trails), they began modifying their bicycles and emulating their heroes on self-built tracks. As a relatively cheap and easily accessible activity, the sport quickly gained popularity. Organised BMX racing—which involved eight riders racing through circuits of approximately 350 metres, including jumps, banked corners and other obstacles, with the top four qualifying for the next round—developed throughout the 1970s, the American Bicycle Association (ABA) was organised as a national sanctioning body in 1977. BMX also continued to gain popularity among groups of youths around the world, particularly Europe and Australia. The International BMX Federation was founded in 1981, and the first world championships were held in 1982; BMX was fully integrated into the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) in January 1993. Two years later BMX featured in the first Extreme Games (later renamed the X Games), alongside bungee jumping, skateboarding, and street luge. The contemporary Summer X Games Programme includes a number of BMX events, including big air, vert, and street, in which riders perform spectacular stunts and gravity-defying manoeuvres on various obstacles (e.g., half-pipes, jumps, rails, and stairs). BMX has continued to gain popularity among youth, particularly freestyle (see Edwards & Corte, 2010; Nelson, 2007).

Acknowledging the success of BMX at the X Games, and the ease at which the racing event could be incorporated in the Olympic Programme, the IOC announced in 2003 that BMX racing would become a medal event at the 2008 Games in Beijing (China). This initiative was strongly supported by the International Cycling Union (UCI), who offered to drop two existing cycle-track events to accommodate it. According to a UCI official, “Olympic cycling needed some pizzazz” and BMX had “all the right elements”: “it can be performed in an arena, it’s fast and short, both men and women can do it, and the concept is something a general audience would understand and enjoy looking at” (Lindstrom, cited in Ruibal, 2008, para. 8). While many grassroots cyclists were disappointed, and petitioned against the decision, some recognised the political factors underpinning the IOC and host-nation’s decision: “China supplies 90% of the world’s BMX bikes, so they were happy with the change, plus it’s a ‘youth sport’, which they like to have in the Games” (British Olympic cycling champion Chris Hoy, 2008, para. 2).

In contrast to the cultural debates among snowboarders prior to the 1998 Winter Olympics, the majority of BMX participants celebrated the inclusion of their

sport into the Olympic Programme. The sport and industry of snowboarding had experienced a period of rapid growth prior to its inclusion in the Olympic Programme; participation rates and industry growth in BMX were meagre in comparison. Thus, many BMX participants and industry members welcomed the exposure and visibility offered via the Olympics. “Racing has been a bit dormant for a while... racing in the Olympics is awesome and can only benefit our sport as a whole”, proclaimed one industry member (Chad DeGroot, cited in Fat Tony, 2008, para. 7). For British BMX team member Liam Phillips, it is “fantastic to be part of BMX’s Olympic debut” which he hopes “will help make the sport more popular” (cited in Cycling Weekly, 2008, para. 4).

Attempting to target younger viewers, as well as make the event exciting and accessible for mainstream audiences, the BMX event was touted as “NASCAR on two wheels” (cited in Ruibal, 2008, para. 1). To ensure exciting coverage and spectacular footage, an especially large and demanding course was designed (Ruibal, 2008). Recognizing the potential of BMX for reaching younger audiences, NBC strongly supported the decision to “beef up” the course, even offering to trial the larger course in their Action Sports Tour (later renamed the Dew Tour) in the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics. NBC actively sought to “create an audience” for the Olympic BMX events by exposing viewers to the new course and educating viewers about the format, rules and cultural values of BMX racing, prior to its Olympic debut. This involvement of NBC in the development of the Olympic BMX racing course also illustrates the increasingly interwoven relationships between the IOC and North American media conglomerates.

The inclusion of BMX into the Beijing Olympics was widely considered a success, particularly among spectators at the event:

“It’s exciting to watch and it’s so much like [snow]boarder-cross. I think it is going to do for the Summer Games what snowboarding has done for the Winter Olympics—give people a fresh new perspective. And there’s a lot of carnage”, exclaimed one event attendee.

(cited in Roenigk, 2008, para. 15)

In terms of television ratings, however, BMX failed to capture the imagination of younger audiences to the same extent as snowboarding. Unlike the Olympic snowboarding celebrities (such as Torah Bright and Shaun White) who participate in the same events in the X Games and the Winter Olympics, BMX racers competing at the Olympics were typically not the cultural superstars of the X Games. BMX athletes gaining the most visibility and exposure at the X Games have tended to be those participating in the more freestyle-oriented events (i.e., vert, street, big air). As discussed in Chapter 6, recognizing the missed opportunity for tapping into pre-established X Games celebrity and viewership, the IOC began making moves to include freestyle or park BMX into subsequent Olympics, with BMX Freestyle featuring for the first time in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.



## Conclusions: lessons learned

In both windsurfing, snowboarding and BMX racing, the approach of the IOC was to “fit” these unique sporting cultures within existing Olympic structures. This evoked considerable cultural discontent, particularly in windsurfing and snowboarding, but over subsequent Olympics these arguments became a distant memory. Most importantly, through the successes of snowboarding—in attracting audiences and sponsors—the IOC came to understand the benefits in working with the sporting culture and giving them space (even if superficially) to do things “their way”. Bringing their own unique flare to the Games—e.g., allowing them to have a say in uniform designs, allowing their own selections of music to be played during snowboarding half-pipe runs, ensuring respected snowboarders were involved as commentators—were all important steps from the IOC towards recognizing the value in being more flexible in their rules and structures, and allowing a little more room for youth culture to pervade the games. The backlash among snowboarders to the inclusion of their sport into the 1998 winter Olympic Games, however, was a warning signal for both the IOC and future action sports (i.e., surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing) as to what can happen when the IOC decides to incorporate a sport without due consultation and cultural consideration. Key themes emerging during these early attempts of Olympic inclusion continue to resonate more than three decades later.

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# Agenda 2020 and the Tokyo announcement

## Initial responses and debates in action sport cultures

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In this chapter, we focus on the responses from the action sport communities to the shortlisting (2015) and subsequent inclusion (2016), of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing into the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Our discussion focuses on both the attitudes from those within the broader cultures (i.e., recreational participants) and those at the core of these cultures. However, first it is necessary to briefly contextualise our discussion of the inclusion of these three new action sports into the Tokyo 2020 Programme within some background information on Olympic-led change initiatives, and specifically, Agenda 2020.

### **Agenda 2020: the broader context**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Global Sports Organisations (GSOs) (i.e., International Olympic Committee (IOC), Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)) are facing growing public and academic critique regarding corruption, lack of accountability, questionable ethics, and social justice issues (e.g., Allison & Tomlinson, 2017; Bale & Christensen, 2004; Boykoff, 2011, 2017; Horne & Whannel, 2020; Lenskyj, 2000, 2008, 2020; Chapter 2). In response to such challenges, as well as a quickly changing social, cultural, political, and economic landscape, many GSOs are employing new strategies and promises of reform in their efforts to maintain their hegemony. For the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a key effort to signal change has been Agenda 2020. Proclaimed as the “strategic roadmap for the future of the Olympic Movement”, Agenda 2020 consists of 40 (20 + 20) recommendations that include: proposals for change to the bidding process (including the reduction of costs of bidding); moving from a sport-based to an event-based programme; adapting and further strengthening the principles of good governance and ethics; environmental sustainability; a focus on achieving gender equity and minimizing sexuality discrimination; and reaching new and hard-to-reach audiences (Olympic Agenda 2020, 2014). Widely attributed as leading this change agenda, IOC President Thomas Bach reiterates the urgency of this initiative, “We have

the opportunity, and we must seize the moment—now is the time for change” (Olympic Agenda 2020, 2014).

While certainly a significant statement towards reform, many commentators remain unconvinced that Agenda 2020 will produce the truly radical changes necessary. It has subsequently received wide-ranging academic scrutiny and critique. Some critique focuses on specific issues such as international human rights (MacAloon, 2016), environmental issues focused on the IOC’s progress with its Sustainability Goals (Geeraert & Gautheir, 2018), and the commitment to “stimulate women’s participation and involvement in sport” (Postlethwaite & Grix, 2016, p. 306). Goldblatt (2016) asks whether Agenda 2020 will “produce enough change to keep the IOC ahead of the game, to tackle the multiple, intersecting crises of governance, legitimacy and purpose that afflict contemporary sport?” In his analysis of the policy, MacAloon (2016) is concerned that many of the new resolutions are “too trivial” and “utterly vague” (p. 775), or “read too often like corporate boilerplate” (p. 774). Describing Agenda 2020 as a direct response to the “organisation’s decline in public opinion, particularly in Europe”, MacAloon (2016) goes on to examine the IOC’s relations with international human rights organisations, suggesting that the policy has led to “real progress” in this area. He concludes, however, with a coda noting that any signs of progress were “suspended or reversed” by the selection of Beijing (with the Chinese Government having an atrocious record in human rights and environmental issues—two key components of Agenda 2020) as host of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. Similarly, Geeraert and Gautheir (2018) examine Agenda 2020’s sustainability goals, concluding that, despite much promise, the proposed changes are largely “ineffective” because they “fail to alter the incentives of Games organisers towards compliance with environmental sustainability objectives” (p. 17). In response to questions about the potential of Agenda 2020 to save the Olympic Games in a context of strong critique and challenges, Allison and Tomlinson (2017) also speculate that “the flawed model of the [IOC] is such that the answer to this key question is a negative one” (p. 143). Yet in making this claim, they do not underestimate “the resilience of the IOC ethics, vision and rhetoric, and the protection still provided by the institutional status afforded it in the Swiss polity” (p. 143). Underpinning such conclusions is an implicit understanding that, while Agenda 2020 is a positive performance of change, the IOC is ultimately not willing to sacrifice what they do, or how they do it in order to realise the resolutions of this reform policy.

Olympic Agenda 2020 was critical in the decision to include new sports (including surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing) into the Tokyo Olympic Programme. Agenda 2020 enabled the creation of a new process for an Olympic Games Organizing Committee (OC) to propose additional events for their edition of the Games. In particular, Recommendation 10 specifically states that the IOC will “allow the OCOGs to make a proposal for the inclusion of one or more additional events on the Olympic Programme for that edition of the

Olympic Games” (p. 14), and this policy is further reflected in Rule 45 of the Olympic Charter concerning the Programme of the Olympic Games. The Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee was the first to have the chance to exercise this opportunity (Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, 2016). An Olympic Programme Commission Report titled, *Olympic Games Tokyo 2020: Tokyo 2020 OCOG Proposal on New Sports*, carefully details the “two-year journey” from new policy to the final announcement (Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, 2016) (see Figure 5.1 below). This report notes that in May 2015 an Additional Events Programme Panel was established to help assess initial applications, with key principles including “a focus on youth appeal” and potential to “add value to the Games by engaging... new audiences worldwide” (p. 11). In September 2015 the Tokyo OC submitted a proposal to the IOC for 18 events in five sports to be added to their Programme, including the three youth-friendly action sports of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing, along with karate and softball/baseball. Following receipt of the official OC proposal, the IOC began conducting its own analysis and observation of the package of events proposed by Tokyo 2020. In March 2016 the Olympic Programme Commission recommended the full package of sports, events and athlete quotas, with the IOC Executive Board further supporting the proposal in June 2016, highlighting that the five sports “offer a key focus on youth”. The final decision was made and announced at the IOC Session at the Rio Olympic Games in August 2016.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the inclusion of these three youth-focused sports, along with karate and baseball/softball, has been described by the IOC as “the most comprehensive evolution of the Olympic Programme in modern

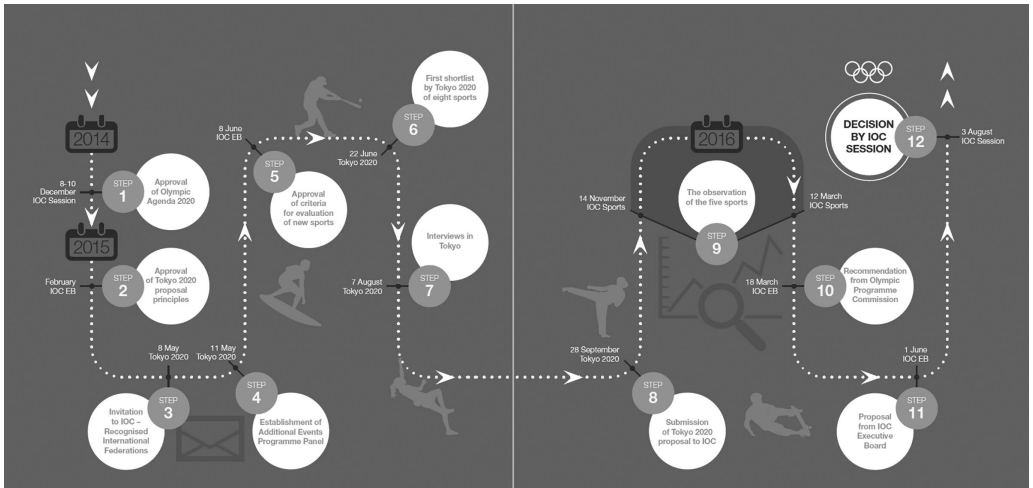


Figure 5.1 The infographic “The process: a two-year journey” from the “Olympic Games Tokyo 2020: Tokyo 2020 OCOG Proposal on New Sports Report” is reproduced with the kind permission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). All rights reserved.

history” (Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, 2016, p. 5). In the announcement, IOC President Thomas Bach stressed the importance of youth appeal, responding to trends of urbanisation and gender equity that these new Olympic sports offered:

The fascinating new events that we approved today... represent a step-change in the Olympic Programme. I am delighted that the Olympic Games in Tokyo will be *more youthful, more urban* and will include *more women*.

(Tokyo 2020 Event, 2017; emphasis added)

Despite the positive rhetoric in the announcement, the inclusion of the five sports into the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games should be contextualised within two key change initiatives from the IOC: (1) new policies about the incorporation of new sports under Organizing Committees and (2) the IOC’s revised approaches to working with new sports and supporting their efforts towards self-governance models (see Chapter 6). Underpinning both change initiatives—at both the level of Agenda 2020 and the Tokyo 2020 Programme changes—is the acknowledgement that an important and mounting issue for the contemporary Olympic Movement is how to remain relevant to younger generations. As previously shown, this is not a new issue for the IOC. Through their various efforts over the years (see Chapter 4) the IOC has learned that the marriage between “alternative” action sports and the Olympics is not a straightforward relationship (see Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b). Reflecting action sports’ countercultural, do-it-yourself (DIY) and anti-establishment heritage, many participants continue to view these activities as alternative lifestyles rather than as competitive sports (Wheaton, 2004), and celebrate value systems that are often incompatible with the disciplinary, hierarchical, nationalistic Olympic regime (Honea, 2013; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b). Similar issues to those raised when windsurfing snowboarding were included into the Olympic Programme (see Chapter 4) came to the fore again when surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing were shortlisted for inclusion in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. While there were similar issues and concerns across the sports, there were also notable differences.

In the remainder of this chapter, we focus on the responses of those within action sport cultures to the shortlisting (2015) and inclusion (2016) of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Herein we discuss both the responses from those in the broader community (via our survey and focus groups) and core members of the action sports culture and industry (via interviews and media analysis). The IOC anticipated that responses from the action sports cultures would be mixed responses. Having learnt from previous experiences, their process (see Figure 5.1) therefore included widespread consultation with multiple stakeholders in these action sports. In our discussions and meetings with members of the IOC Sports Department (2015 and 2016), they were eager to learn of any new events they should be observing or people to consult (Chapter 3).

## **Divergent attitudes to the inclusion of action sport in the Olympics**

With rapidly increasing visibility of action sports during the late 1990s and 2000s, it is unsurprising that action sports continued to attract more participants, from ever more diverse global geographical settings (Evers & Doering, 2019; Fok & O'Connor, 2020; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017; Thorpe, 2014). This expansion in participation includes not only the traditional consumer market of teenage boys, but increasingly older men, women, and girls. Accompanying this rapid expansion has been cultural fragmentation, with enthusiasts engaging in a wide variety of participation styles, which support new and profitable niche markets (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a). Fragmentation has also led to ideological differences among groups of participants, with various styles of participation demonstrating philosophical, skill, and commitment differences. In skateboarding, for example, styles of participation range from park-skating in relatively sanitised and controlled environments, to the more aggressive, unregulated, and male-dominated street skating, to longboarding on paved hills where the emphasis is on speed rather than the performance of highly technical manoeuvres (Atencio et al., 2018). Each action sport has a range of different styles of participation, which includes variations on the technologies and environments used, and values embodied by enthusiasts (Wheaton, 2004). Fragmentation continues to cause tensions and debate within these action sport cultures regarding processes of commercialisation and incorporation. Our research revealed considerably different attitudes towards Olympic inclusion by those occupying different positions within their respective action sporting cultures.

The most vociferous anti-Olympic voices have tended to be in the sport's niche media which is often representative of core male elite (or once elite) participants. We start our discussion by highlighting the stream of anti-Olympic voices in the niche media, and across social media, where we see the cultural clashes between the Olympic ideology and action sports countercultural tradition being vocally expressed. We outline these opinions from the core of these sporting cultures at the time of the action sport's shortlisting and then confirmation. While each sport is impacted differently, themes across these sports included dissent or scepticism about the Olympics, cultural issues (e.g., as related to style/distinctness, clothing, and recreational drugs), and issues about how these lifestyle sports can be packaged as Olympics sports, including the competition format, judging, style, lifestyles, and maintaining participant diversity.

Yet, despite a steady stream of Olympic baiting in the subcultural media (articles and forums), we illustrate that this is one part of a more complex picture. The views expressed by the more recreational and occasional participants as represented in our survey and focus groups differ in opinions and attitudes to those opinions from core participants. Our discussion details the nuances, contradictions, and shifts within these cultural debates across sports, different groups of consumers, and across generations. While some voices mirror the concerns



expressed by action sport consumers in previous attempts to include action sport in the Olympics, we reveal significant changes even between 2015 and 2016, and among different groups of participants and consumers.

**“Anti-Olympic” sentiments: niche media and critiques from the “core”**

Unsurprisingly, many of the initial media commentaries particularly across surfing and skateboarding expressed strong “anti-Olympic” sentiments and focused on the perceived incompatibility of the cultures of action sports with the identity of Olympic sport. This was most prevalent in the skateboarding niche media:

If it was in the Olympics, it wouldn't be skateboarding anymore. It'd be gymnastics on wood with wheels. It'd be overladen with rules and regs created by people who didn't know WTF they were talking about.

(comment posted on Vice magazine)

No way, keep it on the streets and keep it real!

(comment posted on Vice magazine)

Similar attitudes could also be observed in the surfing culture, as seen in the following comments:

Someone please drown this whole f\*\*king idea, surfing doesn't need this shit.

(comment posted on Surf Line)

The Olympics: a strange and intoxicating mix of athletic excellence, corporate fuckery, hysterical flag-waving, sterile conformism, furious competition, exhilarating sporting drama, tacit drug use, mental fortitude, sexual overtones, and heroic feats of adversarial endeavour in the ancient Greek tradition. Perhaps not all that far removed, then, from the present-day incarnation of competitive surfing, however incompatible the Olympic identity may be with the counter-cultural identity we still cling to.

(Wilson, 2015, Surf Europe Magazine)

Some within the broader climbing community also expressed their concerns about Olympic inclusion, as evidenced in comments posted on climbing magazine Facebook pages after the shortlisting in 2015:

Olympics are a commercially driven activity, disguised as sporting event. F\*\*\* off!!

No!!!! No no no no no. Please stop perpetuating the mainstream direction of the climbing lifestyle ... Dammit!!!!!!

Great. Let's make climbing more popular. I mean the crags are not crowded enough as is. Oh wait, this is not rock climbing its plastic pulling.

As seen in the last comment here, different factions within the broader action sports' communities had varying opinions of Olympic inclusion. In climbing, a clear division between outdoor climbers and indoor climbers ("plastic pulling") emerged, with the former mostly against Olympic inclusion, and the later in strong support. Similar differences were observable within surfing culture, and most clearly between "soul surfers" (those passionately seeking the surfing life-style without competition) and those pursuing careers as competitive athletes. Throughout our research we found divided opinions across and within the surfing, skateboarding, and climbing communities. The key point here, however, is that between the shortlisting and announcement of inclusion (2015–2016), voices presented in niche media (produced by and for the core members of these communities) typically expressed their concerns and worries about Olympic inclusion.

Such "anti-Olympic" sentiments were also visible in the written comments on our survey and in some of our interviews during this period. These comments reflected dominant critiques of the Olympic Movement and Games such as corruption, nationalism, politics, the environmental impact, human rights abuses, and the power of elites and corporations:

Activities that most people call extreme or "action sports" don't belong in the outdated Olympic Games, the greed and pride of nations shown during the Olympics is a farce.

(survey)

The Olympics seem like a big waste of money, an excuse for corrupt people to line their pockets.

(survey)

The Olympics represent everything evil about sports. Sports shouldn't be part of politics, and that's what it's all about. If you just look at the places where Olympics [have] been held in the past years (and will take place in the future), they are not the places [that] should do so. Human rights, environmental issues and such are done so badly that there's no way you can say you support the Olympic Movement. Action sports have always been somehow "rebel" in a good way. They have always said "hell no" if someone wants them to be part of something they feel hard to represent. In the end, the Olympics is the biggest NO to represent. With that in mind, not only every action sport should get rid of [the] Olympics but also the whole Olympic movement should vanish.

(survey)

The age of Olympics status defining the most prestigious or elite level of sporting competition is nearly over. Especially for "action" sports. World Cup

and Champs series and large one-off events trump a once in 4-year, media driven, dubious sponsor fuelled jingoistic mess of an event!

(survey)

Many survey participants took the opportunity provided by the comments sections to offer more in-depth discussion about their views on the inclusion of action sports into the Olympic Games, which provided a more nuanced understanding. These showed an awareness that Olympic inclusion has long-been been a contested process (see Chapter 4), an understanding of the cultural clashes between their action sport's ethos and that of the Olympics, and potential problems for the action sport cultures:

Incorporating these sports into the Olympics undermines what some people want them to stand for, alternatives, non-nationalistic, art forms. The inclusion in such a mass media corporate sponsored event takes away the authenticity of the sports and their artistic nature even though it allows the elite level athletes in those sports to have professional careers.

(survey)

Every real world activity that has been introduced into the Olympic Games seems to eventually lose sight of why the sport/activity was developed in the original sense. Taekwondo for example has become less of an actual 'martial' art and more about the flashy kicks that everyone wants to see. I don't see a good ending to some of these activities if entered into the Olympics.

(survey)

It was argued that the Olympic Movement to date had not demonstrated the ability to preserve action sports' difference and creativity, and that commercialisation and institutionalisation have had negative impacts:

I think it's a development for the sport to become part of the Olympic Games. But of course, it's not cool when the "money-making-stuff" starts destroying the spiritual part / the idea of the sport. So it is always important to keep the origins of the sport when it becomes.

(survey)

Reflecting the niche media narratives, almost 30% of survey participants expressed some concern about selling out the alternative ethos and heritage of action sports (as previously discussed in Chapter 4, and by various action sport scholars, including Humphreys, 1997; Rinehart, 1998; Wheaton, 2004):

Action Sports are individual activities that are fun and promote individual development and community building. Turning them into competitive spectacles that ultimately involve money and sponsorships is a perversion of the

soul of the activity, and benefits the sponsoring entity, the commercial sponsor or the IOC, but not the spirit of the activity itself. The commercial exposure may create interest, and may be entertaining to general audiences, but in today's world, it has become cheap programming for TV audiences, stages for National Image Advancement, and opportunity for corruption and greed. It is sad to see the politics, manoeuvring, greed and manipulation that goes on behind the scenes of what is promoted as an altruistic opportunity for great athletes to compete for the "gold". It is truly a sign of the times.

(survey)

As illustrated in such comments, many action sport participants were highly critical of Olympic inclusion, with some having nuanced understandings of the political, economic, and cultural complexities of such processes.

### ***Attitudes of recreational action sport participants to Olympic shortlisting***

Despite some strong voices of disapproval, 60% of the survey participants thought that the inclusion of most action sports was a good idea and would probably lead to them watching more of the Olympics. The sport that survey participants most wanted to see in the Olympic Programme was street skateboarding; however all forms of skateboarding were popular, as was BMX freestyle. Some written commentaries endorsed the inclusion of action sports pointing to them being exciting to watch, enhancing the Olympic Programme, and bringing it up to date. For example:

Surfing and other action sports are a great show! Fun to watch, exciting, it is time for a change in the Olympics.

(survey)

Action sports often require a lot more training than other "normal" sports. And not only that. It also takes courage and bravery, so I think that the Olympic spirit is more represented by this kind of sport. Action sports [have] got that "plus" that always amaze people more than, just for example, the 1000 meters crawl of swimming.

(survey)

Some were enthusiastic because they believed that Olympic inclusion would stimulate processes of professionalism and sportisation that (they felt) was long overdue: "they need to grow up and do it the right way"; "Action sports need to get organised and follow the Olympic model"; they need to work towards organising "National Federations, developmental programmes, drug testing" (survey). Olympic inclusion, it was suggested, would give the sport more visibility, "reputation",

and credibility, and would facilitate more funding to the athletes, allowing “hard working individuals to be able to make a living” (survey).

There were, however, some important differences and trends across ages and nationalities. The under 20-year-old survey participants were most enthusiastic about action sports being included in the Olympics, with 80% of under 20s supporting it. The age group most likely to say, “I dislike what happens to action sports when they become Olympic sports” and least “likely to watch more of the Olympics” were those in the 20–40-year-old age group (27%). These findings further support claims that there are generational shifts in attitudes to Olympic inclusion (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2019). Yet, it is worth noting that much of this youth support (under 20s) focused on urban sports. In contrast, according to our survey, shortboard surfing’s biggest fan base were men over 40 years old. Interestingly, women were more enthusiastic than men about action sports being included in the Olympics, particularly for certain sports (e.g., surfing, kiteboarding, and parkour) (see Chapter 11 for a discussion of women’s support of Olympic inclusion).

In terms of national differences, the Chinese speakers were largely very supportive of Olympic inclusion (84%), with only a very small percentage expressing anti-Olympic sentiments (2%). Given Chinese speakers and nationals constituted over 20% of survey respondents, this may help explain the unexpected positive responses. They also showed a strong preference for urban sports, particularly skateboarding styles, and little support for surfing. Unfortunately, due to a technological glitch in the survey, we were unable to access the comments written in Chinese languages, and thus could not explore the motives and meanings behind these national differences. In contrast to other languages, the English speakers in the survey had more varying viewpoints towards action sports inclusion into the Olympic Games, with 56% stating: “I think this is a great idea” and “I would likely watch more of the Olympics”. In contrast, 26% agreed with the statement: “I dislike what happens to action sports when they become Olympic sports”. These trends point to the importance of further research on national differences, and also the limitations of existing research of action sport consumption that has focused on the Western and US market yet is often generalised to global youth.

In summary, our survey highlighted that action sport participants embraced a wide range of viewpoints and suggested that while some action sport participants avidly consume their sports including at the Olympic Games, that does not mean they agree with how it is represented. For example, despite watching the Olympics, 20% of the survey participants agreed with the statement, “the sports I am most interested in aren’t in the Olympics”, and another 17% said, “the styles of sport that I am most interested in watching aren’t in the Olympics”. Interestingly, the participants in one of the focus groups suggested that the Olympics was not really a topic of conversation in their networks, with comments such as: “My friends haven’t mentioned it at all”, and “I don’t even think they [friends] know certain things are going to be in the Olympics”. Their interest in surfing at the

Olympics was also somewhat ambivalent, with media consumption likely to be dependent on the actual media product:

What it will depend on is actually how they're going to present the surfing, you know. You're going to have to wait and see if it's gonna be good waves... you could see some good surfing, then maybe I'd watch surfing.

(focus group 2, 2017)

Through our focus group conversations many themes emerged that, as we discuss below, were also prevalent in the niche media, such as the importance of how the activity was presented, format of competition, concerns about the selection process, and that exposure would lead to further overcrowding.

### **Voices from the core: cultural clashes and key debates**

The following section outlines the debates in the core of the action sport cultures at the time of action sport shortlisting and then confirmation (2015–2016), including concerns about the “styles” of the sports that would be included in the Olympic Games, the clash between the DIY mentality and issues of leadership, governance, and rules and regulations, and environmental concerns as a result of anticipated growth in their sports. Across these topics, we see core participants anticipating problematic consequences from the merging of two very distinct cultures—the Olympic/elite sporting culture and alternative/action sport cultures.

#### ***The Olympics and styles of participation***

In each of the three action sports shortlisted, we witnessed discussion and debate about the styles of participation best suited for Olympic inclusion. Among skateboarders, these were particularly intense. Some argued for the inclusion of the spectacular vert and mega-ramp styles, others recognised that, while these versions of skateboarding may make exciting television, they are highly exclusive and only available to those with access to costly facilities. Despite some differing opinions on what events should be part of the Olympic format, many recognised street skating as the most culturally relevant, and park as an opportunity to reveal the energy of a pool event, with a number of interviewees mentioning the Van Doren Invitational skate competition at Huntington Beach (that runs alongside the US Surfing Open) as an exemplar for the “vibe” they would love to see at the Olympics:

I definitely think if big air ever made it into it ... the kind of the mega ramp stuff. If that was on a world stage that would be just as exciting as the ski jumping where they flip; I have no idea what they're doing but I enjoy that. I think if street was in there, the people are going to see that some of the

biggest influencers in the world are skateboarders. So that'll be cool, people will see that Nyjah or Paul Rodriguez have just as much influence, I don't want to say street cred but street recognisability as a Kobe Bryant or something, in these places that skateboarding is huge.

(interview, 2015)

I have nothing against vert but the reality is that vert riders are still the same since ages. Why? It's just because it's too expensive for municipalities to install vert so there is not a lot of vert, especially in Europe, maybe more in USA but I doubt it. So, it's expensive. For the ramp it's also dangerous, because when you fall on the vert you fall out and you hurt, when you fall directly on the flat it's a big crash and it's the same for BMX and for roller. So, that's why for me vert is not the future of the sport.

(interview, 2015)

I think that the street aspect of it is because in those big urban centres you have hundreds of thousands of those kids who skate that way. And that's why you have such a diverse pool of people and people are interested in, and those guys are also the more stylish guys who have broader influence in who are in rap videos or hang out with rock stars or anything like that kind of comes out of that group.

(interview, 2015)

As we discuss in Chapter 9, while most surfers recognised shortboard surfing as the most logical fit for the Olympics, some debated the pros and cons of other styles, including SUP (Stand Up Paddleboarding), with some arguing that the SUP racing was more suitable for the Olympic format. As with the other action sports, decisions about which events to include (i.e., shortboard surfing over SUP) were not made by the International Federations (IFs) alone and were often directed by the IOC (via the IOC staff) who had spent considerable time and resources over the two-year process researching the various styles (i.e., attending events) and considering which styles would best meet their criteria (see Chapter 6).

Debates over the styles included in the Olympic Programme were most evident in climbing. Our interviewees offered a number of arguments against the combined approach (speed, lead, and bouldering combined under one medal event), including the concern that those competing at the Olympics would not be the world's best athletes in particular climbing disciplines, but rather those that are good across the three disciplines. Many such concerns, however, came from those industry insiders who would be directly involved in needing to restructure their organisations, competition events and schedules, in response to this change:

People competing in speed are just a few, really just a few climbers training especially for this and doing it and there is no recognition. Within climbing or outside of climbing, it's like the dark side of competition climbing

will be speed climbing. No one cares about speed climbing, absolutely no one. ... Yes, speed climbing is seen as the simplest form of climbing and the most understandable way to explain climbing to a massive audience. But within the climbing community, there is absolutely no interest for speed climbing. Nothing. This is why it is funny to see speed climbing at the Olympics.

(interview, 2015)

There is a section of the folks [within national federations] that have been involved in competition climbing that have some reservations about what is specifically being proposed for Olympics inclusion. Because that format of a combined format doesn't really function ... 99 percent of the events that national federations are hosting are all specific to the discipline, meaning bouldering or lead or speed...but that combined format as an event in and of itself does not yet exist.

(interview, 2015)

Domestically in the US—bouldering competitions, that's where eyes are. People are interested in watching, people are interested in participating. It is by and far the most successful discipline that we run; from participation, viewership, any metric that you want to use, this is where we're seeing success. ...I'm terrified of the fact that this decision for Olympic inclusion will potentially inform what we do domestically as a process for athlete selection at the Olympics.

(interview, 2015)

As illustrated in such comments, there was a lot of confusion and frustration among sport climbing industry personnel as to why the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) opted for a combined approach (speed, lead, and bouldering scores combined). But, as noted below, the IFSC was hamstrung in what they could communicate to their broader community and this has led to tensions and fears about the unknown:

There is a big debate around the combined. Basically, it's because we have one medal. Some people keep thinking that we chose combined instead of asking for three medals. But it's not the case, the case was actually that the quota for us to be in the games was one medal; so, either there was one discipline or the combined.... This explanation of what happened in the past months, the rationale of the decision the IFSC made to put climbing in the Olympic Games needs to be explained to the people in order to have their support of this. That was not possible in the past months because we [IFSC] were supposed to keep all of the bidding information secret. It's still the case normally, but we need to explain at some point.

(interview, 2015)



As I understand it, what was originally proposed was speed. Which is the most contrived of all of these disciplines, because there's only a very small link between speed climbing and what people practice if they go climbing outside. So with bouldering, yes people go bouldering outside, and in general the format of a competition mirrors something that people do for fun as their action sport. Lead climbing same thing. ... Speed climbing though ... I think that once the international federation saw that there is specific interest at the Olympic level in speed, I think they took a step back and said, "Well what does that mean about the sport overall, because we really need to get these other disciplines represented so that the world doesn't think that competition climbing is only speed climbing".

(interview, 2015)

Others, particularly those who understood why the combined approach was adopted, could see a more long-term view and that while the transition might be difficult, sporting cultures do change and evolve over time in response to changing circumstances, and this was not necessarily a bad thing. Some, particularly those closer to the decision making process, recognised the complexities of the decision and the long-term view taken by the IFSC:

The fact is that being in the Olympics, especially the first time imposes some constraints. There are some limitations—the number of athletes, especially the number of athletes, and the number of medals. This was the same for other sports in the beginning, at their first appearance. ... We have this limitation in terms of medals, so we had to find a way make everybody happy—so the IOC who wanted some disciplines, Tokyo who wanted some other disciplines, and of course the values of our sport.

(interview, 2015)

At the moment, I must tell you that we have not defined the format 100 per cent. There is still four-years to go.... So, now it's time to prove that also we are ready to be modern and to modernise a sport that is young but maybe needs some other advice and input to have the best show and the best values to the athletes in the Olympics.

(interview, 2015)

As these comments suggest, in the case of climbing, the combined format was a compromise the IFSC was willing to make. Constrained by limitations set by the IOC (one event), they opted to bring the strengths of the three disciplines together in the hope that in future Olympics they will have more events. Yet, the IFSC continued to face much critique from the sport climbing community about this decision, and they created a strong proposal for two medal events for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, with speed (one medal) and lead and bouldering (one medal) being officially approved in December 2020. This change will see an

increase in climbing athletes from 40 (20 male and 20 female) in Tokyo to 68 (34 male and 34 female) in Paris. This was a significant announcement for the climbing community and an important sign that the IOC was willing to compromise and be responsive to the needs of sport climbing athletes.

Across the three sports—surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing—debates around which styles to include and exclude in the Olympic Programme evoked the philosophical differences within these sporting cultures and revealed power struggles within the industries as they sought to work within the criteria and parameters set by the IOC. Despite much debate about the styles that would be included in the Olympics, many of our participants put the politics of such decisions into perspective. In so doing, many reiterated that the Olympic Games will not be the pinnacle of achievement in their sports (particularly the case for surfing and skateboarding), but rather an “additional” event that only a select few will choose (or have the opportunity) to participate in:

It's like once every four years, they're [professional surfers] not really into that and it'd only be a gimmick thing for them to do.

(interview, 2015)

For [the professional surfers] it would just be a sideshow every four years. They wouldn't value an Olympic gold medal the same way that they would value the world professional surfing championship.

(interview, 2015)

With action sport athletes only temporarily entering the Olympic framework, and the majority of their year dedicated to professional competitions and performances within their sporting cultures with different rule structures, many also anticipated challenges for action sport organisations and athletes trying to align with the strict rules and regulations of the Olympic Games. The philosophical differences between informal, action sport cultures and the Olympic Games were a key area of concern for many core action sport participants and industry insiders alike.

### ***DIY mentality: fear of losing control***

With sporting histories embedded in DIY and anti-establishment values, it is unsurprising that many highly committed action sport participants balked at the possibility of Olympic inclusion. One of the biggest fears was the loss of control of their sport, and the possibility that those within the sport would lose their autonomy over leading their sport into the Olympics and beyond. These concerns were more prevalent in skateboarding where there was much uncertainty as to who would end up leading their sport at the Olympic level:

Skateboarding's kinda like an independent subculture as is, like, there's not, most of the brands, there is like Nike and other brands and stuff, putting their

foot in, but obviously, it's a skateboarder run community, like as a whole. So it's kind of weird, but there's already things like X Games and Street League and stuff.

(interview, 2015)

We watched as snowboarding went in [to the under the Skiing Federation], so we're definitely interested in skateboarding being able to be in control of our own sport and our image. That's kind of the biggest point for us.

(interview, 2015)

For many skateboarders and other action sport participants, their biggest concern was that those leading their sports into the Olympics would be lacking “authenticity” and, thus, respect and understanding of the unique cultural values within their sports. With much uncertainty around skateboarding leadership structures (see Chapters 6 and 8), many skateboarders were very cautious that the IOC would reappropriate their sport with little room for skateboarders to have a say in these processes. The fears of what had happened to snowboarding being repeated, frequently came up in our discussions.

Whereas surfers and climbers knew from much earlier stages that processes of Olympic inclusion would involve members of their own community (with IFs from their own sports, as outlined in Chapter 6), there were still concerns about leadership at both the International and National levels, and questions about the motives of those leading the processes towards Olympic inclusion. Such concerns were expressed across cultural intermediaries in surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing:

It's a really stifling atmosphere at the ISA level.... So you're dealing with a management style that doesn't provide much autonomy for the people organising it. ... I think he's a massive control freak and he doesn't know what he's doing in that element. ... So there's a completely different management style.... So Fernando should concentrate on what he does well, which is charm the Olympic committee.

(surfing interview, 2015)

My biggest fear is that people who have their own agendas may get control. Some big companies are part of ISF. I think that if you're one of the two or three companies that are pushing to get skateboarding into the Olympics and you've got business people trying to run it, and they only care about sales of their products, then you have the potential for corruption. Because there are going to be people that want to sway the decisions, and there's going to be money. I think it took years for FIFA to get the way they are. But I think if you start out the wrong way, before even the first 2020 Olympics there could be some really bad stuff happening in skateboarding, and I'm very leery about that.

(skateboarding, interview 2015)

My fear with the [National] Olympic committee is that they'll suddenly try to seize control from our national federation. I don't know if that's just speculation or me being some kind of conspiracy theorist but it is a fear. And I don't feel confident that there are many other people that will try and protect the heart and soul of what we do, and keep that link to action sport alive. My fear is with Olympic inclusion or recognition or support that suddenly it's turning into a homogenous, easily recreated sport that moves further and further away from the sport that we actually practice in our free time outside of competition.

(climbing interview, 2015)

As we reveal in subsequent chapters, some of these concerns were allayed as International and National organizing bodies became more organised. In other cases, such tensions continued to simmer as the Olympic Games drew nearer and more parties were drawn towards the economic and cultural capital associated with Olympic inclusion.

### **Rules and regulations**

Many core action sport participants and industry insiders also expressed concerns about how their sports, athletes, and organisations would respond to the extensive rules and regulations of the IOC. A question that garnered much consideration in the shortlisting process, both within the action sporting cultures and within the IOC, is “are the athletes ready?” As we discuss in Chapters 8 and 9, the topic of drugs came up frequently, particularly among skateboarders and surfers. Throughout our interviews and social media analysis, both athletes and core participants expressed their concern about skateboarders and surfers failing to meet strict World Anti-Doping Agencies (WADA) drug policies. Another topic that continued to come to the fore was branding and cultural attitudes towards uniforms. For some sports (i.e., skateboarding) more than others (i.e., surfing, climbing), the idea of wearing a uniform was highly controversial among those interviewed. As one skate industry insider, declared, “Skateboarders are not uniform people” (interview, 2015):

I had a great conversation with one of my colleagues, who said what are you talking about? You can't argue with the IOC about stuff. They make the uniform, that doesn't even make any sense, they are the Olympics. If they want you, there's just a thing and you just do it. And we're like no, that's not how it's going. And that's the fight that we're trying to have in the first place, is to have some agency. And that's the big thing.

(skate industry insider, interview, 2015)

Likewise in climbing, participants discussed the cultural and economic considerations for athletes wearing uniforms at the Olympics:

For those athletes at international competition, all that USA Climbing contractually agrees to is with our sponsor The North Face is whereby all the athletes have to wear the official US team jersey and jacket, but if they want to wear their personal sponsors lower body wear that's absolutely okay and they just have to make sure that the branding is not to exceed the specific size. So, I think because we structured that way the athletes themselves can still continue to try and generate revenue for their personal sponsorship through that opportunity, but USA Climbing still has the ability to generate sponsorship revenue specific to the upper body wear, if that makes sense.

(climbing industry insider, interview, 2015)

However, there was a belief that the select few athletes who choose to follow an Olympic career path and who gain qualification, will likely ensure they understand and follow the rules and regulations of the IOC. Some noted that it would ultimately be the role of the IFs and National Sports Organisations (NSOs) who need to ensure athletes are well informed of the processes and expectations involved in Olympic qualification and competition:

I think if it's a situation where you are going to the Olympics and you have worked hard to get there, and somebody is saying to you 'if you violate this rule, you'll be thrown out, you work for Team USA and you will be disqualified', I think they would think long and hard about it.

(skateboarding interview, 2015)

There's a lot of rumbling about the drug tests, but I think the guys that want to go, won't care, especially the younger skaters. Because everyone is just going to know—if you want to go down this path, you don't do drugs. ... like no, I'm not going to be an Olympian because I'm going to smoke weed instead? It just sounds stupid.

(skateboarding interview, 2015)

In such comments we see an understanding by some that Olympic participation will only be sought out by a select few, and those who do will likely be willing to follow the rules and regulations (even if just for the time of Olympic participation). The Olympic athletes in these sports will be a very small subgroup (see Chapter 10), and Olympic rules and regulations will not significantly impact either professional contests, the broader action sport communities, or everyday practices (i.e., dress, lifestyle) of action sport participants, the majority of whom do not engage in competition.

### ***Judging subjective sports***

Subjective judging is prevalent in most action sports, where there is an emphasis on creativity, self-expression, and progression of both the sport and the individual.

Such values are embodied and performed differently, and thus assessment criteria have often sought to provide judges with the room for individual interpretation. In contrast, the IOC has traditionally been cautious of anything that is not first-past-the-post (although gymnastics, figure skating, and boxing are good exceptions). However, with a range of more subjectively judged sports introduced into recent Olympic Games (i.e., snowboarding and skiing halfpipe, slopestyle, big air) there is an understanding that the IOC is increasingly open to sports with subjective judging, and that there are ways to effectively educate mainstream audiences to understand the judging criteria. Among core action sport participants, however, there were a range of views about current judging systems, with some expressing concerns about subjectivity and bias within existing surfing and skateboarding competition series:

The thing with surfing that I hate is, if you look at the scoring, the judges talking ‘oh what did you give this?’, changing their scores. I’ve seen it ... I’ve stood there with judges sitting there, behind judges and they’re on their Instagram and then all of a sudden the heat is over, ‘what did you give him, oh an eight’. So there’s no real standardisation. I know it’s getting better and I know ISA with Fernando, he’s trying to standardise it. But I’ve had clients misjudged and then when they went and complained, it affected them down the road and they were underscored, I’ve seen it.

(surfing interview, 2015)

Some acknowledged that any changes in judging criteria would need to be developed in dialogue with the athletes to ensure understanding and agreement:

Judging in elite pro arenas ... is kind of a dialogue between the surfers and the judging panel that evolves over time. ... So, it’s an interesting dynamic and, I think a pretty damn successful dynamic given that it is almost totally subjective. They get the winners right far more often than they get it wrong. But how you’d develop that into an Olympic context, I just don’t know, I don’t know how you’d do that! I find it difficult to imagine them developing that kind of interrogative relationship once every four years.

(surfing interview, 2015)

It’s going to be really interesting, because the scoring of skateboarding, the judging of skateboarding, is so subjective. It’s like “oh I didn’t like it, I wasn’t feeling it”. That could be a comment from a judge. In Street League it tends to get a little more fine-tuned and more specific on how they’re judging tricks. But every judging system still has flaws.

(skateboarding interview, 2015)

Across many interviewees, there was also recognition that judging was hard for mainstream audiences to understand and would require careful education

of mainstream audiences to help them understand what they are looking for in terms of a good performance.

Many of the skateboarders we spoke to expressed their concerns as to how the highly subjective and creative styles of park and street would be fairly assessed, and in ways that were reflective of skateboarding values (“progression over perfection”, Tony Alva, cited in World Skate, 2018) and understandable to non-skateboarding audiences:

The problem with judging today is half of the skaters don't like certain judges and don't think that they give them a fair shot, because it's subjective, right? And you've got a judge that works for Nike SB and he's got Nike SB skateboarders in the contest and it's subjective. There's a lot of pressure to judge people correctly.

(interview, 2015)

Recognizing the complexities in standardizing the process and criteria of how skateboarding contests are judged, World Skate held the International Skateboarding Judging Commission Workshop in Nanjing, China in 2018. The working group consisted of 17 skateboarders from 11 different countries, with over 500 years of combined skateboarding experience. Over four days, the group “worked diligently” to:

...translate the inherent recognition of what makes good skateboarding from something “you know when you see it,” to something that can be written down and explained to skateboarders all over the world. Again and again, the value and appreciation of progression, creativity, and originality rose to the forefront as we laboured to ensure that the criteria we produced supported the continual positive growth of skateboarding on all levels.

(World Skate, 2018)

Together, the group came up with a mission statement for the International Skateboarding Judging Commission (ISJC) to create Skateboarding Judging Criteria that foster the continual progression of skateboarding while highlighting the importance of creativity and originality of skateboarding in competition. In such efforts it is clear that the working group tried to develop an approach to judging that meets both the needs of skateboarding culture and more standardised, organised, competitive sport.

More recently, as part of its ongoing efforts to standardise competition data, judging, and scoring, in June 2020 World Skate announced a new partnership with live scoring platform *LiveHeats*. This partnership is said to bring web-based event management and live scoring technology to World Skate's Skateboarding member federations, with the goal of enhancing live scoring and also competition data across World Skate sanctioned events (Luca Basilico cited in World Skate, 2020). The World Skate website also features an updated rankings list for the

men's and women's park and street Olympic events, showing both totals and the events where points were awarded. Despite early concerns about judging criteria, each of the International Federations has similarly worked to develop judging criteria that meet both the needs of their sporting cultures and organised, competitive sport, and will also be accessible to mainstream audiences.

While the judging criteria and systems have been a key focus for these action sport federations over recent years, some of our participants reminded us that even when action sport athletes feature in the Olympic Games, core participants themselves will continue to value progression and camaraderie over rules, regulations, and 'win at all costs' values:

If you're at the Olympics and it's skateboarding, and someone wins, and they win and it's obvious, every single other competitor there is going to be stoked for that guy who's getting that gold medal. I mean, if no one's ever made that transition and someone makes it... ..the place will go nuts, it's not just people watching, it's every other competitor is like, you're the man. ... And that kid could be from any country in the world, anywhere!

(focus group 2, older male skater, 2017)

As this quote suggests, despite the necessity to develop judging and scoring systems that are appropriate for the Olympic Games and clear for non-action sport audiences to understand, many participants (including fellow athletes) will hold true to the cultural values of "progression over perfection", with the most status awarded to those who continue to progress the sport, whether they win an Olympic medal or not.

### ***Crowding and environmental concerns***

Another common concern among surfers and climbers was the potential increase in participants that Olympic inclusion would inevitably inspire, and the social and environmental consequences of heightened popularity of these sports. Over recent decades, cheaper and easier travel, and improved technology (e.g. cheaper lighter boards, warmer wetsuits), among other cultural factors have contributed to the growing popularity of surfing (Anderson, 2014; Wheaton, 2017). This in turn has led to overcrowding in many popular and increasingly accessible places, causing a range of tensions from increases in injuries through collisions, to aggressive localism and surf violence (see also Anderson, 2013; Evers, 2016; Olive, 2019). Among core surfers, many expressed their concern that Olympic exposure would further exacerbate this problem:

Including surfing in Tokyo 2020 will increase the recognition of surfing as a sport—I could not care less about it. I really do not need this status. All I want is empty line ups, and having surfing in the Olympics will definitely get more people into the water. Urggg.

(comments section, 2016, World Surf League Website)



A big factor is actually about the number of surfers in the water... already surf spots are crowded ... if something becomes an Olympic sport ... millions and millions of people ... I think that's probably one of the most consistent concerns that seem to be voiced, like "great that's just what we need, even more surfers".

(interview, 2015)

Our interviews with climbers revealed similar concerns. Many felt that the inclusion of climbing into the Olympics will increase the number of participants and, thus, lead to overcrowding in outdoor climbing spaces, heightening processes of environmental degradation:

For the record, I think that climbing in the Olympics is a really crap idea because of the impact on me. Olympics = more media attention = more people = more damage to the environment = more access problems = I can't go climbing in the places that I want to go. I know it is selfish, but the whole point of climbing is selfish (nobody else gets any benefit of me getting to the top of a rock).

(Cited in Holwill, 2013)

I'm not sure what is going to happen to the sport in terms of outdoor access, sustainability and all this stuff. The issue is just that the sport growing, and it will grow even more with the Olympics, but outdoor spaces are limited.

(climbing interview, 2015)

It was also noted that climbers tend to be environmentally conscious, and that the inclusion of climbing into the Olympic Games could lead to greater environmental awareness:

I think actually, even the ones who are afraid that [Olympic inclusion] will bring too many people, don't really quite understand that the growth in sport climbing is really a growth in environmental beliefs, because it's the general attitude of the people who do it. And I think what they would see with a rise in participants is more power, there would be more protection and more opening of outdoor spaces. There's always a strong environmental slant to climbing, and everybody involved is also pretty much involved in environmental programmes.

(climbing interview, 2015)

Various researchers have discussed the close relationship outdoor, lifestyle, and action sport participants have with the natural environment and how it can lead to heightened "ecological sensibilities" (Olive, 2016) or "ecocentricity" (Brymer & Gray, 2010) (also see Borne & Ponting, 2017; Humberstone, 2011; Stoddart, 2012; Wheaton, 2007, 2020). Some scholars suggest that nature-based

action sport participants' develop environmental activism through the deep "kinship with the natural world" that develops through their sporting participation (Brymer & Gray, 2010; p. 366; Hill & Abbott, 2009). Others offer a more contradictory and nuanced reading of action sport participants' environmental relationships as "individualistic *and* part of a collectivity: they are hedonistic *and* reflexive consumers, often politically disengaged yet environmentally aware and/or active" (Humberstone, 2011; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2010; Wheaton, 2007, p. 298; 2020). Our research with core action sport participants about their attitudes towards Olympic inclusion is suggestive of such contradictory relationships with the environment (see also Chapter 9). Many core surfers and climbers expressed their concerns that Olympic inclusion will lead to crowding which will be detrimental to their individual experiences (they have to fight more for limited resources). Yet, while some acknowledge the environmental consequences, few are willing to give up their own participation; the discourse of "environmental degradation" appears to be used as a "good" argument to make against Olympic inclusion, but such comments are riddled with contradiction.

### **The promise of Olympic inclusion: the rhetoric of global diversity**

Despite many concerns, for some of our core cultural participants, one of the greatest benefits of Olympic inclusion was the possibility that it would make these activities more accessible to people around the world, and that the Olympics would be a stage to represent the diversity in the global action sports community. For example, according to one male skateboarding interviewee, the Olympics could create an opportunity for "girls that represent Uganda, Mexico, Brazil... that would be exciting to watch!" Others expressed similar sentiments: "It'll open up skateboarding to more people around the world":

It's kind of these little pockets where skateboarding is flourishing. The South American and Latino American countries are also booming. We think there could be more Brazilian skateboarders than American skateboarders. Brazil and Mexico, even Peru and Colombia, they have these huge burgeoning skate communities that go right along with this whole Olympics thing, it's the international organisation of skateboarding that is growing very quickly.

(interview, 2015)

Further echoing such sentiments, Tony Hawk explained, "If nothing else it [the Olympics] is going to get kids interested in skating from unlikely areas, from unlikely countries". Some further romanticised notions that urban sports, such as skateboarding (a relatively cheap and highly accessible sport to youth around

the world), would offer a democratisation of the Olympic Games, with athletes from diverse geographical, ethnic, and socio-cultural backgrounds sharing the stage:

Bringing these new events into the Olympics will give the opportunity to new countries to be involved from the beginning in these new events. ... It's fair to give the chance to every country in the world to showcase their talents in the biggest sport event ever.

(interview, 2015)

While US male skateboarders are currently dominating the rankings, Brazilian and Japanese women are holding the majority of the top ten rankings lists for street and park, respectively. Furthermore, in the 2020 Olympic World Skate rankings, ten of the top 20 women skateboarding park athletes are under 16 years of age, including number one ranked Japanese skater Misugu Okamoto (14 years old) and number four ranked (Anglo-Japanese) Sky Brown (13 years old) representing Great Britain. In the top 20 women street skaters, nine are under the age of 16 years, including three Brazilian girls (number two ranked skater is 12-year-old Rayssa Leal) and four Japanese girls. For a sport that has been long stereotyped as an activity dominated by young men, the visibility and high skill levels of young girl skateboarders from Asian and Latino cultures are sure to make a lasting impression on global audiences (see Chapters 10 and 11).

The rhetoric of action sports as the embodiment of global youth culture was used by each of the IFs in their proposals for Olympic inclusion. For example, in their pitch to the IOC and to the surfing community, the ISA claimed that surfing was a global sport, popular with youth that would help to universalise, even “democratise” the Olympics (interview with key individual involved in developing and presenting the ISA Olympic pitch, 2015). Some of our surfing interviewees were hopeful that Olympic inclusion would lead to greater national diversity, even create “geographic universality” (interview, 2016) with participation of athletes from Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia (Heyden, 2017):

World Surf League [is] an elite high end pro-competitive sport and unless you've got so much in the bank as far as skill development and all that stuff, you can't make it into that arena. Whereas the Olympic arena is a lot more open.

(interview, 2015)

Underpinning this belief was that in the past, Olympic inclusion had led to shifting relationships between action sports and national sporting bodies, with the activities being seen as more legitimate “sports”, leading to increased investment

in the development of athletes in some (but not all) countries by NSOs (see Chapters 7 and 10):

Any sport being added to the Olympics increases its reputation and applicability to the general public and boosts the funding and long-term support for the sport.

(survey)

Many in the action sport cultures and industries, including athletes, initially believed that Olympic inclusion would lead to a cash injection in their sports:

Like its mandated, right; if you're an Olympic sport then all these federal Olympic bodies in various countries then sort of have to carve off billions of dollars and throw it at you and say employ coaches, employ this, deck officials out in their regalia, send them off on freebie trips around the world to talk to other officials, all that stuff.

(interview, 2015)

Many countries were hopeful that the Olympics could be a huge opportunity for them. For example, Jamaica was one of many non-dominant surfing nations that had “clear ambitions to use surfing’s Olympic debut as an opportunity” (Heyden, 2017). As their Surfing Association President explained, he was hopeful that Jamaican surfers would qualify for Tokyo, and that Olympic inclusion would lead to “an opportunity to access international and local Olympic funding” and also to run a qualification event:

We are in the process of putting together a four-year development plan to approach the Olympic Solidarity Fund to get assistance for three or four top-tier surfers, to see how we can develop their surfing potential.

(Wilmot cited in Heyden, 2017)

However, such qualification hopes were soon tempered when it became clear that only 20 male and 20 female surfers would compete in Tokyo (Chapter 9). With such a small field, to ensure some national diversity, the International Surfing Association had to develop qualification criteria which would somehow balance including the world’s best athletes, while also limiting the top surfing nations. As one surf journalist observed, their options were very limited:

If they choose to select certain countries, and let’s say they go for 10 countries with two surfers apiece, we’d end up losing a lot of the world’s best. ... Alternatively, if they held a worldwide qualifier, they run the risk of only having 3–4 countries involved in the Olympics. Either way, we’re looking at a seriously flawed system.

(Ciaramella, 2016)

For each of the new action sports, the criteria for Olympic qualification took some time to be decided as they worked to find fair and balanced approaches (that went some way towards realizing their promises of global representation). However, what eventuated were systems that, while attempting to limit the dominant nations, did not significantly open up qualification opportunities for less dominant nations in these sports (e.g., Jamaica in surfing).

Despite statements from the IOC and IFs that Olympic inclusion would lead to the “democratisation” of the Olympics and offer a truly global representation of youth sporting culture, our research reveals that, with the inclusion of these new action sports into the Olympic Games, the support and resources available to competitive athletes are heavily influenced by the levels of interest, resourcing, investment, and organisation within their country. As we extrapolate in Chapter 10, while some countries are investing heavily in their Olympic action sport teams and athletes, including specially-designed facilities, training camps, coaches, medical support teams, and travelling together to international competitions and events, many other countries are much slower to respond. In doing so, we show that Olympic inclusion is set to exacerbate national differences in the skill and progression of athletes in these sports. Furthermore, as some have argued, the qualification processes in most of these sports continue to privilege athletes from the northern hemisphere and those from more wealthy nations willing to fund the travels of Olympic hopefuls (see Chapter 10). Despite the rhetoric of the Olympics being a celebration of global youth culture, and stimulating the growth and development of action sports in diverse parts of the world, our research suggests this to be an empty promise used by the IFs in their early bids for Olympic inclusion. However, that the Olympics would provide such opportunities was also a myth that many core participants also bought into in these early stages of the process.

## Conclusions

In this chapter we explained the important role played by Agenda 2020 in the process of shortlisting and including surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing into the Tokyo Olympic Programme. We then explain how the highly fragmented action sport cultures responded differently to the announcement of Olympic shortlisting (2015) and inclusion (2016). Different cultural positionings (as well as geographical and demographic variables) influenced how action sport participants responded to these announcements. In the final part of the chapter we discussed some of the key concerns among core action sport participants and industry insiders, including the styles included into the Olympic Programme, fears of the loss of control of their sports, doubts about the ability of action sports athletes and organisations to accept the rules and regulations of the IOC, and worries about overcrowding and environmental degradation.

This chapter illustrates the importance of understanding the processes of cultural response over time. As we reveal in subsequent chapters, some of the concerns that evoked the strongest reaction from action sport participants

(e.g., judging and uniforms) were quickly allayed. In forthcoming chapters, we show how the IFs worked carefully with action sport athletes and influencers, as well as media partners and other key agents, to change cultural attitudes and garner more widespread cultural “buy in” (see Chapters 6, 8 and 9). Such processes of cultural opposition, acceptance, and change reveal some of the longstanding contradictions within action sport cultures, and the complex processes of sportisation that have been underway for decades prior to Olympic inclusion. As we explain in forthcoming chapters, many in the action sports’ communities quickly forgot about such concerns. This, we suggest, is another example of the “flexible opposition” that has long been evident in these cultures (Dinces, 2011; see Chapter 8). Whereas some issues were quickly overcome and forgotten, others continued to fester and build as the implications of Olympic inclusion, and the political economy driving them, were realised across different levels.

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# Action sports and the politics of governance

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Olympic inclusion has posed many challenges for the governance of action sports. This has been particularly the case for (new) International Federations (IFs) as they worked (for the first time) to lead and manage the processes of shortlisting, and the subsequent preparation for their debut at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. Our research over the past decade has revealed an important distinction between two different models of governance being utilised for action sports inclusion into the Olympic Games: (1) Action sports governed by an existing federation and (2) Action sports governed by a new action sport-specific federation. The former is the approach used for the incorporation of all action sports prior to 2015, including windsurfing (under yachting International Sailing Association (ISAF)), snowboarding (under skiing International Skiing Federation (FIS)), and BMX racing (under Union Cycliste Internationale, UCI), and also is the case for kiteboarding (also known as kitesurfing) (yachting ISAF) and BMX freestyle (ICF) into the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) and subsequent Olympics. From the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) perspective, the main strength of inclusion under an existing federation is that these organisations already have experience with the roles, rules, and regulations required for a sport competition to be hosted at the Olympic Games. However, as experienced by those action sports already included into the Olympic model via this approach, a severe limitation can be that the parent federation does not have the cultural understanding (and, thus, respect) for what makes the action sport unique. As detailed in Chapter 4, this led to a range of concerns and issues. Given the urgency to include more youth-friendly sports into the Olympic Games, and under the leadership of President Thomas Bach, the IOC seemed willing to stretch their rules and regulations (to a certain extent) to enable the new action sports—surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing—the possibility of governing their own sports. Of course, such an approach comes with risks and challenges for the IOC.

This chapter explores issues of governance across action sports during the processes of inclusion into the Tokyo Olympic Programme, and the complex relations of power between the IOC and other key actors in this process. Engaging our interviews in dialogue with literature on the sociology of sports organisations and governance, this chapter reveals the complex negotiations and tensions

within surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing leading up to and beyond the announcement (August 2016) of their inclusion in the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Programme, and then the subsequent inclusion of BMX freestyle (added by UCI into Tokyo 2020), kiteboarding (Paris 2024), and parkour (still in process). In the latter cases we see a modified version of the first model of Olympic inclusion developing that incorporates these sports under existing IFs but with key allegiances in the action sports industry. Examining the differences and similarities across these various sports, we consider the promise and possibility of new models of governance within the Olympic Games, as well as analysing the various layers of power operating within such organisational changes.

### **The Olympics, sports organisations, and the struggle for autonomy**

As illustrated in the earlier chapters, the incorporation of action sports into previous Olympic Games has been a highly political and contested process within these sporting cultures. For many action sport athletes, events such as the X Games or industry-organised competitions, continue to hold more “cultural authenticity” (Wheaton, 2004) and thus tend to be valued more highly within the action sports culture and industry (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b). From windsurfing to BMX freestyle, action sport practitioners have been wary of their incorporation in these traditional forms of competition, seeing it as a form of “selling out” their “alternative” values and ideologies. As well as the countercultural, anti-establishment ethos embraced by early participants and that remains (or is imagined to be) at the core of contemporary action sport cultures (see Chapter 5), another factor complicating Olympic inclusion is that the action sports industry, rather than International and National Federations, has played the primary role in organizing events and creating opportunities for athletes (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b).

Despite the similarities in subcultural philosophies and ethos across many action sports, the particularities of each activity need exploration (Honea, 2013; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a). The cultural politics between and within groups are unique, based on the distinctive history, ideologies, identities, and development patterns of each lifestyle sport culture, and particularly the specific historical juncture within which the incorporation processes occurred or are occurring. In each case, the market-driven process of Olympic incorporation has led to complex, but contextually specific power struggles between international and national sporting governing bodies, media conglomerates, and action sport cultures and their industries. These power relations play out differently depending on the development of the sport, the strength and size of the industry, and fragmentation within the culture. Adopting a management perspective, Batuev and Robinson (2018) have offered detailed insights into the processes of Olympic inclusion and the organisational development of climbing (2018) and skateboarding (2017), explaining that “the values of a sport can expand and develop in order to fit the

regulatory legitimacy required by inclusion in the Olympic Games”, but such involvement with the IOC ultimately “raises questions about who ‘owns’ the sport” (p. 1). It is only when we look across sports, however, that we see how different power structures and key agents within each action sport’s industry, sport, and culture, influence the organisation and governance, and relationships with the IOC, differently. This chapter focuses specifically on issues of governance across action sports during the processes of inclusion into the summer Olympic Programme, and some of the key challenges in the lead up to Tokyo 2020 (also see Chapters 8–10).

Prior to Tokyo, no action sport has had the opportunity to govern itself within the Olympic model. When action sports have been incorporated into the Olympic Games under existing traditional sport IFs, the primary concern (and, thus, politics) has been fears of loss of autonomy. This loss of participant autonomy and agency is not uncommon when sports are incorporated into Global Sports Organisations (GSO) underpinned by economic motives. As Donnelly (2015) reveals, the governance problems in global sport today are related to “the effects of globalisation, institutionalisation and commercialisation on sport; processes and forces that have acted to produce a cultural hegemony—a global sport monoculture in which the democratic involvement of participants is restricted” (p. 11). As we discussed in Chapter 2, many others have expressed concerns about the corruption and inequalities in global sport governance when run by a core group of global elites (typically white, wealthy men) intimately connected to transnational business (Allison, 2004; Allison & Tomlinson, 2017; Chappellet & Kubler-Mubbott, 2008; Forster, 2006; Forster & Pope, 2004).

In response to growing concerns about the “corruption, malfeasance and an apparent lack of ethical standards” (Forster & Pope, 2004, p. 5) in Global Sporting Organisations (GSOs), Donnelly (2015) imagines “what sports might look like if they were truly democratised... if their form and meaning were controlled by the participants” (p. 11). Continuing, he offers the examples of rock-climbing/mountaineering, Ultimate, and roller derby, as sports with high levels of competition, but where “players do control the sport” (p. 27). He is not idealistic in his understanding of these player-run sports, and is careful to note that within each of these sports there are factions with Olympic aspirations, and IFs—such as the International Federation of Roller Sports (FIRS)—that are “anxious to incorporate them”:

Inevitably, under the current and undemocratic forms of sport governance, this would mean prestige and fame, especially for the best athletes if the sport was accepted to the Olympics; but it would also potentially mean loss of control by the participants.

(p. 27)

A few scholars have focused specifically on the strategies of self-governance in local, national, and international roller derby (Beaver, 2012; Pavlidis, 2015) and parkour

organisations (Puddle, Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). However, when these activities are brought into the crosshairs of globally powerful institutions such as the IOC, new pressures, power plays, and cultural fragmentation can occur. This has certainly been the case in action sports previously included into the Olympic Programme. However, in the IOC's urgency to include more youth-friendly sports into the Olympic Games and with the new regulations brought in with Agenda 2020, the IOC opened the possibility for surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing to be governed by new International Federations run by the participants themselves.

### **The politics of governance: surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing**

In this section we provide an overview of the processes within the International Federations of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing leading up to the decision that they would be included in the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games (Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, 2016). In prioritising the voices of participants within the process, it reveals the differences and similarities across the three sports as they worked to align with Olympic rules and regulations, and simultaneously respond to criticisms from their sporting cultures, while preparing their sport, industry, and culture for the significant changes ahead. We also draw upon our ongoing conversations and interviews with IOC members to further highlight the complexities of these processes, and particularly the challenges. We conclude with a discussion across the three sports that highlights the political struggles as action sports are drawn closer to the global sport monoculture with all the opportunities for new forms of power, and potential financial rewards, that this offers for a select few.

#### ***Surfing: the International Surfing Association finally gets its chance***

The International Surfing Association (ISA) led the bid for surfing's inclusion into the Olympic Games. The ISA was founded in 1964, but it is important to note that during the 1960s and 1970s it was not the only International Surfing Association vying for Olympic recognition. Our analysis of the Olympic archives revealed a long and contested history of ISA and other associations trying to get surfing into the Olympics, with some very questionable ethics and strategies being employed by the various parties (IOC museum fieldwork conducted in 2016). Recognised by the IOC as the official organisation for surfing governance in 1997, the International Surfing Association (ISA) currently supports 108 national federations under the leadership of President Fernando Aguerre, an Argentinian surfer and co-founder of iconic surf brand Reef. ISA organises key amateur international events annually—World Surfing Games, World Junior Surfing Games, Adaptive Surfing Championships, and the World Stand Up Paddleboard Championship (SUP)—where national teams compete.

Although the ISA is the designated international body, it does not have the status of the more prestigious, business-led, and visible professional body, the

World Surf League (WSL). According to a number of our participants, this signalled a division within high performance surfing culture:

...the IOC has given the ISA the approval. But in our little teacup in the world of surfing, the big dog is the WSL—the world champion, the pro tour, everything like that, the big money—and the ugly stepchild is the ISA and the national teams.

(interview, 2015)

Despite such concerns, our interviewees were broadly supportive of ISA and its ability to retain autonomy for surfing: that it has “managed to give legitimacy to his body, rather than it being subsumed under somebody else” (like snowboarding). Some acknowledged the unwavering commitment and careful strategising of Aguerre as playing a key role in maintaining surfing’s autonomy in the process:

I’m critical in many ways of how Fernando runs his events, but I’m super congratulatory in terms of how he’s been able to navigate this path through to where we’re at right now. That... is just a testament to Fernando’s perseverance and his ability to actually navigate the waters; it’s exceptional... I don’t believe there’s anyone else in the whole surfing world that would have had the perseverance to continue this path for that length of time.

(interview, 2015)

There was also a widespread belief that the ISA president was motivated by the legacy it would create, not money or personal power: “It’s not about money, he’s got plenty. ... It’s just a legacy thing for him” (interview, 2015). However a number of issues were raised about the ISA’s governance of surfing in the Olympics, and particularly the style of leadership employed in this organisation. For example, one interviewee expressed the following concerns: “I think he’s a massive control freak... Fernando should concentrate on what he does well, which is charm the Olympic committee” (interview, 2015).

An important theme emerging in the interviews was the negotiation between the ISA and WSL as to who controls professional surfing. Some predicted a struggle between the two organisations due to potential conflict in styles, personalities, and judging systems. Some saw this as a serious potential issue; the majority however thought that despite their differences, all parties would accommodate Olympic inclusion as they all stood to benefit. According to a key member of the ISA, a compromise had been agreed:

We have the full support of the WSL, surfing’s pro league, a private business. When I made the presentation to Tokyo it went on the record in video with the CEO saying “We will bring the best athletes to Tokyo”. So, we presented a unified front.

(interview, 2015)

However, not all the interviewees agreed that a union would be so straightforward, with many anticipating complex power plays between the two international organisations. Yet, despite being seen as a second-rate organisation by many surfers, and ongoing critiques about Olympic surfing, particularly in the niche media (Haro, 2016; Heyden, 2017), the ISA's role as the designated international governing body has not been challenged, and an agreement was reached in October 2016 between ISA and WSL that allows WSL surfers to compete in ISA events to enable Olympic qualification (World Surf League, 2017).

The ISA has been seeking Olympic inclusion since the 1960s, and thus it is important to consider why the IOC has finally given the sport a chance. We posed this question to a key staff member of the IOC involved in the process. In his words:

Why now and not in the past? You know, you look at the Federation and the way they've developed in the past 10 years, it's really been impressive. When you look at especially universality and the number of national federations, the number of top athletes, the number of key events, it's really grown in the past, so this gave the International Surfing Association a real plus when they applied to Tokyo.

(interview, 2016)

Importantly, while the elite of the surfing sport and industry focused on the development of the WSL and professional surfing, Fernando was working closely with his team to ensure the ISA was meeting the IOC criteria, such that when it submitted its proposal for Tokyo the IF had clearly evidenced its readiness to take on this responsibility of self-governing the sport.

### ***Skateboarding: the politics of multiple federations***

Conversations and controversies about the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympic Games date back to 2007 when it was proposed that "skateboarding could make its Olympic debut at the 2012 London Games" as a wheel-based activity under the cycling discipline (Peck and agencies, 2007). In response to such media headlines, thousands of skateboarders from across the world rallied together, signing an online petition addressed to the IOC president entitled "No Skateboarding in the Olympics". The petition underscored that "Skateboarding is not a sport" and "we do not want skateboarding exploited and transformed to fit into the Olympic Program" (The Petition, 2010, para. 1). While skateboarding did not appear in the London Olympics, this was just the beginning of the story.

The proposal for the inclusion of skateboarding into the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games was originally submitted by FIRS President, Sabatino Aracu. However, by the time of the announcement that skateboarding had been shortlisted for possible inclusion in Tokyo 2020, there were two more organisations vying to be

the federation selected by the IOC to develop, manage, and lead the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympic Games: World Skateboarding Federation (WSF) and International Skateboarding Federation (ISF). Each of the three contending federations (FIRS, WSF, and ISF) has different historical and geographical contexts of development, and with different connections to skateboarding as a sport, culture, and industry (Batuev & Robinson, 2017). The WSF was founded in 2014 by non-skateboarding, American businessman Tim McFerran, and is primarily a for-profit skateboarding event management-company based in California that hosts skateboarding events around the world, and particularly in developing regions (i.e., South Africa). The ISF was created in 2004, but until recently remained a largely US-based and mostly dormant organisation. However, with news that the IOC was considering skateboarding for possible inclusion, President Gary Reams (non-skateboarder and owner of Camp Woodward, an international leader in action sports camps) rallied with skateboarding icons (including Tony Hawk), skateboarding athletes, media producers (i.e., NBC), and the skateboarding industry (i.e., Nike, DC, Vans) to become a very strong contender for the leadership position of skateboarding into the Olympics. In contrast, FIRS was established in 1924 and is the IOC recognised world-governing body for roller sports, including rink hockey, inline hockey, inline speed skating, and artistic roller-skating. Although FIRS has not had a history of organizing skateboarding events, skateboarding is under its umbrella of roller sports, and thus the IOC was required to work with FIRS in the first instance (see Batuev & Robinson, 2017).

Both leading up to and following the announcement (September 2015) that skateboarding was shortlisted for Tokyo 2020, it was largely fears of the unknown and loss of control that caused the most anxieties among core skateboarders:

There's definitely a right and wrong way to do things. Hopefully, we can have some sort of representation with whoever does end up representing our sport, and hopefully make sure the right people are in there, the right format and things like that on the contest side, because that's important.

(interview, 2015)

For the skateboarding community to support Olympic inclusion they needed to feel confident that their sport would be managed and represented by those who understand and respect their culture and what makes their sport unique. In other words, for the international skateboarding community to support the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympics, the perceived “authenticity” of the federation and its leaders was (and remains) of utmost importance.

### *Moving towards collaboration*

At the time of interviews (2015–2016), many within the skateboarding industry suspected that ISF may be the strongest candidate to become the official Olympic federation, with some expressing caution against WSF and FIRS because they

seemed to hold less credibility and authenticity within the skateboarding culture. Some predicted boycotts if the position went to any other group than ISF:

Until we understand that it's going to be managed by skateboarding, we are not celebrating. Because if it so happens that it's managed by somebody else, there will be major pushback!

(interview, 2015)

However, there were also some expressions of interest in a more collaborative approach that draws upon the strengths of the various organisations and works to unite the international skateboarding industry and culture:

The best scenario will be to have identified players around the table... and all together we work hand in hand.

(interview, 2015)

In skateboarding, we're really all fragmented. We never really work together as an industry... but I hope [the Olympics] brings it together and we're all working toward this greater good within the industry, which I think will be pretty awesome... I think a lot of good can be done with this power and this organisation in skateboarding.

(interview, 2015)

On March 15, 2016, a group meeting was held in Lausanne with the three Federations with the intent to encourage a more cooperative approach. Some sources suggested that an ultimatum was given that if they did not work together, skateboarding's proposal could be rejected (Butler, 2016). After more meetings and negotiations with the IOC, and also the Tokyo 2020 Skateboarding Commission, a partial solution was reached, with a collaboration formed between FIRS and the ISF. According to an IOC announcement, they had been working to "establish a collaborative model to deliver skateboarding events at the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 and embrace the global skateboarding community" (Further Steps, 2017). This collaboration highlighted the IOC's recognition of FIRS as the official governing body for skateboarding, while "acknowledging the ISF's extensive experience and expertise in the organisation of skateboarding events and the representation of skateboarders" (Further Steps, 2017, para 2). In a subsequent development, at the FIRS Congress in September 2017, FIRS changed its denomination to World Skate to signal an official merger between FIRS and ISF. World Skate is currently the "governing body for skateboarding and roller sports officially recognised by the IOC". According to the World Skate communication manager, "World Skate as a brand and an idea is a perfect fit for the next century of roller skating and skateboarding history" (Butler, 2017). Perhaps not surprisingly, this decision remained controversial within some fractions of the skateboarding culture and industry.



Professional skateboarder and athlete representative for ISF, turned Tokyo 2020 Skateboarding Commission, turned World Skate, Neal Hendrix, recognised the challenges of Olympic inclusion: “In skateboarding, you are not going to get universal agreement on everything. Skateboarders live, sleep, eat and breathe their sport, and they are really protective about it” (cited in Wilkins, 2016). But in his role, Hendrix was tasked with trying to reassure the skateboarding community: “I’m excited to be the athlete representative... It is really important to me that skateboarding culture is fairly represented and protected on this global stage” (<http://skateboarding2020.com/>). In such statements, Hendrix was trying to communicate to the skateboarding community that they still have voice in the process. However, many others were less convinced that World Skate would offer the opportunity for self-governance required for Olympic inclusion with the levels of autonomy that skateboarders deem necessary. Furthermore, with WSF excluded from this collaborative model, McFerran filed a lawsuit against the ISF fighting his exclusion from the process, claiming he was “side-lined despite signing an agreement and investing money and resources into preparations” (Butler, 2016). Further criticising the process and what he perceives as a compromised coalition that ultimately undermines the autonomy of skateboarding within the Olympic model, McFerran argues, “skateboarding has been duped” (Mackay, 2017).

Our communications with the IOC were helpful for understanding their considerations and involvement in this process. An early conversation revealed the ongoing deliberations with the three organisations:

We’ve been in very close cooperation with each of the three organisations for the past year... As you can imagine, this question is quite sensitive about the governance of skateboarding. ... It’s not easy and we keep a dialogue with the three bodies to assess the best model. Because what is for sure, *we want to organise an event for skateboarders supported by skateboarders*. This is very important because we are aware of the specificities of this community and *we want to make things right*.

(emphasis added, interview, 2016)

Interestingly, the IOC staff had a good understanding of the problems that would ensue if an IF were selected that did not have skateboarders at the helm, and were investing considerable time and resources to work through the process (Olympic Games Tokyo 2020, 2016):

We don’t want to go with an institutional organisation or body [that] is not respecting the culture of the sport. So we are very aware of the challenges and we’re taking the time to assess and determine the best model. ... Because what matters at the end, *we want the buy in of the community and the top athletes*.

(emphasis added, interview, 2016)

In a later interview, an IOC employee involved in the process acknowledged that skateboarding governance required different strategies than that of surfing and climbing, and that IOC personnel had conducted intensive research in coming to the decision:

We've been to many events in South Africa, in the US, in Finland. We've been to the headquarters of these federations, we've been to a few conferences and summits in skateboarding, we've talked to all the key players including athletes, sponsors, agents, event organisers, brands, and so on. ... we don't want to close the door to any major organisation involved in skateboarding. *We want to have an inclusive approach, and more importantly, we want skateboarding to be organised by skateboarders.* Why? Because it's the only way to ensure that we respect the culture of skateboarding. And this is fundamental for us. We're not looking at changing the sport. We're really looking at including those sports but beyond those sports including those cultures, because when we talk to them they all say it's more than a sport, it's about lifestyle, it's about communities, and this is what is interesting for us.

(interview, 2016)

As these quotes from the IOC staff suggest, the processes behind-the-scenes were complex, with the IOC giving careful consideration to the importance of understanding and respecting the skateboarding culture. This is a distinctly different approach than previously seen with the inclusion of other action sports (i.e., windsurfing, snowboarding, BMX, kiteboarding) forced into the Olympic model under the governance of existing, traditional sports organisations. In such processes, the IOC showed very little interest in developing an “inclusive approach” or “respecting the culture” of these action sports (see Honea, 2013; Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011a, 2011b).

### ***Sport climbing: the International Federation of Sport Climbing***

In contrast to skateboarding, sport climbing has one international federation, the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) that is leading the development of the sport and led the proposal for Olympic inclusion (Batuev & Robinson, 2018). The IFSC was founded in 2007 when a group of passionate sport climbers decided to leave the International Climbing and Mountaineering Federation (UIAA) due to ongoing frictions. According to one interviewee, the initial motivation to start the IFSC was to “not leave the sport in the hands of the bureaucrats, let's manage the sport ourselves”. The IFSC has worked closely with the IOC since their foundation, such that one participant described it as “deep cooperation”, and another also described a productive working relationship:

From the very beginning, we tried to work with the IOC. ... We are new to this world and we are not politicians. So we tried to get advice from

them [as to] how to make the statutes, how to make the structure, because what we have seen over the years was other federations who had been existing for maybe 100 years, then when they had to change or make some decision it maybe took one year or two years and this is not okay. We didn't want to be the same as those... because they are... really bound by their structure. So, the collaboration with the IOC started from the very beginning. And now... we have seen something change in the IOC and we work very well together. ... This is probably something new, because in the past I think that there was some distance between the international federations and the IOC.

(interview, 2015)

Despite a positive working relationship and perceived “deep cooperation” between the IOC and IFSC, a few interviewees from within the international climbing community expressed some concerns over the leadership of the IFSC:

The way that I see it right now is that there are many, many national federations that are run more effectively than our international federation... strategically, financially, fiduciarily. ... I'm not convinced that climbing's international federation has it's shit together.

(interview, 2015)

Importantly, however, this was a small minority and the general opinion was one of optimism and hope for what Olympic inclusion would mean for sport climbers (as athletes) and the industry more broadly.

As discussed in Chapter 5, many within the sport climbing community were upset with the combined approach accepted with the IFSC (see Figure 6.1). However, the IF continued to work towards a model that would be acceptable to sport climbers, and in December 2020 it was announced that the combined event would change to two (Speed event and Lead and Boulder event) medal events in Paris 2024. This change suggests that the IOC is willing to add new events to the Programme when the sports work well under the Olympic model and the IFs prove themselves to be valuable members of the Olympic “family”. In other words, when the IFs “play by the rules” set by the IOC, some of their original requests are honoured in due course. Through this process, the IFSC learned the importance of a clear strategic policy, as well as patience and perseverance. Arguably, the case of sport climbing is an example of the “rewards system” the IOC is willing to offer when IFs commit to a “long game” strategy and work effectively within the IOC system.

In contrast to surfing and skateboarding, which are both supported by strong global industries, sport climbing is a small sub-sector of the broader climbing community, with outdoor climbing typically garnering the most industry focus and resources. Sport climbing is also not as high profile as surfing and skateboarding, and thus the IFSC has a different set of issues due to less industry and commercial funding. This lack of industry support and financial backing could help explain



*Figure 6.1* Sport-climbing at the Buenos Aires 2018 YOG, with the speed, lead, and bouldering combined event held in the same space in the Urban Park. Photo courtesy of: Ivo Gonzalez for OIS/IOC. Used with permission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). All rights reserved.

the different approach adopted by the IFSC in working with the IOC. Not dissimilar from surfing and skateboarding, however, the IFSC is facing difficult decisions as to how to grow the sport and harness the increased attention into support without losing touch with the core of the climbing community. The following quote illustrates this concern in relation to sponsorship and the need to maintain close connections with the culture:

If we get some big sponsor on board, we need also to leave a space for the smaller sponsor... for the *real* people coming from the community. If we accept support from big corporations, like Coca Cola and all these things, those are nothing to do with climbing... then the IFSC will only manage marketing product and not the heart of the sport. That's why it's important to not forget where we come from.

(interview, 2015)

Importantly, while losing touch with “the heart of the sport” is of central importance to an IF run by climbers, such concerns would be of less importance to an IF without the close cultural connections. This example thus illustrates how economic decisions may be approached differently by a self-governing IF than an

IF with little understanding or respect for the core cultural values underpinning the action sport.

### **“There’s a big change inside the IOC in terms of attitude”: perceptions of organisational change and shifting power dynamics**

Across the interviews, there was a strong perception that the IOC was making a concerted effort to respond to new trends in sporting participation, listen to those within action sports, and respect their cultures, and that this was a recent shift. The following quotes are revealing of such attitudes across the sports:

I do believe the process today is totally different [from when snowboarding was included in 1998]. The world has changed and their [IOC] thought process has changed and they are definitely becoming more relevant to the thought processes of youth. We have a new generation of young people at the IOC, and I do believe they get it.

(interview skateboard industry insider, 2015)

The IOC is often compared to FIFA with money and scandals. This is an opportunity to show the world there is a big change in the IOC, and they are listening to youth.

(interview with climbing insider involved in Olympic inclusion process, 2015)

In the programme composition, the IOC was behind the times, behind history. The arrival of President Bach in 2013 was like the election of the new Pope ... the arrival of another great leader. ... They both needed to figure out how to adapt [to a changing society], how to evolve, how to embrace change.

(interview with surfing insider involved in the process, 2015)

The radical changes suggested in such comments are best understood in the context of longstanding critiques raised by those working with the IOC (e.g., Olympic bid and organizing committees) who have “come to experience the IOC, its staff in particular, as relentless professional routinizers, purveyors of ‘one size first all’ rules, [and] ... ‘the made in Switzerland’ approach” (MacAloon, 2016, p. 775). A few of our participants noted that they felt the IOC was “making things up as they go along”, which has caused some confusion for those who are trying to work within the process. However, others noted that a “younger guard” within the IOC was trying hard to “do it right”, by working closely with key people and organisations within action sport cultures and industries. Ultimately, there was an understanding that the IOC was heading in a positive direction by considering the inclusion of newer sports, such as surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing,

trying to understand what makes them unique, and supporting them towards self-governance.

An interview with a key member of the IOC staff involved in the inclusion of action sports further revealed a different philosophy underpinning their recent approaches to working with action sport IFs: “from day one... we have followed really a very close collaboration towards understanding their cultures, and *not applying the traditional model* because we know these sports are different and we have to respect their specificities and uniqueness” (emphasis added, interview, 2016). Yet, the IOC is not the monolith that they are often portrayed to be, and within the IOC there are various factions working in different ways and with different agendas. While younger employees working in roles, such as within the sport departments and on the YOG, team may be advocating new models and adopting different practices in their efforts to support the development of action sport governance structures, other comments suggested that the overarching power structures of the IOC remain largely in place.

Noting such challenges, some participants observed difficulties for the IOC in responding more quickly to sporting trends within the structures of Olympic governance. The following quotes from climbing insiders are revealing here:

If I have to tell the truth, I see that the IOC is trying to run very fast and of course they have the same problems as any big structure. Sometimes someone is able to follow and someone is not. So the President... he wants to go fast, but the structure has to follow and it may be sometimes they have a different schedule, or they need more time.

(interview, 2015)

I view the Olympics as a big oil freighter inexorably moving in the direction around the world. Given enough time it's going to go around the world, it's always going to continue on its track... it's just slow. Climbing competitions [are like] a jet ski. You're not going to have enough gas to get around the world but you're going to zip, we're going to run circles around big freighter that's moving at 10 knots.

(interview, 2015)

Our ongoing communications and experiences of working with the IOC similarly revealed challenges for those working to bring about changes within the existing Olympic structures.

While some committed action sport participants may be critical of Olympic inclusion, many of the interviewees felt high levels of confidence in the IOC based on their interactions at various stages over the past few years. A number of our interviewees observed a significant shift in their interactions and working relationship with the IOC since the arrival of President Bach and Agenda 2020, as revealed in the following quote from an insider involved in the process of climbing's inclusion: “There is a big change inside the IOC in terms of attitude...

and not only for sport climbing but also the five federations that are involved in this journey” (interview, 2015). Comments were also made about the new strategies being employed by the IOC to better understand the action sport cultures and industries. In particular, mention was made of sending younger IOC staff to action sport events where they spoke with athletes, event organisers, sponsors, and media, to develop more in-depth and nuanced understandings of these sports:

The sentiment that I hear across the industry is that the IOC is taking a lot of time to really choose who is ultimately going to govern skateboarding. And I think that’s awesome. ... They actually had a young IOC representative in South Africa that I hung out with quite a bit. ... I thought that was pretty impressive that they even knew “they send someone that can understand and appreciate this”. So yeah, I think there is a shift. When snowboarding was brought into the Olympics as a sport, I always heard it was done wrong. ... Maybe they’re trying to *not* do that again.

(skateboarding interview, 2015)

[I expect this is being] driven by “the new generation” of people that are representing the IOC now. I’m guessing that’s why ... they’re stepping back and saying “well, we want to do this right; we don’t want to just do it, we want to do it right and in order to do that we really, really want you to inform that process”.

(climbing interview, 2015)

Some interviewees also recognised changes in the IOC in terms of their willingness to make (some) compromises for the inclusion of action sports, and this was appreciated: “We are ready to do some compromise, and I think that the IOC and the federation, they are already doing some compromise” (climbing interview, 2015).

Despite many interviewees commenting positively on the efforts of the IOC to develop more productive and respectful relationships with their action sporting cultures, some noted that there was still some work to be done. In particular, some IF members expressed frustration that they had been unable to access clear answers that would help in longer-term planning and investment in resourcing, and that they felt at the mercy of the IOC who continues to “pull the strings”: “The rules are unclear and to be honest this is not really fair but this is the situation so we need to accept it” (climbing interview, 2015). A number of interviewees recognised the challenges ahead for governance, including clarifying how athletes will qualify to compete, developing and implementing gender equity (Chapter 11) and anti-doping policies, and uncertainty in funding structures within the Olympic Games and via Olympic pathways:

It would be great if some money trickled down from the federation ... but it’s going to be interesting how they allocate that, and who’s going to be in charge of giving the money out.

(skateboarding interview, 2015)

From our side, we cannot say in terms of money what this will bring because still we don't know exactly which will be our position inside the Olympic family in terms of money. ... but we will negotiate with the IOC.

(climbing interview, 2015)

Some participants also expressed confusion as to the process following Tokyo 2020, which was making a more long-term approach to planning difficult:

It will be interesting to understand what is the procedure for the next Olympic Games. If we are chosen for 2020, are we only chosen for 2020? ... There are still a lot of things to be defined inside the IOC to understand what will be the future of the IFSC... inside the Olympic family. ... There is still a lot of uncertainty about the future of our position... [which makes it] difficult to think well beyond.

(climbing interview, 2015)

These high levels of uncertainty and confusion within the IFs seem to suggest that the lines of communication with the IOC may be less “open” than some proclaim. Furthermore, such concerns signal recognition of the vulnerability of the action sport IFs, with the IOC ultimately having the final say as to how funding is allocated to the IFs before, during and after the Olympic Games, and the precarious future of these sports in the Olympic Programme.

Although not widely discussed, for all the new sports in the Olympic Programme, not only do these IFs not gain a share in the game revenue, but they are responsible for “footing the lion’s share of the bill for staging their respective competitions” (Long, 2019). Such economic agreements were short-term (just for the sports Olympic debut), but are further evidence of the action sports being a pawn in the IOC’s economic accumulation strategy. The action sport IFs carried all the economic burden and risk leading to “accusations of exploitation on the part of the IOC” (Long, 2019). President of the ISA, Aguerre, expressed the concerns held by his own and other newly emergent Olympic IFs:

...the operational cost of being an Olympic sport for a small federation, like surfing or climbing, or a new federation, like skateboarding, which is a couple years old, is very high. We’re hard-pressed, with our small resources, to execute and we’re doing the best we can. We’re hoping that the decision-makers find a way to help us in a way to bring even more value to the Olympic Games. This inspiration, love and passion for what we do, we have truck-loads, but the truck needs gas in the tank!

(cited in Long, 2019)

As we discuss in subsequent chapters (see, in particular, Chapter 10), such economic implications became more evident over time and were felt further down the line, with National Sport Organisations (NSOs) lacking financial support and clear flows of information from under-staffed IFs. According to our interviewees



who were working within NSOs, many of them were operating on shoestring budgets and picking up considerable amounts of administrative loading due to the lack of support from the IFs. Simply put, the power relationship between the IOC and IFs is an inequitable one, with the IOC holding the power to define the rules and regulations, and their economic decisions having significant flow on effects for the accumulation and distribution of key resources from the IFs to the NSOs, and ultimately, opportunities for athletes.

Following the announcement of the decision at the Rio 2016 Summer Olympics, the IFs had a lot of work ahead of them in working with existing (and new) national federations, and communicating clearly with athletes and nations interested to know more about qualification criteria, drug testing, event formats and judging, age limits, to name just a few of the relevant topics. For example, in an interview featured on the Olympic website, Neil Hendrix (athlete representative of World Skate) signalled some of the challenges in preparing skateboarding for Olympic inclusion:

It's absolutely been challenging... because skateboarding has never gone through a national federation structure before. The career trajectory for a top skateboarder has always been getting some sponsorship on the amateur side from skateboard brands or shoe brands or an energy drink, and then when you reach the professional ranks and you are able to make a living, it's all been sponsorship deals with private companies.

(Welcome To, 2018)

While the IFs continued to work through their new roles and responsibilities, they were (and continue to be) largely in uncharted territory. Some took a long time to reach compliance on key policy initiatives (e.g., drug testing) and the uncertainty caused confusion for national organizing bodies trying to prepare their athletes (see Chapters 8 and 9). Some federations expressed concerns and requested more support from the IOC in terms of focusing their limited resources and making decisions to best prepare their sport for Olympic inclusion:

I would really love to have a relationship with them [the IOC] and say, "Okay, yes, we have some problems... Now we work on these issues, but you need to help us".

(climbing interview, 2015)

Another interviewee suggested the need for a more hands-on approach from the IOC to help them through this "teething process" of preparing for their first Olympic Games. Our interview with a key member of the IOC revealed an understanding of the need for close mentoring with these new self-governing IFs as they work towards meeting Olympic rules and regulations:

Good governance is very important for us. When we include a new sport we have to ensure that the governance behind it is extremely solid and

respects all the principles that have been defined by Agenda 2020. ... We are convinced that we have a role to play... and [we] work in very, very close collaboration with the federations.

(interview, 2016)

Continuing, he reiterated the strong investment from the IOC into building relationships with the new IFs and working with them towards effective self-governance:

It's a partnership, that's really true! We've invested a lot of money because it goes beyond sport. It's also about relationships and we believe we've built a very central relationship with the top leadership in each of these federations, and beyond. ... We've tried to talk to the whole industry so that we have a 360 understanding, and we really understand what is at stake for these sports and for the Olympic movement, because it's about joint benefits for both sides.

(interview, 2016)

The "joint benefits" here refers to increased viewers and thus sponsorship dollars for the IOC as well as changing perceptions of the IOC as being more up-to-date, democratic, and youth friendly. For the action sports involved, such benefits refer to new opportunities for a select few athletes to perform on the global stage, and the possible (though not guaranteed) flow of resources to the IFs that may or may not be distributed across the sporting cultures in ways that make a social difference.

It is important to note here, however, that our sample involved a number of action sport insiders who (at the time of interviews) were working closely with the IOC. It was apparent that in a lot of interviews, especially with IF Presidents, their responses had a clear agenda that was to use the interview as another opportunity to strengthen their case to the IOC. Moreover, at the time of the phase one interviews, no announcement had been made and, thus, some were taking a lot of care to portray their sport and federation in the best possible light. We also found some of their responses to be somewhat romantic visions for their sports' inclusion into the Olympic Games, and there was some glossing over the complexities of what Olympic inclusion may mean for their sporting cultures and industries more broadly. For example, while many IFs were aware of the need to promote diversity in their sports, reaching out to women and non-core and developing nations, the difficulties and complexities of achieving these objectives were often ignored. We understood such romanticizing to be part of their role as presidents, to captivate the imagination of both the IOC and various key industry and sporting members to help move along their cause. Furthermore, our interactions with IOC staff members involved in this process must be understood in the context of Agenda 2020, a policy document that grew from the recognition of growing global concerns about corruption and lack of transparency within the IOC and the need to

rebrand the Games (MacAloon, 2016). Thus, we must remain critical of claims (from IOC members and IFs vulnerable to the decisions of the IOC) that the power structures within the IOC are changing, and acknowledge the possibility that we are merely witnessing performances of change that may or may not result in any long-term challenges to the cultural hegemony of the IOC.

While the revised policies and practices of Olympic inclusion might signal significant organisational change, we argue that the new IOC approaches towards working with action sport federations, industries, and cultures, are examples of organisational adaptation rather than learning. There are no real signs of “new means under new ends” to suggest the IOC has reflected deeply on their “original values” and is engaging in real behavioural change (Haas, 1990, p. 3). Furthermore, while many involved in the process seem to have accepted that the IOC has changed face and is demonstrating genuine respect for their sporting cultures, it could also be possible that these individuals have been duped by the IOC’s strategic workings of power and performances of organisational change. While surfing and sport climbing, and skateboarding to a lesser extent, have “won” their battles for self-governance (or at least some influence within the process), now that they are inside the Olympic juggernaut they are operating within the Olympic hierarchies and structures, and, ultimately, must comply with the rules and regulations of the IOC. How much power, agency, and autonomy do self-governing action sport IFs really have within the power structures of the IOC? It is too early to offer a definitive answer to this question. However, the three case studies of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing are useful in highlighting the complex workings of hegemony within the contemporary IOC, with “enrolment of others [action sport organisations and key individuals] in the exercise of power by convincing, cajoling, and coercing them that they should want what you want” (Agnew, 2005, p. 2). These processes are discussed further in Chapters 8 and 9.

### **The ongoing politics of governance: BMX freestyle, kiteboarding, and parkour**

Despite claims from those inside the process, we remain hesitant to suggest that the IOC have learned its lessons from the past. Since the inclusion of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing, the IOC has allowed very different and often highly political processes for the inclusion of other action sports (BMX freestyle, kiteboarding, and parkour). In each case, existing IFs have sought to subsume these sports under their governance structures, but with new strategies to ensure some cultural credibility through collaborations with action sports companies.

#### ***BMX freestyle***

While the inclusion of BMX racing into the 2008 Beijing Olympics was successful (see Chapter 4), the IOC quickly recognised the missed opportunity in BMX freestyle for tapping into pre-established X Games celebrity and viewership. Whereas

BMX racing is based on speed through a challenging course, the culture, style, and aesthetic of BMX freestyle is more similar to skateboarding. The IOC first began making moves to include freestyle or park BMX into the 2012 London Olympics. In 2009, British Cycling's performance director David Brailsford informally announced: "the information I'm getting is I'll be performance director of street BMX so I will have to go and get my hoodie and baggie shorts" (Brailsford Claims, 2009, para. 2). Echoing the contestation among early generations of snowboarders leading up to the 1998 Winter Olympics, however, freestyle BMX riders were divided in opinion. In the words of Mat Hoffman, cultural superstar and founder of Hoffman Sports Association, organising body for freestyle BMX events worldwide:

No disrespect to racing or the Olympics, but... we created BMX freestyle to do our own thing, express our own definition of sport, and to have the freedom to express this how we please; not to have our opinions sanctioned by a higher power.

(cited in Fat Tony, 2008, para. 11)

It was ultimately deemed unfeasible to include BMX freestyle into the 2012 Olympics, but the work continued such that BMX freestyle will appear for the first time as a medal event in Tokyo 2020. Repeating history, the process of inclusion has been contested by some key groups within BMX freestyle culture and industry. The IOC sanctioned UCI brought BMX freestyle under their governance structures without recognising the distinctiveness of these movement cultures, or valuing the voices and opinions of participants themselves. In contrast to BMX racing which is a first past the post style of racing, the culture of BMX freestyle emphasises creativity and self-expression, with more subjective judging criteria. Many within the BMX freestyle community felt that being subsumed under the UCI was highly problematic. For example, an "open letter" (published in niche social media) from Mat Hoffman, President of the International BMX Freestyle Federation (IBMXFF), highlighted the problems with freestyle BMX being subsumed under the UCI for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Hoffman describes working with the UCI and the IOC over the past 15 years, only to find him and other leaders in the sport repeatedly being "shut out... for upholding our vow to our sport to protect the uniqueness we have built and cherish" (Hoffman, 2018). He concluded by refusing to "sell out our sport to a governing body that has never been involved in it and had no genuine interest in it" (Hoffman, 2018).

Ultimately, the UCI and IOC bypassed the IBMXFF, instead working closely with the French-based action sports company, Hurricane, and their associated events organisation, FISE (International Festival of Extreme Sports), as an alternative strategy to gaining cultural credibility and athlete "buy in" from some parts of the BMX freestyle community. As the world's largest extreme sports festival with a World Series organised by Hurricane Action Sports Company, FISE has extensive experience hosting BMX freestyle competitions, and thus offered the

Olympics some credibility in the eyes of many competitive BMX freestyle athletes. As UCI President David Lappartient states: “The UCI is strongly encouraging its National Federations to integrate BMX freestyle into their structures, and Hurricane provides valuable support during this process” (The Rise, 2019). Continuing, he adds: “As manufacturers of BMX Parks, Hurricane [SIC] ensures all our events take place in excellent conditions on the best parks in the world” (The Rise, 2019).

Interestingly, the relationship between the IOC, UCI, and FISE/Hurricane has developed over a number of years, including FISE bringing their specially designed BMX freestyle park to the Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games (see Figure 6.2). The park shipped to Buenos Aires was also planned to be the park featured in the Tokyo Olympic Games. In this way, the IOC and UCI have forged a new model in working with an existing action sports events company (that guarantees both athletes and the park) rather than the International BMX Freestyle Federation (IBMXFF). Holly observed this relationship at the Buenos Aires YOG, and of the strategic alignment between FISE and the IOC building over recent years with various acts of allegiance between both parties (i.e., IOC members attending FISE events; FISE BMX freestyle athletes invited to speak and perform at the Buenos Aires YOG; Hurricane and FISE members invited to attend key Olympic meetings and events in Lausanne, Buenos Aires, and elsewhere). In the words of Hurricane Action Sports Company CEO Hervé André-Benoit: “The UCI and Hurricane have built an atypical model of collaboration which is proving itself from year to year and which we hope will help BMX freestyle become one of the most popular sporting disciplines in the world” (The Rise, 2019).

The “atypical model of collaboration” between the UCI and Hurricane aligns with changes signposted in Agenda 2020, particularly the impetus to “forge relationships with professional leagues” (Recommendation 8) and to “enter into strategic partnerships” (Recommendation 20). The latter highlights the IOC’s growing willingness to “open up to cooperation and network with competent and internationally recognised organisations” (Recommendation 20, Agenda 2020). Yet, the UCI and IOC cooperation with FISE and Hurricane remains controversial within the international BMX freestyle community. Despite the power and political sway of FISE within some sectors of the BMX freestyle community, many others are disappointed in the refusal of the IOC to work with the IBMXFF that was established by the world’s leading BMX freestyle athletes, which is the international governing body for the sport, with a key focus to “protect and maintain BMX Freestyle’s lifestyle and culture with authenticity and integrity” (Hoffman, 2018).

### **Kiteboarding**

First developing in the late 1990s as a unique combination of surfing, windsurfing, snowboarding, and skateboarding, kiteboarding is a relatively new sport that has evolved quickly alongside technological developments. Competitive kiteboarding includes a range of events, including freestyle, freeride, speed, course racing,



*Figures 6.2* A BMX freestyle athlete performs on the FISE/Hurricane Park in the Urban Park at the Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games. Personal archive. Used with permission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). All rights reserved.

wakestyle, big air, park, and surfing. The young sport has been through a variety of governance models (and internal challenges), but is currently governed by the International Kiteboarding Association (IKA) and Global Kitesports Association (GKA). Although IKA and GKA are run by kiteboarders themselves, they have different orientations—racing and freestyle, respectively—and operate under the parent organisation of World Sailing (previously ISAF). The relationship with kiteboarding and World Sailing, however, has a longer, more complicated history.

While the broader kiteboarding community was initially ambivalent about Olympic inclusion, the IOC had expressed an early interest in the sport and started conversations with IKA more than a decade ago. This early relationship is expressed in the following comment from an IKA member:

So the IOC put eyes on the new sport and from all the list of the new sport become more known around the world, kite boarding was one of them. We really jumped into it and start to keep IOC informed as much as possible, to try to claim a place in the Olympics.

(interview, 2015)

While those responsible for governing the sport (most of whom had come to the sport via windsurfing) were interested in representing the most popular version of the sport at the Olympics, they quickly learned that the IOC preferred racing over freestyle:

They [Olympic people] said to us no, they're not interested in freestyle, mainly because there is a judging system, they try to avoid judging disciplines, and also because if you have less than 15 knots the discipline of freestyle is a joke, it doesn't make any sense. ... We presented them all disciplines that we had, from freestyle, wave riding, kicker/slider, slalom, speed racing and they said we want to have something racing where we can say first one over the line wins.

(interview, 2015)

The IKA made some critical decisions about where and with whom to align to ensure they maintained some control over their sport as it entered the Olympics. In so doing, they consulted with the Professional Windsurfing Association and looked to previous models of Olympic incorporation and governance structures:

... we started with a group of riders to talk about how... and if we should set up our own international federation or if we should join an existing federation. We had a look around at the different IOC recognised international federations and found that it's on the water, it's powered by wind, it's pretty close to sailing, even if we're jumping and doing other stuff than sailboats. But in principle, similar to windsurfing, which also has freestyle competitions and wave competitions and all of that, which is also organised in the International Sailing Federation, we thought, well that's the closest to kite boarding that we find, and setting up our own international federation with ethics commission, athletes commission and anti-doping, and all of the stuff around it, is just such a huge project for such a small sport.

(interview, 2015)

Following the model of windsurfing (Chapter 4), the IKA officially became an ISAF (later rebranded as World Sailing) sailing class in 2008. Not dissimilar from windsurfing, this was a time-consuming process that required some negotiation and adjustment:

It took us two years to adjust the structures, because equipment rules for sailing, so what defines a board and so on was all not fitting to kite boards because there's no mast, there's no boom. But we were facing the same problems as windsurfing...

(interview, 2015)

The struggles continued with kiteboarding having to lobby for their position and voice within the very traditional sporting federation of ISAF/World Sailing:

Everyone's very traditional and it's all structured, and the people that are sitting in council and the federations, they're 70 years old now and they had their sailing career in the laser in 1950. ... if there's no pressure from the IOC to modernise things, then ISAF will continue to sail in a 70-year old boat in the Olympics.

(interview, 2015)

A past president of IKA described working with ISAF/World Sailing as “a nightmare”:

The problem is they just go softly, softly, they don't want to upset anyone. I've been to probably six or seven World Sailing AGM conferences around the world and honestly, it's just like, pull your hair out! ... Because they should run it like a business, but they're just running it into the ground. It has changed. They rebranded it and they've got a new CEO, but it's all the committees and everything like that that's just so slow. The Olympic sailing is so dull to watch, nobody watches it.

(interview, 2015)

Many within the process felt marginalised, with the ISAF/World Sailing unwilling to compromise, and in some cases, blocking their progress: “kiteboarding is low on their agenda. If it becomes part of the Olympics, of course they will embrace it, but they're not particularly keen on it” (interview, 2015). Interestingly, while those within IKA had received strong messages from the IOC that they were interested in kiteboarding in the Olympics, they felt constrained within their workings with the ISAF/World Sailing: “It's not that the IOC doesn't want it. The problem is that the IOC sometimes should give a little bit clearer indication to the federations on what they want” (interview, 2015). The problems of dealing with the ISAF had also been (and continued to be) experienced among windsurfers (Chapter 4). Over the coming years, the IOC began to deliver a clearer message to all IFs of the expectation that their events must attract audiences and be more youth friendly. It took some time for ISAF to grapple with these new expectations, but eventually it came to recognise the important opportunities that kiteboarding offered in attracting new audiences to their sport. Many within IKA attributed this shift to Agenda 2020: “So now after Agenda 2020 came out... ISAF finally noticed, oh we have to make our events different. It only took them 30 years, but finally!” (interview, 2015).

Slowly recognizing the potential in kiteboarding for attracting younger viewers, in 2012 ISAF nominated kiteboarding as one of the ten sailing events to be included in the Rio 2016 Summer Games. The nomination was controversial as kiteboarding was proposed to replace windsurfing, thus pitting the two sports



against each other. Controversially, however, this decision was later overturned when Spanish Olympic officials admitted to mistakenly voting for kiteboarding at the official IOC vote, with the final decision that windsurfing would remain in the Games. The initial nomination and final controversial decision received international attention and was revealing of the politics within World Sailing, and processes between the IOC and International Sport Federations (ISFs) (see also Chapter 4).

Despite some ongoing challenges for IKA working under the traditional parent organisation of ISAF, kiteboarding (along with windsurfing) was selected for inclusion in the 2018 Youth Olympic Games. Some from within the kiteboarding industry identified the highly strategic lobbying of some IKA leaders as critical to this decision:

Markus Schwendtner, he's basically running IKA as he has been for quite a while... He manoeuvres and lobbies, and he's a very clever guy. He's based in France but actually by Switzerland, so he's based in Geneva so the IOC are right on his doorstep. They're all schmoozing together. But the thing is, a lot of the industry are in the dark... So they have their IKA AGM, and then those member organisations, they should have their racers telling their association what they want, but a lot of the racers, they don't care less because they just haven't got the depth of knowledge or the interest level.

(interview, 2015)

Some within the broader kiteboarding community, however, felt strongly that the IKA and World Sailing were not representing the full diversity of the kiteboarding industry and community.

Around the same time that kiteboarding was announced for inclusion into the Youth Olympic Games, other organisations began contesting the relationship between World Sailing and IKA. For example, the International Federation of Kitesports Organisations (IFKO) was formed by French and Portuguese kite associations specifically to address the relationship between ISAF and IKA which they believed failed to represent “90% of kiteboarding”, with IKA a company looking out for their own private interests over what is best for the sport (Scot, 2016). The tensions between industry groups, and particularly between kiteboard racing and freestyle, continued to build. In 2016, a memorandum of understanding was signed between ISAF, IKA, and GKA (GKA had played a key role in the organisation of a series of popular international freestyle events). The memorandum stated that GKA had the right to run expression events and the IKA would continue to be responsible for the racing disciplines, but that GKA would work exclusively with the IKA and its national kiteboarding associations. In 2018, a subsequent agreement was reached that World Sailing, the IKA, and GKA would work together to “promote and expand interest worldwide in the sport of competitive kiteboarding and to regulate the management and responsibilities for kiteboarding” (A Future Path, 2018).

Interestingly, GKA was not founded as an organisation to run competitive world tours, but rather an alliance of kiteboarding companies, all of who are invested in the economic growth of the sport. According to the Secretary General of GKA, Jörgen Vogt:

I am very glad that professional kitesport now has a clear and transparent structure, which leaves no questions open to athletes, media, event organisers, brands and the public. In recent years the jurisdiction of professional freestyle was not always easy to understand. Now it is crystal clear. Professional kitesport now has a solid ground to prosper in all its disciplines and raise the awareness that these admirable athletes deserve.

(The Future of Freestyle Kiteboarding World Tour, 2018)

In this way, the trilateral collaboration between ISAF/World Sailing, IKA, and GKA was similar to the final agreement reached between World Skate and the brand-dominated International Skateboarding Federation.

Despite some ongoing concerns regarding governance, qualification, and equipment, the inclusion of kiteboarding at the 2018 YOG was largely viewed as a success by World Sailing and the IOC. That same year, it was announced that kiteboarding would make its debut in Marseille at the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics. This decision was the result of years of lobbying by the IKA with World Sailing. The IKA have vowed to “work closely with World Sailing to ensure that the format reflects the wishes and dreams of the competitive kiteboarders all around the world to showcase hydrofoil kite racing at its best” (Butler, 2018). Importantly, however, kiteboarding racing equipment of expensive hydrofoil boards makes the activity exclusive and limited to those who can afford such technologies. Furthermore, while kiteboard racing might be the most suitable for the IOC and World Sailing based on its racing format, it is not the most popular or spectacular version of kiteboarding. In this way, kiteboard racing largely mirrors the challenges that windsurfing has experienced (Chapter 4). This situation is not dissimilar to the differences between BMX racing and freestyle, and the relationship between sport climbing and the broader outdoor climbing industry. Kiteboarding freestyle is the most dominant in the kiteboard industry and in defining the aesthetics of the sport, with kiteboard racing getting a fraction of industry support and media coverage. Thus, for the athletes in these sports (i.e., BMX racing, sport climbing, kiteboard racing), Olympic inclusion offers exciting opportunities for more visibility and funding, which within their own sporting industries tend to go towards the more subjective, creative, and freestyle versions. Olympic inclusion of these sports, however, is unlikely to shift the power relations and allocation of cultural capital within their sporting cultures that continue to value the more creative, expressive, and subjective styles of participation.

### ***Parkour (with Dr Damien Puddle)***

Parkour is another example of an action sport of interest to the IOC. Rather than working with the parkour community, however, the International Gymnastics

Federation (FIG) has sought to subsume the activity under their governance structures (for possible future Olympic inclusion). In so doing, they failed to recognise the distinctiveness of parkour's movement culture or value the voices and opinions of participants themselves.

Tensions began in early 2017 when FIG announced its intention to “develop [parkour] in order to broaden even further the appeal of [gymnastics]” (Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique, 2017a). A statement by then Secretary General, André Gueisbuhler, further stated that,

President Watanabe wants to broaden the base of gymnastics, especially to the youth ... There are many groups around the world who do parkour, so we will invite all of them, we will tell them what we want to do, and we will invite them to cooperate with the FIG in order to develop this discipline into a sport. At the moment they are not organised. Their basic spirit is to be free, not to be organised. Yet they want to have competitions. But if they want to do competitions, obviously they need minimum rules and environment to make attractive competitions. I'm sure the FIG is the international federation most qualified to further develop parkour.

(Kavkaza, 2017, para. 8)

The international parkour community rallied together to challenge FIG's attempts to subsume parkour under their umbrella with the intent to ultimately bring parkour into the Olympics as a discipline of gymnastics. A digital campaign with the slogan “We are not gymnastics” and hashtags #FighttheFIG, #parkour-isours, gained widespread circulation across the global parkour community (see Puddle, 2018). While FIG and the IOC worked to collaborate with carefully selected groups within the parkour community to try to obtain some cultural credibility and build momentum, such actions have been marred by controversies and prompted tensions and divisions within the parkour community. Although some key parkour athletes and organisations were initially intrigued by the offers and opportunities, most ultimately walked away from the table rather than “selling out” the parkour community. For instance, FIG's original Parkour Commission resigned en masse stating that the project lacked transparency, no involvement of national communities, and was ultimately incompatible with parkour community values (Morgan, 2018a).

These significant concerns ultimately catalysed the establishment of Parkour Earth, a self-governing IF seeking to challenge FIG's claims to their activity. Since 2004, various attempts have been made at establishing an international federation for parkour (see Constantine, 2017). While most failed to gain appeal, two exceptions exist: (i) The International Parkour Federation (IPF), a US-based organisation formed in 2014 by the owners of the World Parkour and Freerunning Federation, a for-profit parkour company and (ii) Parkour Earth, federated by six national parkour federations in 2017 in response to FIG's “encroachment and misappropriation of parkour” (Parkour Earth, 2018). Both organisations met independently with FIG to explore possible resolutions. Parkour Earth identified

that their main intention to meet with FIG in November 2017 was to formally clarify the independence and sovereignty of parkour and to bring the conflict to a swift resolution (Parkour Earth, 2017). However, Parkour Earth subsequently invited FIG to agree to mediation via the Court of Arbitration for Sport, citing that their concerns were not allayed (Parkour Earth, 2017). To date FIG has not agreed to the invitation. Several months later, the IPF (despite criticizing FIG in the early stages) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) pledging to work together with FIG to develop the sport while maintaining parkour's autonomy (Morgan, 2018b). Nevertheless, no clear collaboration between the two organisations has occurred with reports identifying that the MoU has now expired and will not be renewed (Obenreder, 2020).

Without the support of Parkour Earth, IPF, or the parkour community at large, FIG, like the UCI, has worked with FISE (International Festival of Extreme Sports) to nonetheless try and legitimise their efforts and gain cultural capital through an existing action sport framework. Instead of exploring relationships with other parkour industry actors and competitive formats in the likes of Red Bull's Art of Motion or the Sport Parkour League and their North American Parkour Championships (NAPC), FIG have used the FISE platform to develop their "Parkour World Cup" rules and regulations unilaterally, with a vision and strategy to take parkour to the World Games 2022 and subsequently Paris 2024 (Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique, 2017b).

Ahead of the IOC Executive Board meeting in December 2020, Parkour Earth publicly wrote to the IOC asking them to reject any attempt by FIG to propose parkour for Paris 2024. The letter stated that "those with the most insights and knowledge are not housed within the expected sporting infrastructure (such as FIG or any other existing International Federation) but within our sport and community" (Parkour Earth, 2020). The letter concluded by inviting the IOC to work with Parkour Earth rather than supporting FIG who does "not understand and respect the unique cultural value systems and are not aware of the important issues within our sport and community" (Parkour Earth, 2020). Subsequently, parkour was not included in the Olympic Programme. However, responding to a media question on this topic, Kit McConnell, the IOC's Sport Director, avoided any references to Parkour Earth or the parkour community's opposition to parkour under FIG, instead explaining that although not including parkour at this time, the IOC believe that "parkour have a lot to add, potentially, to the Olympic Games in the future", adding:

We look forward to parkour obviously having a role in terms of the engagement programme with young people around the games in Paris and further consideration as we look forward to future Olympic Games.

(International Olympic Committee, 2020)

Parkour will be included on both the Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 engagement programmes, like it was at the Buenos Aires 2018 YOG, under the aegis of FIG (Figure 6.3).



*Figure 6.3* A rudimentary parkour course set-up alongside the skateboarding ‘have a go’ park (mostly for children to learn) in the Urban Park at the Buenos Aires Youth Olympic Games. Photo taken by author.

The example of parkour highlights the ongoing and complex relationships between action sports, international governance, and the Olympic Games. In particular, Parkour Earth’s continued development and activism, the IPFs recent MoU with World Obstacle Course Racing with the aim of growing obstacle sports collaboratively with FIG (Houston, 2020), and a 2020 statement by FIG’s Vice President, Nellie Kim, calling their pursuit of parkour into question (Pavitt, 2020), all signpost the contested nature of the relationship between parkour and the Olympic Games. While there is certainly a desire from the IOC and FIG to incorporate more youthful and urban-focused activities under the umbrella of ‘gymnastics’, the (increasingly fragmented) international parkour community is also highly motivated to maintain its autonomy. Put simply, this is a battle over the future control, organisation, and definition of parkour.

The examples of BMX freestyle, kiteboarding, and parkour being usurped—by varying extents of success—by an existing IF under the auspices of the IOC, highlight the need for further lines of sociological inquiry as to why the IOC went to such efforts to be seen to be “working with” surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing towards self-governing models for Tokyo 2020, only to promptly revert to previous strategies of forcing unwilling action sports under existing IFs. However,

in contrast to previous versions of this approach (i.e., windsurfing, snowboarding), the IOC has developed more strategically creative and collaborative approaches in their relationships with action sports events and companies to ensure some cultural credibility from sectors of these sporting cultures.

## Conclusions

In this chapter we revealed the sport-specific processes and politics involved in lining up surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing with Olympic governance expectations for the Tokyo Games. We explained that those involved in the process largely believed that there had been a changing of the guard in the IOC and generally felt well supported in the process towards self-governance. Our conversations with IOC staff members involved in the process seem to support a different philosophical approach towards the incorporation of action sports from a position of respecting and valuing the unique cultural systems within these sports. This finding stands in stark contrast to the Olympic incorporation of action sports in the past, where they were unwillingly subsumed under existing Federations, and thus is indicative of change within the IOC (see Chapter 4).

Certainly, the changes enabling the inclusion of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing into the Olympic Games and the support for models of self-governance have led to new practices by the IOC in how they are working with action sport international federations, but such changes are based on organisational adaptation rather than deep learning and structural and philosophical changes in the IOC (see Thorpe & Wheaton, 2019). In performing such changes, however, the IOC has convinced many key agents in action sport federations and industries of a mutually beneficial relationship. We, therefore, suggest that the inclusion of action sports into Tokyo is a salient example of the complex operations of hegemony in the global sports market, with the power of the IOC adapting as it travels and enrolls others in its operations (Agnew, 2005). Furthermore, recent examples of the IOC's efforts to bring BMX freestyle, kiteboarding, and parkour into the Olympic Games highlight old patterns of being subsumed under existing, longstanding, and seemingly powerful IFs. However, these examples also illustrate the development of new strategies to work around existing action sports federations and towards collaborations between existing IFs (i.e., UCI, World Sailing, FIG) and carefully selected brands, companies, and organisations who are willing to work within IOC structures. In so doing, the IOC has developed a new approach that helps them maintain their existing structures and relationships with IFs while gaining enough cultural credibility to attract some of the world's best athletes, without having to grant existing action sport federations autonomy over their sports.

Importantly, we are also cautious of romanticising the processes of self-governance in the new action sport IFs of surfing, skateboarding, and climbing. While surfing and sport climbing were managing their own sports in the lead up to the Tokyo Olympics, there were many ongoing tensions and fragmentation

within the respective sporting cultures (see Chapters 5 and 9). The major functions of the action sport IFs of formalizing and leading their international sports towards their first Olympic Games are far from complete and will continue long after Tokyo. We anticipate many challenges as they continue to work towards governing their sports in highly fragmented cultural industries and with many conflicting cultural and economic forces. As Forster (2006) acknowledges in his analysis of traditional sports GSOs, issues of self-governance are further complicated by “their evolution and the massive commercialisation of sport of recent decades” (p. 72). Certainly, the global action sports industry is a multi-billion dollar business with powerful transnational and national corporations deeply invested in the growth and development of these sports to varying degrees. Thus, it is inevitable that the new self-governing action sport IFs will be navigating uncharted terrain as they work within and between their sporting cultures and industries, and the broader Olympic cultural hegemony.

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# The action sports industry

## A shifting landscape

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Action sports have undergone rapid growth, commercialisation, and institutionalisation over the past five decades (Booth & Thorpe, 2007; Rinehart, 2000; Wheaton, 2013). Mega-action sports events such as the X Games (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2017), the increasing involvement of transnational corporations (Thorpe, 2014), the emergence of mainstream media houses and growing number of photographers and filmmakers (e.g. Dumont, 2015; Woermann, 2012), and the widespread usage of digital technologies (e.g. Dumont, 2017; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; MacKay & Dallaire, 2012; Thorpe, 2017) have been re-altering the flows of resources, knowledge, products, and people for many years (Thorpe & Dumont, 2019).

However, the inclusion of surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, and BMX freestyle into the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and the ongoing politics regarding the possible future inclusion of other action sports mean that we are witnessing major structural changes at the global level. These changes are trickling down with considerable implications at national and local levels, and in the everyday lives of action sport participants, as well as those working in these industries. With inclusion into the Olympic Games, the industry structures and professional opportunities for action sport participants are changing rapidly. While Olympic inclusion has prompted new professional opportunities for some, it also shifts some of the power away from the sporting cultures towards North American mainstream media organisations (i.e., NBC). Such shifts call for a re-examination of processes of commercialisation, institutionalisation, and professionalisation within action sports.

This chapter considers key transformations being prompted by Olympic inclusion, focusing particularly on the action sports industry, media, and athletes, and new career pathways for coaches, agents, and other key agents. Olympic inclusion promises to offer more opportunities for businesses, athletes, and others pursuing careers in these sports (i.e., coaches, agents, journalists, event organisers, commentators), but such changes also prompt new tensions and debates within the action sports industry. As international sports organisations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) seek to incorporate more action sports under their own structures for the primary purposes of audience building and attracting corporate sponsors, the axes of power are shifting. While Olympic

inclusion brings these issues front and centre, it is important to note that such processes have been underway for many years.

### **Context: the commodification and professionalisation of action sports**

The commercial or mainstream inclusion, particularly the shift from “alternative” to “mainstream” (or more commercialised forms of) sports, have been a prevalent theme in the action sports literature (e.g., Beal & Weidman, 2003; Beal & Wilson, 2004; Donnelly, 1993; Humphreys, 1997, 2003; Rinehart, 2005; Wheaton, 2007) (see Chapter 2). In one of the first in-depth investigations of the commercialisation of action sports in the post-Fordist culture and economy, Humphreys (1997) examined the processes by which action sports such as skateboarding and snowboarding, increasingly became controlled and defined by transnational corporations seeking to tap into the highly lucrative youth market. As action sports became incorporated into the mainstream via mega-events such as the X Games, and subsequently the Olympics, they assumed many of the features of other modern sports, including corporate sponsorship, large prize monies, “rationalized systems of rules”, hierarchical and individualistic star systems, win-at-all-costs values, and the creation of heroes, heroines, and “rebel” athletes who look like “walking corporate billboards” (Messner, 2002, p. 82). As Wheaton (2004) and others have noted, debates on “selling out” relate not just to commodification, but also to the appropriation of action sports’ ethos and ideologies, such as attitudes to risk, responsibility, freedom and regulation, and repackaging and selling their values and lifestyles for mass consumption (p. 14; Humphreys, 1997; Rinehart, 2000, 2008a, 2008b). Importantly, however, contemporary action sport participants and those working in these industries are not simply victims of commercialisation, but active agents who continue to critically engage with the ever changing power relations and growing pressure from external organisations and corporations (Rinehart, 2008a, 2008b; Wheaton, 2004).

### **The original action sports mega-event: the X Games**

Since their emergence in the 1960s, action sports have experienced unprecedented growth both in participation and in their increased visibility across mediated spaces (see, for example, Booth & Thorpe, 2007; Rinehart, 2000; Thorpe, 2011; Wheaton, 2004). Many of these activities were already gaining popularity when American-based cable television network ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network, owned by ABC, itself a division of the Walt Disney Group) saw in them the potential to tap into the hard to reach young male consumer group. ESPN broadcast the first Summer X Games in mid-1995. Staged at Newport, Providence, and Middletown (Rhode Island), and Mount Snow (Vermont), the inaugural games featured 27 events in nine categories:

bungee jumping, eco-challenge, in-line skating, skateboarding, skysurfing, sport climbing, street luge, biking, and water sports (Booth & Thorpe, 2007). Twelve months later, X Games II attracted around 200,000 spectators, and early in 1997 ESPN staged the first Winter X Games at Snow Summit Mountain (California) Resort (Pickert, 2009). The X Games quickly garnered an international audience, and by 2002 the Summer X Games was broadcast on ABC, ESPN and ESPN to a record of 63 million viewers (Wong, 2013). Backed by a range of transnational corporate sponsors, the X Games—the self-defined “worldwide leader” in action sports—played a significant role in the global diffusion and expansion of the action sport industry and culture (Rinehart, 2000), and in redefining how sporting mega-events appeal to younger viewers. As a “recurring spectacular commercial media festival” (Smart, 2007, p. 130), we argue that the X Games constitute an action sports focused mega-event, prompting similar and different tensions and debates as the Olympic Games more than two decades later.

While the X Games have been a mainstay in the (particularly North American) action sports industry and culture for over two decades, it is important to recall that action sport participants were highly critical of the initial efforts by ESPN to capitalise on their self-generated and do-it-yourself (DIY) activities and cultures (Beal & Wilson, 2004). The emergence of the first few X Games prompted vociferous debate among grass-roots practitioners who contested ESPN’s co-option of their lifestyle into television-tailored “sports” (Beal & Wilson, 2004; Rinehart, 2008a). Inevitably, incorporation, institutionalisation, and commodification continued regardless of action sport participants’ contrasting viewpoints. In so doing, action sport cultures increasingly became controlled and defined by transnational media corporations such as ESPN via the X Games, as well as others, including NBC via the Gravity Games that occurred from 1999 to 2006. According to professional US snowboarder Todd Richards:

The X Games marked the end of one era but simultaneously gave birth to a whole new world of possibilities. It was sort of sad to say good-bye to being a bunch of misunderstood outcasts. A lot of joy was derived from the punk-rock spirit, and once the masses join your ranks ... it’s over. The image had already begun to change, but the X Games put the icing on the mainstream cake.

(Richards with Blehm, 2003, p. 182)

Today, however, most action sport athletes recognise mass-mediated events such as the X Games as endemic to action sport in the 21st century and are embracing the new opportunities for increased media exposure, sponsorship, and celebrity offered (Beal & Wilson, 2004). With the support of many action sport athletes and celebrities, the X Games have become an important forum for setting records and performing ever more technical and creative manoeuvres for international audiences.

Blurring the boundaries between music festival and sporting event (Rinehart, 2008a), the Summer and Winter X Games have also been hugely successful in

capturing the imagination of the lucrative youth market. The 1998 X Games were broadcast (via various ESPN channels) to 198 countries in 21 languages (Rinehart, 1998). In contrast to the aging Olympic viewership, the medium age of these viewers was 20 years (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011, p. 833). In the first decade and a half since the first X Games, the event experienced exponential growth in terms of participants, television, and online audiences. More recently, however, evidence suggests X Games viewer numbers in the USA are declining (Paulsen, 2016). For example, domestic viewership of the 2016 US-based Winter X Games was down 11% from the previous year (Karp, 2016), which some are attributing to the decline of popularity of snowboarding—historically a mainstay of the Winter X Games (Higgins, 2016). Thus, in an increasingly competitive sport-media-culture context, the X Games continue to invest in ever-new strategies in their efforts to attract both action sport participants and mainstream viewers, and reach new audiences in the global market. In so doing, they are influencing the production and representation of other sporting mega-events also seeking younger (male) audiences.

Roche (2000) argues that sports mega-events are an important part of an “evolving global cultural economy” (p. 227). The X Games were instrumental in launching ESPN2 and helped spawn dozens of licensing deals including an IMAX movie, X Games skateparks, and X Games DVDs and toys. The X Games continue to show innovation in mega-event management and media representation to remain relevant to (relatively) younger (male-targeted) audiences. For example, the annual Summer and Winter X Games events in Austin (Texas) and Aspen (Colorado), respectively, continue to celebrate a music festival environment, with the former attracting over 160,000 spectators throughout the four-day event held in 2014 (Mickle, 2011). The 2015 Summer X Games in Austin received extensive coverage with content distributed across multiple television and digital platforms. In the USA, ESPN and ABC televised a combined 20 hours of live competition with an additional 6.5 hours of live action exclusively on ESPN3 and supported across ESPN digital platforms, including XGames.com, the X Games Austin app, and through official X Games social platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat. Additionally, X Games Austin was televised and syndicated in more than 215 countries and territories to more than 439 million homes worldwide (Baron, 2015). They also continue to develop emergent technologies for more spectacular media coverage, for example, in 2015 drones were used for the first time to cover the skiing and snowboarding events from above (Alvarez, 2015; Thorpe, 2014). As a result of these ongoing developments in content, representation, and an expanding array of media platforms, the average age of viewers of the Summer and Winter X Games—33 and 34 years old, respectively—was younger than other mega sporting events (Ourand & Karp, 2012). In comparison, the average age of Olympic viewers was 55 years and aging (Bauder, 2010).

As discussed in Chapter 4, the diminishing numbers of young Olympic viewers prompted the IOC to pursue the incorporation of a range of youth-oriented action sports into both the Summer (e.g. windsurfing, mountain biking, bicycle motocross)

and the Winter (e.g. snowboarding, skier cross) programmes (Bialik, 2002). The IOC and some affiliated media conglomerates also began to draw heavily on the representational styles developed by the X Games in their ongoing attempt to appeal to youth. For example, action sport events at the 2010 Winter Olympics included youth-focused features such as live graffiti art displays, break-dancers performing in the stands, and DJs and bands during breaks in competition (Thorpe, field-notes, February 2010). Commentators attributed the success of the Vancouver Olympics to the “jazzed-up formats” of some events (e.g., half-pipe and snowboard-and-ski-cross) which, drawing on the “the razzmatazz and street credibility of the X Games”, transformed the “sometimes stuffy Olympic arena” into a “party atmosphere” (Booth, 2010, paras 3, 11). Our discussion with the IOC staff confirmed that the IOC continues to draw inspiration from the X Games, with plans for a music festival style atmosphere and increased use of social media for audience engagement and interaction in Tokyo and beyond. This new format and presentational style was trialled in the Urban Park at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Buenos Aires, where Holly was in attendance. While IOC and International Federations’ (IF) members and staff seemed wowed by the exciting, innovative, and youthful atmosphere, the Urban Park was similar to any action sports festival, the model of which had been defined by the X Games two decades earlier. The IOC and Tokyo Organizing Committee (OC) have been working hard to build this festival atmosphere and celebration of urban sports and culture into the heart of the Tokyo Games (see Chapter 8). While it may seem a radical innovation for the Olympic Games, it is certainly not new to action sport cultures and industries.

### **Action sports media and consumption patterns**

Action sport cultural industries have long been at the forefront of new media technological developments aimed at capturing the moving body in ways that are not only able to vividly capture the “thrills and spills” but also to evoke deeply affective responses among viewers (Booth, 2008; Borden, 2003; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). The emergence of new social and digital media technologies is playing an evermore important role in the ongoing progression of skills among action sport participants and building a sense of community among enthusiasts and audiences across local, national, and global contexts (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; Thorpe, 2014). More than repeating previous patterns, however, such media technologies are contributing to new relationships between corporations, action sport bodies, and communities (Evers, 2019; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; Thorpe, 2014, 2017). As we signpost, such media production and consumption patterns influence how action sport participants engage with current and future Olympic Games.

As various scholars have illustrated, action sport participants have always been actively involved in the consumption and production of niche media, particularly magazines and videos (see Borden, 2003; Thorpe, 2008; Wheaton & Beal, 2003; Willing, Green & Pavlidis, 2020). However, over the past decade, the Internet and new media and communication technologies (e.g., smart phones) have continued

to play an evermore important role in sharing information across borders and facilitating trans-local communication within and across action sport communities (Dupont, 2020; Evers, 2016, 2019; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; Kidder, 2017; Thorpe, 2014; Woermann, 2012). Thus, before illustrating how action sport participants are consuming the Olympic Games and other key sporting events, it is worth briefly highlighting the power of action sport and media corporations in representing and (re)defining action sporting performances, aesthetics, and cultural dynamics.

As with many traditional sports (see Hutchins & Rowe, 2009, 2012), action sport-related events are increasingly being designed and choreographed for online audiences. Some action sport events (i.e., Vans Triple Crown) were early leaders in social media engagement during events, with the digital audience hotly sought after and carefully considered in all action sport event preparations. Such event-media-technology relations have developed quickly, with many action sport events now having specifically designed Apps for phones and tablets (see Thorpe, 2017). As a result of action sport events early embrace of such technologies, the 2012 Winter X Games was the most watched yet, with an estimated 35.4 million viewers in the USA tuning into Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) and a digital media audience that was up 147% from the previous year (Hargrove, 2012).

Corporations have long utilised action sport events in their efforts to reach young male consumers (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004; Bennett et al., 2009), such that it should not be surprising that they were early embracers of social media and digital technologies to further establish the connection between their products and the action sport lifestyle. A particularly noteworthy example of the use of new digital technologies for unique marketing strategies is the energy drink company Red Bull; a transnational brand that has worked hard to become associated with youth culture and the action sports lifestyle and community (Thorpe, 2014). This connection has been established through the creation and organisation of over 90 individually branded action sport events around the world, all of which are captured by some of the world's best photographers and cinematographers. In 2007, the Red Bull Media House (RBMH) was founded as an umbrella for Red Bull's massive print, television, online, and feature film production. With offices in Austria and Santa Monica (California), the RBMH employed over 135 people who were involved in the production and distribution of an extensive range of action sport events and content, including videos (e.g., the snowboarding film, *The Art of Flight* that cost US\$2 million to create but quickly became the hottest property on iTunes), websites, web videos, documentaries, Facebook (with more than 48 million fans), Instagram (13.7 million followers), and the Red Bulletin, an action sports magazine, with a global circulation of 2 million copies each month, available in four languages (German, English, French, and Spanish).

The RBMH also became experts in producing "media events"—"live broadcasts of historic occasions that engage a committed or worldwide audience, which does not merely watch the event, but celebrates it" (Dayan & Katz, 1992, cited in Giulianotti & Brownell, 2012, p. 204). One such example was their carefully



choreographed “media event” of Austrian BASE jumper Felix Baumgartner’s “space dive” of 120,000 feet from a helium-filled balloon (October 2012) that garnered huge live audiences across a range of digital platforms and social media (see Thorpe, 2014). The IOC has been watching these innovations closely, and even recruited a Red Bull staff member into their YOG team for a period (personal communication, 2016).

Much like their peers in more traditional sports, professional surfers, skateboarders, snowboarders, BMX riders, climbers, mountain bikers, and other action sport athletes are embracing new media to connect with fans around the world. For example, global skateboarding icons, Tony Hawk and Ryan Sheckler, have more than 4.12 million and 2.7 million Twitter followers, respectively. As other scholars have revealed, many action sport athletes are also using YouTube and other video-hosting platforms (i.e., Vimeo, TikTok) to post short videos and montages of their sporting achievements and everyday activities (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; Ojala, 2014). In so doing, some of the more skilful and creative athletes are able to forge careers away from competition and almost solely through their social media activities on an array of social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok). Such social media capital can be converted into economic capital when the athlete garners the financial support of action sport (and related) companies who may opt to sponsor their digital media-based careers (Ojala, 2014).

Of all the social media options, Instagram has been the most popular platform among action sport athletes, many of whom use it to share photos and short videos of their sporting pursuits and lifestyles with their friends, family, and fans (Dupont, 2020; Thorpe, 2017). According to one action sports journalist, the action sports industry “has thrived through Instagram”: “First there were magazines. Then there were videos. Now there is a whole new medium for you to see how much cooler someone’s life is than your own” (Andrews, n. d., para. 1). Continuing, he connects the hero culture within action sports to the immediacy and intimacy that Instagram offers action sport enthusiasts who are interested in the lifestyles and sporting pursuits of their heroes:

We have always sought out heroes in these sports, as they do the seemingly impossible day in and day out—and continue to raise the bar. Now, with Instagram we do not have to wait for a video to be released or for a magazine to hit the stands—these athletes’ videos and photos are posted as easily as a tap on the phone.

(Andrews, n. d., para. 2)

Revealing such social media fandom, in 2020 skateboarders Tony Hawk, Nyjah Huston, and Leticia Bufoni had 6.1 million, 4.3 million, and 2.6 million Instagram followers, respectively. Surfers Gabriel Medina, Bethany Hamilton, Alana Blanchard, and Kelly Slater have 4.3 million, 2.1 million, 1.8 million, and 1.3 million Instagram followers, respectively. In the contemporary context, action sport athletes’ sponsorship deals typically include social media clauses, requiring

the athlete to post on a semi-regular basis, with financial rewards when posts and videos accrue high numbers of views, likes, and shares.

Importantly, the lines between commercial and non-commercial media, and (paid, paying, and volunteer) producers and consumers, have also become increasingly blurred. Indeed, action sport participants of all ages, even very young children, are active consumers and producers—or “prosumers” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010)—of new digital and social media. In this way, they are often critical consumers of mass media products, and enjoy the social activities of responding to existing cultural products, as well as coproducing their own (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013; Thorpe, 2017; Woerman, 2012).

Action sport participants’ evolving relationships with various media products have influenced how they engage with other sporting events, including the Olympic Games (Bennett, Sagas & Dees, 2006; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2019). Our research revealed the impact of action sport niche media (i.e., magazines, videos, social media), action sport events (i.e., X Games), and corporations (i.e., RedBull) distinctive presentational styles, and the innovations with digital technologies (i.e., drones, Go Pros) on action sports participants’ Olympic media consumption patterns. Our survey suggested that action sport participants across different continents, ages, and genders, are avid consumers of international and national action sport competition and festivals such as the World Surf League and the Summer and Winter X Games. While the majority of survey participants also watch the Olympic Games, some noted that they “find the Olympics boring” (9.7%) or “don’t like what the Olympics represents/stands for” (8.2%). Some offered further context to their Olympic media consumption, as one participant explained:

Even though I watch snowboarding at the Olympics, it doesn’t tell whether I actually like it, nor that I think it is the right movement for snowboarding. Whole competitive snowboarding has been in sort of a stable situation where no progress has been seen, thanks to the big players such as FIS [International Ski Federation] and IOC.

Our focus groups also revealed a complex picture of sport media consumption. The local skaters (focus group two) were largely ambivalent about watching the Olympics, and claimed not to be “sport fans”. One admitted that he liked sport and watched the Olympics as “as a kid”, but his excitement “has died off as I’ve gotten older”. The conversation developed to show that their sport viewing was largely unplanned, “Yeah, it’s not a big event in our lives aye” (participant 1); “if we just come across it at a mate’s house we’ll like, just sit down and watch it” but, they wouldn’t “go out of their way” to watch sport (participant 3). Similarly, among focus group one, whose ages were closer to the typical Olympic viewing demographic, most were not Olympic fans:

I don’t look to watch the Olympics that much, tend to find it boring, I do catch like headlines, of various sports that maybe, I’m keen on, um... but

not really looking at individual specific sports as such, and not following anything in particular.

(focus group 1, male 50yrs, 2016)

The focus group participants also commented on the importance of “how they present the sport” as one declared: “I think in some ways the Olympics turns you off because it’s so tediously boring. It seems to be the same all the time” (focus group 1). The skateboarders also talked about the importance of “how they actually film”, with skaters preferring “raw footage, which is just a dude following someone with a fish eye” or more sophisticated styles, including “all the new shit, like... drones and stuff” (focus group 2).

Another notable finding about media consumption among our focus groups was a clear shift from watching sport on TV to forms of online streaming. While this trend has been recognised among younger people, this was evident among all of the age groups of action sport participants. Among both focus groups were several participants who no longer had televisions.

We watch everything online these days.

(focus group 1, male 30–40yrs, 2016)

Everything they [daughters who are also avid action sport participants] do is on YouTube and stuff like that, so it’s all web based. I don’t think anything is live they watch, but, um, it’s all clips of kids that are at around their age, and girls especially.

(focus group 1 referring to daughters 7–11yrs, 2016)

As one of the skaters declared, “If they streamed it [the Olympics] live easily on the internet, I probably would watch it”. Another laughed and agreed, “Yeah, like Netflix”.

The focus group discussions also revealed that while many action sport participants are avid consumers of some traditional sports (e.g. football, rugby), when watching action sports media, they watched via YouTube videos, live streaming, and used apps, even when the quality was poor. As one participant illustrated discussing his passion for watching the professional surfing World Surf League (WSL) and before that Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP), online:

I’ll watch... if it’s on in the night I’ll watch hours and hours, like, on end... and I have watched it forever since they started webcasting, even when it was like, basically an unwatchable pixelated mess. ...I enjoy the competition side of it. ... if I miss heats or have to go out and do something else, I’ll watch heats on demand and go through the heats, usually picking out what looks like good scores and good surfing.

(male surfer in his early 40s, focus group 1, 2016)

These findings are likely to be important in understanding any future impact of action sport inclusion on increasing the Olympics media audience in Tokyo and beyond (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2019). That is, these findings suggest that for some action sport participants, it is the mode and style of consumption, not just the content (i.e., which sports) that has made the Olympics less popular in the contemporary mediascape.

Action sport participants' media consumption patterns have been heavily influenced by trends in action sports media, which initially focused on niche media (i.e., magazines, videos) and has transitioned to social media, apps, and online streaming, with much innovation by large media corporations (i.e., RedBull) and with the embrace of new media technologies (i.e., Go Pro, drone, follow cams) (Thorpe, 2017). While the IOC has been working to respond to changing media consumption patterns, with the launch of their own YouTube channel in 2008, they are essentially playing "catch up" with more technologically innovative youth and sports events and corporations. Despite some improvement over recent years, their social media approach continues to lack the spontaneity, creativity, self-expression, and "fun" so prevalent in the action sport culture social media landscape. Surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, and BMX Freestyle in Tokyo 2020 will be covered by their contracted media providers (i.e., NBC), most of whom will likely bring a familiar style to representation. While the opportunities and constraints for Olympic action sport athletes to represent their own experiences via social media are yet to be known, the IFs are working hard to ensure they meet (or exceed) the IOC expectations for event online audience engagement. Each of the IFs is actively building their online followings and working with their athletes (and industry partners) to tap into their existing networks (some of which are significant and truly global in reach).

### **The action sports industry: the possibilities and politics of Olympic inclusion**

The action sports industry has historically consisted of companies providing technical goods necessary for performing these activities (i.e., equipment), a large variety of related products (i.e., clothes, shoes, bags), media content, events, and competitions (see Booth, 2005; Stranger, 2011; Thorpe, 2014; see Thorpe & Dumont, 2019). By successfully broadening the reach of these products beyond the niche of action sport participants, action sport companies, such as Quiksilver, Billabong, Vans, Burton, and Rip Curl, have become major retailers in sport-related apparel (Hough-Snee, 2020; Stranger, 2010; Thorpe, 2014). Nowadays, behind these giants, smaller action sport companies are following similar paths, seeking to extend their reach beyond core participants and diversifying their products to reach new consumer segments. Rooted in the efforts of dedicated participants who started designing and producing their skis, skateboards, surfboards, or climbing shoes in their garages, these companies have generated an array of new career opportunities (i.e., brand manager, communication officer,

digital content specialist, team manager). Companies such as Black Diamond, Burton, Patagonia, and Quiksilver with headquarters in Salt Lake City, Vermont, Ventura, and Huntington Beach respectively, attract action sport enthusiasts as employees by offering the opportunity to combine their passion for their sports with highly flexible working schedules (Stranger, 2011; Thorpe, 2011).

The action sports industry has experienced many peaks and troughs, often alongside economic downturns (see Thorpe, 2014). Despite much debate about “selling out”, many invested in the industry came to view the Olympics as an exciting new revenue stream for building a wider consumer base. In so doing, they recognised that processes of commercialisation and commodification had been underway for many years and the Olympics was an extension on these trends. In surfing, for example, there was a growing acceptance among cultural intermediaries and industry members of the inevitability of cultural change:

I don't give a damn about surfing's “soul”. I mean, what even is our soul? No longer are we a homogeneous counter-culture based around a rhetoric of freedom and “sticking it to The Man”.

(Michael Ciaramella, *Surfer Magazine*, 2016)

However, those we spoke to in the action sports media and industry held diverse views about the increasingly powerful role of corporations in driving the future direction of action sport cultures. As has been discussed in the literature, and also in this research, action sport cultures differentiate between the brands and corporations that are “run by” participants and those from “outside the sport” (Wheaton & Beal, 2003). The lifestyle brands with their target consumer as non-participants “buying t-shirts” rather than selling “hardware” to the sport aficionados, have had an increasingly powerful role in driving the direction of action sport cultures. As one surf industry insider explained, brands like Nike, had “taken over our sport” through the backdoor (interview, 2016). He was referring here to how Nike's initial attempt to crack the surfing market had failed, so instead they purchased the core brand, Hurley, as “that was the only way to buy credibility”:

The truth is that the corporate brands have taken over our sports, taken it over ... Fine, it works, but they [Hurley] are now considered the jock brand. You know, they only want you if you're going to be on the podium holding the cup.

(interview, 2015)

But with significant declines in sales during the Global Financial Crisis (and more recently the COVID-19 Pandemic) resulting in company mergers and cancelled sponsorship deals, many action sport industry members were optimistic that Olympic inclusion could give a boost to a declining industry, building consumer markets, and driving sales. The Olympics was seen as a way to increase mainstream acceptance of these activities, which it was assumed would help athletes

and events secure sponsorship endorsements outside of the action sports industry. As a surf industry insider explained:

... reaching out to new markets and going into the non-traditional surfing cultures, that's their opportunity to resell the same old story. And they're trying really hard, and the IOC can get them there.

(interview, 2015)

Nonetheless, cognisant of the ways in which consumer allegiances shift and how authenticity debates have played out in action sports, some questioned whether the Olympics might also lead to discontent with their core audience:

Right now all of the major brands are in retreat and they're trying to reach out and re-connect with their core audience, with their surf shops and all that, which is the exact opposite of going to the Olympics. And for exactly that same reason, going for the Olympic rings they may see as just too straight for their core audience. It's not Volcom with [their logo proclaiming] "youth against establishment", this *is* the establishment.

(emphasis added, interview, 2015)

Certainly, Olympic inclusion had a significant boost to the snowboarding industry for almost two decades, but then came the decline with snowboarding no longer offering participants access to a "cool" or distinctive sporting identity. In the 2020s, snowboarding has been in the Olympics for more than two decades, and the industry has continued to decline, prompting some to ask "is snowboarding dead?" (Snow Magazine, 2016) and "is snowboarding dying?" (Pursell, 2016) (also see Chapter 4). If we look to the history of action sports inclusion into the Olympic Games, surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing industries would be right to expect a significant jump in sales, but they might also rightly be concerned about the longer-term effect on the popularity of their sport, particularly among the core, youth audience that drives sales, even through challenging economic times.

### ***Action sports global celebrities***

Intimately tied with the growth and professionalisation of the action sports industry is athlete sponsorship. The commodification and dissemination of action sports are typically associated with a limited number of world-famous athletes whose names resonate with the brand of their sponsors. Professional skateboarders (e.g., Ryan Sheckler, Leticia Bufoni), surfers (e.g., Kelly Slater, Stephanie Gilmore), snowboarders (e.g., Shaun White, Chloe Kim), climbers (e.g., Chris Sharma, David Lama), BMX riders (e.g., Mat Hoffman), and other action sport athletes have benefited from the increasing commercialised forms of their activities. Some have achieved superstar status within and beyond the culture of their

specific sports, attracting widespread corporate sponsors from Apple to Visa, and are earning multi-million dollar salaries from their sponsorship and advertisement deals combined with competition earnings.

For many action sport celebrities and athletes, however, their support for Olympic inclusion was complicated by fears of a cultural backlash. For some, publicly supporting Olympic inclusion early in the process of shortlisting came with the risk of compromising their “authenticity” within their sporting cultures. For professional skateboarders it was particularly difficult to publicly support Olympic inclusion without fear of a cultural backlash that would negatively impact their perceived “authenticity” and credibility within the skateboarding culture. As the following quotes from skateboard industry insiders reveal:

There is not a skateboarder alive, or very few, that will do an interview and say (if they are sponsored, if they earn their living through the skate community), “Oh I can’t wait til the Olympic Games”. There are some that are old enough and feel comfortable in their skin and financially tied that are able to do it ... but the rest have to watch themselves. But I believe that we will rally skateboarders around this.

(interview, 2015)

The Olympics doesn’t look core to the hardcore skaters. ... image is just so important to these guys ... I’ve had clients turn down such big money because their friends will make fun of them if they do it. So 100 per cent it’s cool to say it’s not cool to do the Olympics. We’ll see what happens when people get asked.

(interview, 2015)

Recognizing such challenges, the action sports industry and key organisations worked closely with action sport celebrity athletes to convince core members of the value in Olympic inclusion. During our research, we also witnessed the IOC involved in this “wooing” process, including bringing key action sport “influencers” (athletes who use social media to document their action sports lifestyle) including skateboarding stars Leticia Bufoni and Nyjah Huston, to the Youth Olympic Games in Buenos Aires (2018) and treating them like royalty, with the expectation that they would make at least one positive social media post about Olympic inclusion during their stay (personal communications). Most important, however, were the roles of surfing and skateboarding global celebrities, Kelly Slater and Tony Hawk, respectively, in the process of Olympic inclusion and for changing attitudes of those within the action sports industry and broader communities. As one industry insider explained, the endorsements by surfing “star” athletes were a turning point in the debate;

If they all got on board with it and started pushing it, Kelly [Slater] and co, all the way down. If they all just went “yeah we should have the Olympics”,

then I think it would just be fait accompli, the whole rest of the surf culture would get on board with it.

(interview, 2015)

Similarly, in skateboarding, the support of Tony Hawk and other key insiders was critical to gaining the approval of others (not all) within the broader culture. The IOC themselves quickly recognised the importance of “cultural credibility” gained through their association with action sport stars, and they have consciously invited action sports “influencers” to a range of different events (field observations, 2018). Whereas some have been wooed by the luxury travel and hospitality provided by the IOC, others have been more critical in their willingness to buy-into the Olympic marketing machine. The key point here, however, is that the IOC has come to recognise the power in action sport “influencers”, and the important role they play in swaying the attitudes and opinions within the broader action sports communities and youth cultures.

### ***Sponsored athletes: the impact of the Olympics***

While the voices of action sport celebrities were integral to the shifting attitudes within the action sport cultures, Olympic inclusion also impacts the careers and aspirations of current and emerging athletes differently. Historically, action sport athletes have obtained financial support from their sport-specific companies. Sponsorships and company teams have long been the most common and important source of support within the action sports industries (Snyder, 2012; Thorpe, 2014). However, action sport athletes could opt for an array of career paths, including the competitive circuit, or a more freestyle non-competitive approach, as illustrated in the following comment:

In skateboarding, you can be a contest skater and have a career, but then you have other guys that don't skate contests at all. At all! And they're held in such high regard and so highly respected in skateboarding. You have these guys that are iconic skaters that don't give a shit about contests. I think that's going to continue, because that's what traditionally has sold skateboards. Champions have not traditionally sold skateboards or skateboarding products.

(interview, 2015)

For many non-competition action sport athletes, their careers have closely related to their appearances in a range of niche media, featuring in videos, magazines, and more recently, social media.

As Ojala (2014), Snyder (2012), Woermann (2012), and Dumont (2017) have described in snowboarding, skateboarding, freestyle skiing, and climbing, respectively, many action sport athletes pursue alternative career paths via media-based performances. Also, the rise of social media has enabled those pursuing media-based careers (as athletes, but also as photographers, writers, filmmakers, etc.) an important new forum to share their skills with their transnational



communities and to build audiences via social media platforms (i.e., YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok). Such digital entrepreneurialism has helped action sport athletes to gain and maintain sponsors based on their digital performances and success at connecting with hard-to-reach consumer groups (Dumont, 2017; Thorpe, 2014, 2017). A good example of action sport athletes following a social media-based career strategy is Storrer, a UK-based professional parkour team, who occasionally compete, but spend most of their time travelling the world self-producing short films (e.g., Roof Culture Asia) and posting images and “stories” on Instagram, such that they have close to one million Instagram followers. They have created their own line of clothing that they market and sell via their social media accounts, and have attracted various corporate investors and advertisers who recognise the cultural and economic capital of their digital reach. The alternative career strategies married with the entrepreneurial, self-branding, and marketing approaches being employed by some freestyle surfers (Evers, 2019), street skaters (Snyder, 2012), freestyle snowboarders (Ojala, 2014), climbers (Dumont, 2018; Rahikainen, 2020), wakeboarders (Parris et al., 2014), windsurfers (Wheaton, 1997), and parkour participants (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2013), and their large international followings, suggest that there remains a critical, highly creative value system evident at the core of action sport cultures and industries. In the contemporary moment, for some action sport athletes and committed participants, becoming an “influencer” has become more profitable than performing at the top level of competitions. There are also a handful who are taking advantage of the synergies across some action sport industries and cultures, with some managing to become “influencers” across several action sports, such as Shaun White (snowboarding and skateboarding) and Kai Lenny (surfing, windsurfing, kiteboarding, Stand Up Paddleboarding [SUP] and foil sports).

In previous generations, it was the action sport athletes’ company that supported their career, providing equipment and clothing, opportunities for travel to competitions or filming, and salaries for the most successful athletes. Such support within the action sports industry, however, was not equitably distributed across the most talented athletes, and resources have been more accessible to young, white male athletes (Das, 2020; Siber, 2017). Whereas some action sports-women were gaining high levels of media coverage and corporate support, they tended to be those who embody and conform to a traditional heteronormative femininity. For example, world-champion surfer and self-proclaimed “surf feminist” Cori Schumacher (2017) has described the challenges for women in competitive surfing and in a homophobic, sexist surfing industry. Similarly, lisahunter (2016) and Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce (2017) have illuminated the politics of who is made visible in surfing media and who remains invisible, and the strategies of different women to negotiate coverage in (mass and social) media and access to cultural and industry resources (i.e., sponsorships). Unfortunately, the lion’s share of resources continues to go to those action sports women who perform well *and* embody a heterosexuality appearance, although there are promising signs of increasing coverage and support for more diverse groups of women and non-binary action sport athletes (see Chapter 11).

With the increasing institutionalisation and professionalisation of action sports, and their inclusion in the Olympic Games, the structures of support are changing with some national sporting bodies becoming increasingly focused on the development of future Olympic athletes and medal hopefuls (Chapter 10). But prior to Olympic inclusion, national sporting bodies rarely supported action sports athletes and thus participants' allegiance was often with their corporate sponsors. While the Olympic Games will change the career trajectories for some competitive action sport athletes and encourage (at least temporary) national allegiance, others will continue to pursue alternative pathways outside of such institutionalised and competitive mega-events. Even among those who opt to pursue the Olympic pathway, some will continue to struggle with the nationalism associated with Olympic participation, particularly when this means prioritizing the nation over their sponsor companies who (in some cases) have supported them for many years. However, as we explain in Chapters 10 and 11, some see these changes as important in ensuring more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities, and creating career paths that would not otherwise have existed.

Even with Olympic inclusion, however, it would be a mistake to assume that corporate and national-level sponsorships and support will flow evenly across different action sports and countries. Indeed, action sport athletes from countries with less financial resources to invest in new high-performance sport will continue to struggle to generate enough income to pursue their careers (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2016). In Chapter 10 we explore the impact of different national governmental investments in Olympic development on the career opportunities for action sport athletes.

### ***New roles: coaches and agents***

Action sport athletes are the very visible tip of the industry "iceberg". Such focus obscures the increased opportunities for related professional roles, including photographers, filmmakers, team managers, agents, coaches, and personal trainers (e.g., Dumont, 2015; Snyder, 2012, 2017; Thorpe & Dumont, 2019). Historically, such individuals have typically been hired by magazines, companies, sports federations, and/or individual athletes to work as independent contractors. With Olympic inclusion; however, these relations are changing. Herein we discuss the evolving roles of coaches and agents, respectively, which have prompted some debate within the action sport cultures.

Many early action sport athletes embraced a DIY approach to learning the activities. The use of "coaches" was considered antithetical to the countercultural philosophies of many early action sport cultures, with peer mentoring, observation, trial-and-error, and the use of video, some of the most common ways of learning (Ojala & Thorpe, 2015). But, as action sports have become increasingly institutionalised and competitive, some individuals and groups sought out professionals from within their sporting cultures to better their chances of success.

To develop the strength and flexibility necessary for highly competitive performances, and to minimise the potential for injury, some athletes are increasingly working with coaches, personal trainers, and sport scientists, and engaging in highly structured and disciplined training regimes, as the following quote from a surf agent suggests:

Surfing was originally a by-product of the counterculture... many of the early surfers were burnouts ... they were drug addicts ... they were eccentrics and they were the loafers in life. Today, surfing has become not only big dollars but it's considered a sport. You have the Hurley, Nike, train train train, work out, don't drink, don't smoke, vegan, do push ups when you're not doing anything, sort of lifestyle. It's no longer the guys going on tour just getting drunk and getting high and sleeping with girls, which is what it was in the 80s and a lot of the 90s.

(action sport agent interview, 2016)

In addition, some national Olympic committees and sporting bodies are increasingly investing in the development of their action sports talent by hiring highly skilled coaches, many of whom are ex-professional action sport athletes with expertise in both coaching theory and practice (also see Chapters 5 and 10). In some cases, such expertise comes from outside of the sporting culture. For some of these sports, this will be a radical shift in approaches to learning and training.

Coaching is a more common practice in some action sports (e.g. snowboarding, surfing, BMX racing) than others. In skateboarding, for instance, coaching has long been considered a “taboo” subject, as one skateboarding journalist writes:

For many of us the idea of skateboarding as a competitive or team sport has long been a point of contention. And because the word “coach” automatically conjures up images of sweaty old jocks with whistles and exercise drills, it's sometimes not a very respected profession in the skateboarding world.

(Nieratko, 2014, para. 2)

However, there are more and more opportunities for coaches to work with elite and emerging competitive skaters. Sean Hayes was widely recognised as the “world's first skate coach” when he was hired by professional skater Ryan Sheckler in 2010 to help him make a comeback at the X Games after being injured the previous year (Nieratko, 2014). With greater understanding of the pressures facing competitive action sport athletes today, cultural attitudes are shifting and some are recognising that professionalisation is inevitable.

Despite a rise in the use of coaches in action sports (and particularly those included into the Olympic Games), Ojala and Thorpe (2015) suggest that positive action sport athlete–coach relationships tend to differ from more traditional, hierarchical coach–athlete relationships. They explain that action sport athletes have traditionally placed greater value on coaches with high levels of past experience

as athletes themselves, and thus bring with them to the role deeply embodied understandings of the unique cultural dynamics and value systems within action sport cultures. Our interviews with those working in national surfing organizing bodies highlighted the importance of coaches having cultural status and respect (Chapter 9), with almost all elite surfing coaches once professional surfers themselves. They explained that most surfers held the view that “if you don’t surf, there’s no way you can be a coach” (interview, 2017). Today, coaches are no longer just for elite action sport athletes. Many parents are seeking out coaches and training camps (e.g. Camp Woodward, Windells) for their children who are entering action sports competitions, and pursuing careers as action sport athletes, from ever-younger ages. As athletes move up the ranks, however, there is an expectation that coaches have high levels of cultural status and respect (most often as recently retired successful athletes).

Another professional endeavour that has continued to grow alongside new opportunities for action sport athletes is the action sports agent. Not dissimilar from action sport coaches, there has been some backlash to such positions both from within the sporting cultures and from the corporate world who preferred to deal with action sport athletes without the negotiating experience of an agent. According to a surf and skate agent:

The truth is [that] this industry is run by suits, and it’s run by guys that answer to shareholders. But the second I go to sign a client, all their sponsors go ‘oh no you don’t want to sign up with that guy, he’s just going to take from you’. And what it is, is the whole blocking so that they can get as much out of these kids as possible, wear them out as much as possible for as little as possible. That’s their job. But my job is to ensure that my clients aren’t taken advantage of. From my personal perspective, I don’t view surfing and skateboarding as a sport, I view it as a cultural phenomenon. ...  
(interview, 2016)

Some action sport agents have transitioned from the action sports industry, whereas others are less familiar with the action sport cultures but with more experience working for celebrities and/or athletes from more traditional sports. Some of the former are explicitly aware of the contradictions in their role, and sometimes struggle to negotiate their position between the action sports culture and the corporate world:

When Apple calls and they want one of my skate clients in a commercial and all they have to do is skateboard, they get paid to do what they’re going to do anyway, you’re letting a big company use your image and you’re getting paid a lot of money. They’re making more than the average income of most Americans in one weekend.

(interview, 2016)

Yet for both groups there is a tendency to justify their jobs as “protecting” their athletes and making sure they are paid their worth:

I've gotten such a push back from these major corporate guys... but they're doing the same thing that the Olympics, and ESPN and Mountain Dew and NBC are doing which is exploiting our culture. And is that bad? Yes and no.  
(interview, 2016)

Despite some tensions between companies and agents, as action sports are incorporated into the Olympic Games, they are becoming increasingly professionalised and as such their relationships with companies, media and institutions are evolving quickly.

While the opportunities for action sport coaches, agents, and managers (among other roles) are increasing as these sports become more institutionalised, action sport social networks and personal connections remain the main gatekeeper to access this unique labour market. It is worth noting that some national sports organisations are working to ensure those being offered such positions come from the action sports culture. For example, USA Skateboarding National Team hired long-time professional skateboarder, Mimi Knoop, as team manager for the 16 members. Such hires are important in ensuring the athletes feel the support is coming from within the action sports community, and they are not being “managed” by someone with little understanding of their unique cultural values.

Importantly, recent research has shown the role of racial considerations in accessing careers in the action sports industry. The doctoral research of Williams (2020), for instance, focused on the career paths of Black and People of Color (POC) skateboarders in the USA and explores the lived experiences of professional skateboarders, photographers, editors, journalists, and company owners, with a focus on their experiences of race, racism, and racial politics at various stages in their careers. With more professional opportunities for coaches, agents, and managers as a result of Olympic inclusion, the gender and racial politics in such positions are deserving of further attention in coming years (also see Chapter 11; also see Williams, 2020).

### ***The rise of the groms: the next generation of action sport athletes***

With Olympic inclusion, parents are encouraging younger and younger children to take their passion for action sports seriously and to pursue professional careers in these activities. Commenting on this trend in skateboarding, a US action sports agent proclaimed, “There are so many kids nowadays that train and go out and they skate three, four, five, six hours a day and they are true athletes” (interview with action sport agent, 2016). Indeed, the internet is filled with widely shared videos of very young, incredibly talented action sports athletes who are travelling the world redefining what was thought possible on a skateboard, in the

waves or on rock walls. For instance, climber Ashima Shiraishi (born 2001) has been pushing the limits of the sport, climbing a V14 boulder when she was just 13 years old. Another child climbing star, Oriane Bertone, set a new standard by climbing a boulder of similar difficulty at the age of 12. Athen Camacho, a 3-year-old Californian skateboarder, became the youngest sponsored skateboarder in the world when he started receiving “flow” of clothing and equipment after his father set up an Instagram account and began posting photos and videos of him skating (Valentini, 2016). Similarly, British Japanese child skateboarding phenoms Sky Brown (13 years) and her younger brother Ocean have millions of social media followers. Sky, sponsored by Nike, is the youngest professional skateboarder and among the youngest Olympians ever to compete in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics (see Chapter 11). Importantly, social media is playing a key role in raising the awareness of very young action sport participants and corporate awareness of their talent. While sponsors have typically been unwilling to pay action sport athletes until their early teens, they are increasingly providing product (clothing and equipment) to very young children with large social media followings “in exchange for social media tags, shares, and shoutouts” (Valentini, 2016).

Such processes are clearly speeding up relationships between corporate sponsors and young action sport athletes, such that by the time these athletes reach their early and mid-teens some are deeply entrenched in the action sports economy. According to an action sport agent, “the proliferation of things like X Games and Dew Tour” (and we would add the internet) has led to new financial opportunities for very young athletes: “You have 15, 16, 17 year old kids buying their first homes, they have more expensive cars than I do, they make more money in a year than I made probably the first 15 years of my professional life combined” (interview 2015). However, in tandem with such opportunities have come increased pressures from parents seeking to live vicariously through their children. According to one skateboarding father, “I’ve seen parents pushing their kids. Those skate dads, they’re yelling at their kids, ‘Get up there and get that! If you want to get that sponsor you better do this!’” (cited in Valentini, 2016). This is not to say that the opportunities are the same across action sports. Indeed, their respective economies present some sharp differences as outlined by Dumont (2017) in a comparison between climbing and surfing competitions prize money. Yet, with the inclusion of more action sports into the Olympics such pressures continue to abound, with younger action sport athletes experiencing new pressures and expectations from parents, national sports organisations, their sponsors, and their social media audiences.

### ***Athlete welfare: new pressures and expectations***

With Olympic inclusion, major mainstream and sport-specific corporations are increasingly investing in action sports. In so doing, they are offering large sponsorships and advertising deals to (carefully selected) action sport stars. Some athletes have also complained that extreme forms of individualism and

egocentricism have become increasingly prevalent. Observing this shift in the early 2000s as snowboarding became an Olympic mainstay, US Olympic silver medallist snowboarder, Gretchen Bleiler, proclaimed that “industry pressure” and the “ultrahigh” level of snowboarding abilities was creating an “extremely competitive atmosphere”, such that, in their hunger to win, the younger generation was “changing the overall feel at the top of the half-pipe” (cited Sherowski, 2003, p. 146). With Olympic inclusion, there is a growing awareness in some action sports of the implications of the professionalisation processes and the new pressures and expectations on athletes. For example, Brad Bricknell (2017), a former professional surfer, writes:

Surfing is certainly moving deeper and deeper into the professional arena as far as sports go. Globally recognizable surfers like Kelly Slater and Mick Fanning, along with the WSL changing its gears on reach, have all contributed to the sport’s elevation. That’s generally a good thing, but [with] things like social media and professional coaching, there are heavier expectations being placed on the surfers we watch. ... Could it be time for professional surfing to consider athlete welfare and development officers, similar to those that has been employed by the National Football League in the USA and AFL and NRL in Australia? The pressures are largely the same in these mainstream sports as in surfing, and I’d argue, so is the need.

As this quote suggests, as action sports become increasingly professionalised, the support structures surrounding the athletes require more careful consideration. In the context of Olympic inclusion, some IFs and National Organisations are developing policies and processes to better support athlete welfare. While the International Surfing Association, International Federation of Sport Climbing, and World Skate have all established Athletes’ Commissions and Ethics Commissions, most are in the early stages of developing adequate systems and protocols to deal with the many complexities of athlete well-being (i.e., sexual abuse, mental health). Athlete welfare is a new consideration for the previously informal and corporation-organised action sports industry, such that many of the IFs and national-level organisations are still grappling with being “responsible” to the health and well-being of their athletes (who were previously under the purview of action sport companies who offered little in the way of athlete welfare support), and as such are looking to the models of more established sports.

As noted above, many contemporary young “up-and-comers” participate in different ways to action sport participants from the past, with many opting for alternative schooling options to give them the time and space to focus on their training and travel. In contrast to previous generations of action sport athletes, many of whom taught themselves and engaged in peer mentoring throughout their careers (Ojala & Thorpe, 2015), today children and youth are increasingly training under the guidance of coaches (only some of whom are qualified coaches) in highly organised structures in which their sports offer the possibility of earning

a profitable career (Ellmer & Rynne, 2019; Smits, 2019, 2020). As we explain in Chapter 10, the opportunities to do so, however, vary considerably between countries. In some countries where there is economic support for developing young action sport athletes (i.e., Australia, USA), some are also working with agents and social media teams to manage their online profiles. Many others are trying to manage these roles and responsibilities themselves, or with the help of their parents. Some of our interviewees noted observing increasing parental pressure on younger athletes as a result of Olympic inclusion:

We already see it in some areas of the US, like Texas, where a lot of parents that grew up in a high pressure, high performance football culture, are really trying to apply that type of belief on behalf of their children with climbing. It's an interesting thing in and of itself in terms of where climbing sits with the parent/athlete relationship.

(climbing industry insider, interview, 2015)

For young athletes, the pressures to perform can become too much without the necessary support structures. The tragic suicide of British professional snowboarder, Ellie Soutter, on her 18th birthday, further brought to the fore the pressures on young action sport athletes and the often-unacknowledged mental health issues that can come with such expectations. Soutter's father spoke publicly on mental health concerns, head injuries, and the excessive pressure on young athletes: "She wanted to be the best. She didn't want to let anybody down... There's a lot of pressure on children" (Soutter, 2018).

Such cultural shifts and increasing pressures on athletes are gaining momentum in the lead up to the Tokyo Games. One such example is the recent near-death injury incurred by the then 12-year-old world number three, Nike-sponsored, skateboarding phenom Sky Brown while training with Tony Hawk on his private ramp. Although wearing a helmet, the serious head injury (among various other injuries) experienced by Brown should raise important questions about the normalisation of the high-risks being taken by increasingly young action sport athletes, and the ethics and responsibilities of adults (i.e., coaches, parents, agents) who are "supporting" pre-teen action sport participants in their "careers" as both digital entrepreneurs and highly competitive athletes. As action sports become increasingly institutionalised and professionalised, younger athletes are training and competing at very high levels. They are expected to manage a wide-array of (sometimes conflicting) pressures and expectations from parents, coaches, corporate sponsors (sometimes multi-million dollar contracts), national sporting bodies, and digital audiences (often in the millions). Despite such high stakes and pressure on ever-younger athletes, the organisational structures of action sports are evolving more slowly. Issues of athlete welfare and well-being, and particularly facilitating ethical and responsible young athlete support and development, need to be at the forefront of such developments (Smits, 2020). Such issues will be ever more important as these very young athletes compete and podium at the Tokyo Olympics and beyond.



### ***The promise of Olympic inclusion: new opportunities and infrastructure***

The growing popularity of action sports over recent years has contributed to a dramatic increase in action sport facilities and events. Many consider Olympic inclusion as important in the increasing investment in facilities (i.e., skateparks, climbing walls, climbing gyms, BMX parks, and pump tracks), and new competition circuits. With such venues and events has emerged a variety of work opportunities (see Van Bottenburg & Salome, 2010), and notably by supporting the rise of new professions and related certifications and programmes. For instance, route setters for climbing competitions must now undertake formal training leading to professional certifications to work on national and international competitions. Additional examples are found in the work of the shapers in charge of designing and building park facilities for ski resorts and events, and in the creation of professional consultancy services helping in the conception and implementation of climbing gyms, skate parks, BMX parks and tracks, and bike parks. As Atencio et al. (2018) explain, the rise of urban skateparks in the USA has led to new social dynamics, with parents (particularly mothers) and community members taking on new (paid and unpaid) roles in managing and regulating these recreational sporting spaces. The opening of hundreds of action sport facilities (i.e., Woodward action sports camps, Windells) worldwide also fostered the emergence of more teaching, training, and facility management related jobs. For those that are passionate about action sports, the increased visibility and opportunities that are expected from Olympic inclusion suggest more diversification in the ways to carve out a career in the industry, and to sustain one's participation within the sporting cultures and communities that they love.

Importantly, there are politics involved in who fills these positions. For example, in preparations for the Tokyo Olympics, the skateboarding community has engaged in heated discussion and debate as to who is best suited to take on the important roles as competition commentators. As one skate journalist writes:

Skateboarding will be in the Olympics for the first time next year, whether we want it to or not. So now, the important question is how it will be presented. More specifically, who will literally present it, as the first ever Olympic skateboarding commentator. To skateboarders, it is obvious that NBC should hire an actual skateboarder. Sadly, NBC is rumoured to be leaning towards their existing talent: professional snowboarders.

(Haptas, 2019)

Recognizing the importance of having an “authentic” voice from skateboarding at the Games, a group of women skateboarders and magazine editors launched a campaign to encourage NBC to consider Alex White as a commentator for the Tokyo Olympics skateboarding events. The campaign began with “Alex 4 Olympics” stickers at important skateboarding competitions, and subsequently on Instagram. Not only was it about having an experienced woman commentating on skateboarding,

but also having someone who can speak passionately to the stories and history of the sport. As White explains: “When you lose the story you’re just watching boards flip in the air, that’s making it one-dimensional. The skaters deserve to be seen AND heard. I can be their mouthpiece” (cited in Haptas, 2019). The #Alex4Olympics campaign continued to build momentum, and in so doing was challenging the longstanding status quo of choosing recently retired professional male skaters for such roles, who then play a key role in communicating particular values in the sport. As this example demonstrates, Olympic inclusion shifts the power relations within the action sports media, with mainstream media corporations (i.e., NBC) controlling the coverage that was once the domain of niche media. Those within action sports industries are working to ensure they maintain (some) control over the representation of their sport to global audiences. In so doing, some are developing creative strategies to ensure their voices are considered. However, such decisions are no longer being made by action sport participants themselves, but rather those in leadership positions in traditional sporting infrastructure where there may or may not be an appreciation and respect for the unique values within these sporting cultures and communities, and different institutional pressures.

## Conclusions

Processes of commercialisation, institutionalisation, and professionalisation have been underway within action sports for many years. However, with Olympic inclusion such processes require careful re-examination. In this chapter, we illustrated how the recent inclusion of surfing, skateboarding, BMX freestyle and sport climbing into the Olympic Games, has resulted in changes in the action sports industry, including transformations in media, events, and athlete career trajectories. While Olympic inclusion promises to offer more opportunities for businesses, athletes, and others pursuing careers in these sports (i.e., coaches, agents, journalists, event organisers, commentators), it also prompts new tensions and debates within the action sports industry. While Olympic inclusion has prompted new professional opportunities for some, our research signposts a shifting of power away from the sporting cultures and towards mainstream media organisations (i.e., NBC). However, as we reveal in the next four chapters (Chapters 8–11), these shifting power relations are not consistent across sports or countries, and are impacting the opportunities for athletes differently based on a range of socio-economic, gender, and geo-political considerations. While this chapter has offered a broad brushstroke of changes with the action sports industry, the following chapters reveal how nuanced these changes are for different sports (focusing on skateboarding and surfing) and countries with a range of case studies.

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# **Skateboarding, the Olympics, and flexible opposition**

## **The sportisation of the anti-sport**

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As various cultural histories have confirmed, skateboarding initially emerged in California during the 1950s as the “asphalt” version of surfing (Beal, 2013; Borden, 2003; Weyland, 2002). Since these early beginnings, skateboarding has continued to evolve and develop, with new technologies and styles emerging, different environments being explored and reappropriated (i.e., the streets, under highways, hills, pools, skateparks, pump tracks, and backyards) and more diverse groups taking up the activity (Lombard, 2015; Pomerantz, Currie & Kelly, 2004; Williams, 2020; Willing et al., 2019). Throughout the history of skateboarding, however, youth have been at the core of the sporting culture, driving these developments and bringing their passion, creativity, and unique values to the physical culture. While skateboarding has become a global phenomenon with participants across each continent enjoying the activity in their own ways—i.e., street, park, vert, long-boarding, skate dancing—and ranging in their levels of skill and engagement, global representations of skateboarding continue to be dominated by young men (this is slowly changing), and the skateboarding media and industry continues to be defined by male-run companies and corporations in the USA.

Sport sociologists first began researching skateboarding in the mid-1990s. In an ethnographic study based in the USA, Beal (1995) was the first to explain how skateboarding culture differed from mainstream, competitive sports, and how this alternative sporting culture appealed to particular youth, and particularly young men. A key theme that emerged in the early skateboarding research was the concept of “authenticity”, including those who could access this precious cultural asset, and those who defined the rules around its accumulation (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Humphreys, 1997). Early research on skateboarding identified a culture that “celebrated” young white males and particular expressions of youthful masculinity, with girls and women mostly marginalised within this culture (Beal & Weidman, 2003; Wheaton, 2004; Wheaton & Beal, 2003).

Research on skateboarding has burgeoned over recent years (Lombard, 2015), with scholars from an increasingly broad range of backgrounds and lines of analysis. Scholars have explored the important role of niche and informal media (Jeffries, Messer, & Swords, 2016) as well as mainstream media portrayals



of skateboarding (Brayton, 2005; Kusz, 2007; Yochim, 2010), the ongoing and evolving identity politics (Beal et al., 2016; Williams, 2020; Willing & Shearer, 2015), and skateboarders' understandings, and interpretations and negotiations of public and private space (e.g., Borden, 2003, 2019; Chiu, 2009; Howell, 2005; O'Connor, 2018). A particularly strong line of analysis has been gendered power relations, and how some women negotiate space within this youthful sporting culture (Atencio, Beal & Wilson, 2009; Beal, 1996; Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2005; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013; Pomerantz, Currie, & Kelly, 2004). More recently, some have explored issues of race (Atencio, Yochim, & Beal, 2013; Brayton, 2005; Dupont, 2014; Wheaton, 2013; Yochim, 2010) and the significant contributions of Skaters of Colour (SOC) to the US skateboarding culture and industry (Williams, 2020).

As with much action sports research, the processes of commercialisation, commodification, and sportisation have garnered considerable attention, primarily because these are issues of ongoing debate and contestation within skateboarding and other action sport cultures (Dinces, 2011; Dixon, 2015; Donnelly, 2008; Humphreys, 1996, 1997; Lombard, 2010) (see Chapters 2, 4, and 5 for a more detailed discussion of these processes). Some have argued that the anti-authoritarian, creative and do-it-yourself (DIY) philosophies inherent in skateboarding culture, and the fragmented and fluid subjectivities of skateboarders, align with a post-modern ethics (Beal & Weidman, 2003, Rinehart, 2000). Others have argued that skateboarding's distinctive and oppositional character is less the result of the specific subjectivities of skaters themselves, but rather through shared "reimaginings" of space (Borden, 2003; Chiu, 2009). While skateboarders themselves have long claimed an "alternative", oppositional identity (alternative to "jock" culture; different to more organised, competitive, team sports; distinct to broader society), such claims should be contextualised within broader political and economic change.

Contesting claims of an inherent oppositional character among contemporary skateboarders, Dinces (2011) identifies a close alignment with skateboarding and neoliberal processes of accumulation. In particular, he draws upon Harvey's theory of flexible accumulation to explain skateboarding as "a regime of accumulation that incorporates multiple forms of commodification *and* anti-authoritarian imagery" (Dinces, 2011, p. 1515) under the rubric of late capitalism. Engaging with Harvey's theorising of flexible accumulation as the intensified commodification of cultural forms like fashion and athletic spectacle, Dinces (2011) offers an insightful history in which the "ethos of skateboarding is less a matter of fragmented and fluid subjectivities that resist generalisation and more a symptom of the emergence of culture and identity as increasingly important outputs of capitalistic production processes" (p. 1514). Focused on changes as represented in skateboarding niche videos from the 1960s to the early 2010s, Dinces (2011) argues that "regardless of how creatively skaters have crafted a subculture based on space, danger and any other aspect of the sport, they have continued to interact symbiotically with dominant structures of capital" (p. 1527). Similarly,

Beal and Wilson (2004) identify these contradictions within skateboarding culture:

The skateboarder identity is centred on the notion of being committed to the activity for its own sake, as an avenue of self-expression, and not primarily for money. Yet skaters are using mass mediated commodities to express an anti-materialist and individualistic stance.

(p. 36)

As we explain in this chapter, the processes of Olympic inclusion have brought such tensions to the fore, revealing the contradictions within skateboarding culture and for some, the selectively “flexible” (and at times, forgetful) nature of their longstanding “oppositional” positioning.

The complex relationship between skateboarding and the Olympic Games has also garnered some attention. The work of Batuev and Robinson (2017, 2018) is particularly noteworthy in that they documented the organisational changes that occurred with Olympic inclusion and the processes of bureaucratisation and sportisation under the Olympic Movement. They identify the important roles of key agents in the skateboarding industry (i.e., Tony Hawk, NBC, Woodward Camps) in supporting Olympic inclusion, and document the tensions that emerged between the values in skateboarding and prolympism. There is also an edited book by Kilberth and Schwier (2019) that explores different gendered, economic, and cultural dimensions involved in the processes of Olympic inclusion. Some scholars have focused specifically on the new opportunities and ongoing challenges for women in skateboarding as a result of Olympic inclusion (Beal & Ebling, 2019; D’Orazio, 2020; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). Building upon and extending this literature, in Chapter 11 we further explore the gendered impact of the Olympics for women in action sports, including women and non-binary skateboarders.

This chapter builds upon recent scholarship on skateboarding and the Olympics, drawing upon our research that began in 2015. Our longitudinal research illustrates how the cultural attitudes have shifted and responded over time to Olympic inclusion. Some of the key concerns among the skateboarding community in the lead up to inclusion have been resolved through creative and collaborative approaches, while other tensions continue to develop. In so doing, we build upon Dinces (2011) arguments, suggesting that the relationship between skateboarding and the Olympic Movement is one of flexible *and* forgetful opposition, with multiple contradictions (at times) and a rather short cultural memory. First, however, we provide an overview of why skateboarding was so attractive to the IOC, despite the many challenges it posed as an Olympic sport.

### **What skateboarding brings to the Olympic Games: global youth culture and the rise of urban sports**

As detailed in Chapter 6, the relationship between the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and skateboarding was complicated with three organisations

vying to be the one chosen to govern the Olympic version of the sport. In the end, the IOC requested a strategic collaboration between World Skate (previously Federation International e de Roller Sports, FIRS)—an IOC affiliated organisation that had no historical relationship with skateboarding and no events in the Olympic Programme—and the US industry-dominated International Skateboarding Federation (ISF) (who had little experience organizing skateboarding competitions). In the process, the World Skateboarding Federation (WSF) (and particularly Tim McFerran) was excluded from the governance model, which resulted in various lawsuits and ongoing accusations. Despite the challenges for the IOC in finding a workable governance model, skateboarding was important to the IOC in that it offered a powerful means of connecting with global youth culture and new trends in the urbanisation of sport.

Although our interviewees had varied opinions about the inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympics, they clearly understood why the IOC wanted their sport in the Programme. They identified the potential in skateboarding for attracting younger viewers back to the Olympics, signalling a shift in the Olympics towards more contemporary sporting trends and a clear youth-focus, and bringing a unique combination of sport, music, popular culture, fashion, and art. According to our interviewees, if done well, the inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympics could offer a distinctive experience for attendees as well as international audiences:

Youth relevance. There's not a sport on the globe that has more youth relevance than skateboarding. It's very youth relevant, it's very accessible, it's global, and also there's a huge percentage of the sport/activity that does not compete, so there is the complementary side to the competition of skateboarding, that it's an art form. And it's also driven by what youth are doing with technology and ... music.... So there's a perfect storm.

(key member of International Skateboarding Federation, 2015)

Skateboarding is going to make the Olympics so much cooler and hipper.

(key member of US skateboarding industry, 2015)

Because of this connection between skateboarding and trends in broader youth culture, the IOC invested considerable time and resources to ensure a workable relationship with the skateboarding industry, which they understood as critical to the success of skateboarding in the Games (see Chapter 6). Without support from the skateboarding industry, the IOC Sport Department implicitly understood that gaining athlete engagement would be very difficult (fieldnotes, 2016).

### ***The urban park: “bring sport to the people”***

With Agenda 2020 and President Bach focused on trying to change the perception that the Olympics is only about elite competition, the inclusion of skateboarding and the development of the Urban Park concept offered a powerful new approach

for introducing a more sustainable and participatory approach to the Games. This “Urban Park” concept was first trialled in 2018 at the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Buenos Aires, and was conceived with input from key members of the skateboarding industry. As the following quotes illustrate, those advocating for the inclusion of skateboarding into the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Programme were arguing for a celebration of urban culture from the early stages of their campaign:

If we are presented on the global stage in Tokyo, it should be a celebration with world-class music, social media and art, and the world’s best skateboarders. And we will deliver the youth to your doorstep. And in the process, we will change the thought process of youth globally. ... If the IOC allows skateboarding to present itself in the right way, after the games the IOC will be the hero.

(key member of International Skateboarding Federation, 2015)

A real, real, global vibe! That’s what’s going to happen. This is world changing for youth. This is a powerful influential passionate group of kids globally.

(key member of International Skateboarding Federation, 2015)

The Urban Park in Buenos Aires was organised in a similar way to many other action sport festivals (field notes, 2018), including multiple events occurring simultaneously (i.e., climbing, skateboarding, BMX freestyle, basketball 3x3, breaking (also known as breakdancing) exhibitions, and competitions), live music and attendees free to walk around the venue (see Figures 8.1–8.4). However, through our conversations with IOC and International Federation (IF) members visiting the arena, it was apparent how exciting, innovative, and new this approach was for those from traditional Olympic sports.

Of particular importance was the potential of the Urban Park for “bring[ing] sport to the people”, with free access (with a festival-style entrance bracelet) to those who had previously registered or to those who brought their skateboard along. Olympic media following the event proclaimed:

Using the Youth Olympic Games once more as the perfect testing ground for the Olympic Movement and, in particular, to explore ways to make the Games more youthful and urban, the IOC worked with the Buenos Aires 2018 Organising Committee to develop one of the most ground-breaking concepts to date, the Urban Park.

(from Buenos Aires, 2019)

As well as appearances and exhibitions from action sport celebrities (including skateboarders, Leticia Bufoni (see Figure 8.3), Nyjah Huston (see Figures 8.3 and 8.5), and Tony Hawk), the Urban Park also invited attendees to skate the parks (and climb the walls) and interact with their heroes. The Urban Park concept



*Figures 8.1–8.4* Images from the Buenos Aires 2018 Youth Olympic Games Urban Park, showing climbing (8.1), breaking (8.2), and skateboarding (8.3) with audiences close to the action, and enjoying the ‘festival’ feel of the events, including live music (8.2 and 8.4). Used with permission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). All rights reserved. (8.1) Photo courtesy of Lukas Schulze for OIS/IOC. (8.2) Photo courtesy of Simon Bruty for OIS/IOC. (8.3) Photo courtesy of Simon Bruty for OIS/IOC. (8.4) Personal archive.



*Figures 8.1–8.4 (Continued)*

was also shared on the Olympic Channel, with social media playing an important role. The athletes and invited influencers were encouraged to actively use social media, “ensuring that fans on the ground and around the world were brought closer to the Olympic action than ever before” (From Buenos Aires, 2019). Such strategic efforts to break down the boundaries between the athletes and audience

were also seen in their attempts to make warm-up sessions visible to the public. According to Olympic media:

Many experiential elements tested at the Urban Park will be seen at Tokyo 2020, such as opening the venues to fans when the Olympic competition finishes and the opportunity to try out sports. In Tokyo, the festive atmosphere of the Urban Park will be seen across the Waterfront City area with the Urban Festival, which will play host to BMX and skateboarding events. Meanwhile, the Playground will include outdoor warm-up areas where visitors can watch 3x3 basketball players and sport climbing athletes as they get ready to vie for Olympic glory.

Based on our observations and analysis, the Urban Park concept is an effort to change perceptions of the Olympics as elitist and exclusive, and to offer more accessible and participatory models for Olympic sport engagement (Figure 8.6).

The Tokyo Organizing Committee (OC) was in attendance at the Buenos Aires Urban Park, and in July the following year announced that the Tokyo Waterfront City area would “offer a buzzing festival environment that brings fans closer to the Olympic action than ever before” (Tokyo 2020 Takes Sport to the People, 2019). The Tokyo Waterfront City area includes both the Urban Festival and the Playground concepts, with the former taking place across the Ariake Urban Sports Parks (where fans can watch the BMX racing, BMX freestyle and



*Figure 8.5* US professional skateboarder Nyjah Huston was a huge draw-card for youth to the Buenos Aires Urban Park. Huston and other invited skaters (including Bufoni and Hawk) participated in a demonstration with local skateboarders. Photo courtesy of Dylan Burns for OIS/IOC. Used with permission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). All rights reserved.



*Figure 8.6* Male and female professional US skateboarders casually share the platform with national Argentinian skateboarders, at the skateboarding exhibition at the Urban Park in Buenos Aires (photo taken by Holly Thorpe).

skateboarding competitions and exhibitions), and the Aomi Urban Sports Park (which will host the sport climbing, basketball 3x3, and 5-a-side football competitions). The nearby Playground area is accessible to those without tickets to observe the athletes warming up and also to try out the activities themselves. One of the masterminds behind these innovations, IOC Olympic Games Executive Director Christophe Dubi, proclaimed:

We not only want people to come to the Olympic Games, we also want to take the Games to the people. We want to make Olympic sport as accessible and engaging as possible; we want to create an environment where they are both entertained and inspired, where they can witness history in the making and then get active themselves.

(cited in Tokyo 2020 Takes Sport to the People, 2019)

In an article appearing in *The Japan Times* (2017), IOC Vice President John Coates similarly praised the opening up of the facilities to the public, suggesting:



“children can access and have a go for themselves. They’re all sports that, as you can see, engage with young people”. Connecting the Urban Festival and the Urban Sports Park is the Olympic Promenade, a free-to-access walkable area featuring the Olympic and Paralympic cauldron, cafes, and restaurants, various sporting and artistic performance areas, and a Tokyo 2020 mega-store. Making the Olympics accessible to more people also means more sales and visibility for both the Olympic Games and key sponsors.

Our interviews with OC members in Tokyo in December 2018 identified some of the many opportunities, as well as challenges, in making the Urban Festival and Urban Park a reality in the middle of Tokyo. Although the Tokyo OC was excited and passionate about the incorporation of five new sports (surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, karate, baseball/softball), this came with many organisational and logistical challenges including managing the audience flow, transport, and security:

As you see in our Aomi area, they have not just urban but beach volleyball or triathlon. On the other side, we have rowing and equestrian. We’re doing all these at the same time so the transport team is having a difficult time.

Furthermore, the schedule was also “really, really challenging” particularly as Tokyo’s summer weather could include heavy rain or a typhoon, so they needed to prepare for all eventualities:

We have to make contingency plans for the days in case of rain – heavy rain, skateboarding, we don’t have a roof so we’re thinking about a contingency plan.

They reiterated that the Japanese audience was important, not just the television audience. The Tokyo OC also mentioned some challenges in working with those in charge of the new sports, including skateboarding:

Yes, we had many troubles. One federation cannot be the leading federation, that is confusing for other federations so we have established the one team federation, the Tokyo 2020 Skateboarding Commission. We’ve advised the IOC that we made a new organisation just for Tokyo, it’s called Tokyo 2020 Skateboarding Commission. It seems to be working. Since it was established there’s been good contact and I think we’ve progressed since we had that new organisation. I think that’s one way of doing it in the case where you have many federations.

They were pleased with progress made since setting up this Skateboarding Commission, who became their key advisers including in designing and building the facilities:

... the process of choosing the designer—you know, the course is very important—it’s different with BMX and skateboarding, the same ramp, but

different. Why you can't do that... there are so many regulations. We almost started from zero knowledge so it's very valuable.

In attending the Buenos Aires YOG, the Tokyo OC had seen the value in having urban events close to more traditional sporting events, and had taken on board the messaging from President Thomas Bach that new models are needed to innovate the games and change audience experiences:

As President Bach is saying, [it is not] buying a ticket and then sitting in a seat... it's more casual... Even for someone that had never seen an Olympic Games maybe, the hurdle is very low that they can step over it easily.

They commented on how the rowing event in Buenos Aires was very well attended because it was right by the Urban Park: "Just 30 seconds or a one-minute walk and oh, there's rowing... So, if there's an urban sport next to traditional sports, then people will flow". For members of the Tokyo OC, the Urban Park concept, and the incorporation of skateboarding more specifically, was important for realizing the new Olympic goal of "bringing sport to the people":

... urban is the concept that you go very casual. We even have for the first time at Olympic Games a standing seat, so we're going to have standing seats. You know, you can casually move this way or this way, let's go together, you go from this angle to watch that. Very casual.

Furthermore, this was explicitly seen as a way to change perceptions among youth:

Young people think these Olympic Games, that's only for special people, for exclusive people involved with the athletes or even the audience, some federation people. These are very exclusive...The Olympic Games is not something very special just for special people, but for everybody. We're lowering the bar a little bit that people can reach to easily.

One key aspect of Agenda 2020 has been the aim to make hosting the games more affordable and with more sustainable approaches to sporting facilities. As one member of the Tokyo OC acknowledged, "the cost cut is very important, too".

At the centre of the Urban Festival and Park concept are the portable skateboarding and BMX freestyle parks, and climbing walls, that can be opened up to the public to use at different times of the day, and then can be easily dismantled and moved to other areas after the Games (if needed). With the option of renting some of this equipment from existing event companies (i.e., FISE), the host city avoids considerable additional costs associated with building permanent infrastructure. Some of our interviewees identified the

sustainability in this approach as another important draw-card for the IOC and host organizing cities:

The skatepark built for the Olympics is the opportunity for the IOC to really start a sustainability legacy programme. I think for Tokyo it's important—people want to understand when the Olympics comes, what benefits them after the Olympics goes? And skateboarding is the perfect mechanism to help with that. I think it's going to be hopefully they're talking about, building a temporary skatepark and leaving a permanent one later, and that's good for me. That's important—a skatepark left for the community.

(skate industry insider, interview, 2015)

As illustrated, the Urban Park and Festival concepts have taken inspiration from skateboarding events and culture, but have been activated by Agenda 2020 with the stated aims of bringing younger audiences back to the Olympic Games, to lower the cost on host cities, and to move towards more sustainable and participatory approaches to sporting mega-events. Although the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympic Games has been a challenge, the IOC and Tokyo OC sees enormous potential in skateboarding to help them overcome a range of problems in the Olympic model, and thus their efforts are worthwhile. In the following section, we reveal how everyday skateboarders and those working in the industry have had conflicting opinions and oscillating perspectives on these developments.

### **Skateboarders' perceptions of Olympic inclusion: tensions resolved and ongoing**

For many skateboarders around the world, the inclusion of their sporting activity into the Olympic Games was deeply disturbing, particularly as it seemed to be the ultimate “sell out” of their sport to the “establishment” (see Chapters 2 and 3 for more discussion of action sports and processes of sportisation and anti-establishment values). Many considered Olympic inclusion to be an unforgivable compromise of the “soul” of skateboarding:

If it was in the Olympics, it wouldn't be skateboarding anymore. It'd be gymnastics on wood with wheels. It'd be overladen with rules and regulations created by people who don't know WTF they are talking about.

(Comment posted on *Vice* magazine)

No way, keep it on the streets and keep it real!

(Comment posted on *Vice* magazine)

As discussed in Chapter 5, the niche media (i.e., skateboarding magazines, websites, and social media) were key spaces where skateboarders discussed and debated their opinions on possible Olympic inclusion. Some forms of niche media used

humour and parody, mocking the Olympics, such as offering their own suggested Olympic skateboarding events, including: “Fencing: Skaters jump over as many fences as they can while being chased by overweight security guards”; and “High Jump: Each participant takes three rapid-fire bong hits and then does a method air off a curb cut” (Go For Gold, Thrasher, 2016). Such niche media posts typically garnered high responses from their core audience, with comments ranging widely from vehement opposition to strong support. Each of the following comments was posted in response to the *Thrasher* article mentioned above:

First time I have smiled reading an article about skating in the Olympics.

The Berrics, street league and other competitions are to blame for this. They made people believe skateboarding is only about riding in those fancy skateparks. At 2020 I'll be 37 and it won't hurt me so much to watch skateboarding become a whore.

Your magazine displays and rewards those who push the limits. The Olympics will provide these competitive skaters another avenue to showcase their talents, represent their homeland and possibly make a better living for themselves and their families. I've been skateboarding since 1989 and have witnessed mind blowing progression. I feel that this is just another stage in that progression. No one will be forced into competing and no one will be forced to watch. If you don't like it, then ignore it and go skate.

It is important to note that it is typically those who hold strong opinions who take the time to engage in such online debates.

In contrast to the opinionated voices shared on social media, the passionate recreational skateboarders that we spoke to in the focus groups (2016) did not hold strong views about Olympic inclusion, with most professing not to be particularly interested or invested:

It's like putting drawing in the Olympics...everyone's got their own taste, everyone's got their own preference.

(focus group 2, male skater, 2017)

I guess you know, there's no rules in skateboarding, it goes against all of the, ah, I don't know, attitudes of skateboarding.

(focus group 2, male skater, 2017)

You gotta see how it plays out really, cos it could be great, or it could be terrible. But I don't think that it's gonna have much of an effect on the Olympics itself...

(focus group 2, male skater, 2017)

It depends how much influence they have. Well, in terms of the Olympics it doesn't really matter, cos it's... if it like, affected us as skateboarders in the

local skate park, then yes it would matter... but if it doesn't have any direct effect on us... then I'm not too bothered.

(focus group 2, male skater, 2017)

As well as feelings of apathy, others acknowledged the ongoing cultural debates and arguments against Olympic inclusion:

... cos there's so much soul in skateboarding and it's such an art form that you're such a sell out if you were to become a big brand name... ..instead of an actual artist skateboarding, you're just a brand.

(focus group 1, male skater)

I don't know, there will be people not going because of that anti-establishment thing. They might be the best of the best, but they, they're not doing it because of that, they don't want to. Braydon Szafranski, a rider for Baker Skateboards, he said, um, "skaters are a gang of misfits, not a gang of athletes, skateboarding is a crime, not a sport".

(focus group 2, male skater, 2017)

Our focus group discussions held six months after the decision for Olympic inclusion showed that everyday, recreational skateboarders had little knowledge about the process such as what the skating competition might look like, which styles of skating would be included, or about qualification, with the focus group convenors ultimately providing answers to many questions.

While our media analysis suggests that many core, recreational skateboarders were critical of Olympic inclusion, and focus groups showed apathy and confusion among many recreational skaters, some of our interviews with skateboarding industry insiders revealed how they had to navigate personal tensions between arguments for or against the Olympics. This was particularly the case for those who had spent their childhoods and young adult lives committed to core skateboarding values, but had transitioned into roles where their livelihood is dependent on the continual economic growth of the skateboarding industry. Some skate industry insiders noted that the processes of commercialisation and institutionalisation had been underway for many years, and thus the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympics should not suggest that "skateboarding is selling out":

That's how I view the Olympic thing. You don't want it to be there. You don't want it to be on this world stage because you want to keep it for yourself? That's already way gone with Nike, Monster, Red Bull, and every other corporation involved in skating. That's not even an argument anymore. You can still keep skateboarding for yourself and how you want it to be. You can live skateboarding exactly how you want it to be, but to hold it back from other people, or potentially hold it back from other people, that seems selfish to me.

(2015)

Some interviewees also commented on the self-focused opinions of recreational or core skateboarders who wanted to “keep skateboarding for yourself and how you want it to be”:

I think the way I look at it [Olympic inclusion] is if it's good, if it gets more kids on skateboards, and we can get more kids to experience skateboarding, and it can bring great things to their lives like it has for me and all the people I associate with in skateboarding, then I can view it as a good thing.  
(2015)

Of course, nothing's going to be perfect, there's going to be flaws, and we kind of look at it here as you're going to have competition skateboarding that becomes very, very organised and very specific, and has all these rules and regulations and policies and things you have to adhere to be in that business, or be recognised in that business. But then you're going to also have the whole other do-it-yourself aspect or ethos of skateboarding that has always existed. Guys that are building ramps in their backyard, building spots under bridges, filming skating and just living like skaters and doing what they want to do. I think there's going to be room for both, and for me, yeah, I'm in the middle: I'm a grown up that has to have an income because I have a family, and I'm also a skateboarder.  
(2015)

Sometimes you get very narrow-minded attitudes in skateboarding... They don't want to change things.... It really only affects 40 skateboarders in 2020, and it only affects those skateboarders who want to be affected, right!  
(2015)

Despite acknowledging the economic benefits of Olympic inclusion, most recognised that for core “skateboarders globally ... it's not cool to be part of the establishment”, and this makes the relationship with the IOC and possible Olympic inclusion that much more difficult for those working with skateboarders (i.e., IFs, National Olympic Committees (NOC), the IOC).

As illustrated in Chapter 6, however, the IOC and key members of the skate industry, including those involved with the World Skate collaboration and the Tokyo 2020 Skateboarding Commission, worked carefully to change the opinions of the skateboarding culture. Thus, despite outrage and an international petition when skateboarding was first considered for inclusion in the London Olympics, at the time of writing (late 2020) the skateboarding culture had toned down its voice on the matter. Niche media articles were increasingly presenting arguments both for and against Olympic inclusion, with more professional skateboarders speaking out in support for the Olympics. For example:

I think the Olympics is hands down the best thing that can happen to the skateboard industry. If you look at it, everybody wins! Skating in the

Olympics brings hundreds of thousands of new people into the skate industry. It would be super rad to compete for our country.

(Jagger Eaton, 2016)

I don't care because skateboarding will always be skateboarding to me. If anything, it's good because as women skaters we now have more contests to go to and travel opportunities. It totally changed snowboarding for the women. Once snowboarding was in the Olympics, women snowboarders were really able to just live off putting out video parts. The more girls who are making a living skateboarding, the more diversity there can be.

(Nora Vasconcellos, 2016)

As highlighted in the final quote from professional US skateboarder, Nora Vasconcellos, the impact of the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympics has particularly significant ramifications for women in this sport that has long been dominated by young men (see Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). We explore the gendered impact of Olympic inclusion in more depth in Chapter 11.

Many of our interviewees (core skaters and industry insiders) acknowledged the potential of Olympic inclusion for challenging traditional stereotypes of skateboarders as troublemakers (Beal, 1995; Howell, 2005). They saw the value in the Olympics for offering new representations of skateboarders as serious athletes and thus making a valuable and unique contribution to the contemporary sporting landscape. Many hoped that such representations would lead to increased governmental investment in skateboarding facilities in local communities around the world, which would benefit everyday skaters:

Skateboarding is relatively inexpensive compared to other sports, and once you build a skate park, there's somewhere for kids to skate. And I look at it like, "Wow, if more countries could do this and give kids hope." I think that skateboarding in the Olympics will legitimise it in that way, where other municipalities and governments in general will look at it and go, "Yes, we can build this [skate] plaza". It seems so clear to me, how you can help kids and give them something to do, just via skateboarding.

(interview, 2015)

Other interviewees pointed out that changing longstanding stereotypes could also positively impact upon how skateboarders are treated by parents, the public, and authorities (Atencio et al., 2018; Howell, 2005):

There are people out there that have had nothing but bad experiences or bad tastes in their mouths with skateboarders their whole lives. They either broke the ledges out in front of the place, or graffiti-ed something. Did something not cool, who knows, whatever, trespassed, whatever. But now it's going to be like, "Wait those guys are on an Olympic stage! This is like legitimate now".

It's legitimate and it's like if the world is recognising it, if the Olympics are recognising it, and that's like the ultimate judgement.

Indeed, a recent article in the *New York Times* outlined the impact of Olympic inclusion on the rising number of skateparks being built across the USA and the changing attitudes of many city planners and policy makers (Armstrong, 2020). In one example, having recently invested in a series of new and upgraded skateparks, Jersey City's major, Steven Fulop, explained: "If you're really going to be a world-class city and you're going to invest in recreation, you need to think beyond traditional sports". In the same article, Brooklyn Commissioner for New York City's parks and recreation, Martin Maher states: "I can sit for hours and [be] amazed at skaters from like 30 cultural backgrounds playing in the space of a basketball court in total harmony. It's something to watch". While many of our interviewees embraced the possibilities for the Olympics changing stereotypical views of skateboarders and more facilities available to everyday participants, some core participants continued to hold onto their "oppositional" positioning and predicted many challenges for the sportisation of skateboarding, an activity they aligned more closely to art than to sport.

### **The sportisation of skateboarding: uniforms, drugs, and rules**

Even among those in support of Olympic inclusion, many skateboarders expressed their confusion when trying to imagine skateboarding at the Olympic Games. Part of the challenge here was how skateboarders would "fit" within the highly regulated and rule-bound structures of organised, elite, competitive "team" sport. Although most skateboarders recognised that competitions had been growing in popularity for a number of years among some groups of skaters, across our interviews, focus groups, and media analysis, concerns were repeatedly expressed about the strict rules and regulations of the Olympics. As the following quotes from professional skaters reflect, uniforms and drugs were topics of particular concern, reflecting the significantly different lifestyles and values inherent in skateboarding and elite sport culture:

I think it's cool skaters will be able to represent for their countries. But the Olympics will try to turn skateboarding into an organised sport with scoring systems, regulations, coaches, uniforms and drug testing and that's not what skateboarding is about.

(Jack Curtin, cited in *Skating In*, 2016)

I'm down with it. I think that it's gonna be good for skateboarding in general. But the uniforms for sure are gonna be suspect and I don't know who's gonna pass the drug test.

(Jaws, cited in *Skating In*, 2016)



As we discuss below, some of these sportisation concerns were overcome with creative collaborations across the skateboarding industry, whereas other issues continue to percolate.

### ***Uniforms: the politics of defining the skateboarding body***

The body has always been a key site of distinction in action sport cultures (Thorpe, 2011). With self-expression and creativity as core values in skateboarding culture, and the moving and clothed body as the embodiment of these values, it is perhaps not surprising that skateboarders balked at the idea of wearing uniforms. In contrast to sport climbing or surfing (Chapter 5), uniforms have continued to be a key concern among skateboarders at all levels. Professional skateboarders were some of the first to express their confusion about uniforms, which seemed to represent everything about elite, competitive “jock” sport cultures that they considered skateboarding as oppositional to. The following comments are representative of such concerns:

To be honest, I think it's really lame. I know these guys are trying to make it super legit—Street League style or whatnot. If I had it my way, the way skateboarding should be in the Olympics would be long jump, high jump and top speed. Make skateboarding look lame to everyone. There's gonna be too many parents at the skatepark trying to turn their kids into athletes. Hopefully it brings more money to the guys who don't get paid much so they get a little more. But I think it's going to be the select few. I really hope the outfits are super awesome with spandex and big numbers. I would love to be the costume-design guy.

(Mike Anderson, cited in *Skating In*, 2016)

It's definitely an interesting one. ... If I get invited I would probably go. The uniforms are another story. I could imagine them being pretty wack. They might as well go all out and give us a tutu.

(Louie Lopez, cited in *Skating In*, 2016)

It's gonna happen regardless. ... It's gonna be kinda weird but whatever. I don't even wanna think about the uniforms, man. It's gonna be really trippy.

(Ishod Wair, cited in *Skating In*, 2016)

As these comments reveal, skateboarders continued to come back to the issue of uniforms, and often used humour to emphasise the seeming absurdity of skateboarders wearing a national uniform.

Historically, skaters from sponsorship “teams” (i.e., Zephyr, Sims) wore clothing (mostly consisting of matching t-shirts) to identify themselves at competitions, but a national team uniform is a new concept for skateboarding. Likewise,

everyday skateboarders in Aotearoa New Zealand (2016), all said that the possibility of skaters wearing uniforms stuck them as “strange”:

Participant 1: Yeah. You couldn't really grasp what, like, it would be, you know, or how it... Your countries uniform, will they be skating around in their countries uniform?

Participant 2: Will they have to wear helmets and what not? It seems weird!  
(focus group 2)

The niche skateboarding magazine *Thrasher* tapped into this controversial topic, running a tongue-and-cheek “competition” for skaters to design their own uniforms. *Thrasher* offered readers their own parodied representations of skateboarding uniforms such as a skater in a Lycra one-piece covered in brand logos, and two naked skateboarders passing a large purple dildo as a baton (Olympic Skateboarding, 2016).

The attention given to this issue reveals skateboarders underlying concern about how far skateboarders were going to have to compromise their core values to fit within the rules and regulations of the Olympic Games. Were the IOC and national organizing bodies going to try to “force” skateboarding into their model of sport, or was there the possibility for skateboarding to maintain some authenticity and unique cultural style within the Olympic model? The issue of uniforms was controversial because it represented the power struggle between skateboarding core cultural values and elite, high performance sport, and particularly the IOC version of sport:

We are part of the process, but if the IOC or the Federation oblige the skateboarders or the riders, for example to wear a uniform, this is a fault, and no way, I prefer not see skateboarding at the Olympics than oblige the rider to wear some uniform. We need to keep the authenticity; again some compromise with the dollar. But it's mandatory to keep the values and authenticity.  
(French skater and industry member, 2015)

Uniforms continued to be a topic of much discussion and debate until Nike released their designs for the national team uniforms for Brazil, France, and the USA (February 2020). In consultation with the national organizing bodies, Nike worked with Dutch artist (and ex-skateboarder) Piet Parra to design a uniform that both reflected each nation and their core values and unique histories of skateboarding. The uniforms which reflected different elements of the history of skateboarding fashion—cargo pants, jumpsuit, tennis shirts—were applauded by many within the skateboard industry and culture. For example, the niche skateboarding company, The Berrics, endorsed the uniforms:

Gone are the tired flag color-blocking and form-fitting gear that makes your thighs chafe just by looking at it; Nike's new uniforms represent

skateboarding's individuality, with each "federation" getting its own voice and style (sometimes even paying homage to a country's unique sporting history, like Brazil's soccer-inspired uniforms).

(Nike Unveils, 2020)

Importantly, this relationship between Nike and some national organisations (i.e., Brazil, France, USA) was a financial one, and not all skateboarders at the Olympics will have access to uniforms with skate cultural influence in the design.

Ironically, a topic of heated discussion and debate seemed to have been resolved among many in the skateboarding culture through a carefully choreographed collaboration between national sports organising bodies (i.e., Brazilian Skateboarding Federation, French Skateboarding Federation, USA Skateboarding), a transnational corporation (Nike) and a trendy fashion designer with a historical relationship with skateboarding. For many core skateboarders, the homage to their skateboarding styles was a sign that the Olympic Games might be willing to provide space for them to bring their own cultural values (see Figure 8.7). Although a relatively small symbolic gesture, the topic of uniforms, and how quickly the core skateboarding culture seemed to accept the solution, is an example of the "flexible" (and forgetful) opposition among skateboarders (Dinces, 2011) in their dynamic relationship with the Olympic Games.

While many in the broader skateboarding culture expressed some relief that skateboarders would at least "look" like skaters at the Olympics, the topic of uniforms is symbolic of the wider intra-politics and shifting power dynamics within the skateboarding industry as a result of Olympic inclusion. With the USA playing such a key role in the global skateboarding industry—long producing and defining the styles of clothing and equipment—it is worth honing into the decisions that have been made in relation to the US skateboarding uniform and relationship with Nike. According to Josh Friedberg, President of USA Skateboarding (USAS), the motivation underpinning their approach to working with Nike was to give skateboarders options for self-expression through their clothing choices:

From the beginning our goal with the apparel for the games was just to make sure that the skaters would be comfortable and be able to skate in the clothes that they're used to skating in. We worked with Nike who came up with a handful of different options and combinations that the skaters can choose from so that they're most comfortable. It's like, "Hey, let's make it functional and what skaters are used to wearing so that they're, you know, not bothered by pants that are too tight, or too loose, or shirts that don't fit, or any of that stuff". So that's all taken care of. Obviously Nike is super good at what they do when it comes to apparel and I'm actually incredibly excited about their designs. It feels way more skateboarding than what a typical uniform would be.

(cited in Carnie, 2020)

Also recognizing the important relationships between skateboarders and their board and shoe sponsors, the USAS is allowing their athletes to wear their own shoes and ride their own equipment (boards, trucks, wheels, etc.) at all times, with the Nike apparel only mandatory during Olympic events. As Friedberg explains:

We've been purposeful in our team agreements to allow our skaters the freedom to represent their regular sponsors in all but a few specific situations. They're only required to wear USA Skateboarding apparel in Rule 50 controlled events, like the Olympics, and at some team specific appearances.  
(cited in Carnie, 2020)

According to Kelly Bird at Nike SB (the skateboarding focused branch of Nike), while they had some limits on their designs, they had found the IOC willing to give skateboarders some space to express themselves through their clothing choices:

It's been my experience so far that they [the IOC] want what we bring to the table more than they want to inject their customs into what we do. They're looking to skateboarding to bring something fresh to the Games. So I think they were being mindful of not trying to limit the creativity and they weren't as strict with the uniform guidelines as they are for some of the more traditional sports, which was cool.  
(cited in Carnie, 2020)

The flexibility that the IOC allowed for (some) skateboarding uniforms signals the value they see in skateboarders bringing their own fashion and embodied creativity to the Olympic Games. As we explained in Chapter 4, the IOC came to recognise the value in snowboarding's distinctive cultural style. As they loosened some of the rules around uniform and music, for example, Olympic snowboarding grew in popularity among audiences. The IOC's approach to skateboarding demonstrates some learnings from the inclusion of previous action sports.

However, some within the skateboarding industry asked questions as to why the contract for the US Skateboarding uniform was given to Nike and not a more longstanding core skateboarding brand. For example, Danny Way spoke out in an interview in *Transworld Skateboarding* about his concerns with this deal:

It might be worth working with the culture a little bit more to do things right. I think they [USAS] could have been slightly more courteous to the culture and also to the other brands that helped pave the way to get skateboarding to the platform that they are trying to capitalize on.  
(cited in Eisenhour, 2019a)

In response to such concerns, Josh Friedberg (USAS) and Kelly Bird (Nike SB) clarified that this was a sponsorship relationship based on both financial interest (i.e., willingness to pay the most money for the contract) and the proven ability

of the company to design appropriate clothing for skateboarders at the Olympics. For USAS, an existing relationship with skateboarding culture was important in this decision, but this was ultimately a financial deal:

We talked to a handful of companies and it quickly shook out into who had interest and who didn't. For some companies Olympic sponsorship programming isn't what they do, but for Nike that's something that they're very focused on, so it was a pretty natural fit. ... Yeah, it's a sponsorship deal and literally anyone could have proposed it. Had it been someone that didn't have any competency in skateboarding, we would have turned it down because that wouldn't have done us or skateboarding or our team any good.

(Josh Friedberg, cited in Carnie, 2020)

I know that the federations talk to anybody that's willing to come to them with sponsorship dollars. So certainly a New Balance, or a DC, or an Adidas, or a Lakai can sponsor any federation. It's certainly a money conversation, I'm sure there are other factors involved, but it's open to whoever wants to get into it.

(Kelly Bird, cited in Carnie, 2020)

To date, Nike SB is sponsoring the Brazilian, French, US, and the Japanese skateboarding team uniforms, with other national organising bodies working with different sponsors, some of whom will be from within the skateboarding industry, and others may not. At the time of writing, many countries were still struggling to establish a national organizing body for skateboarding and understand the qualification system, let alone consider uniform options (see Chapter 10).

The politics of Nike's sponsorship of several national skateboarding teams was not lost on some skateboarders. Even in our first phase of interviews, prior to Olympic inclusion, some of our participants predicted this shifting of power away from core skateboarding companies, to transnational corporations, such as Nike. While not speaking specifically to the topic of uniforms, some anticipated that smaller, more authentic skateboarding companies would be pushed out of the market by big corporations offering large sponsorship deals:

Absolutely, the big super powerful companies 100% back it [Olympic inclusion], but all they are is culture appropriators. The second it stops making them money, guess what, bye. ... they only want you if you're going to be on the podium holding the cup. ... But take into consideration the culture and how these brands are coming in and sort of selling culture and why they're doing it.

(skate industry insider, interview, 2015)

All the endemic brands now have to worry about all these non-endemic brands pushing at them, stealing their riders, doing all of this. The core skateboarding companies are not necessarily going to win in this Olympic bid.

(skate industry insider, interview, 2015)



*Figure 8.7* Image of Nike SB uniforms designed for the Brazilian, French, and USA skateboarding teams. Used with permission from Nike.

Therefore, to those in the skateboarding industry, uniforms are a battle over the power to define the skateboarding body and to reap the financial benefits.

As skateboarding enters the Olympics, the athletes bodies become “walking corporate billboards” and, thus, highly “valuable real estate”. In this context, the issue of skateboarding uniforms was further complicated in that some industry insiders were calling for clothing to be considered performance equipment, such that athletes could wear the clothing of their sponsors. Rather than advocating for this position, the Skateboarding Commission within World Skate accepted that “skateboarding apparel doesn’t meet the definition of performance equipment in the eyes of the IOC” (Friedman, cited in Carnie, 2020). Yet, the Director of Global Product Marketing Strategy at Vans (Justin Reagan), argued that the Skateboarding Commission at World Skate should have fought harder for the athletes’ rights to wear their own clothing:

This is my biggest issue with Olympic skateboarding right now. In the International Federation’s [IF: the Skateboarding Commission at World Skate] decision not to protect performance skate apparel as equipment, it favored

the National Federations [NFs] over athletes by stripping those sponsorship rights from the individual athletes, where they have traditionally existed in skateboarding, and gave them over to the NFs.

(cited in Carnie, 2020)

He went on to explain, “The athletes are the big losers... when the NFs take advantage of their [athletes] lack of organisation to remove their rights at the very moment of highest visibility”:

A decision by World Skate NOT to protect it [skateboarding ecosystem] gives the national federations, like USA Skateboarding, the rights to sell apparel as part of the “on field” team uniform, the most visible, and therefore valuable real estate.

(cited in Carnie, 2020)

Furthermore, Reagan argued that there would be longer-term impacts on the skate “ecosystem” which was becoming more like “traditional team sports”:

whereby team owners own rights versus individual athletes wherever professional skateboarding is currently less developed (i.e., most of the world). This is the total antithesis of the spirit and uniqueness of professional skateboarding that you and I grew up with.

(cited in Carnie, 2020)

Regan articulates how the leadership within World Skate and the Skateboarding Commission, did not advocate strongly enough for the athletes or the values of skateboarding:

Understand that the IOC knows nothing about skateboarding. It’s up to the IF to determine what falls within the guidelines for performance equipment for their sport. This decision is World Skate’s to make and recommend back to the IOC. Josh and Gary were supposedly acting inside World Skate to inform these decisions on behalf of skateboarding.

(cited in Carnie, 2020)

As we have shown, uniforms are an excellent exemplar of the intertwined cultural and economic struggles over the skateboarding body; who has the power to define what a skateboarder can wear at the Olympic Games, and, most importantly, who gains economically from such decisions? This issue also reveals the changing power dynamics within the US skateboarding industry, with skate company clothing sponsors who have long been a significant source of sponsorship and support for professional skateboarders, losing power to National Federations who have previously had little or no control over what skateboarders wear or do. As the comment from Regan above suggests, as the power continues

to shift, it is the skateboarders themselves who are losing some autonomy over what they wear and their contractual obligations to their sponsors. In summary, while uniforms may seem insignificant to many outside of skateboarding culture and industry, they highlight the ongoing struggles and changing power relations within the skateboarding industry, with National Federations a new power broker in defining who and what will be made visible at the Olympic Games.

### ***Organisation and qualification: who defines the rules?***

Since the announcement that skateboarding was shortlisted for Tokyo 2020, it was largely fears of the unknown and loss of control over defining their sport that caused the most anxieties among skateboarders (see Chapter 5). Many remained “hopeful” that “we will have someone in charge” that understands skateboarders view and issues:

There’s definitely a right and wrong way to do things. Hopefully, we can have some sort of representation with whoever does end up representing our sport and hopefully make sure the right people are in there, the right format and things like that on the contest side, because that’s important!

(skate industry insider, interview, 2015)

As detailed in Chapter 6, the process of deciding who would govern skateboarding was long and complicated. Even with the collaboration between Fédération Internationale de Roller Sports (FIRS) and ISA, and then the formation of the Skateboarding Commission under the umbrella of World Skate, there was a lot of work ahead of those organising skateboarding at the international level. Of particular urgency was the preparation of National Federations and the athletes, and developing the most appropriate formats for competition and systems of judging that would be respected by the athletes and cultural participants, and easily understood by mainstream audiences. A number of interviewees in our first phase of research (2015–2016) recognised the challenges ahead for governance, with some admitting confusion as to how funding would be organised and administered and how athletes would qualify to compete:

There’s only a few places in the world where [competitive skateboarding] is really dialled in. There’s going to be a lot of work to do in a short period of time.

(2015)

It would be great if some money trickled down from the federation ... but it’s going to be interesting how they allocate that, and who’s going to be in charge of giving the money out. From my understanding, there will be a ranking system or something that’s going to have to be created for how



skaters go to the Olympics, but I don't really know. I keep hearing different things, so I don't know how it's going to work. You're going to have to win certain competitions, I'm assuming, just like other sports.

(2016)

I think too, about training and being an athlete, who's in charge of coaching? Most skateboarders don't have coaches, some do; now it's becoming very popular to have a coach. I hear it more and more. So yeah, who's in charge of all this stuff and how does that work? I don't know. I'm not sure...

(2015)

Similarly, professional skateboarders raised many questions as it was challenging to imagine the processes that would need to occur over a short period of time:

All I know is my dad is super stoked on it. He called me and said, "You got four years to train." I haven't really thought about it too much but honestly it's gonna be weird. Because I just can't grasp the idea of skateboarding in the Olympics. Like, how it's going to be laid out or whatever? It just doesn't click for me.

(Professional US skateboarder, Paul Hart, cited in  
Skating in the Olympics, 2016)

Whereas some expressed confusion, as outlined in Chapter 5, strong opinions were expressed about which events should or should not be included, and why street and park were the two events chosen from many other options (i.e., big air, vert, halfpipe, mega ramp). Most recognised street skating was the most culturally relevant style and park was an opportunity to showcase the energy of a pool event (see Chapter 5). Regardless of which events were included, skateboarders were of the strong opinion that the processes for making such decisions should be managed by skateboarders and those already involved in the organisation of skateboarding events. It was of utmost importance that the IOC, and any other actors in the process, worked with those who have a deep understanding and respect for the culture:

Skateboarding, it's such a passionate sport!... They're not used to being told what to do, it causes friction in general. And they're very eccentric. But I think in terms of the best show and the best possible product for NBC and the Olympics, it would be smart to have the experts tell them how to do it so they can have that end result.

(skateboard industry insider, interview, 2015)

If they're not skateboarders, what if they don't have a background in it... then they shouldn't have anything to do with it!

(focus group 1, young male skater, 2016)

I think what matters is who chooses our athletes to compete in the nationals, to then be chosen to go through to the Olympics. I think the people that either choose them, or organise the competitions, matter. Um, cos they'd make sure that it had the right marketing, and it had the right reach, and the right sponsors would be involved. It's just terrible when people... take advantage of industries, and it goes pear shaped.

(focus group 1, young male skater, 2016)

Although it was the IOC—in collaboration with the Tokyo OC and the ISF—that decided in 2015 that street and park were the two Olympic events to feature in the Tokyo Programme, what these events looked like, how athletes qualified, and how they were judged, remained in question. It was the subsequent relationships between the IOC, World Skate and the Skateboarding Commission (with leadership from US skate industry members Gary Reams, Josh Freidman, among others), and US-based skateboarding event series that played an important role in the next stage of developments. Despite various options, World Skate and the Skateboarding Commission worked closely with the Street League Series and Vans Park Series to model the Olympic events off these already successful skateboarding competition series, and to incorporate these existing events into the qualification process. In so doing, Olympic skateboarding was not trying to “reinvent the wheel” but rather to work with industry and event organisations already with the experience and cultural acumen needed to successfully bring skateboarding into the Olympics. As we note in Chapter 6 (governance), such relationships with existing sports events series were enabled under Agenda 2020 that endorses the IOC building relationships with sporting competitions and industry partners.

The Street League Series (SLS) organises the key qualifying events for Olympic park skateboarding. The SLS was founded in 2010 by professional skateboarder and entrepreneur Rob Dyrdek, and originally featured 25 professional street skaters competing for the largest monetary prize in the history of skateboarding (US\$200,000). Early versions of the SLS were criticised for being male-dominated (women were included in 2015) with an invitational approach that privileged some, typically North American skaters. Women's inclusion in the SLS came about from a partnership with the Women's Skate Alliance (led by Mimi Knoop), an organisation that had long been advocating for the opportunities for women in skateboarding (see Chapter 11). Even with women's inclusion in 2015, the prize monies were highly disparate with the women's winner (Leticia Bufoni) receiving US\$30,000 and the male winner taking home a cheque worth US\$200,000. In April 2018, the SLS entered into collaboration with World Skate to become the body's official and exclusive world tour and world championship until 2022. This involved expanding the number of events and locations, to include five separate two-day events each year, and including women's events at each stop. Importantly, the revised SLS series involved a doubling in the number of competitors, opening up more opportunities to international skateboarders. According to a joint press release from the SLS and World Skate:

The alliance represents the dawning of a new era in sport, where the complementary skills and experience of an international federation and the leading commercial enterprise in the associated sport are united to foster the global growth of the sport.

(2018)

The SLS has a number of large corporate sponsors (i.e., Monster Energy, Beats by Dre, G-Shock), and close media partners (i.e., Thrill One Sports and Entertainment). In 2020, the SLS schedule was due to incorporate events in the USA (Las Vegas) and China (Beijing), culminating with the World Championship in London in May, and then the Olympics two months later. Podium placement at the World Championships would provide straight qualification for Tokyo 2020.

Similar to the SLS, World Skate partnered with The Vans Park Series as the official qualification series for the Olympic Games park events. The collaboration between the Vans Park Series and the International Skateboarding Federation pre-dates any official relationship with World Skate. In 2018, the World Skate sanctioned inaugural Park Skateboarding World Championship took place in Nanjing, China, with competitors becoming eligible through World Skate National Federations as well as the Vans Park Series Professional League. Subsequently, the Vans Park Series has become the blueprint for the layout of park terrain competitions at the Tokyo Olympics. The Vans Park Series organises the official park terrain skateboarding Pro Tour and Regionals. The Men's and Women's Pro Tour consists of events in France (Paris), Canada (Montreal), and the USA (Salt Lake City), with the Tour "gifting" three new, state-of-the-art skateparks to these cities as part of their global tour. The concept of the skatepark as a legacy for the local community is being replicated at the Tokyo Olympics and beyond. As well as the Pro Tour events, the Van Series also includes regional events in Asia (Japan), Oceania (Australia), Africa (South Africa), Europe (France), and Americas (Canada).

During our first phase of interviews, skateboard industry insiders expressed their concerns over how athletes would qualify for the Olympic Games, in particular that only some athletes were being invited to compete at particular events, based on corporate interests. According to one sports agent, "the only people that get invited for the most part are whoever's sponsoring it", adding: "like my clients are getting left out because they're not on Monster [the sponsor]. And kids that shouldn't be in certain disciplines, because they're on Monster, are getting invited. To me that's total bullshit" (interview, 2015). A skate industry insider similarly commented:

The three big contests outside of the world championships are X Games, Street League and Dew Tour. All three of them are hurting a little bit financially right now. They're not making any money and they're laying off people, but part of the problem is that they all only invite specific skaters. And they invite them based on everything except for how they're doing on the contest,

how they compete. ... It's like picking Michael Phelps to swim in the Olympics because he has more Facebook likes than anybody else.

(interview, 2015)

Recognizing the challenges of qualification and the importance of a clear and fair approach, World Skate and the Skateboarding Commission worked closely with the IOC to develop a systematic approach to qualification. At the time of inclusion, the IOC had confirmed 80 quota spots for skateboarders at Tokyo across park terrain (20 men and 20 women) and street (20 men and 20 women). But at the time of our interview with the Tokyo Organizing Committee in December 2018, they were still confused as to how skateboarders would qualify for the Games:

We still don't know how the entry is ... How are they going to select the athlete? That's a little bit challenging too. It's challenging in, are the professional athletes interested to come to the Olympic Games or not? We want the best athletes, so we have to work together with the IOC and IFs.

(2018)

Finally, World Skate confirmed that each country, or National Olympic Committee, would be allowed six men and six women for skateboarding. But no country would be allowed more than three athletes per gender per event, as stated per the World Skate qualification system. Three athletes would qualify as the highest-ranked skaters in the 2020 Season World Skate World Skateboarding Championship events (Vans Series and the SLS). Sixteen would be eligible through the Olympic World Skateboarding Rankings as of June 1, 2020. One athlete would also qualify as the allocated host nation slot as the highest-ranked skater in the host nation (Japan for 2021). In 2020, all of the Vans Park Series and SLS international qualifying events were either cancelled or postponed due to COVID. The IOC subsequently approved an extension of the qualifying period ("season two") through to the end of June 2021. All results already achieved in "season one" and in the early parts of "season two" continued to stand, but the extension of the season was necessary to ensure maximum amount of time and flexibility to hold qualification events.

While the Vans Park Series and SLS had recently been expanded to offer a more comprehensive international series, it is important to note that both event series were founded in the USA with deep connections to the US skateboarding industry. Despite claims about the international representation on the International Skateboarding Federation (that ultimately became the Skateboarding Commission under World Skate), this was also a predominantly US-industry based organisation. The relationships between the Chair of ISF (later World Skate Skateboarding Commission), Gary Reams, and US-based skateboarding industry members have played a key role in the agreements made with both qualifying series. Part of the challenge for establishing a global qualification system then, was to ensure athletes from around the world had a fair chance to access events. World

Skate and the IOC reached an agreement with Vans Park Series and SLS as the official points-based qualifying series for the Olympic Games, with other national and regional events also providing points towards qualification. However, Tim McFerran, disgruntled WSF President (and now founder of World Skateboarding Grand Prix, a global skate events management company with events in South Africa, Turkey, Peru, USA, and Latin America), spoke out about the relationship between World Skate and SLS, proclaiming: “I find this agreement to be very dangerous and reckless to all of skateboarding and completely adverse to the IOC’s idea of inclusiveness”. His concern was that the US-dominated and defined system of qualification would not be widely accessible to skaters in other parts of the world. Continuing, he argued that the London Pro Open (the culmination of the series) was highly exclusive:

It’s not open, it’s closed. You have 29 skateboarders, all hand-picked or invited, and they are competing for a one-year contract to compete on this year’s tour. There are thousands of skateboarders all over the world who have no way of being part of this process. In many countries there is no national governing body for the sport. If you are a skateboarder in Turkey, or South Africa, how are you going to qualify for Tokyo 2020? That’s against everything the Olympics is supposed to be about. It appears to be a marketing gimmick...

(cited in Rowbottom, 2018)

In May 2019 a further controversy emerged when the Street League Series scheduled a World Tour Event in Los Angeles at the same time as the Pan Am Games (another qualifying event for skateboarding) were to be held in Lima (Peru). Pan Am Sports proclaimed a “lack of respect” shown by SLS and World Skate, and proclaimed a lack of organisation, poor communication and a questionable classification process:

The recent scheduling of a qualifying event for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games for the discipline of street skateboarding in the city of Los Angeles, on exactly the same dates as the skateboarding events at the Pan American Games of Lima 2019, is something we understand as a lack of respect to the Pan American Games, to the athletes that were going to participate in these Games and fundamentally, to the Organising Committee of Lima 2019.

(cited in Morgan, 2019a)

As a result, the Pan Am Games rejected skateboarding from the event. World Skate offered an apology, publicly stating that it regretted the decision taken by Pan Am Sports and promised in the future to “give top priority to key events such as the Pan-American Games by means of a qualification process able to guarantee quality, transparency and equal opportunities to athletes and the entire sport community” (cited in Morgan, 2019b). Again, Tim McFerran used the opportunity to air his grievances, including concerns about the questionable qualification

processes in practice by SLS, and decisions made by World Skate to enter into a partnership with a US-based events company that was not truly international in its focus and priorities.

As signposted by Barjolin-Smith (2020), the relationship between action sports (particularly snowboarding, skateboarding and surfing) with American youth culture is longstanding and still significant. In the case of skateboarding, we clearly see that the IOC's relationship with the US-skateboarding industry will have a strong impact on how skateboarding is presented at the Olympic Games. To paraphrase Barjolin-Smith's arguments about snowboarding and the Winter Olympics, Olympic skateboarding is likely to be an "American-driven show" because of the strategic alignments that the IOC has made with key individuals and organisations in the US-based skateboarding industry. Such alignments are not simply because of the US-dominance in the global skateboarding industry. For the IOC, the US market and the relationships with American-based sponsors and television and media partners are also highly valuable economic considerations that have contributed to such leanings (fieldwork observations and informal conversations at various IOC events).

So, not dissimilar from the issue of uniforms, while everyday skateboarders seem to be largely satisfied that the events leading to Olympic qualification are those already organised and run by skateboarders for skateboarders, our analysis shows more complex workings; the decisions being made as to who organises the events, and thus makes critical decisions about who will qualify, are highly political and economically driven, and exacerbating inequalities. With both the qualifying tours organised by US-based skateboarding companies with longstanding relationships with key members of World Skate, we see a close alignment emerging between the IOC and the US-skateboarding industry. Inevitably, the version of skateboarding at the Olympics will be highly influenced by the American skateboarding culture and industry.

## **Drugs**

Lastly, the issue of drugs was another topic of much debate among skateboarders, providing another vivid example of a "clash of cultural values", and skateboarders' hesitation to bend to the "rules and regulations" of elite Olympic sport (see Chapter 6). The following dialogue with a focus group of young core skateboarders is revealing:

...a lot of them are just like, druggies. ... pretty much everyone that skates' smokes weed.

So, the drug tests, I was thinking about that... to be fair, Nyjah Huston who's pretty much like, the superman of skateboarding; he's high in every single competition, very visibly...

...and it's like, well how do you give the perception that skateboarding, I don't know... is sort of, not a drug related thing?

(focus group 2, 2016)

Some professional skateboarders and industry insiders predicted that those unwilling or unable to stay clean would likely steer clear of the Games. As the following interviewee from our first phase of research (2015) identified, even prior to Olympic inclusion, industry insiders recognised the need for proper education for those seeking to go to the Olympics, and a rethinking of how skateboarding industry and events have typically approached drug testing for competitive skateboarders:

I think skateboarding's got some real problems that have to be fixed. Number one is the drug education part of it, and I think that's a huge problem. I just sent an email to WADA and sent an email to Thomas Bach, because I think what Street League did at the Chicago Finals, I don't know if you heard about that? They announced that they were going to do a drug test for the final eight guys, and they did it like a week or two before the event, then they realised that if they were going to go by WADA rules that if anybody tested positive, they would have to suspend them. So then, they cancelled the contest and I think that put a shadow over all of skateboarding that these guys are a bunch of drug users, and I don't think that's fair. So my standpoint is, number one you've got to do the education. These guys are not used to drug testing. This is new to skateboarding, and they're going to want to know when's the last time I can smoke pot before the contest? They're going to want to know things like that. And that's what the education process has to be. I guarantee if you put the proper education processes in, no one will test positive.

(interview, 2015)

Another controversial situation arose when the 2016 X Games in Norway refused to drug test their athletes, proclaiming it was a private event and, thus, did not need to follow World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) protocol. ESPN and the X Games were widely criticised by the heads of the Olympics, Norway's anti-doping federation, and WADA. The WADA director general David Howman called the lack of testing "surprising and regrettable. This sends the wrong message to athletes at a fragile time for clean sport worldwide" (WADA Head, 2016). But ESPN reiterated that they are an independent event with their own guidelines for competition and athlete participation. While their own policy is no testing, they have always provided space and credentials so that other organisations can set up and conduct their own "out-of-competition" tests. Similar concerns were raised by WSF President Tim McFerren, with (another) lawsuit filed alleging that the ISF—a WADA-approved governing body—had been intentionally circumventing anti-doping procedures and openly allowing alcohol and drugs at sanctioned events. The lawsuit claimed that ISF violated WADA standards by handpicking athletes who were tested, and notifying them ahead of time.

Recognizing this as an area requiring careful attention, World Skate and the Skateboarding Commission have developed clearer policies around drug-testing

with some national governing bodies educating their athletes about what is on the WADA prohibited list of substances. For example, CEO of USA Skateboarding Josh Friedberg explained in *Transworld Skateboarding* (2019) that skaters do not need to worry too much about the THC from marijuana usage, but they should be informed and be careful:

We recommend that people don't smoke eight weeks before any potential events that would be subject to anti-doping. It's going to depend on what the THC level is in your body. WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency) actually increased that level ten-fold compared to what it was. With weed becoming legal in many states and countries, the anti-doping policies have evolved which I think is a good thing. That said if the THC level in your body is too high it will result in a suspension.

(cited in Eisenhour, 2019b)

As highlighted in Friedberg's comments above, the challenge is that while United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) rules state that the use of marijuana outside of competition is not prohibited, athletes can face sanctions if it is found in their system during events. Thus, the message within skateboarding is not that Olympic hopefuls must give up recreational and therapeutic drugs (i.e., marijuana), but being careful with timing such that they do not accidentally test positive if they are tested at a competition. This is another example of skateboarders finding ways to be included within the Olympic Games—navigating rules and regulations—without having to give up their taste and lifestyle practices. In Tokyo 2020 and beyond, we may see some skateboarders challenging the rules and regulations, with some getting “caught out”, as we witnessed with snowboarding in 1998 (see Chapter 4). Over time, however, skateboarders will either opt into or out of the Olympic model, and the pathway to the Olympics will likely become much clearer. As we saw with snowboarding, those who do not want to alter their lifestyles, will continue to pursue alternative career paths (i.e., niche media) which will continue to be available within the skateboarding industry.

## Conclusions

For many, both inside and outside of skateboarding, the differences between skateboarding culture and the Olympic Games appeared to be too radical. How could these two seemingly diametrically opposed sporting cultures—one with a history in anti-establishment and DIY values, and the other as the most powerful sporting establishment with rigorous rules and regulations—work together to produce something that was respectful of the traditions and values of both? As this chapter has shown, while many skateboarders were outraged, confused, or ambivalent about Olympic inclusion, many of their gravest concerns (i.e., uniforms, event organisation, drugs) were (partially) resolved with creative and strategic collaborations between the IOC, World Skate, the Skateboarding Commission, and key



skateboarding industry partners. Some within the industry have expressed concerns about the less than transparent dealings and US prevalence (culturally and economically) in some of these strategic collaborations. Somewhat surprisingly, however, the disgust that many professional, core, and some everyday skateboarders initially expressed at the prospect of their sporting culture being subsumed within the Olympic model appears to be resolving. Increasingly, skateboarders (particularly those professional athletes working with key partners and hoping to qualify) were voicing their excitement for the Olympic Games.

In sum, as Dinces (2011) reminds us, regardless of how creatively skaters have crafted a subculture based on their “oppositional” positioning, they have always interacted symbiotically with cultural commodities and structures of capitalism (i.e., media, fashion). As skateboarding has been incorporated into the Olympic Games, these processes of cultural accumulations and contestation have been further exacerbated. Yet, the power struggles over who has the right to “define” skateboarding at the Olympic Games are shifting, with corporations outside of the sporting culture gaining power (i.e., Nike) and National Federations taking on new roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, some nations will gain power in the processes of sportisation, with athletes in underfunded countries increasingly struggling to compete at the same levels of countries who are investing significantly in Olympic athlete development and infrastructure (see Chapter 10). The power relations within the skateboarding industry, sport, and culture are shifting, and these will be felt most strongly by the athletes who are navigating new terrain in the lead up to and beyond the Tokyo Olympics.

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## Surfing's paradoxical journey from alternative lifestyle to Olympic sport

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Surfing's history as a Polynesian cultural practice in pre-colonial Hawaii is well documented (Walker, 2017). As “the birthplace of the sport” (Lewis, 2017), Hawaii continues to hold a symbolically significant place in surfing culture and mythology. Yet through processes of colonisation and cultural appropriation, from the 1950s—and fuelled particularly by Hollywood and the surf music craze (i.e. The Beach Boys)—surfing became re-imagined as an “American-made” (Barjolin-Smith, 2020, p. 5), nomadic countercultural, youthful lifestyle, centred on the West Coast of the USA (Booth, 2001; Lawler, 2011). This image has subsequently been extended globally in popular discourses (Comer, 2010; Laderman, 2014; Wheaton, 2013). As Lawler (2017) argues,

what over a century of tourism and beach promoters, journalists, advertisers, and filmmakers have known and put to profitable use: the surfer is American culture's most prominent and most consistent archetype of freedom.

(p. 306)

Barjolin-Smith (2020) also suggest that the USA continues to drive this narrative of surfing as a specifically American youth culture (along with other modern lifestyle sports snowboarding and skateboarding) because they “hold important cultural, ideological, and economic values associated with the United States” (p. 5) that make them valuable economic and political resources. The Olympics provides another opportunity to further this Americanisation agenda (Barjolin-Smith, 2020).

Yet, as Hough-Snee and Eastman (2017) explain in the introduction to their *Critical Surf Studies Reader*, this narrative masks surfing's more diverse and complex past and present which is shaped by “Indigenous, colonial, industrial, and neoliberal histories” (p. 2). Surfing is “a profoundly complex global practice, rife with contradictions” and which can be variously understood as “religion, cultural practice, ludic pursuit, countercultural iconography, competitive sport, multinational industry, and consumer culture” (Hough-Snee & Eastman, 2017, p. 2). Importantly, surfing culture involves “material content” (Booth, 2017), including

equipment from boards to wetsuits and increasingly lifestyle accessories, fuelled by the growth of a multimillion-dollar surfing industry. Surfing brands appeal to consumer's emotions and dreams in a very effective ways promoting desirable, exhilarating, "exotic", adrenaline-fuelled surfing experiences. The development of this industry from local backyards in the 1950s focused on surf-board production, to multinational corporations worth billions in the late 1980s and 1990s selling lifestyle commodities such as clothing and accessories to new "mainstream" markets beyond surfing's core consumers, has been well documented (Booth, 2017; Hough-Snee, 2020; Stranger, 2011; Warren & Gilson, 2017). Throughout the 1980s, led by the so-called global "big three"—Quiksilver, Rip Curl, and Billabong—these companies expanded rapidly, both demographically and geographically (Stranger, 2011).

Therefore, as Douglas Booth (2017) argues, to understand surfing culture it is important to pay attention to its political economy. Developing what he terms a "historical materialist analysis" of surfing culture, he argues that surfing's "material content" needs to be located in the capitalist mode of production, that is, recognising the ways in which economic growth, competition, and the various relations of production and consumption are all important parts of surfing culture's political economy (2017, p. 324). As Booth (2017) also shows, many cultural relationships in surfing have coalesced around a "paradox"; that on one hand, surfers "celebrate irreverence", escape, and "harmony with the natural world", yet they also "strive to accumulate various forms of cultural and economic capital" (p. 319). This paradox, we argue, also underpins the various forms of contestation over surfing's appropriation as an Olympic sport. In this chapter, we consider how Olympic surfing has been "formed in articulation with various indeterminate economic, political and ideological forces and processes" (cf. Belanger, 2009, p. 63) that have shaped surfing's somewhat paradoxical and shifting relationship with the Olympic Movement.

Despite surfing's dominant cultural narrative, surfing culture has fragmented and changed, including over the past five years. No longer the preserve of youth, demographics such as age, gender, and nationality have shifted (Wheaton, 2013). As Booth (2017) illustrates, in Australia, participation "over the past 12 years has halved amongst youth", with surfers aged 15–17 having the lowest participation of any age group (p. 334). In contrast, older surfers, those aged 35–44, are the biggest demographic group. Also diverging from the popular narrative of youthful hedonism, Western surfers are increasingly associated with affluence: "surfing is now perceived as a pastime nestled between golf and yoga" (Hough-Snee & Eastman, 2017, p. 14). Compounding and driving this demographic change is the economic decline of the surfing industry, particularly the financial collapse of many major brands over the past decade. As Warren and Gibson (2017) show, this downturn in profitability can be attributed to a combination of cultural issue in brand legitimacy, macro-economic factors (i.e. the Global Financial Crisis), and the companies capitalist accumulation strategies including debt financed global

expansion, public-listing, risk, standardised global products, and take-over by non-surfing executives:

With values pertaining to surfing replaced with imperatives of market share and growth, the corporatised, multinational brands lost meaningful connections to subcultural origins. As one former Billabong employee put it: “We completely sold out. That’s the reality”.

(Warren & Gibson, 2017, p. 184)

As surf megabrands became stripped of their cool, they were subsequently abandoned by surfing’s core consumers (Warren & Gibson, 2017). According to Bob McKnight, CEO of Quiksilver International, less than 10% of those who identify with surfing actually ride waves (Booth, 2017, p. 334). This struggle over cultural authenticity—and over capital via the means of production and consumption—defined the surf industry at the time of Olympic inclusion:

Most generations now are right into the commercial arm of surfing. ... That’s what 40 years of pumping the next big thing ends up doing. ... The numbers of purists are diminishing.

(interview, 2015)

As these cultural insiders recognised, surfing’s “countercultural identity” was something some surfers “cling-to” despite the corporate take-over of the industry and culture.

Within this cultural and economic milieu, Olympic inclusion presented potential new revenue streams for an industry struggling with financial decline, unprofitable professional leagues, and events and athletes suffering from cancelled sponsorship deals. Conversely, the industry was cognisant that it needed to find ways to re-connect with their core audiences, which the Olympics was unlikely to provide (See Chapter 7). In this chapter we map these tensions in both the cultural and economic realms (i.e. relations of production and consumption), showing how different groups within the surfing industry and broader Olympic stakeholders were struggling for control and ownership of surfing’s cultural, physical, and economic capital (p. 319). The emergence of the artificial wave pool as a potential venue for Olympic surfing provides a revealing case study. The development of this potentially profitable new technology was highly contested among surfers centred on debates about “authentic surfing”. Yet, examining relations of production and consumption reveals that wave pool development was intertwined with vested interests, including commercial opportunities to solidify power in this rapidly expanding market and the political interests of Tokyo and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for creating a particular Olympic legacy which re-connects the Japanese people with the coast (IOC, 2016). In the last section of the chapter, we unpack the claims made by the International

Surfing Association (ISA) and IOC about surfing's potential impact for implementing aspects of Agenda 2020. We show that contrary to the claims made by the ISA and IOC, that surfing is a globally popular sport that would increase global youth (IOC, 2016), competitive surfing—including at the Olympics—is an elitist sport, with limited geographic and demographic reach.

First, to give some context we briefly discuss the development of competitive surfing culture. This historical perspective shows how contestation over different surfing styles, between regions and nations, first developed. This tension underpinned ongoing differences in the processes of sportisation and professionalisation both before and after surfing's Olympic inclusion.

### **The institutionalisation of competitive surfing**

Commentators in the 1970s and 1980s argued that surfing culture had “a competitive taboo” (Farmer, 1992; Pearson, 1979). Yet competitive surfing has played a significant part in defining surfing as a marketable and mediated consumer experience, particularly shortboard riding. In contrast to the dominant narrative, professionalisation and institutionalisation have been evident in surfing since the 1960s (Booth, 2001). Sport historian Booth (1999) notes that the first international surfboard riding competition was held in 1954 in Makaha, Hawai'i and has continued to play a significant, yet ambiguous role in the global spread of surfing. Then in the mid-1970s “a group of sports-minded surfers” inaugurated a professional tour, largely as they believed it would provide an economic avenue to pursue their lifestyles (Booth, 2017, p. 328). These surfers formed the International Professional Surfers, the forerunner of the ASP (Association of Surfing Professionals), which subsequently governed professional surfing until the mid-2000s, when it was sold to ZoSea Media and rebranded as the World Surf League (WSL) (Booth, 2017).

Yet, surfing's globalisation was not linear or uniform (Wheaton, 2005), and from the 1960s there was already considerable local diversity in surfing's meaning and performance styles across the main settings (Australia, California and Hawaii). Indeed, various attempts from the 1960s to impose “universal” international rules caused conflict between these settings as each wanted to preserve the authenticity of its unique surfing “style” (Booth, 2001). For example, Hawaiian surfers “danced with waves” whereas Australians were “gladiators of the surf, conquering and attacking them” (Booth, 1995, p. 194). As Booth (2001) outlines, these different “local” meanings, including divergent philosophies about “relationships with nature” (p. 101), impacted attitudes to competition and institutionalisation, which to some extent were still apparent at the beginning of surfing's Olympic journey. For example, according to one North American industry insider, California continued to embrace the “romantic version of surfing” that had impacted, to some extent, the development of competitive surfing (interview, 2015). He explained:

California is the dominant surf culture in America, and Californians essentially don't like competitive surfing – the surf culture there has a much more



romantic version of surfing... they like the idea that surfers are really sort of rebels and cool and all that stuff.

(2015)

In Hawai'i surfing is part of the island's Polynesian cultural heritage (Ingersoll, 2016; Walker, 2017) and underpinned by the Hawaiian concept of *kuleana*, broadly a "responsibility to community and environment" (Hough-Snee & Eastman, 2017, p. 17). Hawaiian surfing, therefore, emphasised being at one with waves and nature, and embraced institutionalised forms of the activity more slowly than other regions (Booth, 2001). As Walker (2017) outlines, *kuleana* continues to give meaning to Indigenous Hawaiian surfers. Native Hawaiian professional surfers on the world stage continue to embody and display a unique sporting and cultural identity and sovereignty (Walker, 2017).

In contrast to Hawaii and the USA, from the 1970s, Australia had a more competitive and aggressive surfing culture. As we illustrate further in Chapter 10, surf culture in Australia was institutionalised earlier than most national contexts. Booth (2001) demonstrates how the pre-existence and dominance of Surf Lifesaving clubs on Australian beaches impacted surfing's institutionalisation and more competitive character. The Surf Lifesaving clubs' had an aggressive masculinist ethos which also infused the surfer's style which Booth (2001) described as one of dominating the waves. Australia has subsequently become dominant in professional surfing with multiple professional world champions, male and female, past and present. Over time, Brazil has emerged as a surfing powerhouse, particularly in men's professional surfing. Known for their aggressive and competitive approach, four Brazilian men were in the top 20 placed surfers in the WSL's Championship Tour (CT) in 2019, with the top four spots dominated by the Brazilian trio of Italo Ferreira, Felipe Toledo, and two-time world champion Gabriel Medina. However, Brazilian women, until recently, have been less successful, which as we discuss in Chapter 11 is reflective of the ways in which female surfers have been "othered" in Brazilian beach culture (Knijnik, Horton & Cruz, 2010).

Lastly, in mapping surfing's institutionalised landscape, it is important to note that Olympic surfing has been fronted by the ISA. As we discuss in Chapter 6, the ISA is a non-professional and relatively peripheral organisation in surfing's core culture. Yet, the ISA has been lobbying for surfing's Olympic inclusion since the 1970s, losing five Olympic bids—Sydney, Athens, Beijing, London, and Brazil—leading many to question "the sport's ability to influence the IOC" (Surfing Included, 2015). The personal drive and passion of current ISA President Fernando Aguerre, an Argentinian but California-based former surfing industry leader, had mobilised this desire into a reality, despite most other stakeholders in surfing showing little interest. However, despite the ISA's visibility in surfing's Olympic story, it is a relatively small organisation, without the cultural or economic power of either professional surfing (the WSL) or the surf industry.

## **Cultural contestation: Olympic inclusion and key debates in the surfing culture**

In Chapter 5 we outlined cultural contestation (in the niche media and core participants) across the three action sports as provoked by Olympic inclusion. Here we briefly highlight the key debates specific to surfing. Underpinning many concerns about Olympic inclusion were longstanding “authenticity debates” about what surfing was, has become, and should or could be. Core surfers were fearful that who held the cultural and economic power to define surfing was shifting.

The most prevalent concern in the niche media and among all demographics of surfers was the prospect of over-crowded surf breaks, which it was believed would be further exacerbated by Olympic exposure to new audiences (Chapter 5). Many core surfers—in the niche media and across our interviews—also continued to lament commercialisation and competitive surfing, which was seen as “selling the soul of the sport” (interviewee, 2015). The idea that “authentic” surfing takes place in natural and ever-changing environment has long been central to surfing culture (Ponting, 2017). The control and structure of competition was seen as the antithesis of surfer’s spiritual relationship to nature (Booth, 2001; Lazarow & Olive, 2017; Taylor, 2007; Wheaton, 2007):

the surfing identity is so tied to a relationship to nature, in a constantly shifting, unpredictable environment. Competition demands structure, it demands repetition, and it demands stability. And That’s not surfing.

(interview, 2015)

In this context, as we detail below, the possibility of surfing taking place in an artificial wave pool rather than the ocean became one of the most vociferously debated and contested issues (see also Ponting, 2017; Roberts & Ponting, 2020; Wheaton, 2020). However, even among those who were more accepting of competition, there were debates about the format and style of Olympic competition, and of surfer’s as Olympic athletes. Many were perplexed about how current competitive formats and environments would fit with the Olympics, particularly given the ever-changing environment and subjective nature of judging the sport (Chapter 5). Like skateboarding, many surfers continue to see the activity as an art form and resent this further sportisation of surfing as a cultural form. The idea of a national uniform and being part of a team was also seen as “counter to the bohemian nature of the sport” (interview, 2015), as was drug testing. Recreational drugs were considered to be endemic to the sport’s lifestyle, including among some professional competitors (see Chapter 8 for similar observations in skateboarding). The drug-related death of three-time world champion professional surfer, Andy Irons, in 2010 (see Thorpe, 2015) had been a defining cultural moment in bringing this to the fore, and had sparked a wider conversation in the sport (interview, 2015). However, in 2018 the WSL was still not World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) compliant (interview, Surfing Australia 2018) perhaps suggesting this was not a high priority. An anti-Doping Agreement between the WSL and ISA was eventually announced in 2019 (WSL and ISA, 2019).

However, these differences in cultural ethos were, to some extent, generational. As our survey suggested, younger surfers (under 20) were most likely to embrace surfing as a competitive (mediated) and corporation-drive sport. Our interviewees also recognised that older men (i.e. in their 40s) who they termed “the old guard” and who had been surfers for many years, were particularly nostalgic about surfing as a less commercialised, less popular, and more “authentic” activity, and mourned the experiences of their youth:

They're mostly older, they're grumpy because they feel the experience of surfing that was their youthful experience has somehow been lost to them. ... One of the classic resentments is any kind of organised competitive surfing, they just dislike the Olympic idea in the same way they dislike profession surfing and everything else of that nature that they feel is coming over the top of their own experience.

(interview, 2015)

Despite ongoing cultural critiques in the surfing media, between the shortlisting decision in 2015, and our second media analysis in 2016, there was evidence of changing attitudes towards Olympic inclusion.

### **Shifts in surfing's political economy**

Increasingly, the niche media coverage recognised positive associations with surfing being included into the Olympic Games, with greater acceptance even from core lifestyle surfers. For example:

It's sport whether you/we like it or not. Competitive surfing is completely different to free surfing and most surfers with a few brain cells left understand that. Surfing won't change because it's going to the Olympics.

(Facebook reply post, 2016)

We suggest that this increasingly positive narrative about Olympic inclusion from the niche media and industry was to some extent because of the influence of surfing's key stakeholders, (the corporations) who were increasingly embracing the Olympics because of the potential to increase and diversify their declining revenue (see also Chapter 7). As noted earlier, the WSL had been losing “millions year-on-year since its inception” (Almost the entirety, 2019) and many of surfing's biggest brands had either gone public or been subsumed by sport companies like Nike, whereas in the previous era—when brands CEO's were core surfers—companies had invested heavily in both event sponsorships and athlete contracts, often making “irrational” business decisions based on “what surfers want”:

while the numbers might not have always added up, thanks to their love and understanding of the surf world, these founders could always justify the

deflated ROIs because of how much cultural capital these surfers provided—especially when the relationships spanned decades.

(Almost the entirety, 2019)

However, with the corporate takeovers, the new shareholders and non-endemic executives often did not share these subcultural values (see Warren & Gibson, 2017). As a consequence, in 2019 many athlete sponsorships were cancelled, and only four of the 11 Men's CT events were sponsored by core surf brands (Quiksilver, Rip Curl, and Billabong), down significantly from 2010. Similarly, since 2016 non-surfers dominated the WSL's executive positions. This is a significant shift in surfing's political economy, with the gate-keepers and decision makers, who have historically shaped competitive surf culture, no longer holding the cultural or economic power.

Given this situation, it is unsurprising that these increasingly cash-starved professional surfers and businesses were starting to enthusiastically endorse the Olympics, and that this flowed into the subcultural media. The cultural intermediaries we interviewed were in no doubt that the most influential stakeholder was the surf industry:

Modern surfing is pretty well governed by the media who in turn is governed by corporations.

(interview, 2015)

Surfing has escaped into a web of vested interests that leaves surfing purists (ever diminishing breed) less than happy.

(interview, 2015)

By early 2019, the WSL had also shifted from ambivalence to the Olympics (see Chapter 6) to active endorsement. Concerns about the ISA's organisational competence or potential judging bias were no longer evident (Chapter 6). The WSL's own media channels (e.g. website, apps) gave regular updates about who had gained Olympic qualification, and it supported its athletes to compete in the 2019 ISA World Surfing Games (an Olympic qualification event), which received extensive media coverage including live streaming on the ISA website, and live television in Japan (the host) and beyond. Likewise, increasingly the athletes and their National Governing Bodies (NGB)/National Sport Organisations (NSOs) increasingly spoke about their excitement and the prospect of Olympic medals, complicit in this process from which they all stood to benefit. Yet, to some extent this was a performance for the sport's stakeholders. In private, many athletes admitted that they saw Tokyo as a "side-show", as did their sponsors, a secondary goal to professional CT success (Chapter 5 and 10). Even among the dissenting voices in the industry, most had come to accept that while Olympic inclusion created challenges, it posed little threat to surfing's core identity:

Yeah well, there's elements of surfing that don't change, there's elements that do. If surfing is in the Olympics, that'll change surfing a bit in some ways but

surfing would be changing anyway. ... Yeah, I don't think the Olympics is going to challenge that part of surfing in the slightest.

(interview, 2015)

As had been predicted by industry insiders, most parties had ultimately accommodated Olympic inclusion.

### **Wave pool development and the power to define surfing's identity**

The possibility of Olympic surfing taking place in an artificial wave pool rather than the ocean was one of the most debated and contested issues. Many surfers initially described the technology-made wave as the ultimate "sell-out", taking surfing away from the "natural" and unpredictable ever-changing ocean environment, killing surfing's creativity and meaning as a nature-based activity:

Moving surfing from the natural element to this element is complete, final elimination of our identity as surfers as connected to something natural, and the complete disconnect from the ocean. ... Surfing isn't the thing that you do on the waves, it's the relationship that you have to the ocean, and a lot of surfers understand that. ... You stop being a surfer, because the surfer identity cannot be disconnected from the natural element. It becomes wave riding.

(ex-professional surfer, interview, 2016)

As Roberts and Ponting (2020) also discuss: "can surfing an artificial wave be considered authentic surfing, and are surfers who surf in wave pools real surfers?" (p. 230). Many others have raised similar concerns:

Simply because the most esoteric nature and one of the most beautiful things about surfing is the fact that it's in the ocean. It is the ever-variable waves, it is the magical sense of being in the surf and the spiritual nature of all of that, which is absolutely gone if you're in a wave pool.

(surf industry insider, interview, 2015)

The only way surfing would be considered an Olympic sport is if it was held in wave pools, and if it was held in wave pools then I wouldn't consider it surfing.

(Sean Doherty, Surfer mag, 2015)

This was not just the view of core surfers in the niche media. Only 20% of recreational surfers in our survey (in 2015) supported Olympic surfing being held in a wave pool, with both Stand Up Paddleboard (SUP) and longboarding being seen as more popular forms of surfing in the Olympics. At this time however, most

surfing commentators (2015) were critical of the quality of waves that a wave pool could produce:

I think wave pools are kind of embarrassing things for surfing, certainly in their current state. I don't think you can possibly imagine that wave pool surfing is... I don't know, it's so far from the summit of surfing. And so if you stick the Olympics in a wave pool, I think it'd just lend more fodder for those who want to mock the Olympics in a surfing context.

(interview, 2015)

Yet, on the other hand it was also recognised that wave pools could potentially provide a controllable, predictable environment ensuring that competitions could be held regardless of weather and location, and would be spectacular for non-surfing audiences. As one of our focus group participants argued, the "mainstream audience is gonna go 'Wow, that looks kinda cool', them doing some airs [aerial manoeuvres]". Furthermore, as each wave is identical it could also provide a potential solution to the problem of fair judging:

I think that's [judging issues] probably why they're so hopeful about wave pools in the Olympic context, because they think that will kind of normalise the situation, so everyone will be riding the same wave all the time.

(interview, 2015)

the idea of a static and consistent environment is completely in line with the rest of the Olympic events, including recent addition skateboarding and longtime inclusion snowboarding.

(Michael Ciaramella, Surfing Magazine, 2016)

Initially the ISA president gave mixed messages about whether the ISA would be promoting wave pools for the Olympics. In a statement on 'Surfing and The Olympics' (2012) Aguerre reflects on the initial "Short List" For The 2020 Summer Olympic Games (as made by the IOC in July 2011); surfing had made the top 12 but not top 8. He claims 'Surfing was on the longer list but was not selected due primarily to the need for further development of man-made surfing waves' (ISA president, 2012). Later (2015) in an interview (Surfing included, 2015) it was claimed "Aguerre has always supported wave-making technologies as a natural path towards the Olympic Games":

The ISA boss believes that surf pools will "provide opportunities for the integration of diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, and age groups long after the Games have moved on".

(Surfing included, 2015)

However, in our interview in late 2015, Aguerre stated:

Although wave pools have improved a lot and they're very promising, we don't have a couple of years under our belt to show how they operate and how they work in competitions.

(2015)

He repeatedly stated that surfing at the Tokyo Games would be held in the ocean, reinforcing "that's what the IOC wanted to do" and also the Tokyo Organising Committee (OC) (interview, 2015). This was also the view of the IOC Sport Department (2016). While recognising that wave pool development had contributed to surfing being seen as a "more viable Olympic sport", "it's an additional plus, an additional opportunity looking forward if they don't have access to the ocean" it was stated that surfing in Tokyo had always been intended for the beach.

In the following discussion, we explore how debates around wave pools developed over time, exemplifying the shifts among different factions of the surfing community and stakeholders in Olympic surfing, showing how contestation was often tied to surfing's political economy. As we outline, wave pool technology and developments were entangled with vested interests. For some stakeholders in the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage, including the WSL, waves pools were important as commercial opportunities in this rapidly expanding market. For others, including the Tokyo OC, wave pools would be detrimental for creating the desired beach-based legacy for Tokyo.

The first shift occurred after the unveiling of multiple world champion Kelly Slater's surf pool (date 2015) called *The Surf Ranch*, which utilised a new game-changing technology (The WSL buys, 2016), that one journalist claimed produced "the most perfect and expensive" waves in the world (Williamson, 2018 in Wheaton, 2020, p. 169). Within one week of Slater uploading a video of him surfing this "perfect wave" on the Internet, the video had received over 9 million views (Mozingo, 2016 cited in Roberts & Ponting, 2020, p. 230). WSL-sanctioned competitions at Slater's Surf Ranch soon followed (in 2018, 2019), strategically demonstrating that surfing in wave pools was viable for future Olympic Games (Roberts & Ponting, 2020). However, not all surfers were convinced:

a standard wave coming down, which is going to be like a benchmark for people to do exactly the same thing, almost. And I think that'll become very boring.

(focus group 1, surfer, 2016)

Nonetheless, the positive media coverage surrounding Slater's *Surf Ranch* reignited the debate about the possibilities offered by such technologies (Robert & Ponting, 2020; Wheaton, 2020), and many commentators were predicting that Slater's wave pool would fit the Olympic requirements. This shift from seeing

wave pools as inauthentic (“wave riding” but not “surfing”) to making competitions fairer and more media friendly also became more widespread following the confirmation that surfing would be held at Shidashita Beach (Shida) located 40 miles east of Tokyo on the Pacific coastline. The proposed contest site was widely considered a mediocre surfing location, with the waves in Japan likely to be small particularly in contrast to the challenging (bigger, more spectacular) waves venues chosen by the professional WSL Championship tour:

You can't just pick 20 guys [sic], make them surf at a Japanese beach break, and declare one of them the best surfer in the world.

(Michael Ciaramella, *Surfing Magazine*, 2016)

The wave pool, therefore, was becoming more popular, even though it would “create a whole new genre of the sport, much like the halfpipe did for snowboarding, or the mega ramp did for skateboarding” (Alexander Haro, *The Inertia*, 2016):

So while much of the general surfing public hates the idea of surfing in a pool, it's the only way to make competitive surfing fair—and to crown a world champion in the Olympics. Any other way won't be fair to anyone, the winner included.

(Alexander Haro, *The Inertia*, 2016)

Questions were also being raised about their “enormous energy consumption” (interview, 2017; see Wheaton, 2020) as well as the vast costs to build and maintain such highly technical facilities:

That's cool but the cost is insane. Swimming pools are almost not cost effective as it is, without any machinery to make waves. ... Whack waves on the top of that and it's like sh\*t.

(focus group 2, 2017)

According to CNN, the Surf Ranch cost around \$30 million USD to build; and because the facility's wave frequency is low, the daily rental charge is between \$32K and \$50K (Empire Ave, 2020). Given many surfers' claims about being “environmentally connected”, one might expect that the environmental impact of these would be a focus (Wheaton, 2020). Yet such critiques were not prominent in the surfing media, providing further evidence of the contradictions and inconsistencies in the proclaimed relationship between surfing lifestyles and pro-environmental behaviours (Wheaton, 2020).

### ***The multi-layered politics of wave pool promotion***

It soon became apparent that a range of vested economic and political interests were driving decisions about wave pool development and implementation. Some



industry insiders expressed concern about the “politics” underpinning wave pool development and promotion, particularly those who stood to benefit financially from these new technologies. As one industry insider claimed:

The actual surf pool manufacturer, or some surf pool manufacturers, are driving it hard because it's just purely to solidify their market position and be synonymous with this particular type of wave pool. ... I think that should be taken out of the argument.

(interview, 2015)

In 2016 it was revealed that the WSL had “bought” partial rights to the technology for the Slater Pools (The WSL buys, 2016), and subsequently became a major shareholder in Kelly Slater Wave Company. This led to speculation of insider dealings, and further predictions that the Olympic surfing would be in a pool. As one of the national surfing insiders we spoke to in 2017 said: “I would have given it 50/50 to be a wave pool” in Tokyo. Similarly, Kim Crane, High Performance Manager of Surfing Australia (SA) also affirmed that until around mid-2018 they had continued to plan and prepare for both possibilities for Tokyo, wave pool and beach (interview, 2018).

The WSL were conspicuously driving the wave pool agenda; from 2017 it held sanctioned CT events at the Wave Ranch, and according to WSL CEO Sophie Goldschmidt (2018), they had plans for multiple pools with “WSL high-performance centres” to be used across competitions from pro-junior to the top level CT (cited in Ostrander, 2018). In an interview in February 2018, Goldschmidt admitted “there's no commitment yet from Tokyo 2020 or the IOC”, but made the WSL's desires for Tokyo clear:

If you can imagine, the best surfers in the world competing in this world-class wave facility, floodlit at night, stadium seating coming up out of the water, surfers surfing towards them, amazing camera angles — That's a reality; that could happen. ... We are trying to get a wave facility built in Tokyo in time. Hopefully, if we can get it built, there's a good chance that the Olympics would take place in one of our facilities. I think if we're able to do that, it's likely to be the lasting impression of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

(cited in Ostrander, 2018)

Yet, despite continued speculation about whether the Tokyo OC would change their mind and build a pool to substitute the unreliable waves at Shidashita Beach (Heyden, 2019), the WSL appears not to have had the power to influence this decision. The public message from the IOC, ISA and Tokyo OC that beaches in Tokyo's vicinity would be the sport's first official Olympic venue stood firm. According to Aguerre, “That's what the IOC wanted to do”, adding, “we're all happy with doing it on the ocean” with “fans on the beach”, which “at the end of the day it's the way surfing is” (Aguerre, interview, 2015).

## Tokyo, the politics of legacy, and safe “clean oceans”

The most compelling factor, however, for this decision to not use a wave pool in Tokyo appears not to be cost, but tied to creating the particular legacy that Tokyo and the IOC had envisaged. As Olympic scholars have widely demonstrated, creating a sustainable legacy has been a central way host cities and countries mobilise support, funding, and prestige, although the forms this legacy can take have fluctuated (Horne & Whannel, 2020; Tomlinson, 2014). For Tokyo, according to the IOC, “The staging of surfing competitions in Japan would leave a legacy of “upgrades of beach and hospitality” and “re-connecting the Japanese people with the coast and life by the sea” (IOC, 2016, p. 54). In our interviews with key members of the Tokyo OC (December 2018), while admitting wave pools had “big potential”, surfing as a nature-based ocean sport was reinforced, as was the notion of “more than sport” through surfing’s beach culture: “I think there is a big message for Tokyo that it’s more than sports” (Interview Murofushi, 2018). The vision of a surfing festival to foster surfing’s lifestyle image—“fans are on the beach and there’s 3000 people wearing shorts and bikinis” (Aguerre, 2015)—had also been central to the way the ISA “sold” surfing to Tokyo and the IOC (interview, 2015).

However, underpinning this rhetoric is the politics of Japan’s response to the social and physical devastation caused by “Japan’s triple-whammy catastrophe” (Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020, p. 3) of the 2011 magnitude 9 earthquake and tsunami and subsequent Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant disaster. As Boykoff and Gaffney (2020), discuss, these tragedies provide an archetypal opportunity for what Naomi Klein (2007) calls ‘disaster capitalism’ using the Olympic spectacle and ideology to create a collective “feel-good” (p. 3). Likewise, Ichii (2019) also argues that Japan is strategically using the Olympics as part of this national recovery project, or what he terms a “creative reconstruction” (p. 96). Emphasising the cultural association with surfers, nature, the beach, and clean water, appeared to be an important part of this wider creative reconstruction project. As our interviewees also suggested, Olympic surfing was a “smoke screen” to rebuild Japanese confidence in their coastline being clean and safe. It was claimed that following the Fukushima nuclear reaction disaster “radioactive waste” had leaked “into the oceans” (interview, 2015). As two interviewees claimed:

So, it’s a big PR campaign... a full blown marketing campaign to try to distract away from Fukushima.

(interview, 2015)

The biggest thing for them was that it seems politically that Japan got surfing in the Olympics and they want to prove that their oceans are clean after Fukushima, and that has a massive bearing on it, by the sound of it.

(interview, 2017)

Evers (2019), who discusses the impact of Fukushima on Japan's communities, highlights surfer's concerns about the "high-level radiation" that had "leaked into the sea" (p. 2; see also Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020). Anti-Olympic protesters were also focusing on how the Olympics were being mobilised to gloss over Fukushima, with slogans such as "No to the Radioactive Olympics in Tokyo" (cited in Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020, p. 2). Unsurprisingly, in our interview with members of the Tokyo OC (2018), they did not mention the nuclear reaction disaster specifically (also a noted absence in wider discourses from Japan, see Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020). However, the conversation did show the ways in which the surfing festival was being envisaged to help demonstrate Japan's "safe" coastal areas and recreational water. Murofushi stressed Japanese people's fears of the coastline "after the earthquakes and tsunamis", and his hope that the surfing events would help encourage Japanese people back to the ocean and to the beach. Furthermore, Murofushi discussed at length how surfing is associated with ocean environmental awareness, "so if the water is not clean you can't surf, so the surfer knows about it". He outlined initiatives taken by Japanese surfers to clean local beaches which he claimed was more than a PR exercise:

So, what attracted us was they started cleaning the beach.... All the beaches and oceans in Japan. ... I think this is the best part – the athletes, the national federation taking [care of] all the beaches in Japan

As the sailing events at the Rio 2016 Games illustrated, poor water quality at Olympic venues led to widespread negative media including claims of risk for athletes health and of being in breach of Agenda 2020 commitments for environmental sustainability (McDonald & Sterling, 2020). Therefore, as Evers (2019) argues, the "Japanese government has a lot at stake when it comes to the seaside", both politically and economically (p. 7). This environmental message as embodied in the surfing festival was central for Tokyo's National "recovery" project (Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020) and for the IOC, even, it seemed, at the expense of the quality of the Olympic surfing competition and human-ocean health.

## Paris 2024 and beyond

By 2018, building a new wave pool in Tokyo before the games seemed highly unlikely. Attention, therefore, turned to the Paris 2024 Games, where it was confirmed surfing would get a second outing (reported in 2019, and ratified in December 2020). Many inside commentators considered the wave pool an inevitability. In early 2019 the *Wave Garden* technology franchise placed an official bid to host Olympic surfing in a new wave pool, *Terre d'Eaux* proposed for a Parisian suburb (Heyden, 2019). Subsequently, there were reports that the WSL with the Kelly Slater Wave Company technology, wanted to rival *Terre d'Eaux's* bid (Heyden, 2019). Yet, in a surprising turn of events, in June 2019 the Paris 2024 OC President announced "We will not be using an artificial wave for the surfing event. We are

very lucky to have several natural sites that can be used in France” (Estanguet cited in Heyden, 2019). Reports suggested that the cost of the infrastructure for an artificial wave was too high; instead, the South West Atlantic surf beaches (Biarritz, Lacanau, and La Torche), longstanding venues on the WSL CT tour, were being considered. Nonetheless, Sevrans’s mayor suggested “The door is not closed on *Terre d’Eaux*. It is still designated an official training site of the Olympics, and can serve the Paralympic Games” (Heyden, 2019). Then, in December 2019, seemingly out of the blue, the 2024 Paris OC announced they had chosen Tahiti in French Polynesia, a geo-political administrative division of France, as the site for the Olympic surfing events (Chrisafis, 2019). They reasoned that the renowned surf break, Teahupo’o, in Tahiti is among the “most spectacular and powerful” waves in the world and a popular “big-wave” venue on the men’s WSL CT circuit (Chrisafis, 2019). This venue would therefore provide a more reliable, spectacular, and media-friendly wave site than the Atlantic coast of France, despite being nearly 10,000 miles from the host city (Chrisafis, 2019). The IOC Executive Board subsequently ratified this decision (March 2020). Concerns were expressed about the cost, lack of legacy for France, and environmental impact (carbon footprint), particularly as it was reported that athletes would fly back to Paris for the ceremonies. However, in niche and mass media accounts these issues were overshadowed by the widespread support from the IOC, ISA, and athletes. The ISA claimed this was “truly exceptional in offering our athletes, and our sport, spectacular conditions for optimal competitions” (ISA cited in Paris 2024, 2019), that would “draw an unprecedented level of attention and excitement to the Games and ISA athletes” (commission chair Justine Dupont cited by Paris 2024, 2019).

In summary, while the cost of wave pool development was clearly a key factor in the IOC’s, Tokyo’s and Paris’ OC decision making, a range of economic, political, and ideological forces are driving surfing in the Olympics. Despite having invested heavily in wave pool technology, and holding influence within the cultural and economic dimensions of surfing’s assemblage, neither the WSL nor the surf industry had the influence to change this decision. Nonetheless, wave pools will continue to impact the development and political economy of competitive surfing. Wave pool scientists and developers are adopting increasingly sophisticated and more cost-effective technologies (see *The Business of Wave Pools*, 2020), with more being built around the world, largely funded by private investors as leisure and tourism destinations. As our interviews with several surfing NGBs indicated, access to wave pools for training would become essential to developing future surfing success. However, that such expensive facilities were likely to also reproduce socio-economic differences was evident in surfing’s niche media. One journalist referred back to Kelly Slater claiming that wave pools “would democratise surfing”, instead suggesting, “What we got is the opposite of that: a little playground for the rich and famous” (Longtom, 2019). In the last section of this chapter, we shift our focus to critically consider various claims about the ways in which surfing addresses Agenda 2020 aspirations with regards to youth, global diversity, and universality.

## Olympic surfing and the challenges of geographic and demographic diversity

In their pitch to the IOC and to the surfing community, the ISA claimed:

Surfing is truly a global sport, more popular and more widely practiced than many current Olympic sports. Surfing is pursued in every corner of the world, in more than a hundred countries. There are now over 35 million surfers worldwide!

(Surfing included, 2015)

Furthermore, Aguerre asserted that the sport's popularity with global youth and unique values would help to universalise, even "democratise" the Olympics (interview, 2015; Chapter 6), providing "opportunities for the integration of diverse socio-economic, ethnic, religious, and age groups" (Aguerre, 2012). Yet, despite surfing's iconography symbolising countercultural youthful care-free lifestyles, surfers are increasingly associated with affluence rather than youth (Hough-Snee & Eastman, 2017). Furthermore, the evidence of a growing global following is mixed, with commentators pointing to an industry in decline and some trends suggesting an increasingly ageing demographic (e.g. Booth, 2017; Chavarria, 2015). The sport's lack of cultural cachet among contemporary global youth was evident on our survey; surfing was less popular than many other action sports, particularly for the under 30s (Chapter 5). Such realities do not match the rhetoric from the ISA (above) or IOC:

Surfing has a unique and modern blend of sport performance, lifestyle and youth culture....Surfing has an incredible global youth following – infused with dynamic energy and youthful enthusiasm.

(IOC, 2016, p. 42)

Moreover, surfing-as-sport does not have mass participation, nor is it a global sport. Competitive surfing is elitist and limited by privilege and geography, with limited opportunities for those outside a few core regions to become professional (see also national case studies in Chapter 10). Competing on the WSL is very costly, usually funded by the individual athlete via personal sponsorship and prize money (see Booth, 2017). The regional tours which are the stepping stones to CT qualification are typically in surfing hubs, such as Australia and Hawaii, making the travel costs (for the surfers and all their equipment) prohibitive for many. Therefore, the opportunities for those unable to secure commercial sponsorship are very limited and competing is a "perpetual struggle", as most "earn a mere fraction of the money commanded by those in other individual professional sports such as golfers, boxers, and tennis players" (Booth, 2017, p. 329). Surfing journalist, Nick Carroll, defines surfers as "contractors rather than company employees", with contracts that lack health insurance, superannuation, income insurance and other financially protective measures (cited in Booth, 2017, p. 329).

It is therefore unsurprising that professional surfing is dominated by a small group of nations which have the most vibrant and profitable surf industries (i.e. the USA, Hawaii, Australia, parts of Europe, Brazil). In 2020, of the 35 top-tier male athletes qualified for the WSL CT, only nine nations for men and seven for women were represented; 22 of these male qualifiers were from Brazil and Australia (with 11 surfers each), and in the women's event, Australia and Hawaii/USA surfers were dominant (The World Surf League.com). In contrast, the ISA's membership includes over 100 nations (in 2020), including non-traditional surfing countries, such as Russia, Iran, and Sierra Leone. The ISA also has much wider national representation at its yearly amateur international events; for example, 51 nations competed at the last amateur ISA world championships (2019). As discussed in Chapter 5, many were therefore hopeful that Olympic inclusion might lead to opportunities and greater national diversity.

The ISA attempted to diversify Olympic competitors through the qualification system (outlined in Chapter 5). They limited representation to two men and two women per nation, and specified that only ten male and eight female surfers could qualify through the professional WSL CT. The remaining slots were allocated to the top-placed male and female athletes from each region (i.e. Asia, Europe, Africa, and Australasia) in the designated "amateur" contests, including the ISA World Games (2019, 2021) and the Pan American Surfing Games (PASA), which took the qualification status for surfers in the Americas. These regional slots could not be awarded to countries that had their quota already filled via the CT. However, ultimately with such a small number of competitors, diversity was hard to achieve. Based on the provision qualification to date (end 2020) across both men's and women's Olympic events, only 10 nations had qualified, hardly an increase from the 11 nations represented on the WSL's CT (2020). In the men's event, two each from Brazil, Hawaii/USA, and Australia had qualified, with others from France, South Africa, Japan, Portugal, Aotearoa New Zealand, Morocco, and Peru. In the women's event, two had qualified from Hawaii/USA, Australia, and Brazil, along with competitors from France, Costa Rica, Japan, Israel, Aotearoa New Zealand, South Africa, and Peru.

However, to some extent these "national" flags mask that some professional surfers, like other professional athletes, are transnational global nomads (Thorpe, 2014). For example, CT contender Brisa Hennessy, while born in, and representing Costa Rica in the Olympics, moved to Hawaii with her family aged 8. Other CT athletes have shifted national allegiances to secure support and enhance their qualification chances. Kanoa Igarashi (CT rank 7th) was born in Japan, but as a resident of California has competed on the CT for the USA. But with Olympic inclusion in 2018, he switched nationality to Japan where his Olympic qualification was assured as their top ranked surfer. Similarly, Brazilian-born, Hawaiian, Tatiana Weston-Webb (CT rank 3) used her dual citizenship to switch nationality from the USA to Brazil, again facilitating Olympic qualification and also the promise of greater support (Howard, 2018). In Chapter 10 we extend this discussion of access and opportunity with case studies of the development

of competitive surfing in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, revealing the vastly divergent opportunities for athletes between nations, and that national representation is often contingent on individual opportunity and socio-economic privilege. Furthermore, as we discuss in Chapter 11, despite the fact that female consumers had become central to the economic health of the surfing industry (Booth, 2004; Schumacher, 2017), up until very recently, women and girls have been marginalised in professional surfing (Lamontagne, 2016; lisahunter, 2018). In the 2020 CT (top level of the WSL) there were only 18 spots for women versus 36 for men, a gender-imbalance that is reflected in their qualification events worldwide. Furthermore, female surfers continue to face different challenges to their male competitors (Chapter 11). Despite subsequent moves towards equal prize money and restrictions placed on how photographers shoot the women in WSL competitions (no photos of bikini bottoms), surf companies, surf media, and competitive organisations have promoted hypersexualised blonde, tanned, toned “surfer girl” images (lisahunter, 2018; Schumacher, 2017, p. 285).

Another noteworthy tension emerging from the Olympic qualification system was the potential demise of Hawaiian identity and autonomy in competitive surfing. Hawaii's surfers compete as a separate entity to the USA within both the WSL (professional) and ISA (amateur). While this situation is “a holdover from the competition of pre-statehood” (Lewis, 2017), it also reflects Hawaii's revered status in surfing culture. As Walker (2011, 2017) explains, in this settler-colonial context, for Indigenous Polynesians, surfing has been and continues to be an important way of establishing a sense of Hawaiian identity and autonomy. In informal conversations with surfers from Hawaii (2016), it was suggested that subsuming team Hawaii under team USA was likely to be a site of contestation, with protests and even a boycott likely. However, when Olympic surfing qualification criteria were announced in 2017, Hawaii, like all Olympic sports, was under the USA banner. While some commented on this as a “double-edged sword” (Lewis, 2017), most were resigned. As Fred Hemmings, a former championship surfer and surf historian, argued:

It is unfortunate that we can't maintain that identity since surfing is endemic to Hawaii, but we have to respect the same rules as everybody else. ... You can see where it would be opening up a Pandora's box otherwise.

(cited in Lewis, 2017)

Of the four surfers who have qualified for team USA (in 2020), two are Hawaiian (John John Florence and Carissa Moore). Although Carissa Moore identifies as an Indigenous Hawaiian, this was not widely evident, and in some media images she was also depicted draped in the USA flag. Her press releases, however, were carefully crafted to not explicitly discuss “representing her country”. For example:

It's a huge honour to be able to be part of an event like the Olympics that has been around for so long and has so much history...It's cool to be respected

on that level. I think surfing has come a long way from the stereotype it used to be.

(Carissa Morre cited in LoRe, 2019)

On-site Olympic protests by Hawaiian surfers also seem less likely since the IOC's controversial move to fortify Rule 50 of the International Olympic Charter, which bans demonstration and protest, of any kind (political, religious, or racial propaganda) across Olympic sites, venues, or other areas.

Lastly in discussing surfing's Olympic profile it is important to note that recreational as well as international and national competitive surfing takes place on a variety of craft, including longboarding, bodyboarding, prone and SUP, as well as para surfing. Few commentators challenged or even remarked on shortboarding as the only form of competitive surfing gaining Olympic inclusion, nor that it was not included in the Paralympics. Some of our interviewees recognised that the SUP which has both racing and wave competitions "feels like a more natural fit" for the Olympics; "the first across the line sort of thing which the Olympics really likes and seems to work really well there" (Interview, 2015). The ISA had proposed SUP for Tokyo, but failed to get it recommended for the Olympic Programme. In an interview conducted with Aguerre before the 2016 decision, he expressed his hopes for Olympic "surfing" to be expanded, including the SUP disciplines. Subsequently, the International Canoe Federation (ICF) challenged the ISA for international governance of SUP. This dispute was finally settled on 6 August 2020 with the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) awarding the governance of SUP at Olympic level to the ISA (Court of Arbitration, 2020). Aguerre subsequently re-stated their long-term ambition and plan to see the sport included in the Olympic Programme under the leadership and authority of the ISA (ISA, 2020). However, promoting shortboard surfing was clearly a strategic and commercially-based decision given its status as the economic and cultural driver of surfing culture and preeminent status in professional competitive surfing. Furthermore, the SUP has a lack of status among surfers (interview, 2015). Therefore, despite SUP's Olympic suitability, and growing demographic worldwide, it does not have the same public image as shortboard surfing, is less popular with core brands, and, currently, of little interest to the WSL. In this decision, therefore, the power of the surfing industry (even if behind the scenes) aligned with the IOC's desire for this particular version of surfing's cultural narrative, and over-rode the aspirations of the ISA.

## **Discussion**

Our discussion has revealed the different stakeholders in the process of surfing's Olympic inclusion, and how different cultural and economic factors have played out over time. We have also shown that much of the IOC's rhetoric around the inclusion of these new action sports has focused on the urban and on global youth. In this context, we have suggested that surfing as a competitive sport is



an unlikely Olympic bedfellow, embracing multiple cultural contradictions. We briefly summarise these key contradictions.

First, surfing does not have the urban roots, accessibility, or low-cost participation of sports like skateboarding, and is confined to particular and often exclusive coastal geographies. Despite claims of global popularity, the evidence is more mixed. Ideologically, surfing continues to be interpreted as a specifically American youth culture, advancing cultural, ideological, and economic values associated with the USA (Barjolin-Smith, 2019). Second, professional surfing is struggling for revenue and mass audiences. As even surfing aficionados recognise, competitive surfing is not a particularly media-friendly event, with considerable challenges to package for media consumption by non-surfers. The judging criteria are often difficult for the general public to understand and therefore “would require careful education of mainstream audiences” to help them understand what they are looking for in terms of a “good performance” (interview, 2015). Competitions are also weather dependent (to produce swell for waves) and have to be scheduled over multiple days to ensure contestable surf conditions. In live events, there are long periods where athletes are either paddling or just sitting, “waiting for waves”, hardly a formula for the spectacular live television that the Olympic mega-event requires. However, the WSL has worked hard to create a media product that is entertaining. Fans can consume their content in multiple ways from live streaming on their phones, to highlights, and apps (Thorpe, 2017). As the members of our surfing focus groups discussed, these forms of consumption have become the norm with conventional live television viewing largely redundant (see Chapter 5). The IOC, however, despite recent innovations such as the Olympic website and YouTube channel, is still wedded economically to the traditional television consumption model (Horne & Whannel, 2020). Third, while the IOC and Tokyo OC continue to endorse the “urban sport” concept, surfing is not a natural fit. The surfing event at ocean beach is over an hour from the Urban Park where sport climbing and skateboarding will be situated (see Chapter 8), and according to those who had visited Shiba in preparation for the Games, travel is difficult with on-site facilities limited (interview, 2018).

The fact that the surfing contest is unlikely to be as spectacular as most events in the WSL CT, and will only represent a few nations, appears relatively unimportant to either the Tokyo OC or the IOC, for whom the inclusion of surfing appears to be more about appropriating surfing's lifestyle narrative. For the IOC, this storyline fits with their need to demonstrate that the Olympics are embracing change:

The world's best surfers would attract a new wave of young fans to the Olympic Movement. Through their strong digital engagement and presence online, these surfers can influence millions of new fans.

(IOC, 2016, p. 42)

The surfing programme's planned festival-like experience also reflects the mega-events shift towards developing the Olympic spectator experiences (see

also in Chapter 7). “To experience a new approach to watching the Games” (Long, 2019) was dominant in the rhetoric from both the IOC and Tokyo. We have suggested that for the Tokyo OC, surfing contributes to Japan’s broader political aims for their Olympic legacy. Surfing in Japan is an increasingly popular recreation, and one associated with tourism, environmental sustainability, and healthy active lifestyles. As Murofushi put it; “body and environment is essential to the sport, so I think there is a big message for Tokyo that it’s more than sports” (interview, 2018). Lastly, surfing was a way to encourage Japanese people back to the beach. While the ISA had a key role in getting surfing into the Olympics, they are a relatively small organisation without the cultural or economic power of either professional surfing (the WSL) or the surf industry. Between 2016 and 2020 their presence was less visible, beyond keeping their stakeholders informed of decisions (e.g. qualifications) and continuing to lobby for surfing after Tokyo. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 6, the ISA had struggled with the workload of Olympic preparation, including ensuring compliance with the IOC’s stringent demands, administration time, and the substantial costs involved, despite the fact the ISA does not gain a share in the game revenue. In this context, the ISA appears to be a pawn in the IOC’s economic accumulation strategy. However, as many of surfing cultural intermediaries argued, the Olympics for Aguerre was never about money, but a personal passion. For example, “It’s not about money, he’s got plenty. ... So, for him, it’s his legacy. He sees it as the continuation of Duke Kahanamoku’s work and he wants to be on that ticket” (Chapter 6).

## Conclusions

In this chapter we have argued that surfing’s articulation via the Olympics is a cultural paradox, but one embedded in its material relations and an ongoing site of struggle for meaning. Therefore, to understand the production of surfing within the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage, and the different forms of contestation, our analysis “explored the meeting point between political economic forces and cultural practices” (Belanger, 2009, p. 62). Despite the early contestation in the surfing community and niche media, most of the key stakeholders (surfing industry, media, WSL) came to see the Olympics as an opportunity to expand revenue without significantly impacting their core business or identity. The world’s top professional athletes, WSL, surf industry, and, to some extent, surfing’s NGBs, regardless of their ideological or cultural concerns, were complicit in this process from which they all stood to benefit. The predictions by the IOC about the power of surfing to attract younger viewers eventuates will be revealed in Olympic audience figures. Yet, these were all aspirations in the pre-COVID landscape. Without on-site spectators, the beach festival vibe was not realised, with some expressing concern that the Olympics had stripped the event of surfing culture. The perceived “success” of surfing in Tokyo, and future opportunities for surfing in the Olympics Movement, continue to be a point of much contention among some parts of the surfing culture.

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# Developing pathways to Tokyo

## National differences in the professionalisation of self-governing action sports

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Over the past 50 years, governments have become increasingly aware of the value of elite sporting achievements, particularly at the Olympics, “to help achieve a range of non-sporting objectives” from ideological superiority, diplomatic advantage, economic benefits—particularly through hosting major events—and the “feel good” factor it engenders (Green & Houlihan, 2005, p. 2). Therefore, over recent decades, governments have shown a considerable willingness to invest significant sums of public or government money to the continuation or progression of elite sporting success (Green & Houlihan, 2005; Green & Oakley, 2001; Mansfield & Piggin, 2019). As Green and Houlihan’s (2005) analysis of the changes in elite sport policy in multiple nations shows, governments have also intervened directly in the elite development process, requiring the National Governing Bodies (NGBs) or National Sport Organisations (NSOs) to develop politics and practices that more systematically adopt professional and science-based approaches to elite athlete development (i.e. talent identification, coaching, sport science, and medicine).

Prior to Tokyo, action sports included into the Olympic Games were appropriated into existing International Federations (IFs), and, thus, were also managed nationally under longstanding NSOs (i.e. yachting, skiing, cycling; Chapter 4). These NGB/NSOs were all members of their respective National Olympic Committees (NOCs), and mostly well-established organisations in the landscape of high-performance sport policy, and while variable nationally, many garnered public high-performance (HP) sport funding. For example, after BMX became an Olympic sport in 2008, in Australia it received additional federal and state government funding, and through increased national and international visibility, developed new commercial partnerships (Ellmer & Rynne, 2019). However, skateboarding, sport climbing, and surfing were incorporated under a new “self-governing model” (see Chapter 6). While, as outlined in Chapter 6, this governance model has given these sports autonomy to preserve their sport’s cultural value systems, as Ellmer and Rynne (2019) note, “relatively little is known about the impact” on the national organisations or on the sport’s participants, due to the shifting formalisation and professionalisation of action sports awarded Olympic status (p. 1743).

Research to date on the impact of Olympic inclusion of action sports in national settings is limited, and much of it has focused on sports which have been subsumed under existing NSOs such as BMX (under cycling) and snowboarding (under skiing). Furthermore, processes of institutionalisation are constantly evolving; Strittmatter et al.'s (2019) research on snowboarding shows how the shift from an "industry-based system" with self-governance of their own sports, to the "nation-based sport systems" where they had to "conform to unfamiliar hierarchical regulations", presents challenges and conflicts (p. 1655). Despite the emergence of individual actors who try to bridge this gap, this tension continues to "influence the current governance structure of the sport at macro-, meso- and micro-levels" (Strittmatter et al., 2019, p. 1670). Ellmer and Rynne (2019) explore the professionalisation of three action sports in Australia, two of which are self-governing, skateboarding and surfing (see also Walker, Soroka, & Kellett, 2005). In Australia, since the 1980s there has been a clear commitment in Australian sport policy to direct sports funding towards elite sport programmes, with an integrated approach to athlete development that draws upon sport science and medicine (Green & Houlihan, 2005). However, as Ellmer and Rynne (2019) show, while inclusion in the Olympic Games has led to increased access to funds from governmental sources, differences in status and legitimacy across these sports impacted the opportunities available, particularly for accessing forms of public funding. Furthermore, there were considerable differences between sports (i.e., surfing, skateboarding, BMX) in terms of their stages of professionalisation, and, particularly, coach and athlete development (Ellmer & Rynne 2019).

Insights from our first Olympic Stakeholder Symposium in Aotearoa<sup>1</sup> (2016), also showed a patchy and uneven funding landscape across sports, and different patterns and priorities across sports and national contexts. Confusion existed among sports stakeholders about processes such as qualification of athletes, national selection, and funding streams. For those, like skateboarding, that were without NSOs/NGB, they had to learn the rules, regulations, and formalities of their national sport policy landscape and accommodate the governance requirements of an international Olympic sport. Building on these insights, we were interested in exploring the challenges at the national level for the athletes, organisations (NSOs), and the wider national sports systems in which these action sports are now embedded. The following questions framed our research.

- a The governance challenges for NGBs: In what ways were action sports being impacted by existing sporting structures as they are brought in line with Olympic rules and regulations? What were the strategies and struggles for national federations and organisations? Were new opportunities created (e.g. in coaching, management, leadership) as a response to Olympic inclusion?
- b For the athletes: What were the challenges and opportunities for athletes in these sports during this time of change? How were athletes being identified,



selected, and supported, and was this support equitable, and were women and girls being supported?

- c The politics of the process: What were the relations between and within these international, national, and local organisations in this time of change? How were power relations changing within and between the sports organisations, and how did this impact the control of the flows of funding, information and resources? Was there an impact on grass roots funding and facilities? What were the politics in who gains access and who is excluded, particularly in terms of gender equity?

Our research incorporated focused multiple-cases (Yin, 1994) allowing detailed comparison across cases (different sports and countries) to show how they vary in response to a “common problem”; that is, their various responses and challenges for new “self-governing action sports” in adapting to becoming Olympic sports. Such an approach has been advocated for comparing sport policy change, particularly across nations that are similar in terms of their political, economic, and social structures and ideologies (see Green & Houlihan, 2005). Our first case study allows comparisons across one sport—surfing—in two neighbouring countries: Australia and New Zealand Aotearoa. In both countries surfing is a popular recreational activity, with a history of competitive surfing in international events. Furthermore, both had long-established NGBs before Olympic inclusion, and similar sport policy funding landscapes. We show the vastly different levels of professionalisation, status and funding of surfing in each country, impacting how the NGB has been able to manage the transition to being an Olympic sport and opportunities for athletes. In the second section of the chapter, we consider the impacts for another self-governing action sport: skateboarding. This section includes three shorter case studies. The first is a discussion of skateboarding in Aotearoa that shows the differences between surfing and skateboarding in one country. Second, a brief exploration of skateboarding in the USA is used to illustrate the vast differences for skateboarders in these two nations (USA and Aotearoa). Finally, we offer a brief discussion of the top-down approach employed by the Chinese government to develop future Olympic hopefuls in skateboarding. Our concluding discussion highlights the challenges and opportunities across sports and different national context, and highlights that rather than increasing diversity and opportunities across nations, Olympic inclusion may indeed be having the opposite impact.

### **The professionalisation of surfing: comparing two oceanic neighbours**

Our first case studies focus on surfing in neighbouring countries Aotearoa and Australia, showing their very different challenges in the transition to being an

Olympic sport. First, we briefly outline the status of surfing in each country and their governance and funding models.

Australia is a nation that embraces sport, including traditional and action sports (see Ellmer & Rynne, 2019). As noted above, since the 1980s, elite sport has been the key policy focus for the federal government, signalled clearly through the establishment of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) (1981)—dubbed the “gold medal factor” (Magdalinski, 2000, p. 317)—and Australian Sports Commission (ASC) (1985) (Green & Houlihan, 2005; Magdalinski, 2000). As one former elite Australian male surfer in his 40s explained,

[in Australia] the Olympics is such a huge thing because Australia does very well in the Olympics compared to its size. ... These sorts of sporting things are like the Australian culture. We're indoctrinated with that as kids and all the way through.

(interview, 2015)

According to a report into the “future of Australian sport” (Hajkowicz et al., 2013) conducted by the *Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation* (CSIRO), the popularity and increasing demands for action sports within Australia is a key “megatrend” in sports participation and consumption across both adolescents and adults. Within this report, surfing was identified as “the most popular action sport in Australia” (Ellmer & Rynne, 2019, p. 1745), and according to the ASC, in the top 20 most participated sports for young and old Australians (ASC 2016, cited in Ellmer & Rynne, 2019). According to Surfing Australia (SA) surfing underpins the coastal fabric, and is a lifestyle in which millions participate or have an interest, and the “big three” brands in the surfing industry all originated in Australia before expanding globally (see Chapter 9; Stranger, 2011; Warren & Gibson, 2017). In professional surfing, Australians have been a dominant force for decades, with multiple men's and women's professional world champions, past and present, including potential Olympic contenders.

Surfing Australia (SA) was formed in 1963 and, while the NGB's role has shifted over time, the organisational strategic plan and structure focuses on both competitive and participation strands, including water safety. Reflecting the wider federal model in Australia, underneath SA are the six State surfing associations, with clubs, coaching, and competitions long been a big part of their national and local surf culture (Booth, 2001; Chapter 9). In 2016, at the time of the announcements of surfing's Olympic inclusion, SA was recognised by, and gained funding from the ASC through the countries' high-performance funding pathway (AIS). Surfing was near the top of AIS's second tier “Perspective sport” with their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) based around professional surfing (i.e. continuing world championship titles). They also had a high-performance centre (HPC) located near the beach in Casuarina, New South Wales, built with six million dollars from a mixture of Federal and state regional infrastructure funding. Relative

to most countries, Australian surfing was very well-funded and supported, particularly through the surf industry:

[Surfing Australia] just take the template from all these other sports as well....So surfing has plugged right into that, they get plenty of money off the government.

(interview, 2015)

Therefore, as Ellmer and Rynne, (2019) also argue, Australia is “considered the number one surfing nation worldwide”, with SA “leading the world in innovation” (p. 1763).

Although Aotearoa does not have the same status as its neighbour in the global surfing imaginary, it is an island nation that also considers itself a “world-class surfing destination” (Surfing. 2020). Surfing is a popular recreation (Active NZ survey, 2019; Walker & Haughley, 2012) among kiwis and surf tourists. It also has a long history of competitive surfing with the first annual National Surfing Championships held in 1963, and a national competition circuit established in 1982. The national team has competed in International Surfing Association (ISA) events since 1982, including the ISA’s inaugural World Junior Championships (1989). The country won the team and junior male events in 2001, with further sporadic successes. However, more usually the teams have finished between 8th and 11th place. In the 2019 ISA *World Games*, Aotearoa gained two of the Tokyo Olympic qualification spots for Oceania, with Billy Stairmand in the men’s and Ella Williams in the women’s division. However, success at the professional level has been infrequent, with only one or two surfers in the top professionals’ ranks. Paige Hareb first qualified (then the ASP World Tour) in 2008, and stayed on and off in the top female group over the next decade (2019), joined by Ricardo Christie in 2014 (ranking of 16th). Aotearoa, therefore, represents one of the many countries where surfing is popular, with surfing competition well established, and good natural resources, but who sit outside of the small group of very successful and well-funded surfing nations (Chapter 9). More widely, Aotearoa is also a nation where sport is valued for multiple policy areas (Collins, 2008). High Performance Sport NZ (HPSNZ) was established in 2011, to lead the high-performance sport system in Aotearoa with the aims of creating a “performance-driven, athlete-focused and coach-led system”. Investment goes to identified targeted sports via an athlete “carding system” which includes HPSNZ assessing each NSO HP plans (Ryan & Thorpe, 2013). HPSNZ works in partnership with Sport New Zealand (SNZ), NSOs and key stakeholders, such as the New Zealand Olympic Committee (NZ OC).

### **Surfing in Aotearoa**

Surfing NZ (SNZ), the National Governing Body (NGB), was established in 1966 (Feigel, 1999), with its first paid employee in 1995. Like many NSOs it had a broad

remit across participation—particularly “learn to surf” programmes and promoting surfing’s role in health and well-being in collaboration with partners such as Water Safety NZ—as well as competition (surfingnz.co.nz). However, it is a small organisation, with only three employees in 2020, with its government funding from Sport NZ predominantly covering staff salaries (interview, SNZ, 2017). SNZ’s board, mostly surfers, includes representation from the North and South Island. However, as we highlight later in the discussion, the board and (salaried) CEO were accused of poor governance, incompetence, and nepotism, including in a damning article in the national press (Clever, 2018).

Prior to Olympic inclusion, SNZ’s key role, and staff skill set, was event organisation, which generated money for the organisation to operate. The NGO organised and ran a range of annual competitions including the Nationals (juniors to masters, and different crafts i.e., shortboard, longboard, kneeboard, Stand Up Paddleboard (SUP)), Māori titles, adaptive, and national scholastic team championships. These were an important revenue stream for the organisation (interview SNZ, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Locally, the “board rider” clubs—with 27 across the country were affiliated to SNZ in 2020—also organise surfing contests, including for youth (under 18). Like most sports in Aotearoa, board rider clubs are run by volunteers with varied skill sets and little resources beyond membership fees. These clubs vary hugely in what—if anything—they offer to aspiring competitive surfers. Some do not have a pathway to identify talented surfers, even informally, relying heavily on the skills of parents to support and coach talented young surfers (interview SNZ, 2017).

### ***Olympic inclusion and the changing role of SNZ***

In 2015, SNZ was hungry for knowledge about the process of Olympic inclusion, such as what qualification would look like, and particularly if funding streams would become available. However, as the General Manager outlined (interview, 2017), SNZ did not start from the assumption that there would be “buy in” from the surfing community, so their first step was to “see if there’s actually interest in being an Olympic sport or representing New Zealand at the Olympics”. At that time, many were sceptical that Aotearoa would have more than one athlete who might qualify.

At the time, SNZ “didn’t really have a relationship” with HPSNZ (interview, 2017). While they had the opportunity to apply for funding, they “would apply all the time and get declined” (interview SNZ, 2017). Any hopes that Olympic inclusion was going to be a “cash cow” were soon dispelled. During our first stakeholder symposium in 2016, it was made clear by HPSNZ that there would be little, if any, funding available for these new sports (i.e. surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing) only assigned for one Olympic Games. Similarly, in an email correspondence after the symposium (Sept. 2016) the NZ OC stated they were ‘unfortunately’ not in a position to invest resources to get people together to develop a strategy on participation /growth and performance pathways.

That surfing's status beyond Tokyo was not confirmed until 2019 was a key frustration:

It's really important... the way High Performance Sport New Zealand fund sports is you've got to have a track record, and you've got to have a future, and you've got to be getting results. ... If you're new to the Olympics you don't have a track record, and if you don't have a future you're stuck, and you haven't got any results so you're missing three pillars.

(interview SNZ, 2017)

While HPSNZ did not support activities via the NGB, some "campaign investment" funds went directly to one athlete, Paige Hareb, NZ's highest ranked professional surfer. In 2018, Hareb confirmed this funding had doubled between 2017 and 2018 (from \$10,000 to \$20,000), which she believed was due to her qualifying for the World Surf League (WSL) Championship Tour (CT), and also with the Olympics upcoming:

I got it this year because I was on the world tour. Then I've had it one year before and that was because I finished second at the ISA World Games, so that came within their criteria of being in the top three in the world. ... Obviously, one of my goals that I wrote down when I was applying was to qualify for the Olympics. I think if I didn't have that in there then they probably wouldn't give me the money.

(interview, 2018)

This amount, however, did not go far in funding her WSL CT (Championship Tour) campaign and training costs, having to "pretty much rely on sponsors and prize money" (interview, 2018). Many other elite surfers in Aotearoa were struggling to gain national funding for their training and expensive international competition series. As one junior surfer commented:

They [SNZ] could definitely be more helpful and supportive and have better opportunities. I don't know if it's their top priority or not. You'd think it would be. They need to bring out the athletes and train them hard, but they're sort of just not really doing much.

(interview, 2018)

With Olympic inclusion, SNZ recognised they needed to shift their emphasis, and to find ways to fund HP programmes or camps, which in contrast to events did not "generate money for the organisation" (interview, 2017). Yet, their administrative workload had "ramped up" with a range of new tasks including communications with surfing organisations (International Surfing Association and Oceania Surfing Association), developing relationships with new stakeholders such as NZ

OC and applying for funding. However, they had developed a “really good relationship with the NZ OC” who seemed keen to promote the sport.

### ***Developing a high-performance pathway: edging towards professionalism***

Given only two surfers could make the Olympics, SNZ identified that they needed to develop and manage a HP plan as a “pathway to the Olympics”, rationalising that this might also encourage HPSNZ to invest:

It’s always been the desire of the organisation that the next person that was going to be funded was either going to be a head coach or a coaching role, or head of high performance.

(interview, 2017)

From mid-2017, they appointed a person 2–3 days a week with the responsibility of setting up the HP programmes and finding the funding. This appointment marked a shift in SNZ’s emphasis, essentially “taking money from other parts of the organisation” such as sport development. In 2016 they had also gained some Olympic Solidarity Funding (NZ \$8,000) from the NZ OC. SNZ used this to set up a weekend workshop to meet with stakeholders including coaches, potential athletes, their parents, and interested parties in the surfing community, to determine “what people wanted or what they thought was needed”. According to attendees, this was a difficult and chaotic meeting with many different and competing viewpoints. It soon became apparent that a lot of groundwork was needed before they could discuss what “high-performance mean[s] to the NZ surf community” or to get community buy in. In attendance were those who had been struggling for many years, “figuring things out for themselves” through informally networking with other parents (parent, 2017). However, these parents and athletes felt that national leadership was absent, and SNZ’s “arrival at the table” was met with suspicion:

Now you’ve got some money you’re paying for us to come to this now. ... Where have you been for the last 25 years when we’ve been doing the hard yards and there’s been zero assistance at all, and now you want to mine all this information?

(parent, 2018)

The following year, after extensive community engagement work, and considerable help from volunteers in the business world, a HP weekend workshop was organised, and sold out to 30 aspiring surfers from all around the country. Costing each athlete NZ\$400 (US\$280), the workshop introduced athletes to technique and strategy, strength and conditioning, and mental skills. In 2018, a second round of Olympic Solidarity funding (\$NZ 14,500/US\$10,230) allowed SNZ to organise training camps targeted at an Aotearoa team of 12 junior and senior athletes, as a build up to the World Surfing Games in 2019 and 2020.

### ***The challenge of coaching***

As we outline in Chapter 7, the use of coaches was considered antithetical to the countercultural philosophies of many early action sport cultures. The situation in 2015, and still largely in 2018, was that many elite Aotearoa surfers did not have a coach for their skill development, nor support for fitness and preparation. The six national representatives (junior to professional level) we interviewed (2017–2018) most relied on local support, Instagram and video analysis; some occasionally paid for coaching including from overseas (interviews, 2017–2018). As a world top 16 competitor explained:

I just try and coach myself a lot of the time, or I'll send the footage to a coach or I'll work with a coach maybe every couple of months and take something away from them and try and work on it. ... I kind of switch between a couple of coaches or I'll get one at certain events because it's just so expensive to take one around everywhere.

(interview, 2018)

SNZ noted that “everybody agrees” coaching is the key area needing development, but the difficulty was putting a strategy in place to “upskill” existing coaches, particularly at the club and regional level. He argued that many of the elite surfers who had become skills coaches (the most common path) were reluctant to engage with more mainstream sport approaches:

we don't have the quality coaches over here. To me, we've got [name]. I'd sing his praises every day of the week...but we don't have a bunch of [names] so it's about building that base up ... we've tried to push coaching programmes through regional sports trusts or through Sport Waikato and they [the surfers] go “no, I do my own professional development”. ... how you get that across to surfers, I don't know... We really need to upskill a coach in each region, and not just one.

(interview, 2017)

Another factor complicating coach development was that the few existing coaches who were working with elite athletes, tended to make their living coaching recreational or junior surfers (e.g. holiday camps). They were therefore “quite protective of their IP”, and didn't “want to share it too much”:

the top coaches are going “Hey, that's my livelihood and if I go and upskill another 12 coaches, 12 scholastic coaches, then my opportunity to generate income is going to be diminished in each of those regions”.

It was recognised this would be an issue until SNZ could find the salary for one full time coach, “where he [sic] doesn't feel threatened”.

For surfers to recognise and accept more mainstream professional approaches to skill development, and value other aspects of HP training, would require a cultural shift. Many of the surfers attending the first SNZ workshops were unaware of areas such as mental skills, and did not have any expert input into their physical development or conditioning. Work had to be done to “educate” the athletes, their parents, and some “old-school skills coaches” about their role and benefits:

It's like no, “He doesn't know that, he's not a surfing coach”, and yet they're a qualified doctor or strength and conditioning coach, and they deal with Olympic athletes in soccer and all these things.

(interview, 2017)

Thus, the first HP camp introduced the “three pillars of technique and strategy, strength and conditioning and mental skills” through experts who were also surfers known in the community. Our conversation with athletes who had attended these HP camps suggested that this had been very effective, with many subsequently choosing to train regularly with these and other individuals for their physical development. As one junior surfer commented five months after starting to work with a trainer:

it's changed my surfing completely. It's probably the best thing I've done for my surfing. It's really good because I just kind of – it's injury prevention. I use my body in the right way and it just means that I'll be at the top of my form when I go out and compete.

(interview, 2017)

Thus, with a small amount of funding from the NZ OC, SNZ has been able to start changing attitudes towards high-performance approaches. Importantly, however, this was among a small group of surfers who were able to fund their own attendance (Figures 10.1(a–c)).

### ***Lack of a national high-performance pathway: the drain “over the ditch”***

Compounding the problem of developing and professionalising local and national coaches was the belief among elite surfers that going overseas (usually to Australia) was the only viable pathway to becoming a professional surfer. This point was made by athletes, parents, and even a representative of SNZ:

That's the pathway to get to the international stage. Those events and the skill base there is so much bigger so the competition is much harder that if you want to succeed you've got to go over there and make a name for yourself. I don't think we'll ever get away from that.

(interview 2017)





Figures 10.1 (a–c) New Zealand Olympic surfers training camp. Photo credit: Oliver Farley.

SNZ said there were around 40 children and youth that went to get coaching in Australia each year, including to Australia’s state of the art High Performance Centre on the Gold Coast. Despite the availability of consistent waves in Aotearoa, few events attracted international athletes, thus limiting the standard of competition. The lack of a serious competition pathway and smaller groups of serious competitors, has long limited the progression of surfers in Aotearoa:

There’s so many more surfers and the level is so much higher over there [Australia]. Even if you’re free surfing without a coach, you could be surfing next to Mick Fanning or someone on the Gold Coast and if you see him do something amazing, you want to do it. ... I think New Zealand has a bit of that big fish in a small pond. ... It’s kind of just getting that experience as well and comparing yourself to more of an international level.

(international competitor, interview, 2018)

Whereas a series of Pro Junior events were held in Australia each year, Aotearoa had not held a professional WSL “grom event”<sup>3</sup> for many years, with the cost and lack of funding cited as a key reason. As a small country (around 5 million people) with a small surf industry, this was seen as hard to achieve; “The surf industry just isn’t big enough yet to do it, so you’ve got to get corporates”. However, in

2020 progress had been made in this respect with WSL Pro junior and Qualifying Series events scheduled in March 2020 with commercial backing; both, however, were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In summary, the pathway to the international professional stage was limited to those few who had succeeded in gaining commercial sponsorship (e.g. Australasian Youth competitor Kehu Butler with Red Bull) or who had parents able to fund the cost of travel, competitions, and coaching; “for the most part it’s mum and dad helping for like me to go overseas to compete” (international competitor, aged 19). Richardo Christie, one of two national surfers on the WSL CT, had to turn to crowdfunding to finance participation in the WSL QS (Qualifying series) after being “dumped” by Rip Curl in 2013 (Booth, 2017). Because of the small size of the national surf industry, even support for equipment was limited:

I have like product sponsorships for clothing and half-price boards and stuff like that, but it doesn’t really do much. ... as far as like surf brands, I haven’t really signed anything with big surf brands because in New Zealand there’s not a lot of funding from those sorts of companies, like your *Billabong*, your *Rip Curl* and stuff, they’re going to give you a budget to spend on clothes and stuff, but nothing to help with your travel... I was previously sponsored by a wetsuit company, but they weren’t selling enough wetsuits to stay in business, so I think they stopped importing to New Zealand and dropped their team.

(International competitor, interview, 2018)

SNZ also conceded that some talented junior surfers selected for the ISA (amateur) world teams had not been able to fundraise sufficiently to compete, and others had missed out on national representation as they could not afford the cost of travelling to all national qualification events.

Although often complimentary about those at the “working face” of SNZ (i.e. the General Manager and team), many parents expressed frustration that the NGB could offer their children so little. As one explained, they had assumed the NGB would at least “point them in the right direction” for help with funding, coaching, and information, but found this “non-existent”, beyond “saying, just go to Australia” (parent, 2017). Furthermore, some claimed support for elite youth had actually got worse over the past ten years, with SNZ “doing little” to rectify this. As one athlete explained; “I feel like they’ve gone backwards” (2018), reasoning the Aotearoa team had received “at least some part funding” for representing their country, and, yet, the quality and number of national events had actually decreased. It was acknowledged that a key factor was that the national surfing industry had “taken a dive” around 2008–2009 resulting in less funding and sponsorship available.

However, SNZ’s governance structure, the executive board, and strategic lead also came under attack, with concerns ranging from complacency to incompetence and nepotism. While these claims have long bubbled in the surfing community, in 2018 this situation attracted national media attention, with a controversial article

describing SNZ as “a national sports organisation teetering on the brink of civil war”, with the management and board facing accusations of “incompetence and questions concerning elections” (Clever, 2018). The salaried CEO who had led the organisation since 1995, making him the “longest serving chief executive of a national sporting organisation” (Clever, 2018), came under particular attack. It claimed that one former board member had sent a letter to the stakeholders outlining his dissatisfaction with multiple elements of SNZ’s governance, including conflicts of interest, and stating “It’s so far from best practice, it’s not funny” (Clever, 2018). Our research did not explore these governance issues, however, in some ways the operation of the NGB appeared to be a reflection of the individualistic, culture of surfing in the country, described by interviewees as laid-back, tight-knit and having a “boys club” mentality. Some surfers were reluctant to get involved in organisations including the NGB (e.g. via board membership) and local board rider clubs. As one parent argued, their local Board Riders club did nothing to support youth:

I’d like to see their minds open up a little bit more to seeing that things are changing and evolving, the up-and-coming surfers are the future of the club. We really need to get more in support for our groms who are underfunded, that aren’t supported enough, that aren’t given the tools and knowledge and support of a coach or anything really. Have more meetings together, get everyone more involved.

(interview, 2017)

While volunteering is widespread across sport in Aotearoa (Active NZ survey, 2019) in surfing this was not forthcoming. Although many lacked the experience or knowledge required for governing a sport organisation, it was suggested that few gave “anything back” to the sport beyond supporting their own children (interview, 2018).

However, there was some optimism in 2017 among some parents and younger competitors who saw that the Olympics had led to important shifts in attitudes in SNZ (including a new CEO in 2018), and many hoped that surfing might now be seen as a more legitimate sport leading to better opportunities. While the female athletes and parents felt that girls and women were given equal status to the male competitors, as discussed in Chapter 11, this was not always the case among surfing’s wider stakeholders:

That’s one reason why I’m so stoked that they’ve got the Olympics because I just reckon it’s changed people’s perceptions, particularly about women surfing, as being a more serious sport.

(interview parent, 2017)

In summary, within these various constraints, Olympic inclusion had led to the NGB shifting its strategy and operation to some extent, but the lack of a development pathway, as well as funding for athletes travel, remain significant constraints to the professionalisation of the sport that athletes desired: “I’m pretty

passionate that we've got the talent here, we've got waves here; we just haven't got the infrastructure around moulding it" (parent, 2017). For significant change to occur, expertise is needed across many areas of the NSO's operation from strategic governance to coaching development, and a recognition in the broader surfing community of the limitations of only involving those individuals with credentials and cultural capital in the sport of surfing to aid in this professionalisation process. As a consequence of this cultural and economic landscape, in Aotearoa, competitive "surfing's become a rich person's sport" (parent, 2017), with national and international representations limited to those who had financial resources and connections in the culture.

### **Australia, the surfing giants**

Our discussion of the Australian context focuses on the development of the high-performance [HP] programme and derives from two visits to their high-performance centre (HPC), located in Casuarina, New South Wales (NSW), and interviews with staff including Kim Crane (2018), the National High-Performance Director appointed in 2017.

As noted above Surfing Australia (SA) is a much larger and better funded organisation than SNZ, with an executive management group of seven people, four of whom are related to high-performance (HP) and funding through the Australian Sport Commission's (ASC) high-performance pathway (AIS). The HPC was built with a mixture of federal and state regional infrastructure funding—although the location on the East Coast had caused tension between the different state surfing organisations—and is supported by a range of private sponsors from both the surf industry (e.g. Hurley) and corporations (e.g. Hyundai). It was designed to cater for athletes across a range of board sports (e.g. skateboarding, snowboarding), and allows for private hire (i.e. coaching camps for recreational surfers, and for athletes across a range of sports) which contributes to the running costs. The facility had a revamp in 2018 and now houses the HP leadership team and staff, with a range of facilities including: living accommodation for athletes; gymnasium; training areas (e.g. ramps, trampolines, sprung floors, rooms for video analysis); physiotherapy and sports injury clinics; sport science research and support; and storage for surfing equipment (including boats, jet skis etc.) (Figures 10.2(a–d)).

Despite this enviable position, it still took six months from the Olympic inclusion announcement for any strategy or policy discussion amongst surfing's stakeholders "to get everybody to go oh shit, now what do we do?" (Crane, interview 2017). Importantly, Olympic inclusion led the AIS to re-consider surfing's funding and strategic direction in 2017:

AIS's question to the sport was in how you're running your business right now. Is that going to support you to deliver on your performance targets for Tokyo? It was deemed that it wasn't.

(interview, 2017)



Figures 10.2 (a–d) The Australian High Performance Surfing Centre. Photo credit: Surfing Australia.

This led to a new structure for SA; they decided to invest in a National High-Performance Director, a role that was advertised internationally, with Kim Crane appointed (September, 2017).

Crane’s appointment was unusual for an action sport culture. First, she did not have the status or credibility of being an elite surfer, and second, she was a woman working in what she described as “still a very male culture” (discussed further in Chapter 9). Her credentials for the role were from business and then high-performance sport having worked at the New South Wales Institute of Sport and then AIS. At AIS, she was a performance manager facilitating several sports including surfing:

There is no doubt if I hadn’t of had Olympic experience, and experience to be able to show that I had tangibly done this work in other sports, there’s no way I would have got that role.

Nonetheless, she recognised that having “grown up” in a surfing town, with “family and friends totally ingrained all through the sport” and also being known by “the industry stakeholders” was essential to gaining acceptance from the athletes and industry. The HP Manger’s first task was facilitating the full-review of the HP Programme on behalf of the AIS. This led to recommendations to the SA board about what “Olympic readiness would look like”. In Crane and the AIS’

assessment, surfing lagged behind many other national sports in strategic direction, leadership, and professionalisation; she declared “we’re just learning to walk in the high-performance space”. Crane also argued that because the surfing industry had traditionally played a key role in sponsoring events and individuals, there was a misconception that surfing was being well supported. Yet, the commercial sponsorship model only rewarded a handful of athletes, and, therefore, was not a viable way to develop future talent:

Because our athletes at the top tier are professional, the perception that we constantly challenge in [sic] conversations with the AIS is: do you really need federal funding when your athletes are doing all right regardless?... They see the Mick Fannings and the Steph Gilmores as quite successful with big corporate sponsorship portfolios.

As a consequence, surfing gained less federal funding than she felt it deserved or needed. For example, in 2017–2018 surfing was allocated (A\$1,860,997 of which A\$1,362,206 was for HP). In contrast, Snowsports had a larger budget (A\$2,345,579) and swimming garnered ten times as much money as surfing (AUS\$11,625,300) (Australian Sports Commission Annual Report 2017–2018).

### **Getting “buy in” from the surfing culture**

Relationships are currency in surfing in this industry. Everyone knows it, so if you don’t have those relationships you’re doomed.

(Australian surf industry insider, interview, 2015)

Despite this well-developed and funded organisational context, operationalising an Olympic pathway presented many of the challenges that have been documented in the literature on the professionalisation of other action sports like snowboarding (Strittmatter et al., 2019). The culture of performance surfing was still very different to other sports in Australia. Crane said that while she had expected that “there would be a pocket of coaches and industry stakeholders” that still resisted professionalisation and would be difficult to convince about the need for change, she had not realised how hard some “small pockets of antagonists” would “hang on”. Furthermore, the stakeholders investing in HP surfing including the surf industry, the national and state sports bodies, and the athletes, were working in isolation, without a clear strategy:

Everybody’s investing heavily, working their butts off, but are all working in silos... and athletes building their own sort of performance hubs. It’s been just so disjointed,... So, the vision around our strategy was how do we actually integrate our national network?

(2017)



Figures 10.3 (a, b) Surfing Australia's first Olympic Readiness Camp. Photo credit: Surfing Australia.

Initially a “three-day Olympic Readiness Camp” (January 2018) was designed to bring the surfers together for “planning, education, and the establishment of what will be a Team Australia culture as we head to Japan” (Surfing Australia News, 2018). Invitees included 24 targeted Olympic surfers (8 did not attend), former Australian surfers, The Australian Olympic Committee, and former Olympic Gold Medallists Cathy Freeman and Ken Wallace (Surfing Australia News, 2018). Crane was still unconvinced she had buy-in from the surfing culture, and admitted that in the days running up to the event, she was very nervous about how her ideas would be received by those entrenched in the individualised surfing culture by acknowledging that a “massive cultural shift” would be required (Figures 10.3(a,b)).

Coaching was a particularly complex area to develop effectively. Despite being much more widespread than in Aotearoa, surfing coaches in Australia were either employed by brands (brand-based performance teams) or employed by the athlete themselves. Therefore, neither the elite surfers nor their coaches had much to do with the NGB:

The idea is that we have integrated performance teams. That's very new to surfing. That's pretty standard [in] high-performance sport ... but surfing, you can imagine...that was foreign to our sport.

In January 2018, a head coach was appointed (Bede Durbidge), a retired surfing competitor who had “respect and credibility” among the athletes. Crane recognised this was essential for the whole programme to get “buy in” with surfers, particularly given her own lack of cultural capital in the surfing world. Another challenge was rebuilding relationships with their elite athletes. In 2017 SA was not convinced that they had “buy in” from the athletes recognising “previous strategies had alienated some surfers” (insider, 2017). SA was cognisant that for most elite Australian surfers, their number one priority at least until 2020, was the World Championship Tour, not the Olympics. Therefore, anything they offered

needed to recognise that “Olympic readiness” had to be flexible and “add value” to their “world championship campaigns”:

I can't say to them – because I'm also supporting the fact that I want them to win world titles – hey, don't go to event seven and eight; come to Chiba [Japan] with me, sacrifice two world championship tour events. That's not going to happen.

Most professional surfers were in Australia less than 100 days a year. Therefore, designating the HPC as the athletes' base with centralised coaching there, as is common in more traditional team sports, was not going to work:

At the elite level, if we don't have an ability to be flexible and adaptable ourselves in how we deliver our expertise in a tailored way, then we weren't going to get the athletes leaning in.

Individualised delivery options were developed for wherever the athlete was based nationally or globally, ranging from facilities and equipment (e.g. a home gym), coaching, performance support, or injury expertise. The athletes would continue to invest in their individual coaching, with Durbidge facilitating and managing the coach athlete relationships. Further appointments were made including coaching staff for the elite and talent pathways, and a range of “non-surfing” expertise across physical preparation, nutrition, performance psychology, acrobatics, physiotherapy, medicine, and across athlete well-being and engagement (<https://surfingaustralia.com/high-performance>). Recognising that such integrated approaches were not well understood in surfing, time was spent with the new teams to create understanding between all of these different areas of HP.

One of the most significant and successful investments in the Olympic team athletes to date was a six-day camp at The Surf Ranch, the infamous and exclusive wave pool in California's Central Valley (Chapter 9). SA paid the full costs for the facility hire, and 16 Olympic team athletes, along with their individual coaches, their board shapers, and their performance staff. SA's photographers also captured video and stills which were gifted to the various surf-industry companies that sponsored the individual athletes:

It was 15 waves an hour, 150 waves a day, six days straight. It was a win-win and I have never seen more of an effective training environment than this one just in terms of efficiency of time. Without the Olympics and without AIS funding, we would never have been able to do that.

With such strategic investments in athlete training and building relationships with sponsors, Crane believed that by 2018 most athletes were “totally on board”. Another commentator confirmed, “they've done a lot of work to try and pull everyone back in line”, “everyone bought into it” (2018).



However, within the surfing media, some were questioning such investments of public money, pointing out that “taxpayers” had “subsidised pro surfing for a decade”, which given that Australian men no longer dominated professional surfing, was hardly a good investment (Longtom, 2019). Nonetheless, the NGB acknowledged that starting a national HP system just three years before Tokyo was unlikely to have any significant gains for Australian’s success in Tokyo. Most athletes were unwilling to sacrifice World CT events to enable them to train in Japan. Careful planning was needed to maximise the small “pockets of time” to prepare for Tokyo. Thus, despite SA’s rhetoric of ‘Tokyo preparation’, they recognised that any impact of this federal investment would be longer-term (four to eight years). The funding was enabling them to develop a better “understanding of what high-performance really looks like” in the surfing space, and increasing their future capability, particularly through implementing (in 2018) a talent identification pathway with 122 nationally identified surfers (from foundation through to elite). As Crane explained: “We’re going to go on a journey and it’s going to take some time... there’s been a significant change and we’re on our way”.

However, like Aotearoa, the lack of clarity about surfing’s future in the Olympics created challenges. Without confirmation that surfing was going to be in Paris and LA, SA was not able to put “rigorous investment” into athlete development work, and their federal funding via AIS remained capped:

We are top of the tree with Perspective categorisation based on our World Championship results, which is very strong, but it will probably take us another [Olympic] cycle with some hopefully performance targets that have been achieved for us to have any influence to upscale ourselves to Foundation.  
(interview, 2017)

It was also the case that not all surfing crafts were as well supported as shortboarding (the Olympic craft). Although SA was also responsible for SUP and adaptive surfing, neither could get funding through the AIS high-performance funding because they were not Olympic sports. SA was paying small costs such as coaching and uniforms for these non-Olympic versions of surfing, but recognised the inequity:

It’s a real tension point in the community, and I can understand it. The stakeholders in the adaptive group see what we’re doing for the Olympics in the shortboard.

Our interviews also identified that SA did not rely on either the ISA or the Tokyo committee to provide the information they needed to plan for the logistics for Tokyo as both organisations, they said, lacked capacity. In 2017, SA ran an Olympic forum bringing together the key stakeholder (i.e. National Olympic Committee, the surf industry, athletes, and their personal managers) to identify potential “tension points”. Crane talked about the importance of early education with the

athletes and industry on issues such as the size of sponsors logos on surfboards, and explaining rule 40 and the “black-out period”<sup>4</sup> which would impact athlete’s individual clothing sponsorship. While Olympic athletes needing to negotiate conflicts with their individual sponsorship is common to Olympians, it was new to the world of surfing. Speedo had been announced as the Australian team uniform’ sponsor and Crane discussed the conversations she had to have with athletes’ sponsors:

If Julian Wilson is the athlete selected, you’ve got to go in knowing that you won’t be seeing Julian in Hurley boardshorts; despite your multi-million-dollar contract you have with him, he will be in Speedo.

The surf industry appeared to be supportive and appreciative of this pro-active approach, working with SA to create better opportunities (i.e. financial) and outcomes for themselves and their athletes.

### ***Summary: surfing, national cultures, and Olympic inclusion***

Many in surfing’s culture and industry had believed that Olympic inclusion would lead to a cash injection in the sport, supporting the growth and professionalisation of competitive surfing at all levels, such as the development of formal competitive structures, coaching pathways, talent identification, and training facilities (Chapter 9). Surfing Australia has invested in the personnel and infrastructure needed to ensure Olympic success into the future, and to support their athletes across all forms of competitive surfing. Nonetheless, significant changes in cultural attitudes were needed to enable the initiation and development of the type of HP sport programme that is common for most Olympics sports. The partnership between the National sporting organisations (i.e., AIS) and the surfing industry (from brands, to athletes) was one that had needed careful planning and constant negotiation of the different stakeholders. To manage this relationship required someone (Crane) who could navigate and understand these different cultural worlds (i.e. surfing and traditional HP sports).

Yet, in many countries, like Aotearoa, surfing was largely more informal and less professionalised, their surf industries less sizable, and often un-funded by the state. France and Australia stood out as countries where state funding had been forthcoming for some years, and both had serious medal contenders (interview, 2016). Despite Brazil’s international dominance in professional surfing, according to industry insiders, the national structures were less developed than Australia (interview, 2016), and significant Brazilian government funding targeting the Olympics was only confirmed in 2019. In Aotearoa, despite the geographic suitability for surfing, and a pool of aspiring elite competitors, the impact of the Olympics on competitive surfing has been limited by factors including: lack of government or industry funding; an NGB that lacked capacity and expertise; and a surfing culture that were ambivalent to change. In contrast, in Australia, acknowledged

to be one of the most professionalised surfing nations, Olympic inclusion has already led to a significant shift in the institutionalisation and professionalisation of competitive surfing. The availability of significant funding from Federal, state, and commercial sponsorship is key, but so is the organisation's ability to draw on expertise from within and outside the sport, bring the stakeholders together, and initiate change in ways that were relevant to the surfing culture. However, regardless of the discourse around Olympic success, this was not the main objective for many elite surfers, nor the NGBs, with professional industry-run competitions holding more cultural status (and economic power). However, the Olympics has already been a catalyst for cultural and institutional change. As Crane (2018) claimed, "Regardless of our performance [in the Olympics], I know that the sport here in Australia is in a better place".

In the final stages of writing this book (December 2020), Crane announced (via twitter) her "time at SA had come to an end". In an email announcement, SA confirmed "Kim Crane will be stepping down as High-Performance Director with immediate effect":

Without a doubt her [Crane's] leadership and passion for high-performance environments, high performing teams and culture, excellence and integrity has driven major changes in the organisation and the sport, and as such she has set Surfing Australia up for success both in and out of the water.

Bede Durbidge, the Elite Program Manager / Olympic Head Coach was given the role of interim High-Performance Director, followed swiftly by the appointment (January 2021) of another woman Kate Wilcomes, formerly working for SA as a Talent Pathway Coach (Surfing Australia, 2021). While we are not privy to the decision-making (about Crane's exit, nor the new appointment), it is interesting to note the SA press releases focused on Wilcomes credentials as an elite surfer (a past World Championship Tour athlete) and event coach; "It's fantastic to have a surfer at the head of our High-Performance program". "You can't beat experience in the field" (press release, 12/1/2021).

### **Skateboarding: three case studies**

In the next section we offer three shorter case studies of skateboarding, the action sport which arguably has had the greatest range of challenges for Olympic readiness (see Chapters 6 and 8). First, building on our discussion of surfing in Aotearoa, we show the specific challenges for skateboarding in this country. The discussion is written by John MacFarlane and derives from his PhD research (2018–2021) that focuses on the self-establishment of Skateboarding New Zealand (SBNZ) as an NGB and its attempts to formalise this informal sporting culture in Aotearoa. Then, in contrast, we briefly compare this to the USA, the epicentre of skateboarding's culture and industry, written by Neftalie Williams. We then offer a brief discussion of the top-down model of governmental investment in Chinese skateboarding.

**Skateboarding in Aotearoa: case study**  
**(by John McFarlane)**

Skateboarding in Aotearoa has followed an evolutionary path similar to the rest of the world. That is, from some initial popularity in the 1960s, to becoming a fad during the 1970s, then “unfashionable” but “alternative” and “underground” in the 1980s, to slowly but steadily becoming more popular from the early 1990s to present day (Pollock, 2013). While Sport New Zealand’s (SNZ) active participation survey (Active NZ survey, 2019) suggested only 5% of young people (aged 5–17 years) skateboard, Skateboarding New Zealand (SBNZ) estimates much higher participation, with “half million to a million people” who are “actively involved in the sport” (personal communication, November 20, 2020). For many informal sports, national surveys rarely reveal the full extent of participation and can be a barrier in demonstrating the sport’s popularity for policy makers (Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2011, 2017). There are approximately 200 skateparks in Aotearoa (KickFlip, 2020) which also provide the social hub for local skateboarding communities to develop (cf. Borden, 2019). For example, the parents of local skaters at the Washington Skatepark in Christchurch provide free BBQs on Friday evenings to encourage social connectivity among the skate community at the park. Similar to international trends, there has been a steady increase in skateboarding participation levels among girls and young women in Aotearoa over the last decade.

Aotearoa’s remoteness and natural beauty has attracted international skate teams to discreetly “tour” the country, and document their trips and skating antics via video and social media. Such stories are usually themed as “intrepid journeys” or “gorilla skateboarding” or “fly-by-night” (some examples by GoPro, Volcom, and Vans skate teams, can be seen on YouTube). There have been several Aotearoa skaters that have had professional careers internationally; however, like surfing, it is common for the more serious skaters to relocate to Australia (particularly Melbourne or Sydney). Such mobilities are motivated by a thriving Australian skateboarding scene, better “skating spots”, more professional career and/or other entry-level industry employment opportunities, and a similar skate culture to Aotearoa; “It’s so much easier to slip into a familiar culture, than trying to make it in the US or further abroad” (Manual Magazine, personal communication, December 2020).

Driven by skateboarding’s Olympic inclusion, SBNZ was established in mid-2016 by a small group of passionate skateboarders with the intention to become the official NGB for skateboarding. Regardless of the IOC and World Skate mandate to affiliate with the local Roller Sport NGB (see Chapter 6), SBNZ believed that it would be recognised as Aotearoa’s skateboarding legitimate NGB because it was founded by and for skateboarders. Little progress was made over the first three years of the development of SBNZ as the inexperienced committee struggled with staffing/volunteers, the knowledge to negotiate the rules, regulations, and formalities of the Aotearoa sport system, and an inability to acquire funding. Eventually, it became apparent that SBNZ needed to affiliate with the New Zealand

Federation of Roller Sports (Skate NZ) to be taken seriously by the international and national sport governing bodies. Consequently, in late-2018 a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between SBNZ and Skate NZ was signed that formalised: (a) the hierarchical governance and administrative pathways, from SBNZ to Skate NZ, and then to World Skate Oceania; and (b) that SBNZ was directly responsible for dealing with and administration of New Zealand skateboarding, and any Olympic hopefuls. The MoU also legitimised SBNZ with the NZ OC, the central government agency (Sport NZ) and its subsidiary, HPSNZ. Nonetheless, SBNZ has yet to meet Sport NZ requirements such as: formal coaching and athlete pathways; an organised sport structure; evidence of “membership”; evidence of participation levels (see above); and initiatives to meet central government initiatives for gender and ethnicity participation and inclusiveness in sport.

Despite such strategic alignments, the Aotearoa skateboarding scene remains relatively unstructured. Aside from several small community-based groups usually organised around local skateparks, there are four Regional Skateboarding Associations (RSAs). While SBNZ has informal relationships with the RSAs in terms of “supporting” the NGB, there is no formal affiliation in place, and the RSAs operate independently. However, the RSAs are important advocates for skatepark development and improvement, and also provide the occasional “Skate Jam” or “Get-Together”. In 2020, SBNZ had yet to develop and implement membership affiliation processes as the NGB was still coming to terms with who its “members” are and what form “membership” should take (personal communication, November 25, 2020).

Like surfing’s NGB in Aotearoa, acquiring funding has been difficult for SBNZ. Regarding support for top skaters, a SBNZ meeting with HPSNZ in early 2019 made it clear that there was no government funding allocated for skateboarding as it is not one of its priority sports. Subsequently, HPSNZ suggested that SBNZ should pursue potential athlete sponsorship from alternative sources, such as commercial businesses (SBNZ, personal communication, April, 2019). Recognizing the potential in a few Olympic hopefuls, HPSNZ did independently enter into negotiations with a professional skater residing in Australia. But the skater became frustrated with how long it was taking for HPSNZ to produce a contract or offer any means of support. According to SBNZ, out of frustration, the skater opted to skate for Australia who had also flagged their interest, and was quickly issued a contract, financial support, and an Australian passport with a commitment to represent Australia at the Olympic Games should he qualify (personal communication, November, 2020).

To date, the NZOC has struggled to come to terms with how to best support SBNZ and Aotearoa skaters as part of the Olympic team. During a meeting with the NZOC in November 2018 for instance, a SBNZ committee member said that he “had to stifle a belly-laugh” when he was asked how many skateboarding coaches needed to be considered, to which he replied, “We have mentors, not coaches” (personal communication, February 14, 2019). Notions of being “coached” are

usually culturally frowned upon by the skateboarding community as skaters are perceived as being self-taught with informal mentoring the key model of learning (Beal, 1995; Thorpe & Dumont, 2019; Chapter 6). In 2020, SBNZ did receive some Olympic Solidarity funding which was used to provide a developmental camp for a select group of up-and-coming and top Aotearoa skaters (personal communication, November 2020).

Over recent years, SBNZ has become more familiar with the requirements for the NZ sport system. It has established an athlete identification and selection committee composed of three “ex-professional skaters”, who have a high degree of “authenticity” with the Aotearoa skateboarding community. However, the selection process towards Olympic selection and participation is still subject to World Skate’s international point system which favours participation in international professional skateboarding circuits (Chapter 8). While Aotearoa’s skaters do obtain brand sponsorship, this is normally presented as donations of free product (i.e. “free-stuff”) rather than financial resources. Thus, like the surfers, the ability to cover travel and living costs to compete in international events necessary to earn qualification points are largely non-existent. Recognizing the economic challenges for Aotearoa’s competitive skateboarders and Olympic hopefuls, SBNZ paid for a few local skaters to compete in two World Skate recognised competitions in 2019 using money secured with a local media company to livestream Aotearoa skateboarding events.

To conclude, processes of sportisation and institutionalisation of skateboarding in Aotearoa have been minimal. The recently formalised link between SBNZ and Skate NZ provides the NGB with the legitimacy that it needs to be taken seriously by World Skate Oceania, NZOC, Sport NZ, and HPSNZ. Meanwhile, SBNZ’s links with the Aotearoa skateboarding community organisations (and individuals) remain largely informal (or “social”) providing a casual network of inter-organisational connections of sporadic “cooperation” when needed, rather than focused and organised “coordination”. The fact the SBNZ is “skateboarder-run”, rather than by “non-skaters” or “outsiders”, provides the NGB with the legitimacy (or “authenticity”) that it needs to be taken seriously by the Aotearoa skateboarding community. Being run by skateboarders, however, means the organisation has much to learn in terms of working within the formalised Aotearoa sporting system (run by those with little knowledge of skateboarding culture).

While the skateboarding community were hopeful that Olympic inclusion would motivate the central government to release public funding toward skatepark and competition development, to date there has been no such funding provided. Olympic inclusion has provided some opportunities for SBNZ and Aotearoa skateboarding such as: opening doors with the NZOC; the ability to provide a national skateboarding camp for up-and-coming and top Aotearoa skaters; SBNZ’s ability to attract and secure a media broadcasting deal; and potentially most importantly, initiate the motivations of a few individuals to establish an NGB and attempt to provide a structure to grow the Aotearoa skateboarding scene. Despite signs of progress, SBNZ have conceded that no Aotearoa skaters will be going to Tokyo

2020 largely due to the lack of funding for top skaters, and World Skate's Olympic qualification points system that prioritises athletes in the Northern hemisphere. According to SBNZ, however, Paris 2024 may be a different matter, and there are two up-and-coming skaters that it wishes to put its support behind in the coming years. The future challenge for SBNZ will be to continue to prove its value to both international and national governing bodies, as well as maintain their connections and perceived authenticity among the Aotearoa skateboarding community, to consolidate its position and develop a strong "membership" base. For a highly informal sport with few formal structures, skateboarding in Aotearoa has had a steep learning curve as the sport enters the Olympics. Those leading SBNZ are highly conscious of the challenges of navigating skateboarding's unique cultural values and the highly structured and formalised processes of Aotearoa sport which has long favoured organised, competitive sports over informal, recreational activities.

### ***Olympic skateboarding in the USA: case study*** **(by Dr. Neftalie Williams)**

The USA is the symbolic home of skateboarding and still the economic and cultural hub of the skate industry. As discussed in Chapter 8, many within the US skateboarding industry have played key roles in the International Skateboarding Federation (ISF), and then more recently, in World Skate. Furthermore, both of the main Olympic qualifying series (Vans Park Tour and the Street League Series) have their home in US skateboarding. Unsurprisingly then, skateboarding at the Olympics was greeted with enthusiasm and industry support.

The USA Skateboarding organisation currently governs US Olympic skateboarding. Founded by members of the US skateboarding industry in 2003, it was formally recognised in June 2018 by the United States Olympic and Paralympic committee (USA Skateboarding National Team, 2019). According to the President, Josh Friedberg, it formed with "the goal of protecting skateboarding, ... to ensure skateboarders had a voice at the table" (personal communication, 2020). The organisation's funding revenue extends from the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee to other commercial partners and sponsors, including Nike (see Chapter 8) and Toyota. While there are currently no "coaches" on staff, Friedberg noted that the financing pays for "team manager" positions instead. Former professional skater, Mimi Knoop, serves as a team manager and the "high-performance director", with her role involving the development of "coaching and instructional programmes" (personal communication, 2020). As well as High Performance Director, Knoop is also the Women's Team Manager/Coach (Chapter 11). Knoop acknowledges that USA Skateboarding is currently operating on a skeleton crew with the staff covering a range of roles, but notes the longer-term strategic vision: "once we become more established and have the capacity to bring on more staff, I will help build out an official coaching certification programmes for USA Skateboarding as well" (Huston, 2020).

Selection for men and women onto the US Skate team derived from a combination of the athlete's past performances in International Federation World Skate events and a discretionary criterion determined by the NGB. USA Skateboarding's fluid approach stems from board members' previous experience managing other skateboarding events and accounting for athlete injury and adequate time for recovery. As Friedberg stated, "skaters get hurt ... we didn't want that to be a reason ... the best skaters in the world might not have a chance to be supported" (personal communication, 2020). Friedberg also noted that their approach offered space for the democratisation of selection and fewer opening for nefarious power dynamics. So, while currently "twenty-one skaters [are] on the team", "a maximum of 12 will go" (personal communication, 2020). Furthermore, "you don't have to be on the national team to qualify to go to the Olympics. ... If you make the podium at the World Championships in [early] 2021, you will go to the Games" (personal communication, 2020). Friedberg believed their approach creates the broadest opportunity for Olympic hopefuls, and allows for the most outstanding display of diverse talent for the 2020 Olympic Games. The US skate team is also ethnically diverse. Friedberg noted the importance of diverse voices within their support of skateboarding, considering it a driving factor towards its overall health. Skateboarding USA is working to ensure every member of the skateboarding community can see themselves reflected on the Olympic stage—a win regardless of who obtains the first gold medal (Williams, 2020).

In contrast to SBNZ, the USA Skateboarding team is very well supported, with benefits including: a stipend; elite athlete health insurance; logistic and athlete support; personal trainer access; and access to mental health resources (personal communication, 2020). According to Knoop, in addition athletes have "access to other resources from the USOPC ranging from scholarships and grants for college, assistance with accounting and finances, and also courses in entrepreneurship" (Huston, 2020). Presently, US skateboarding lacks an official skateboarding training facility but leverages its position to access private training facilities like the *Berrics* skatepark (Dupont, 2019). USA Skateboarding has also worked closely with various media partners to build a strong social media following, and to garner mainstream interest in the team and various personalities on it leading towards Tokyo. Hopeful of creating a home in Southern California before the 2028 LA games, Friedberg remains excited about the potential of Paris 2024 and LA 2028, "Paris is a great skateboarding city. ... I see LA 2028 as a watershed moment for skateboarding and our ability to support skateboarding" (personal communication, 2020).

### ***Top-down approaches to skateboarding in China: case study***

Similar to trends seen in snowboarding and other action sports (see Thorpe, 2014), some countries are adopting top-down models of investing in skateboarding in their efforts to obtain Olympic successes. For example, while China has



a history of investing in action sports dating back to the late 1980s, Olympic inclusion has ensured a strong governmental focus on the development of future talent. The same year that skateboarding was announced as an official Olympic sport, the People's Republic of China hosted the first national skateboarding competition as part of the National Games held in Tianjin, northeast China, and created the China Skateboarding League the following year. In 2016, the General Administration of Sport also established six training corps (or "skate schools") in Shenzhen, Nanjing, Shanghai, Shandong province in the east, Guizhou province in the southwest, and Heilongjiang province in the northeast to nurture skateboarders (O'Connor, 2018; Yau, 2019).

According to one Chinese skateboarder, attendees at the corps were "young kids... scouted from martial arts schools, acrobatic troupes or other groups. The kids agreed to try skateboarding and join the corps, training from 9am to 6pm every day, with a two-hour lunch break". As Head Coach Cai Yongjun, stated, "our goal is simple. We want the gold medal in the 2020 Olympics. The Olympics have a huge influence in China. If our skaters do well, it's sure to make skateboarding more popular in China" (cited in Schmitt & Xiaochen, 2019). For some Chinese skateboarders, however, there are concerns that the top-down approach to training competitive skateboarders is in conflict with the "soul" of skateboarding: "The Chinese government ... tell us what to think, and now they want to tell us how to skate, where to skate..." (16 year old male Chinese skateboarder, cited in Moir, 2019). Another long-time skateboarder and skate-shop owner in southern China explains the rapid investment in skateboarding events and infrastructure and changing attitudes among the general public:

It's like in every city or town, the local government is building a skate park or hosting an official skateboard contest. Also with skate show brands and hardware building the China team and sponsoring local skaters, everything about skateboarding is getting the change to develop at a very fast speed. Since 2016, the growth of skateboarding in China is like a rocket.

(Tim Tian, cited in Moir, 2019)

Some see the benefits in growing the sport around the world: "I really believe that the Chinese athletes have the skill and the potential to win medals in the future, and I think it's fair" (interview, 2015). Yet others have expressed concerns about the highly sportised approach to skateboarding talent development in China:

I've seen little kids being yelled at by their coach for not landing a trick in a contest. ... That's not what skating used to be about, but I guess it is now and it's going to be just like gymnastics or some other sport like that pretty soon. China is leading the pack as far as it being a "sport". They won't be getting any medals probably in the next decade, but the time will come that they'll probably be dominating.

(a skate industry member working in China and US, cited in Moir, 2019)

At the time of writing (late 2020), five Chinese women were ranked in the top 100 street skateboarders and two in park, with three Chinese men ranked in the top 100 park and four in the top 100 ranked street skaters. With ongoing investment in skateboarding training and development, Chinese skateboarding is sure to continue to improve significantly in future Olympics. Some within the skateboarding culture and industry may consider the top-down approach adopted by the Chinese government as in conflict with the core values of skateboarding culture. However, with Olympic inclusion, what may occur as some countries (without histories in skateboarding) invest heavily in the sport and development of talent (i.e., China), they may begin to challenge the deeply entrenched US defined versions of the sport.

### **Discussion: the opportunities and challenges of Olympic preparation for self-governing action sports**

In this last section we briefly summarise what these purposive case studies, and our wider research, including a range of action sports (i.e. sport climbing, kiteboarding, parkour) and different national contexts, reveals about the challenges for National Sports Organisations [NGOs] governing an Olympic Sport for the first time. We discuss the impacts—intended and unintended—on the athletes, on the NGBs/NSOs, and on the national sporting landscapes. First, we consider the key similarities and differences between surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing. Each sport is experiencing change across many areas of provision, but they differ widely in the degrees to which they had previously embraced high-performance approaches, and therefore the extent to which inclusion in the Olympic Games had shifted their sporting cultures and practices in the high-performance realm.

Before Olympic inclusion some parts of sport climbing were becoming highly professional, with some adopting expertise from more traditional sports, particularly sport science and coaching. In Australia, for example, Olympic inclusion had made less difference to their activities, other than “tweaking the HP department to ‘adapt’ to the new Olympics format” (interview, Australia, 2018). Despite a NSO with minimal federal funding and just one employee (from the end of 2017), they saw a coaching and HP manager as a high-priority. However, rather than appointing a former elite climber, they saw the value of a high-performance manager “involved with multiple sports” at the AIS (interview, 2018). In contrast, in surfing, significant shifts in cultural attitudes were needed among athletes and other surfing-stakeholders to enable the development of the type of HP sport programmes that is common to most Olympics sports. Coaching remained a largely informal activity, with peer-based learning approaches most common. In skateboarding, institutionalisation and professionalisation were least developed, and many countries did not have a NSO even by 2020. Formal coaching was underdeveloped or non-existent, with many emerging skating organisations lacking the skills—as well as the funding—to effectively prepare or promote their athletes.

As the Aotearoa case illustrates, there were multiple challenges for setting up an NGB that skaters saw as legitimate. Similarly, Ellmer and Rynne's (2019) research in Australia also shows that skateboarding lagged behind other action sport (i.e. BMX racing and surfing) in funding, quality of provision, and public respectability or esteem. The time taken for World Skate to be officially recognised as the representative IF for skateboarding (late 2017) had a significant impact on the development of national federations. For example, in Australia, despite having athletes in the top 10 Global Rankings (Poppy Starr-Olsen and Shane O'Neill) (cf. The Boardr 2017 cited in Ellmer & Rynne, 2019), sports funding and formal programmes had been delayed due to the ongoing governance issues in both national and international skateboarding (Ellmer & Rynne, 2019). Similarly to Aotearoa, the national organisation initially designated to oversee skateboarding was their roller sports body, Skate Australia, leading to Australian skateboarders forming the Australian Skateboarding Federation (ASF) (Ellmer & Rynne, 2019). However, in 2017 as ASF was still not recognised by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) it could not receive government funding (Ellmer & Rynne, 2019). In 2016, just one skateboarder (Shane O'Neill) was selected by the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) out of 71 athletes vying for financial support in preparation for Tokyo (SBS 2016 cited in Ellmer & Rynne, 2019).

Second, although our case studies do not reflect international diversity, either geographically or in terms of different sport policy systems, clearly action sport NGBs varied vastly in size and support both from public and private funding. While this is also the case across many traditional sports, given the new challenges for all these small or new organisations, this is significant as it has led to extending differences in capacity, causing structural inequalities for athletes. Support from NOCs or national "sport" funding for these new action sports depended on the countries' national priorities, politics, wealth, and sporting ideologies. In some countries, like the USA with a strong action sport industry, the commercial sector played a key role in this developing Olympic landscape. However, public High-Performance funding in most countries is dependent on long-term performance goals and strategies (Green & Houilhan, 2005). Therefore, as shown in Aotearoa, HPSNZ did not have access to any new monies to support or fund these action sports, and also seemed unwilling to shift funds from other sports (2015). In a communication to HPSNZ, an IOC member wrote:

Communications to date from the IFs to the NSOs have been minimal, NSOs are doing their best, and seeking help, and NOCs [National Olympic Committees] are having to work through a lot of new issues regarding their treatment of these new NSO members.

(NZ IOC member, 2016)

In this context, the IOC's decision to only mandate these action sports for one Olympics, with delays about naming the sport's inclusion in Paris until 2019 (confirmed in Dec. 2020), had severely impacted many national (and international)

stakeholders' ability to support Olympic readiness. As Sport Climbing Australia also showed, to garner any HP funding (from AIS or the ASC), they had to demonstrate "podium performance" at the Olympics: "once you have one athlete who has managed to get there the whole sport will get funded" (interview, 2018). Many NSOs, therefore, expressed frustration with the IOC who they saw as creating this situation, particularly with their increased administrative workloads. Surfing's new responsibilities nationally included developing skills and funding pathways for judges, and implementing drug testing; "So, we're actually a facilitator of Olympic readiness, not just with coaches and athletes, but actually also the industry" (interview, 2017). Given many IFs were also under-resourced, much of the administrative work seems to have fallen on to the NSOs, and to some extent, the athletes and their families (SA interview, 2018).

One key benefit, however, was a perceived shift in the legitimacy and "visibility" of the action sports amongst the general population. For example, in sport climbing:

The big change is around the fact that to the general public climbing is actually a sport, instead of just a crazy thing or something that you do for fun once in a while.

(interview, 2018)

Increasing national media coverage was also leading to better opportunities for fundraising and sponsorship, which they could leverage for fundraising purposes:

We had mainstream media getting interested about athletes, or running stories about athletes. The Australian Olympic Committee has a pretty strong media channel and they have media contacts that are really good. They have their media department that is coming to our national events and they're writing stories about them. And we also often have the local radio involved. All these things. It just changed from nothing to something.

(interview, 2018)

This increased legitimacy was also opening up new opportunities for some action sport athletes such as sport scholarships at universities (see also Ellmer & Rynne, 2019) including Aotearoa, Australia, and the USA. As one Aotearoa surfer recognised, "I've gotten a scholarship, which I probably wouldn't have gotten if surfing wasn't in the Olympics" (interview 2017). Furthermore, the self-governing status of these three action sports has ensured any new funding, however small, comes directly to the sport giving their NGB/NSOs the autonomy to decide how funding is spent, and—to some extent—which activities and styles of participation to support. For example, because SA's federal funding was targeted at KPIs across professional surfing and the Olympics, they could target areas of importance to their sport and athletes. Like many other NSOs, while upholding a discourse of Olympic success, behind the scenes SA was leveraging the Olympics for funding

health and well-being focused participation and development initiatives which, like many contemporary sport policy contexts, also fell under their remit. For example:

There's an enormous amount of leverage that we can have potentially from the Olympics... [surfing] is just the perfect brand for mental health awareness and intervention, and implementation and strategy ... that allows us then strategically to tap into other funding pools that aren't just sport.  
(interview, 2017)

Likewise, one of the French skateboarding coaches, Mathias Thomer, argued that despite his initial ambivalence about skateboarding in the Olympics, he eventually came to see it as a good thing: "We'll be able to impose standards on people building skateparks. We'll have the Olympic card to pull out every time we need negotiating anything with officials. To people that don't understand skateboarding it gives what we do a lot of credibility" (Derrien, 2018). As sport policy research shows, many NGBs/NSOs continue to struggle with the challenges of trying to balance achievement objectives with those associated with mass participation, and increasingly health and well-being (Green & Houlihan, 2015; Mansfield & Piggin, 2016, 2019).

## Conclusions

In this chapter we have contributed to the limited academic literature considering the impact of Olympic inclusion on the institutionalisation and professionalisation of action sports at the national level, and the impacts across a range of stakeholders including NGBs, parents, and athletes. In so doing, this chapter has highlighted how decisions made by the IOC and international sporting organisations have had a range of different intended and unintended impacts for policy and practice at national and regional levels. Reflecting research on snowboarding, Olympic inclusion has led to more strategic approaches towards the development of these action sports in some countries and, in some, a concurrent shift from private funding to a model based on both private and public investment, creating various tensions (Strittmatter et al., 2019). However, these action sport's elite competitive cultures have been, and continue to be, dominated by a few nations. Olympic inclusion via the self-governance model has offered vastly different funding, training, and qualification opportunities for each of these action sports, nationally and internationally. In each case a number of interrelated factors impacted the capacity and support the action sports national organisations received, including: the existing national sport policy landscape; the status and legitimacy of the sports in the country; the likelihood of Olympic success; and levels of support through the action sport's industries and sponsors. Therefore, despite the rhetoric of universality and global diversity (see Chapter 5), an unintended impact of Olympic inclusion to date is the widening of the gap between

nations, and perpetuated pre-existing differences in opportunities for athletes. In Chapter 11 we consider how Olympic inclusion is also impacting gender equity across these sports.

## Notes

- 1 Please note that Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand. Rather than using Aotearoa New Zealand, we have abbreviated it to only use Aotearoa.
- 2 All interview data that refers to our interview with SNZ General Manager in 2017 is cited as SNZ, 2017.
- 3 Grom is the term used in surfing culture to describe juniors.
- 4 Rule 40 prevents a competitor, coach, trainer, or official from permitting their person, name, picture, or sports performance to be used in advertising during the Games blackout period just before and during the Games without the prior consent of the IOC. See <https://www.lawinsport.com/topics/features/item/navigating-olympic-advertising-rule-40-a-global-perspective>

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# Action sports and the opportunities and challenges for gender equity

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In December 2020 it was announced that the Paris 2024 Olympic Games will achieve gender equality with women finally constituting 50% of the athletes (IOC, 2020). The aspiration for equal female participation in the Olympics is central to Agenda 2020 (established in 2014); as recommendation 11 specifies, by “creating more participation opportunities at the Olympic Games” and stimulating “women’s participation and involvement in sport” (What is Agenda 2020, 2021). Although much of the public commentary on the inclusion of action sports has focused on their appeal to younger audiences, gender equity has also been important for the International Olympic Committee (IOC). As IOC President Bach stated, commenting on the inclusion of surfing, sport climbing and skateboarding, “I am delighted that the Olympic Games in Tokyo will be more youthful, more urban and will include *more women*” (IOC, 2017a, italics added). In this chapter we focus on the later clause in this statement.

Declarations about the Olympic Movement’s commitment to gender equity are not new, nor are they without critique. The IOC’s self-perception of having pioneered “gender empowerment over the past century” (Postlethwaite & Grix, 2016, p. 307) is one of the well-documented contradictions within the ideologies of Olympism (e.g. Lenskyj, 2013; Travers, 2017). The IOC have scrutinised, surveyed, and regulated women’s bodies, endorsing a range of practices from the “nude parades” that were initially used to “verify” the sex of competitors in women’s events, to gender verification policies, and hyperandrogenism and Differences of Sexual Development (DSD) regulations (Caudwell, 2012; Dworkin & Cooky, 2012; Schultz, 2011; Wheaton et al., 2020). Based in the belief of a “scientifically verifiable sex binary”, the IOC continues to “endorse a restrictive biological account of the female athlete body” (Pape, 2019, p. 4) by implementing policies and practices that regulate and exclude bodies that do not fit (i.e., transgender women, women with high testosterone, see Pape, 2019; Wheaton et al., 2020). Nonetheless, women’s recognition as athletes has progressed. The IOC’s Women and Sport Commission was set up in 2004 as a formal advisory group to the IOC’s Executive Committee, and in 2017 Bach announced a “major review project regarding Gender Equality in the Olympic Movement” (March 16). A joint working group with the IOC’s Women in Sport and Athletes Commission was

launched to assess the state of Gender Equality in the Olympic Movement using five themes; Sport, Portrayal, Funding, Governance, and Human Resources (IOC, 2017b). With the inclusion of the new events (i.e. three action sports, karate, and softball for women) to the Games, along with extensive changes to athlete quotas for different sports and events, it is estimated that the Tokyo Games will achieve 48.8% women's participation (IOC, 2017a, 2017b).

However, such aspirations focused on the numerical under representation of women are rooted in liberal feminist notions of equality, which mask key areas of inequality including gender-based structural and rule differences, and differences in funding, sponsorship, media representation, and publicity between male/female (and non-binary) athletes and sports (Donnelly & Donnelly, 2013, p. 13). As Lenskyj (2013) shows, this liberal approach ignores other problematic aspects, including a conception of a universal (cisgender white Western) woman erasing differences in women's needs while also perpetuating colonialism and oppression globally. Furthermore, many sports organisations, including National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and International Federations (IFs) remain very male dominated (Houghton et al., 2017), with a continuing absence of women in "decision-making positions" including leadership/management, coaching and officiating (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016, p. 550). It has been well documented that cisgender men, and the heteronormative masculine cultures and arrangements that remain prevalent across organised sport, often lead to the marginalisation of women and non-cisgender people (e.g. Travers, 2017).

In an attempt to address these issues, the IOC set targets of 20% of sport leadership positions being female, including all National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and International Federations (IFs) (Houghton et al., 2017; Postlethwaite & Grix, 2016). Such quotas or targets are a common intervention in sports organisations to increase diversity on boards (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014), yet organisations have often seen this as a "chore" which they only implement because of regulatory pressure (e.g. to secure funding) or as a public relations (PR) exercise (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016; Shaw & Penney, 2003). Sports organisations have often failed to address their wider inequitable operational processes, or their gendered cultures (Burton, 2015). Thus, to understand how organisational processes contribute to gender inequity, it is important to understand the practices of gender within organisations (Connell, 2005), and the ways in which organisational cultures continue to reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Burton, 2015, p. 158).

Over the past two decades, the identity politics within different action sport cultures, including the experiences, practices, and politics of diverse women in physical and media spaces, have garnered considerable academic consideration (see Chapter 2). However, much of the focus has been on the individual, interpersonal, and cultural levels, with less attention to the roles played by institutions, such as national and international federations, in reinforcing, challenging, and/or changing gender relations in action sports. As these informal, action sports become institutionalised and sportised via Olympic inclusion, it is "important to re-examine some of these activities and assess the transformative potential of

women's participation in these arenas" (Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008, p. 25), as well as new and ongoing forms of marginalisation and exclusion.

In this chapter we explore whether Olympic inclusion has challenged the male dominance and masculine culture of action sport cultures and industries, and if women have created and negotiated more visibility and status, including as leaders within new and existing sport institutions. In so doing, we contribute to the body of literature critically assessing the IOC's claims to provide opportunities and effective policies and practices for addressing gender equity for diverse groups of women. We begin by highlighting the extensive literature on women's participation across action sports. We acknowledge that women's experiences within and across these action sport cultures are diverse and market-driven processes of incorporation have led to contextually specific power struggles (Thorpe & Wheaton, 2011). Thus, for each of the three sports appearing for the first time in Tokyo—surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing—we contextualise each with a brief discussion of gendered power relations in the sport, culture, and industry, and then present the key findings from our research. In each case we explore the extent to which the sport is being motivated to address the IOC's equity requirements (i.e., quotas in athletes and governance), and any impacts on the sport's federations, structures, practices, decision-making, and wider cultures. Last, we reflect on some of the key opportunities and challenges across these sports, highlighting strategies that women have used to further stimulate change.

### **Action sport cultures, masculinity, and girls' and women's participation**

Gender inequalities in organised sport continue to be deeply embedded and operate at multiple levels, "from economic arrangements, culture, and the state, to interpersonal relationships and individual emotions" (Connell, 2005, p. 1801). However, many of the activities under the industry-defined umbrella of "action sports" came into existence during the 1960s and 1970s at a critical juncture when increasing female participation challenged organised sports (as well as many other social institutions, such as education and the workforce) as male bastions. As Thorpe and Olive (2016) outline, although fewer in numbers women actively participated in the early forms of many action sports (e.g. snowboarding, climbing, skateboarding, surfing), often alongside men. Commentators have suggested that having developed in a different historical and cultural context to traditional, institutionalised sex-segregated sports, these activities were not so entrenched in traditional gender rules and norms (e.g. Beal, 1996; Thorpe & Olive, 2016; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998).

Yet despite the potential for more equitable spaces for women's participation, young white males have long been dominant at the core of most action sport cultures (Beal, 1996; Kusz, 2004; Wheaton, 2000). A widespread celebration of youthful, hedonistic masculinities remains, often marginalizing other identities, including women, particularly those that do not fit heteronormative codes

(Evers, 2009; lisahunter, 2018; Roy & Caudwell, 2014; Thorpe, 2013; Waitt, 2008; Wheaton, 2000). Furthermore, unlike organised sport where legislation (e.g., Title IX in the USA) ensures some degree of equity for girls and women “via government and educational-based surveillance”, informal action sports are “for the most part moderated by private concerns” (Rinehart, 2005, p. 240). Therefore, to understand the operation of gendered power and forms of exclusion within these subcultural contexts, requires understanding of the more informal ways in which gender/sexuality (and other intersecting axes of power) operate. As outlined in Chapter 2, “authenticity discourses” operate across these action sports, which usually involve “some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others” (Thornton, 1995, p. 10). Core male participants (usually young, and highly skilled) are positioned as the ‘authentic core’ participants (Dupont, 2014), thereby de-legitimising, marginalising, or excluding “other” subjectivities and practices, often including women (Dupont, 2014; Wheaton & Beal, 2003). Therefore, which values and behaviours are considered “authentic”, and *who* gets to define them, becomes a crucial subcultural distinction (Thornton, 1995) with material consequences for participants. Within these action sports industries and media older core men often hold positions of power, and via their formal and informal gatekeeping roles, also exert control of material (e.g. sponsorship, prize money, events) and symbolic resources (e.g. representations). In the first part of our discussion we focus on women’s opportunities as athletes and leaders in the surfing culture.

### **The heteronormative surfing culture and industry: women as a “side show”**

Although women’s participation and visibility in recreational surfing has significantly increased over the past 20 years (Comer, 2010), it is widely recognised to be a male-dominated culture (Booth, 2004; Comer, 2010; Evers, 2009; Olive, McCuaig, & Phillips, 2013; Waitt, 2008). Until very recently, the surfing industry marginalised professional women (lisahunter, 2017; Schumacher, 2017). As professional women surfers and feminist researchers alike have repeatedly shown, the surf industry is sexist with sponsors repeatedly ignoring surf talent in favour of model looks (Atkin & Burns, 2017; Franklin & Carpenter, 2018; lisahunter, 2017, 2018). Ex long-board World Champion and “surf feminist” Schumacher (2017) vividly outlines how from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, women surfers had minimal sponsorship or prize money, poor events, and were largely invisible or sexualised and trivialised in the surf media. Reflecting on “the difference between how male and female surfers were treated”, Australia’s four-time world champion Gilmore (2010) was prompted to consider “why is my world title worth less than theirs?” Somewhat ironically, at this time, women as consumers in the surf industry represented “a growth market twice as big as China and India combined” (Schumacher, 2017, p. 294).

Schumacher’s (2017) fascinating “insider” analysis explains that a “deeply held homophobia” in the surfing community not only devalued those with a lesbian

identity, but led to internal battles between women on the world tour. There was a belief in the industry that those “difficult” women who were speaking out against sexism in surfing were lesbian women (Schumacher, 2017, p. 289). According to Schumacher (2017), the worry that “lesbians were ruining the image of women’s surfing” helped explain how the “hyper-sexualised fun loving non-threatening surfer girl emerged” (p. 285). These sexualised images continue to gain the highest financial reward (Franklin & Carpenter, 2018; lisahunter, 2017; Olive, 2015; Thorpe, Toffoletti, & Bruce, 2017), impacting the opportunities for other women in the sport.

Yet, over the past five years or so, women’s competitive surfing has seen considerable improvements (Lamontagne, 2016), gaining better event locations, media coverage, and increased prize monies (Carroll, 2016). In October 2018, gaining widespread mass media attention, the World Surf League (WSL) announced that they would be awarding equal prize money to male and female surfers for every WSL event in the 2019 season and beyond, “making it the first and only U.S.–based sport league to achieve pay equality” (Roenigk, 2018). Commentators attributed different factors to this landmark decision. Some spoke about the influence of the WSL’s new regime, particularly the appointment of CEO Sophie Goldschmidt in 2017. Natasha Ziff, the wife of key WSL investor Dirk Ziff (Nettle, 2017), was also described as being “a huge advocate for women’s surfing” (interview, 2015). However, undoubtedly, female athlete’s ongoing lobbying for equality had also been important. In particular, the Committee for Equity in Women’s Surfing (CEWS), an alliance of (mostly) big wave surfers, had convinced the California State Land Commission to make equal prize money at the WSL sanctioned Mavericks Big Wave Tout contest at Half Moon Bay a requirement to hold a contest there (Roenigk, 2018). This was then leveraged to demand that the WSL pay the men’s and women’s winners equally across all WSL events, schedule equal numbers of men’s and women’s heats, and offer equal access to media, travel accommodations, and equipment (Roenigk, 2018). As Sabrina Brennan, a San Mateo County Harbor Commissioner and co-founder of the Committee for CEWS, argued, “We feel strongly that if it hadn’t been for our consistent advocacy, the WSL would not have made that announcement” (cited in Roenigk, 2018).

In our interviews with men in the surf industry, some acknowledged that the progression of elite women’s surfing over the years had been significantly “held back” by the male-controlled surfing culture, as well as the industry and professional surfing organisations. Some men reflected critically on how surfing’s cultural norms led to the ongoing marginalisation of women, recognising that elite male shortboard surfers tended to dominate surfing spaces, and other men colluded in this exclusion process (Evers, 2009; Olive et al., 2013; Waitt, 2008). As one male industry insider explained:

Chicks are relegated to the crap waves on the inside. That is a fact of life in every surf break around the world. It takes an extraordinary woman to

actually go out the back and catch set waves in competition with the established people in the line-up, that's established men.

(2015)

However, other men claimed that women had simply “got better at surfing”, downplaying the sociocultural and economic factors contributing to women's marginalisation. As multiple world champion Stephanie Gilmore also noted, the “depth of talent” among the women was still less than the men, but she recognised a key reason was the lack of support given to girls (Setting the standard, 2018).

### ***The ISA and promoting gender equity***

The International Surfing Association (ISA), the IF for Olympic surfing, made many efforts to demonstrate its commitment to both diversity and gender equity during and after their Olympic bid. First, in contrast to most professional surfing events (WSL), the Olympic bid had equal numbers of male and female athletes. This was widely seen as a move that would promote women's surfing:

Look at the value that gets placed on a woman's success in that circumstance. Just picture that. Suddenly everyone has to support the girls. I think it would be a very, very healthy thing.

(interview, male, 2015)

Second, the ISA actively promoted itself as an international sporting organisation dedicated “to the principles of Olympism and the Olympic Charter” (International Surfing Association, 2015), including best practice in governance across areas, including gender equity:

Promoting greater opportunities for women and gender equity through our events is critically important to the ISA and to me personally. ... We are constantly working to foster their worldwide development and growth.

(ISA President Aguerre in ISA to promote, 2017)

In 2015 the ISA's Athletes Commission included two women (out of seven), and members from four continents, which was cited as evidence of this “best practice”. Their Executive Committee (2016) also included two women, constituting half of the elected Vice Presidents. In our interview with the ISA president, he also declared a “commitment” to having a 50:50 split in the ISA's leadership position and that challenging gender-based discrimination was important to him (interview, 2015).

However, there were some inconsistencies in the practices of the ISA. It was not until 2018 that girls and boys had equal quotas at the ISA World Junior Surfing Championships—one of the ISA's flagship events. As one interviewee

put it; “women are valued at half the score for a winning team. So I think [equity is] a fallacy” (interview, male, 2015). Likewise, in the World Stand Up Paddleboard event (SUP), an equal male and female policy was not implemented until 2017, nor for the World Adaptive Surfing Championship teams till 2018 (and this was only following lobbying from members of the surf community). It is possible, therefore, that such moves to gender equity were a PR exercise or performance to demonstrate the ISA’s “gender credentials”, particularly as the ISA was also continuing to lobby the IOC to include SUP into the 2024 Olympic Programme. However, as discussed in Chapter 9, the ISA’s influence on surfing’s culture is limited. As the next section illustrates, the market forces that drive professional surfing, and the gender power relations within the surfing culture and industry, continue to have a significant impact on women’s competitive surfing.

### ***The hypersexualised surfer girl: (hetero)sexism in the surf industry***

The elite women surfers we interviewed all believed that their National Governing Bodies (NGBs) treated them “equally” to the boys and men, offering equal opportunities across high performance and sponsorship opportunities. However, the widespread sexualisation of women surfers (Franklin & Carpenter, 2018; lisahunter, 2017; Olive, 2015; Schumacher, 2017; Thorpe et al., 2017) continues to marginalise women’s sporting achievements. As one male surf-industry insider discussing Rip Curl’s advertising argued (2015):

the woman’s line is a by-product of men, and you look at the way they’re marketed. For God’s sake, Rip Curl is a wetsuit company and they hire some chick with a g-string to be their female model.

The impact of this situation on elite women surfers was widely commented on in our interviews (2017–2018) with five junior (age 13–17) and two senior (over 18) female surfers competing at national and international levels.

All of the girls and women we interviewed recognised that social media was a key way of gaining and keeping sponsorship (see Evers, 2019); they all posted “videos and edits on Instagram” to “put” themselves “out there” often from an early age. The content of these Instagram posts was, as one young female surfer put it, “quite scripted”, which often included “bum shots”:

Rip Curl and the big sponsors like to sponsor people that have a good body and wear togs [swimsuit] up their butt and some of them can’t even surf. Well, I mean they can surf, but not that well. They’re just really sponsoring them for their followers and body image.

(age 13)

Rip Curl's brand ambassador Alana Blanchard's self-sexualisation in her social media has been widely commented on (see Thorpe, Toffoletti & Bruce, 2017; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a), including among our participants:

Like Alana Blanchard and stuff, she's the highest paid female surfer but she doesn't even surf on the CT [Championship Tour], which is kind of ridiculous. (age 17)

You have your typical girls that surf good or don't take the modelling side so seriously. Generally, the girls with their bums out gain more followers and get seen more. I don't like it personally. (age 17)

These teenagers were aware that industry sponsorship, even if it was just free kit or clothing, was often contingent on being prepared to post "bikini shots": "I've heard of people like Laura Enever talk about it and they need that kind of money to fund their surfing and that's what they need to do" (age 16). Most of these girls found this situation uncomfortable or problematic. For example:

I don't really want to portray myself as that kind of person. Obviously, if I'm surfing in a bikini I'll post that, but I won't post... I don't know, it's just I don't really want to gain that kind of attention. (age 16)

It's tricky. I see a lot of people that think it's necessary and stuff, and I guess it's working for them, but I'm never going to put my bum on Instagram just so I can get some money. I don't like that. It's just cringe to me. (age 18)

While some of these young women we interviewed had just accepted this situation as normal, saying for example, "it doesn't faze me", or admitting that it is hard "when everyone else kind of starts doing it", they recognised they could do little to challenge this situation other than hoping they would find a surf-industry sponsor that rewarded athleticism (see also Franklin & Carpenter 2018). As Thorpe and colleagues (2017) suggest, this self-sexualisation is reflective of postfeminist ideals that have impacted the self-presentational styles adopted by sportswomen across a range of sporting cultures and contexts (also see Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018a, 2018b). Some industry insiders and parents also suggested that female surfers and consumers were colluding in this process (see also lisahunter, 2017). Offering a similar sentiment, one of our parent interviewees suggested, women are "guilty of buying into the whole fashion thing" and thinking, "this is what I'm meant to be". In Australia, the NGB, while not able to actively challenge the surf industry's mode of operation, had recognised that their female athletes needed support for



managing social media and industry “pressure”, so included “managing this pressure” in their coaching (interview, 2018):

[name] has just qualified for the tour next year... she’s on a multi-million-dollar contract already with [brand], paying her for the shots in the bikini and her whole sense of worth for a while there was around what she looked like on Instagram.

(interview, 2018)

The young women in our study, however, were hopeful that with some of the top women pushing back, things might improve; “there’s surfers like Carissa Moore who don’t feel the need to post pictures like that at all, and they’re just as successful”. Likewise, a professional female surfer believed that the “whole surf industry is becoming a lot less sexist”. She reasoned that pressure from her sponsors to wear a bikini had decreased, and that some elite women had successfully challenged this:

There’s always been a little bit of a battle there, but I don’t think it’s as bad now. You see a lot of the top girls, Carissa and Steph, they still surf in boardshorts a lot of the time.

(interview, 2018)

In March 2018, the WSL took some action to limit the sexualised images in its broadcasts, instructing their cinematographers “to exercise discretion while shooting the women’s heats” requesting them “to be zoomed out during bottom turns or duck dives” (Cinematographers reportedly, 2018). The WSL further claimed that “any competitors in skimpy swimwear” should be filmed in “wide-shots” (Cinematographers reportedly, 2018). Since this policy change, bikini bottoms have been less prevalent among the CT women in competition settings.

Some parents were also hopeful that Olympic inclusion might legitimise the sport, and in so doing change perceptions of female surfers as less “serious” than the men:

I just think girls and social media and sponsorship, they often expect tog shots and I’m really not into that, I want them to be athletes. That’s one reason why I’m so stoked that they’ve got the Olympics because I just reckon it’s changed people’s perceptions, particularly about women surfing, as being a more serious sport.

(parent of a 14 year old girl surfer, 2017)

However, as long as the market—particularly the surf clothing industry—controls the funding stream to athletes, they can continue to perpetuate forms of gender regulation, promoting heterosexuality and competitive femininity based primarily in the fashion-beauty complex (McRobbie, 2015).

The surf industry and media, however, are not globally homogenous in either their representations or impact. As discussed in Chapter 10, sponsorship opportunities appeared to differ vastly across countries and regions, impacting female surfers differently, as did the degree of support they received from their national media. According to a WSL surfer from Aotearoa New Zealand, women rarely got prominent photographs in the male-dominated national magazines; “it does still feel like a bit of a boys club in New Zealand”. In contrast, she said in Australia “they’ve almost got surfing on the news every night”, and their male and female surfer’s achievements were widely celebrated (interview, 2018). In Brazil, however, despite the male athletes being the most dominant in the world, and the surfing industry having a significant cultural presence, female surfers have struggled to get the same financial support. Silvana Lima, who will represent Brazil in the Tokyo Olympics, has been outspoken in her inability to get industry sponsorship, despite being an eight-time national champion, and two-time runner up to the professional World Title (2008 and 2009). She contends that “in an image-driven market”, she wasn’t considered “pretty enough to get full sponsorship” for the first 13 years of her career (The surfer, 2016). As Knijnik, Horton, and Cruz’s (2010) research examining the experiences of professional female surfers in Brazil also shows, surfers, like Lima, have had to challenge entrenched cultural attitudes about the female body in Brazilian society. They describe the “beach” body as an object of idolatry and consumption, which they describe as a “bikini-dictatorship” (Knijnik et al., 2010). Lima, however, also alludes to the racism she has experienced as a “dark skinned” woman in the surf industry, particularly coming from a poor background. As Comer (2010) has shown, racial hierarchies underscore the visual economy of the global surf industry with its “penchant for blondes” (p. 153). She describes how the preferred female figure—the “global California girl” (2010; 153)—also impacts women’s opportunities in other regions such as South America, Indonesia, and Africa.

### ***Cultural change: women moving into leadership positions***

While quotas, such as those set by the IOC, are often a helpful way to kick start the gender equity process, sports management scholars have shown that the effectiveness and impact of women being able to shape policies is more important (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013). That is, to challenge the taken for granted structures, policies, and behaviours embedded in sport organisations, women need to be able to influence the organisation in both production (the division of labour) and power (i.e. holding positions of influence and authority) (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013; Burton, 2015). Over the past five years, a number of women have for the first time gained visible leadership positions in key surfing organisations which has contributed to significant changes for women as athletes, leaders, and coaches.

As noted above, the WSL appointed a new female CEO, Sophie Goldschmidt, in 2017. Goldschmidt was a former sports industry executive, known for her “strong leadership and winning and inclusive management style” (Dirk Ziff cited

in WSL, 2017), but, not a surf-industry insider. Goldschmidt soon became seen as an advocate for women's surfing. However, while the move to equal pay came under her tenure, she did not claim this was due to her influence; "It was definitely something that I was aware of and focused on.. [but] there were people focused on this for decades beforehand, so it's been a real journey" (Goldschmidt in Long, 2019). Goldschmidt also acknowledged that from an equality standpoint, "there's still a long way to go". Working alongside her was WSL women's commissioner, Jessi Miley-Dyer, a previous athlete who after retiring in 2011 transitioned into a role as an athlete representative and began advocating for more opportunities for women. Miley-Dyer was subsequently tasked with "rebuilding the women's tour and has since been credited with introducing new events, taking the women to higher quality waves and championing prize money increases" (Long, 2019). Additionally, as noted above, some attributed the WSL's early efforts to improve the conditions for women to WSL investor Dirk Ziff's wife, Natasha (Nettle, 2017). Her influence in this organisation (run as a private business) had allowed her to initiate significant changes. As Carroll (2016) wrote:

Reportedly this [move towards equal prize money for women] was at the urging of Natasha Ziff, spouse of the billionaire investor Dirk Ziff, who underwrites this pro surfing madness. Well if so, I'd like to say, fantastic work Natasha Ziff. You're a champ. You've done something that left to itself, the surf culture was never able to manage.

Women have also gained key leadership roles in national surfing organisations. In 2015, Layne Beachley was appointed as the Chair of Surfing Australia (SA). Beachley had legitimacy through her status as a seven-time world surfing champion, yet had been outspoken about the surfing world, saying "it needs to change, it has to change" (cited in Atkin & Burns, 2017). Nonetheless, like many in new leadership roles who were former athletes, she struggled to challenge the status quo. Such challenges are not unique to surfing. As Leigh Russell explained on resigning from her role as Chief Executive of Swimming Australia (Nov. 2020); "the constant battle as a woman of taking on a mindset so entrenched that it is entirely taken for granted" wore her down:

when you are "the other" – there are very few female coaches, very few female administrators – you are up against a traditionally male level of thinking. It's not overt. It's covert. It is a hard slog ... the truth is that people don't like being told what to do by a woman.

(Leigh Russell cited in Smith, 2020)

Beachley conceded that having spent her life immersed in surfing culture, "she could even be part of the problem, as she struggled to overcome ingrained 'old-school' attitudes" (cited in Atkin & Burns, 2017). However, Beachley used her position of influence to facilitate the appointment of Kim Crane into the

new Performance Director of Surfing role at Surfing Australia (as discussed in Chapter 10). As Crane acknowledged, her appointment was controversial in the surfing world as she was a woman, and also not an elite surfer, but Beachley had encouraged her to apply. According to Crane, Beachley “was a big believer in me and having female leadership as a way of being able to shake up the culture of the traditional boys’ club in surfing” (interview, 2018). Furthermore, Crane unapologetically adopted a leadership style that was different to that previously experienced in the male-dominated Australian surfing culture (see Chapter 10):

I think the fact that my leadership style, and I don’t know if this is being female, but I’m comfortable with some vulnerability and that’s been communicated to my team. I think that has allowed them to feel quite safe.

(interview, 2018)

Having achieved “buy in” from the men, Crane used her leadership position in SA to shape policies and practices that have disrupted the masculine culture of elite surfing (as shown in depth in Chapter 10). However, this was a challenge; “being a female leader in a male dominated sport, there’s days it’s tough. It’s really tough. I’m not going to hide from that” (interview, 2018). Crane subsequently employed several women on her staff including as coaches, a profession that had previously been very male dominated in surfing (See Chapter 10). She recognised that many surfers were dubious of coaches that were not elite surfers, which had contributed to a “lack of confidence and belief” among some women: “I’ve seen a real struggle for women to get that belief that they have the ability to do that in surfing” (interview, 2018). Through mentoring and support of women, Crane claimed she was able to bring onboard excellent female coaches who not only had impact on the female athletes, but also had managed to gain legitimacy with the male athletes.

In summary the complex relationships between different stakeholders, and their webs of power and influence, make cultural change an uneven and complex process; however, women in key leadership positions have had significant impact. Additionally, female surfers continue to fight for equity, recognition, and (self) identity in the sport (see Schumacher, 2017). Activism, such as by CEWS, has impacted policy and practice, and others have mobilised consumers to boycott particular surf brands that sexualise female athletes (see Schumacher, 2017). Most recently, surfing’s heteronormativity has begun to be challenged. Australian Tyler Wright started the 2021 WSL season (December 2020) with her official contest jersey displaying both the Australian Flag and LGBTQ+ Pride flag. Tyler (on Instagram) explained “surfing is for everyone@wsl. As a proud bisexual woman of the LGBTQ+ community as well as an Australian, I’m delighted to be able to represent both this year on my competition jersey”. Despite widespread fan support for her via twitter, that it took “a decade and two world titles” before she felt she could take such a public step, is telling of the heterosexist norms in the surfing culture and industry, but potentially a significant step. Given the cultural and economic power of the male-controlled and lifestyle image-dominated industry of

surfing, which continues to promote the sexualised female model/athlete for economic “success” (Atkin & Burns, 2017; Schumacher, 2017; Thorpe, Toffoletti & Bruce, 2017), the power of the Olympics to effect change, including sex/gender and others forms of social inequality, seems limited. As recognised by some of the interviewees, the ideology underpinning the ISA and IOC equity policies has clear limitations:

Yes, it’s going to increase the visibility of female surfers. And it’s going to increase the opportunity for women surfers of a certain type to get to the Olympics. So, you can say “yes” in that regard. But I think that we’re beyond a point now in women’s surfing where it’s simply about enlarging the pool of women surfers. I think that targeting certain groups [those with less access and opportunity] becomes the more important point.

(female surfer industry insider, interview, 2015)

As this participant suggests, for women’s inclusion in surfing at the Olympic Games to be considered a success, the surf industry and the IOC need to work to broaden definitions of the “surfer girl”, expanding opportunities for more diverse groups of women.

### **Skateboarding: women as an “afterthought”**

Like surfing, skateboarding is a male-dominated activity (Beal, 1996; Chivers-Yochim, 2010), and the sport’s history of marginalizing or excluding girls and women from international and high-status competitions (Beal & Ebeling, 2018; D’Orazio, 2020) has been well documented (Beal & Wilson, 2004; Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2005; MacKay & Dallaire, 2013a, 2013b). However, in the early days, skateboarding was more gender inclusive than many more traditional, organised sports at that time (e.g. Beal, 2013; Borden, 2019; Chivers-Yochim, 2010). For example, in the 1970s local competitions and demonstrations featured both men and women and embraced many different styles (Beal & Ebeling, 2018). Then, in the 1980s, in response to the recession and a major drop in product sales, rebranding was instigated by the (male) industry leaders to distinguish skateboarding from other sports (Beal & Ebeling, 2018). To do this, they actively promoted the narrative of an urban masculine activity with an “authenticity” discourse that advanced risk-taking, and a DIY ethos without adult regulation (cf. Beal & Weidman, 2003; Borden, 2019). This unsurprisingly had, and continues to have, negative impacts on womens’ and girls’ involvement (cf. Beal, 2013). Research across recreational skateboarding communities has shown that gender norms impact who is considered legitimate (Dupont, 2014), with authenticity discourses continuing to create exclusionary practices by devaluing and marginalizing girls and women (Atencio, Beal & Wilson, 2009; Bäckström, 2013; Bäckström & Nairn, 2018; Beal, 1996; Dupont, 2014; Rannikko et al., 2016). In the niche media too, elite women have had much less visibility than men. While

there has been a recent expansion in the dominant skate narrative to include a greater diversity of participants (Atencio et al., 2018; O'Connor, 2018, Willing & Shearer, 2015), and girls are much more visible in skate parks doing “amazing, awesome, good stuff” (interview, 2015), the numbers of girls at the elite Olympic level is still small. Opportunities for women as elite athletes at the time of the Olympic decision were very limited:

It's still very challenging to create a career in skateboarding for women. Right now there's really only two women in the world that are paid to skate full-time.

(interview, male, 2015)

The Olympics therefore was seen as a pivotal moment in the development of women's competitive skateboarding and for girls and women's inclusion (Beal & Ebeling, 2018; D'Orazio, 2020; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). In this discussion, we assess the impacts of Olympic inclusion for women as athletes, leaders, and on the skate industry more widely.

### ***The skate industry's role: “double standards”***

Skateboarding communities, including the roles of professional athletes, have largely been informal in arrangement (Dupont, 2014). Yet, within such structures there have been a “strict set of rules of interaction” (Snyder, 2017, p. 61) that impacts who is given a “legitimate voice” in shaping skateboarding and the distribution of economic resources (Beal & Ebeling, 2018; Dupont, 2014). In 2015, the US dominated skate industry was a largely uncontested male-dominated space, still struggling to see women's potential role. As one female participant explained, skateboarding remains “an industry based on very core masculine boys club kind of mentality” (interview, 2015). Competitions such as the X Games and Street League did not initially include women. While women in the mid-2000s fought successfully for more equity in contest opportunities and prize monies, with some success, the differences for male and female athletes remained significant (Chapter 8). As a professional female skateboarder explained, events were usually “run by the guys” without understanding the “girl's needs”: “A lot of times it just gets swept under the rug and the girls end up getting stuck with whatever they get. It's almost like the women's side is an afterthought” (interview, 2016). Unsurprisingly, some elite women have been vocal in their criticism of double standards leading to effective female-driven activism (see also Chapter 8; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018).

Sponsorship deals for women skaters were also rare. Companies seldom gave women the same financial and promotional opportunities as men (see also D'Orazio, 2020). As one male industry insider explained:

Maybe the women can be marketable, I don't know. But so far, women have never sold skateboarding product. And that's just a fact.

(interview, 2015)

A sponsored athlete's "signature" model of shoes or boards is particularly highly valued within skate culture (Williams, 2020). However, industry insiders did not believe that male skateboarders would purchase a female signature model (D'Orazio, 2020, p. 13). Therefore, unlike their male counterparts, women were largely unable to maintain an amateur or professional career without entering competitions (D'Orazio, 2020; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). Therefore, in 2015, competitive and/or professional female skateboarders wholeheartedly supported skateboarding in the Olympics, because it held the possibility for new opportunities that they had never had access to, including contests, sponsorship, and industry legitimacy:

We're already used to not having anything. So, aside from our own love of skating and the community we've built, there's really nothing to lose at this point for anyone. Even the most hard-core street skater on the girl's side is ready for the Olympics. They couldn't care less, they're like "bring it on, let's do this!" It's seen through such a different lens for us. We don't have the luxury of some of the men who can just film and do what they want and be more of an artist with their skating. It's definitely seen in a different way by female skaters.

(interview, female, 2015)

For many women working in the skateboarding industry and culture (as athletes and in other roles), the Olympics promised to offer a valuable stimulus for change to the status quo that (despite many efforts) had been hard to shift.

### ***Wake up time? Skateboarding's new Federations and gender equality requirements***

During the early stages of skateboarding's shortlisting and inclusion into the Olympic Programme, the skateboarding industry and the three Federations (ISF, FIRS, WSF) hoping to be selected as the official organising body for skateboarding at the Olympics, had a lot of work to do in terms of demonstrating their efforts towards gender equity, including in the qualification events. At the time of the announcement that skateboarding had been shortlisted for possible inclusion in Tokyo (2015), none of the three organisations vying to be the Federation selected by the IOC to develop, manage, and lead the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympic Games, had made a concerted effort to incorporate women into decision-making positions (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). The Fédération Internationale de Roller Sports (FIRS) Executive Committee was failing to meet the gender equity standards for boards with only one woman on a board of 17, none of whom were skateboarders. Similarly, World Skate Federation (WSF) only had one female member of an 11 member Governing Council. The Executive Committee of the International Skateboarding Federation (ISF) fared better with women holding three of the 12 positions (25%). During the lead up to the IOC decision for inclusion, both ISF and WSF were making significant efforts to improve their gender balance in management roles, as well as providing opportunities for female

athletes. Once a collaboration between FIRS and ISF was formed (IOC, 2017, para 2), the ISF made a concerted effort through establishing a Girls and Women Committee, chaired by American professional skateboarder Mimi Knoop. In 2015 and 2016, the committee consisted of six other female skateboarders from six different countries. Women also constituted five of the nine members of ISF's Athlete's Committee, including Brazilian skater Leticia Bufoni as Chair. However, women had less representation on other committees, and tellingly, none on the Industry Leaders Advisory Committee.

While there was still a lot of work to be done before women had access to equitable opportunities in the sport, industry and culture of skateboarding, it is clear that the Olympic governance equity requirements gave the IF's and skate industry a "nudge". In the words of one male interviewee, "so everyone's like doing what they need to do":

I think it's something as skateboarders, it's such a male-dominated thing, so it's like, "Oh sh\*t, that's right, women are there too, duh! It's 50-50, you know?" The possibility of Olympic inclusion puts it on the agenda.

(interview, male, 2015)

Since 2015 there have been further significant signs of change within the industry to create more opportunities for women both in competitions and leadership roles in World Skate and national organizing bodies. For example, Mimi Knoop has been appointed as High Performance Director and Women's Team Manager/Coach for the USA Skateboarding team. In this role she offers mentorship:

an extra arm of support for them... just being there to help with stuff like registration for each event, breaking down the Olympic World Ranking System so they understand how it works, helping them determine which contests they should focus on, what strategies they should put into place for those contests (long game, short game), what tricks they should do.

(Yeah Girl interview, 2020)

Yet Knoop is an exception, and most national skateboarding organisations remain highly male dominated in the leadership structures and paid positions. The support structures for the US women's skateboarding team are second to none.

### ***Changes to competition: the 2015 Street League***

A notable early example of a shift in the skate industry was the inclusion of women in the 2015 Street League competition (SLS; Chapter 7). Professional female skateboarder and women's advocate Mimi Knoop, described this as an important moment in women's skateboarding: "I think it will give women opportunities as it will legitimise women's professional skateboarding to have it on the biggest platform" (cited in Bailey, 2015, para 7). The SLS press release notes the



historic nature of this decision, while subtly reiterating the cultural legitimacy of this event at an important time during the battle for IOC recognition:

For the first time in history, women will have the opportunity to compete in the true street skateboarding contest that defines the only World Champion as recognised by the ISF. Curated in conjunction with the Women's Skateboarding Alliance (WSA), the women's division at the SLS Nike SB Super Crown World Championship... will bring together the world's most accomplished female skateboarders to battle it out for the title of World Champion and for the highest first place prize purse in women's skateboarding.

(Transworld skateboarding, 2015)

The timing of women's inclusion in this event was not lost on industry insiders, some of whom saw women's inclusion as a strategic move to "check the boxes off" for recognition by the ISF and IOC:

My perspective is that Street League probably wouldn't have thought to include women at this stage of the game. ... I don't think they would have been pushed to do that had they not realised okay, well, we have to make sure it's an even playing field as far as men and women because you can't introduce that sport into the Olympics unless you have both.

(interview, female, 2015)

However, some were critical of the last-minute decision and expressed concern that women's skateboarding was not able to shine on a course designed by men for men:

The women competed in the same venue as the men for Street League, and the girls were saying "oh my god, that drop was so high", and "that rail was really high". They're used to having different size street competitions than the men.

(interview, female, 2015)

Such comments suggested that there would be ongoing challenges for women if they continue to be judged against male-defined standards. However, as the women were given more opportunities to compete on the Street League courses, they continued to build their skills and confidence, and audiences increasingly came to appreciate the performances of the women skaters.

### ***Industry leaders attitudes to women's skateboarding at the Olympics***

All of the nine skate industry insiders (mostly white men) that we interviewed strongly believed that Olympic inclusion would greatly help increase the low

numbers of women participating in competitive skateboarding, and bring symbolic and economic benefits to female skateboarders competing in the Olympic Games. As one male interviewee commented:

the talent's good, but the numbers are down. But the numbers are going to multiply incredibly and the talent is going way up. And it will be done by Tokyo, no question.

(interview, 2015)

Renton Millar, an ISF Executive Board member, recalled “seeing a 50 percent split between girls and boys at the Nanjing Youth Olympics, as an eye-opening experience” (cited in Kassel, 2016). The advancement of snowboarding for women after Olympic inclusion was also frequently cited, which many claimed had “helped elevate” women including in exposure, financially through endorsement opportunities and having people take more of an interest. Some were also hopeful that the opportunities that became available for women in snowboarding would also open up for female skaters upon Olympic inclusion.

D’Orazio (2020) suggests that to some extent the industry “cooperation” with Olympic incorporation was potentially “to gain some influence within an already decided process” (p. 1). This is certainly possible; however, the male and female industry leaders we interviewed seemed genuine in their belief that Olympic inclusion would be positive for women. We also found that those embedded in skateboarding as a competitive sport (as participants or the industry or media) and who were younger, were most likely to be accepting of Olympic inclusion.

### ***Sponsorship opportunities***

As noted, the skate industry at the time of Olympic shortlisting was still struggling to see women’s potential role in marketing to their core audience of teenage boys. However, our interviews showed increasing recognition that women—as consumers and participants—could be part of the market expansion that was driving Olympic inclusion:

Any girl who wins a medal at Tokyo, wow, she will be a household name, because the whole industry is wrapped with consumer products and fashion.

(interview, male, 2015)

We’re having companies out there who have never thought about having girls on their team going, “Wow, if this happens we need to start thinking, we need to start including more women”. And to me that’s a really good thing.

(interview, female, 2015)

However, some elite female skaters expressed concerns that they would be forced into abandoning their “style” and have to adopt the hypersexualised appearance of female surfers:

The skate industry is a bunch of dudes making decisions and judgements. If I don't have long hair, wear tight pants and a push up bra then they decide I look too much like a boy. They don't care about how well I skate or my skill level. It's about how I look. It's about how we all look. It's catering to all these dudes in the skate industry.

(Bailey, 2015 p. 17)

While female skaters have, to some degree avoided the widespread heterosexualisation of their bodies that characterises the surfing media, concurrently, core skate media continues to frame women in sexualised ways or as less skilled (MacKay & Dallaire, 2013a, 2013b), and women who embrace forms of emphasised or hegemonic femininity tend to experience relative advantages (e.g., Leticia Bufoni; D'Orazio, 2020). Beal and Ebeling (2018) cite examples of women skaters being asked to pose in bikinis on the beach holding their skateboards for “free gear”, and others who were sexually harassed by sponsors and at contests, concluding that women are often only valued as skaters “if they also live up to cisgender femininity” (p. 101). US professional skater and activist, Leo Baker (a recently transitioned transgender male skater), has been a particularly outspoken critic of the skate industry's sexism and misogyny (D'Orazio, 2020). Baker describes “feeling like an outcast in my own subculture” (nike.com), but has gone on to become one of the most visible gender-nonconforming professional skaters and a champion for the LGBTQ+ community.

### ***Shifting gendered identities***

Professional skaters, like Leo Baker, who are striving “to make skateboarding more inclusive for athletes who aren't straight, cis men” (Jones, 2020) are having an important influence in shifting cisgendered identities within skateboarding communities, with trans and queer centred groups (e.g. Unity, Skate Like a Girl, and Quell Skateboarding) increasingly challenging the cis male status quo (See Beal & Ebeling, 2018). Baker cites a list of gay professional skaters, suggesting that “the subculture of queer skating is getting some light shone on it, it's opening the doors” (Jones, 2020). In a recent conference presentation, Barbier and Willing (2020) also explain how grass roots non-binary skateboarding communities are impacting the core industry. They discuss the collaboration between the LGBTQ+ community skate organisation Unity and Adidas, as an exemplar, whereby Adidas created a gender-neutral clothing line and shoe range (adidas x Unity, 2020). This collaboration builds upon similar initiatives such as the Nike Skateboarding's (Nike SB) and Leo Baker Orange Label release (2020) and the

forthcoming Converse SHAPES collection. However, Nike SB's sponsorship of Baker who was struggling to get legitimacy with core brands could also be read as very strategic. Nike's own struggles to gain legitimacy in the skateboard culture over the past decades are well documented (Beal & Wilson, 2004; see Chapter 7), and while, resistance to this "mainstream" brand has largely diminished, Nike's promotion of Leo Baker subtly positions the corporation as helping to "challenge" skateboarding's conformity. For example, their promotion of Baker reminds the consumer that "The roots of skateboarding are built around disobedience to mainstream culture":

Skateboarding is all about challenging the status quo. But while it should have been the perfect sport for a gender-nonconforming pro skater and activist like Leo Baker to thrive, the skate world didn't initially welcome someone who didn't fit the mould.

(Always against the grain, 2021)

These initiatives to recognise and celebrate the gender diversity within the skateboarding community have also transpired into changes in elite competition. In 2020, the Vans Park Series, an Olympic qualification event, was due to offer men and women equal prize money, and allow trans and gender-nonconforming pro skaters to self-identity as either men or women and compete in their chosen category (Barbier & Willing, 2020). Although the Vans Park Series was postponed due to COVID-19, this approach to recognizing gender fluidity among professional skaters is due to continue moving forward. While the "push" came from the skateboarding communities, Barbier and Willing (2020) suggest this "allyship" from Vans shows how skaters are influencing mega sport events. While Baker qualified for the US Tokyo 2020 team under the women's street team (March 2019), they eventually withdrew to prioritise their transition: "I couldn't keep putting myself on hold" (cited in Schultz, 2021). Unfortunately, despite the efforts being made within the skateboarding industry to recognise the fluidity of gender identities, the IOC continues to maintain a clear gender binary and will likely expect skateboarders to conform to these rigid ideas of gender if they want to compete at the Olympic Games. However, if qualifying events, such as the Vans Park Tour, continue to challenge binaried ideas of gender in their event structures, and the community continues to support such initiatives, there is hope that the skateboarding industry could be an advocate for long overdue gender changes within the Olympic Games.

### ***The rise of the girl skateboarding phenom***

Perhaps one of the most visible signs of skateboarding identities being in flux, is the rapidly changing demographic of female skaters. In the 2020 Olympic World Skate rankings, 10 of the top 20 women skateboarding park athletes are under 16 years of age, including number one ranked Japanese skater Misugu Okamoto (14 years old) and number four ranked Sky Brown (12 years old) representing Great Britain. In

the top 20 women street skaters, nine are under the age of 16 years, including three Brazilian girls (number two ranked skater is 12-year-old Rayssa Leal) and four Japanese girls. For a sport that has been long stereotyped as an activity dominated by young men, the visibility and high skill levels of young pre-teen girl skateboarders is sure to make a lasting impression on global audiences. Some of these pre-teen skaters (particularly, Rayssa Leal and Sky Brown) have secured highly lucrative sponsorship deals, particularly from mainstream sport brands (i.e., Nike), fashion and popular culture, and media companies, not solely the skate industry.

For example, Sky Brown is the youngest professional skateboarder in the world with a lucrative sponsorship with Nike, and a range of surf and skate companies (e.g., Hurley, Lost Surfboards), including her own signature board with Almost Skateboards (with a portion of all sales going to her preferred skateboarding Non-Governmental Organisation, Skateistan). The Japanese-British pre-teen (who lives in California but is representing Great Britain in Tokyo) travels the world for fashion shoots, competitions, and awards ceremonies and is a Global Brand Ambassador for Polly Pocket (with her own signature doll). In 2020 she published a book titled *Sky's the Limit: Words of Wisdom from a Young Champion*, and also starred in her first song titled, "GIRL", with video footage of her skateboarding and surfing and hanging out with her girl-friends. The imagery and lyrics, such as, "I can be pretty, glitter in my hair, but I'm not defined by what I wear. I can be pretty and shake up the world. I can do anything... I'm a girl", are saturated with young "girl power" slogans. Her sponsorships and media collaborations, including corporations within and outside of skateboarding, are recognising the value in the young, "empowered" "cute" skater girl athlete to market products to diverse audiences, including other young girls. Brown's marketing potential goes well beyond skateboarding.

This younger generation of girl skateboarders are also extremely skilled and effective in using social media (i.e., TikTok, Instagram). For example, in 2020 Brown and Leal had almost 800,000 and 600,000 Instagram followers, respectively (their numbers of followers grew significantly during and after their performances at the Tokyo Olympics). They both regularly feature in paid partnerships on Instagram for a range of products (from nail polish, to Tech Deck skateboards, and airline companies) and are strategically collaborating with other young, fashionable, and famous influencers. The IOC are clearly cognisant of the unique "star power" that such young girl celebrities and influencers will bring to the Games, and have featured many of these girls on their Olympic YouTube channel, including Leal, Brown, and 10-year-old Spanish skater Daniela Terol.

However, the situation also raises a number of important, and as yet, undiscussed questions around child protection, including in social media environments. In these informal sporting cultures with a lack of formalised coaching and training structures, the safeguarding of young athletes is even less well developed than in more traditional organised sports. In the Brazilian media, Rayssa Leal's parents were cited as having concerns that she is still very young and, "if she ends up going to the Olympics, they won't be allowed in the Olympic village

and accommodation facilities” (Rebello & Angeli, 2020). The high-risk training they undertake was evident in the horrific, and potentially life-threatening injuries Sky Brown experienced in 2020 (see Chapter 7). At this stage, World Skate and most national skate organisations have yet to consider the specific needs of young girl skateboarders under their athlete welfare policies. However, in 2018 USA Skateboarding executive member, Neal Hendrix, was suspended due to allegations of sexual abuse of a teenage female skateboarder under his tutelage in previous years. This led to USA Skateboarding setting up their Athlete Safety Policy, Minor Athlete Abuse Prevention Policies, Code of Conduct, and the U.S. Center for SafeSport as a “framework that supports our commitment to creating a safe and positive environment for our athletes and all participants, free of misconduct” (Much, 2020). To date, few other national skateboarding organisations have developed such extensive policy initiatives to protect the safety of their athletes.

Undeniably, these broader representations of skateboarders (beyond particular men) are positive and significant, and alongside this, the core niche media is also including more images of women performing skilled manoeuvres. The rise in the girl skateboarding phenom also seems to signal a shift in the skateboarding industry. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that both Rayssa Leal and Sky Brown were initially sponsored by Nike SB not the core skate brands. For Nike SB, this can be seen as a strategic move that like their sponsorship of Leo Baker, re-positioning the brand as a supporter of identities that the (male) status quo in skateboarding’s core has historically marginalised. Furthermore, some of these young women, such as Leal and Brown, often wear “cute clothes” (skirts and dresses) and make-up while skateboarding strongly supporting the heteronormative. Others, like Leticia Bufoni, embody the heterosexy bad-girl identity that has long been glorified in action sport cultures (Thorpe, 2017). Thus, despite increasing recognition and support for more diverse gender identification in some parts of skateboarding culture, “heteronormative presentations” continue to be favoured and rewarded (Atencio et al., 2018).

In summary, these changes have had a significant impact on women and girls’ opportunities to be included in elite skateboarding and, to some extent, facilitated the emergence of a new group of teen and pre-teen female skaters. The IOC’s expectations for gender equality have clearly put pressure on international and national skateboarding federations (Beal & Ebeling, 2019), and also pushed those organising national and regional qualifying competitions to include women (Beal & Ebeling, 2018; Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). It is unsurprising, therefore, that girls and women have supported this movement (see also D’Orazio, 2020). In terms of leadership, there is less evidence that women are being considered for key roles within the skate industry. However, some significant shifts have taken place in recent years such as the appointment of Knoop as a team manager and the High Performance Director in USA Skateboarding (see case study in Chapter 10). Women have also created important informal leadership positions to address concerns over their access to events and resources, and how they are represented both at the Olympics and in the culture more broadly. Most notably is the Women’s

Skateboarding Alliance (WSA), founded in 2005 by two US professional female skateboarders Cara-Beth Burnside and Mimi Knoop, to “authentically” represent the industry voice of women’s skateboarding and empower women in the action sports industry (MacKay & Dallaire, 2013a, 2013b). The WSA successfully challenged the X Games to allow women and to then broadcast the women’s event and increase women’s pay. At the time of our first round of interviews, members of the WSA were working with the ISA in the hope of having a voice for women at the Olympics and beyond. With the important appointment of Knoop in USA Skateboarding, the women skaters on the USA Skateboarding team are being well supported. However, most other national skateboarding organisations remain male-dominated and defined.

For women, who have had inadequate opportunities from the core industry to become professionals, competition has become a key avenue to make a living in skateboarding. While the identities of core and mainstream are clearly in flux, given the longstanding practise of devaluing skateboarders who focus on contest results (Beal & Wilson, 2004; Donnelly, 2008), the longer-term impact of the Olympics on elite skate culture is harder to predict. That is, participating in Olympic competition may reinforce women’s “inauthenticity” and marginalised status in the skateboarding world (Beal & Wilson, 2004, p. 38). Exploring Olympic inclusion and concurrent sportisation through this gendered lens, has revealed the multiple contradictions in skateboarding’s authenticity discourses and how cultural ambivalence to competition continues to connect with sex/gender exclusion. Despite the unenthusiastic reaction to the Olympics by some core skate industry in the niche media, many of the professionals and industry leaders we interviewed were enthusiastic. As the rise of the young girls, like Sky Brown and Rayssa Leal, shows (and also the growing visibility and support of trans and gender diverse skaters) these power dynamics are continuing to change.

### **Sport climbing: “different but equal”**

As various scholars have revealed, the association between mountain climbing and risk in outdoor climbing is often associated with particular forms of youthful masculinity (Gilchrist, 2007; Robinson, 2004, 2008; West & Allin, 2010). Furthermore, gender identities vary across different forms of climbing, with sport climbing arguably one of the most gender-neutral (even feminised) versions of the sport as it is typically performed in an artificial environment (Evans & Gagnon, 2019). Many in the broader climbing community consider indoor and sport climbing “less” risky, more commercialised (Hardwell, 2009), and less masculine. Others have recognised climbing as less male dominated than many other action sports (Dilley & Scraton, 2010). Furthermore, the requirements of the competitive forms of climbing do not privilege a particular body type (though this is different across different disciplines, speed, lead, bouldering, etc.), including at the elite level where world-famous female climbers have been successful, with some out-performing their male peers (Robinson, 2008). As one interviewee claimed,

“climbing is very attractive for women and it can be proposed as an equal gender sport” (2016). In 2018, 40% of International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) athlete licenses were distributed to women ([ifsc-climbing.org](http://ifsc-climbing.org)). Another confirmed this view:

There’s not really a super type that you have to be in order to be great. There are tall climbers and short climbers and thin climbers and heavy climbers – they come in all shapes. ... It’s open to a lot more people, because a lot of it also requires balance and that it allows the women athletes to really maybe even outperform the men athletes. So, you don’t get a one-sided sport. You have one that both sides have really interesting top athletes and abilities.

(interview, 2018)

Formed in 2007, the IFSC was largely responsible for the successful proposal for Olympic inclusion. In Tokyo, sport climbing featured 20 male and 20 female athletes. However, the IFSC saw achieving full gender equity across all aspects of the organisation, particularly leadership, as both necessary and one of its ongoing challenges. This did not appear to be “rhetoric” to convince the IOC. As the IFSC website documents, and our interviews confirmed, the sport had a pre-Olympic history of developing gender equity in sport climbing across administration and competition:

We started with gender equity in our sport with having equal prize money for men and women from the very beginning. Additionally, we have equal participation from men and women and equal exposure during our competitions.

([ifsc-climbing.org](http://ifsc-climbing.org))

As one insider explained, “from the very beginning in terms of participation at events the number of girls and boys were similar” (interview, 2015). He cited how at the previous year’s youth championships the ratio of girls to boys was “40 (girls): 45 (boys), to 60 (boys): 55 (girls), depending on the age category” (interview, 2016). He continued:

there is no direct comparison between the men and the women. In other words, we create routes for men and routes for women where actually we give to both genders the best possibility to express the skills of their body, because they are not the same. ... In sport climbing both genders can reach the top in different ways. So they can really express the particularity of their body skills.

This situation clearly contrasts with the experiences of women skaters at the Street League, who had to contend with obstacles designed for the male competitors. The inclusion of sport climbing into the Olympic Games was therefore widely seen as having many benefits for competitive female climbers and the next generation of young women entering the sport.



In terms of leadership, the IF was already doing much better than other action sport IFs in some areas, with 66% of their staff being female. However, this had not translated into the organisational management and leadership within climbing, which exhibited less gender balance with only around 20% of membership of the executive board being female (interview, 2016). The IFSC President noted the struggles they had experienced to attract women into key leadership positions:

It's not easy... It's difficult to enter this world because, yes, it is male dominated! I listen to my people, they say, "You don't find so many women motivated to get in," and honestly I don't know why this is. ... I think that in the future we need to motivate more women to be active on the political level.  
(interview, 2016)

Given that the IFSC had already met the IOC's 20% board recommendation, it would appear the desire for gender equity was not solely due to pressure from the Olympic Charter but informed by the climbing culture more broadly. As one interviewee claimed, the IFSC is "a young organisation which is proud of the gender equity displayed both in its events and in the staff and board", and recognises there "is still a significant journey ahead, especially considering representation in National Federation decision making bodies, in Coaching and in Route setting". The IFSC detailed their plans to seek out and "develop leadership and talent for both genders" while focusing specifically on developing "female athletes and female national leaders". Subsequently, in February 2016, a strategic plan was developed to work towards "gender equity in the sport administration" at both "National and International levels", and the following year (March 2017) the IFSC provided "a step-by-step to address the issues they identified within their own federations". The IFSC 2020–2028 Strategic Plan maps a long-term goal of reaching "balanced representation of men and women across the organisation, from officials, coaches, commissions, etc" by Los Angeles 2028 (IFSC, 2020).

### **Discussion: from "afterthought" to centre stage**

Despite the different opportunities currently available for women as athletes, managers, and leaders across these three action sports, throughout our interviews there was a general perception that Olympic inclusion would be a positive development for women. Women's participation in elite competition was described as long being "an afterthought" in the organisation of events, and the resourcing and coverage of athletes, which Olympic inclusion was seen to be helping to shift. In surfing and skateboarding, because women hold marginalised positions within these sports' elite sporting cultures and industries, inclusion in the Olympic Games has the potential to offer opportunities for greater visibility and support that was otherwise largely unavailable.

Our survey also revealed interesting gendered trends in attitudes towards Olympic inclusion. The female participants in our survey were much more enthusiastic than their male counterparts about Olympic inclusion (Chapter 5). Male participants, particularly over 40, who have been invested in these cultures over a period of time, were most wary about the “loss” of their dominance and control of these activities via Olympic inclusion. In contrast, female participants and athletes, tended to view the Olympics as less a threat to the autonomy and authenticity of these (male-defined) cultures, but rather as an opportunity to gain power and identity in elite action sport cultures and industries.

However, often the basis for this optimism is rooted in the logic of liberal feminism with its goals of equal opportunity for individual sportswomen to participate in events and competitions, earn media approval, and obtain sponsorship deals and industry support (Laurendeau & Sharara 2008; Messner, 2002). As feminists have long-argued, this perspective fails to “examine oppositional values” and how cultural and institutional barriers relate to “broader structures of power” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 29) masking the ways in which women’s participation is not equally available to all women with talent. In both surfing and skateboarding, male skateboarders and surfers are extolled for adopting a “gritty alternative lifestyle” (Beal & Wilson, 2004, p. 39) whereas those women who conform to the industry and media fixation with youthful, heteronormative beauty ideals and adopt more individualised, self-marketing strategies, continue to gain the most media attention and economic benefits. Furthermore, as Williams (2020) has argued, research needs to explore the ways intersections of gender and race impact the opportunities for women athletes and industry leaders of colour. Despite the potential in Olympic inclusion for new opportunities for women in surfing, skateboarding, and climbing, to achieve “equality” in these new Olympic action sports requires cultural and ideological shifts beyond the IOC and the sport’s international or national federations.

What is also absent from these conversations is a recognition that equality for women may be better resolved by adding event styles that suit women and girls, such as in Olympic gymnastics, rather than having male-defined competition structures and rules. Sport climbing is most advanced in this respect. As Donnelly and Donnelly (2013) suggest, it is not necessary for the IOC to establish identical events for men and women to create equality; rather it is necessary to add equitable/ equivalent events that achieve the same numbers of events and medal opportunities for men and women at the Olympics. Lastly, but importantly, parts of the skateboarding industry are recognising that the male-female binary used by the IOC (and many other GSOs) is problematic and excludes those who do not identify with binary gender categories. For equity to occur, the IOC also needs to recognise the contested nature of biological notions of sex and gender (Karkazis, 2019), that this gender binary is a socially-constructed myth, and take “a lead in addressing the injustices it engenders” (Wheaton et al., 2020, p. 10). In so doing, it could learn something from recent efforts led by the skateboarding community

and increasingly being supported by some within the skate industry. There is a need to develop more inclusive alternatives to the existing gender-binaries in elite sport and towards more intersectional and international understandings of athletes' gendered and racialised experiences.

### ***Female leadership: the roles of women in creating change***

In terms of women in formal leadership, the IOC has provided an incentive to increase diversity (see also Postlethwaite & Grix, 2016) which has had some impact. Yet these federations, and areas such as coaching, remain male dominated, and while some are making attempts to include women in positions of power, much more can be done. However, the struggles faced by these action sport federations are certainly not unique; international sports leadership remains very male dominated (Henry & Robinson, 2010), more so than many corporate organisations (Adriaanse & Schofield, 2013). However, those women who were able to carve out leadership roles—as seen in the example of Surfing Australia (Kim Crane) and USA Skateboarding (Mimi Knoop)—are having a significant impact on the sport's culture, practices, and distribution of resources. Furthermore, as seen in cases such as the Committee for Equity in Women's Surfing and the Women's Alliance in skateboarding, women's collective activism can be powerful in creating change, but mostly when broader structural changes align. Such activism seems particularly effective when women who have achieved status within their sporting cultures as athletes are strategic in aligning with powerful women outside the sport, as well, as their male colleagues to co-construct new spaces for cultural change.

### ***Men as allies in creating change***

A key finding from our project was that some men are playing significant roles in working towards gender equality in action sport organisations (Wheaton & Thorpe, 2018). As Connell (2005) has shown, alliances between men and women in achieving gender equality is important, and that men can play an important role in reframing “gender equality as a positive project for men” (p. 1819). Connell (2005), however, notes the continuing challenges in the sports/business complex, which was certainly the case in the surfing and skateboarding industries. As Adriaanse and Claringbould (2016) outline, for effective change, those men who control the resources need to become change agents by “challeng[ing] gender stereotypes within their sport's organisational structures and roles” (p. 561). While there is little evidence yet of men in the action sport industries being agents of change, there are signs that some men in surfing and sport climbing, and to a lesser extent skateboarding, are recognising their privilege and how (some) men benefit from the current cultural and institutional structures. Professional surfing icon Kelly Slater was one of many men to publicly support the WSL's decision for

professional women surfers to receive equal prize money (2018). In media interviews Slater challenged the view that women's surfing is less skilled, stating their performances are "every bit as difficult and as dangerous and as impressive as what any man on the tour does" (Setting the standard, 2018). He also explained that gender equity was deeply personal to him, reflecting on being raised by a working "single mom", whom he recognised was "underpaid and underappreciated":

all women — deserve better. Now. ... This decision by the WSL is a message to society — that equal prize money should be the standard. It should be the norm.

(Kelly Slater in Setting the standard, 2018)

Such active endorsement of, and support for, elite women by elite men who are important voices in these informal cultural groups, has not always been forthcoming in professional sports, but can be highly effective in establishing solidarity that advances gender equity (Adriaanse & Claringbould, 2016). Despite such signs of change, we have shown that many working in these industries and organisations continue to embrace practices that emphasise hegemonic masculinity, heterosexism (and homophobia), and therefore contribute to the ongoing exclusion of women and non-binary athletes as athletes and leaders.

## Conclusions

While the desire of the IOC to include new action sports appears to be driven by the need to engage youth, as we have highlighted, demonstrating gender equity is also important in this discourse. Despite differences in the impact of the commitment to gender equity (as expressed in the Olympic charter) across these sports, the top-down push from the IOC has been significant in putting gender equity onto the agenda of the action sport cultures and industries, whom might otherwise have continued to marginalise women's participation and leadership for many more years. Across each sport, a range of stakeholders, including fans, athletes, parents, sponsors, sport-industry, and external organisations, all influenced advances in gender equity. However, in each case, we have seen women working together, often with their male colleagues, both informally and in leadership roles, to effectively help drive such changes.

Yet, in many of these action sport cultures, the (often white, North American centred, and heteronormative) male-dominated core informal networks have acted to funnel resources, even if unintendedly, to men, with little transparency or accountability, continuing to perpetuate male privilege (Beal & Ebeling, 2018). For significant cultural change to occur in the Olympics (or elsewhere), gender equality will need to be addressed across these multi-dimensional structures and relationships, from economic arrangements for athletes, the mass and niche media, national and international federations, to everyday interactions among recreational participants in local contexts.

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# Conclusion

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In this chapter we offer some final thoughts from more than a decade of empirical research about the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage. We revisit some of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) aspirations underpinning Agenda 2020, showing the contrast between the rhetoric and impacts of the inclusion of new action sports into the Olympic Programme.

### **Action sports, the Olympics, and Agenda 2020: a performance of change**

As Olympic scholars Sugden and Tomlinson (2011) argue in outlining the ongoing need for critical socio-cultural research to interrogate the meanings of the Olympics, the task is to “look behind” the spectacle and magical “moments of human accomplishment... for the chains of power, prestige, and status that fuel and mobilise the contemporary Olympic machine” (p. 249). They point to the ground-breaking work of John Hargreaves (1986, 1992), whose advice (in the early 1990s) remains relevant:

interrogate the meanings of the Games, identify the stakes for which bidding and hosting cities (and the nations of which they are a part) defy economic and social logic, and analyse and interpret the broken promises as well as the utopian projections of Olympism.

(Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011, p. 249)

To do so, as Hargreaves (1986) and many others since have shown, requires uncovering the “dynamics of power and conflict in sporting culture”, and “the complexities of the play of power” (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011, p. 249). However, the relationship between sports consumers and sporting mega-events are never stable, but in a “constant state of re-articulat[ion]” amid the various “contextual forces at play” (Belanger, 2009, p. 62). As Boykoff (2014) proposed, the concept of “celebratory capitalism” facilitates an understanding of how the Olympic system is re-articulating itself in the contemporary neoliberal context, showing “the economic system’s nimbleness” (p. 3) in adapting to this era.

Agenda 2020 has been the key mechanism or framework for the IOC to demonstrate change within the Olympic industry under the leadership of President Thomas Bach. Launched in 2014, Agenda 2020's three key pillars of "Credibility, Sustainability and Youth", were driven by growing critique of the IOC and "a recognition that the world was evolving rapidly and that the Olympic Movement had the opportunity to be an agent of change" (Olympic Agenda, 2020). Put simply, Agenda 2020 was the IOC's effort to become (or appear) more relevant in a quickly changing sport-media landscape. In December 2020, the IOC made an assessment of its success to date, stating:

Olympic Agenda 2020 has changed the Olympic Games, the IOC and the Olympic Movement. Having achieved 85 per cent of the recommendations is a great example of what we can accomplish when we work together.

(Thomas Bach, 11 Dec 2020)

The inclusion of action sports was heralded as important for fulfilling these objectives, particularly in achieving youth relevance—"greater connection with young people and those outside the Olympic Movement" (Olympic Agenda, 2020)—and gender equity. The IOC's incorporation of youth-focused action sports is clearly a response to adapt to changing trends in sporting participation and consumption, a bid to claw back younger viewers and to build global audiences who are vital for the continuation of the Olympic system. While our focus has been on action sports, this strategy is also evident in the inclusion of breaking (also known as breakdancing) in the Paris 2024 Games, and the interest that the IOC are taking in parkour and e-sports, further pushing boundaries of what "sport" is in the 21st century, despite the challenge this presents for their traditional core audiences and stakeholders.

Regarding gender equity, our analysis showed that Olympic inclusion has already had some benefits for female athletes in these sports, and those in leadership positions within surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing. Nonetheless, as critics have argued, the IOC continues to approach achieving and measuring gender equality in ways that do not address systemic inequities, including around binary notions of sex/gender, the privileging of Western white women as "universal" subjects, and ongoing processes of colonialism, hyper-commercialism, and athlete exploitation (Lenskyj, 2013). The IOC rhetoric of increasing diversity and internationalism is also highly performative. Regardless of the rhetoric from both the IOC and the sport International Federations (IFs) that these new action sports will help to internationalise the Olympics and show greater diversity across Olympic competitors, this will not eventuate in Tokyo with such a small field of competitors, and with sports dominated by a few nations. For example, in surfing, qualification (at the end of 2020) resulted in only 10 nations qualifying in both the men's and women's divisions. Furthermore, in contrast to recreational lifestyle sporting cultures, the elite competitive versions of these sports are often highly exclusive, requiring substantial material resources to compete on the international stage.

There is a vast disparity in opportunities available for athletes between regions and nations including in funding, facilities, and coaching, which Olympic inclusion is exacerbating. In contrast to surfing, sport climbing and skateboarding in Tokyo are likely to be much more international than surfing, with some evidence of their worldwide popularity, particularly in the rise of elite women and pre-teen girls from Asia (particularly China and Japan) and other countries beyond the USA (i.e., Brazil).

As discussed, the Urban Park concept and beach festival are important attempts by the IOC to change the spectator experience. These concepts are underpinned by critiques that the Olympic Games are elitist and beyond the reach of the “everyday” person, and thus these are spaces that have been carefully choreographed to “bring sport to the people” and to make these activities (and the Olympics by association) seem more accessible, interactive, and participatory. At the time of writing (December 2020), however, it seems that, even if the Tokyo games take place (despite widespread concern within Japan and internationally about hosting a mega-event in the midst of a pandemic), they may well be without on-site spectators. What this will mean for these new action sports events, so dependent on the interactivity and flow of people on the ground, remains to be seen.

In terms of sustainability, the Agenda 2020 rhetoric is largely corporate greenwashing (Boykoff & Mascarenhas, 2016; Geeraert & Gauthier, 2018). The IOC recently asserted that it is “now a carbon-neutral organisation, and has committed to becoming a climate-positive organisation by 2024” (Olympic Agenda, 2020). Yet, it continues to be highly selective in which aspects of its operations it uses to evidence such claims. It is striking that in the debates about wave pool implementation little if any consideration was given to their environmental impact. Furthermore, in the decision to hold the 2024 Paris surfing event in Tahiti rather than the South West of France, and fly all of the competitors back to Paris for the awards ceremonies, the carbon footprint impact of this air travel was largely ignored. Such contradictory practices do not suggest that the IOC—or other actors and stakeholders—are seriously interested in “providing a clear trajectory for the global sports community to help combat climate change” or to “ensure that all upcoming Olympic Games are carbon neutral and have a significantly reduced carbon footprint” (Olympic Agenda, 2020). As well as contradicting the IOC’s environmental claims, the decision to host the surfing event at the world renown, but remote reef of Teahupo’o will reaffirm the elitism of competitive surfing. Furthermore, this decision goes against previous claims of using these events to help “bring sport to the people”. Indeed, such contradictions in policy, rhetoric, and practice are rife in Agenda 2020, and throughout the processes of including action sports into the Olympic Games.

### **Self-governing action sports: the promise and challenge of change**

Agenda 2020 made possible new self-governing models that were key to developing relationships with surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing organisations, and

getting “buy in” from the sporting cultures and industries, more broadly. It was also an important way for the IOC to demonstrate a less top-down and more collaborative approach to defining global sporting culture. Our research has shown that, in contrast to previous models of inclusion, self-governance has given these sports more control over important rules and regulations (e.g. qualification criteria, competition styles and formats, types of equipment, which activities and styles of participation to support). Self-governing sports can also advocate directly with their National Olympic Committee (NOC), national High Performance (HP) sport bodies, and potential sponsors. This has ensured that any new Olympics-related funding, such as from national governments or NOCs, however small, goes directly to the sport with more autonomy in deciding how the funding is spent. This is an important shift as many of the previous action sports included into the Olympics (i.e. windsurfing, snowboarding, BMX racing) under existing IFs found they had little influence within these organisations, and that potential Olympic-focused funds could easily be subsumed into the wider activities of the sport’s umbrella organisation (i.e. Yachting, Cycling, and Skiing). These traditional sport organisations (IFs and NSOs) have continued to show some resistance to these action sports, and despite prompting from the IOC, have continued to support their older and most established sports, seeing the new action sport as less credible or important (Chapter 5). The following quote is illustrative of the frustration experienced by many action sports working within traditional IFs, particularly the slow rates of change, undemocratic processes, and unwillingness to compromise:

The problem is the whole ISAF system is flawed. People always vote in their own short term self-interest not the long term interests of the sport - they vote for how cost effective it is for them to win a medal, not for what’s best for sailing to remain Olympic.

(interview, 2015)

For those sports with the opportunity to self-govern (surfing and sport climbing), there was the opportunity to develop their own systems and processes, but they still continued to experience many challenges working within the Olympic structures and models of sport.

The benefits of self-governing models and maintaining some autonomy have been at a high cost for the IFs and the National Governing Bodies (NGB)/National Sport Organisations (NSO) beneath them, creating a range of impacts for policy and practice at international, national, and regional levels, and also for the Tokyo Organising Committee (OC).

The struggles that the new IFs have experienced over the past five years are noteworthy. The International Surfing Association (ISA) and International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC), in particular, are small organisations with limited budgets that have had a vast task for preparation. Furthermore, because of their “temporary status”, not only are they responsible for footing the majority of the costs of staging the Olympic competitions, they also do not gain a share in the game revenue (Long, 2019; see Chapter 6). According to one journalist:

Income from the event will instead be split between the IOC, the Tokyo 2020 organising committee and the 28 core sports on the programme, leaving the temporary disciplines to forego vital development funds (Long, 2019).

However, with questions being raised by the Presidents of the IFs, it is likely that such negotiations are becoming ever more urgent. Thus, these new action sports may have self-governance and some autonomy within the Olympic family, but the price has been without revenue. As Robert Fasulo, the ISA's executive director has pointed out; "it was a mechanism that allowed change, which of course we're all in favour of, but now - and I'm not sure that the IOC has fully thought this through - it's that sense of uncertainty" (cited in Long, 2019). For the Tokyo OC too, these new sports have created a range of challenges, as well as opportunities. Surfing NSOs reported that Tokyo was still disorganised (in 2018), and the local committee seemed unsure about many aspects of running the surfing competition and festival and had seemed glad to have some input in areas they were clearly struggling to understand and implement. Similarly, in our interview with key members of the Tokyo OC, they admitted that the additional workload had been a significant challenge.

The economic model (or lack thereof) and underfunding of IFs significantly impacted the national organisations of action sports and their ability to prepare athletes for Tokyo. First, the increased administrative workload was challenging for NGB/NSOs which continue to be mostly small and often voluntary organisations, also lacking knowledge and skills in areas including governance. Second, the short time scales between the decision for Olympic inclusion and Tokyo, along with the action sport's non-permanent status in the Olympic Programme created problems, particularly for gaining adequate funding to plan and prepare. This situation has also contributed to the vast national differences both between action sports themselves (see also Ellmer & Rynne, 2019) and between nations. Many countries still do not have operational national federations managing these sports. Our participants within NSOs repeatedly expressed their frustrations with the lack of information and flow of resourcing from the IOC and their underfunded IFs and NSOs.

Yet in 2015, IOC staff were adamant that they recognised the upcoming challenges for new action sport IFs and NSOs, acknowledging they would need considerable help to be Olympic ready by 2020. In 2016, we asked directly: "Is that something that you think the IOC and your staff will do? Or will you leave the federations to figure it out for themselves?" To which we received the following response:

No, no, no... we will be involved, because it's a new process. When you look at the structure of these federations, there is not many staff working there. ... preparing the athletes and preparing the national federation from summer 2016 to summer 2020 will be crucial. We will be supporting the national federations via two channels. First, via the international federation, because

they are our key stakeholders. And second, via the national Olympic committees... they are also a key pillar of the Olympic movement. ...So by working with the international federation and with national Olympic committees, by providing them with tool kits and support, we believe we'll make a difference and we'll be able to really support the key organisation at national level.

Despite such promises, as this book has demonstrated, adequate support was not offered (for reasons we cannot fully know).

In some countries, NOCs have offered development funds, but mostly in very small amounts. Following our first NZ stakeholder symposium in 2016, an Aotearoa New Zealand IOC member who attended was clearly concerned about the national situation. After the event he wrote to us saying that he would be following up with the lead organisations, so that we all clearly understand what can or cannot be done for these emerging activities (email, 2016). In a subsequent email to the New Zealand Olympic Committee (NZ OC), and also national sport organisations (i.e. High Performance Sport New Zealand, Sport New Zealand), he stated that he was keen to keep building on the momentum generated in the seminar, and outlined suggestions for the next steps for preparing and supporting the new Tokyo 2020 sports of surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing (hoping this was already underway). He further noted that while it was clear to him that the sports were all enthusiastic, working hard to build from the ground-up, and wanted to engage with national sports leaders, but they would really value more collective coordinated leadership from High Performance Sport New Zealand, and the NZOC. However, the response he received from the CEO of the NZ OC (which we were cc'd into) made it clear that, while they recognised the potential benefits of what he was outlining, due to resource limitations and priorities that were already set (i.e. a focus on selected sports), they were not in a position to help. Despite offering no assurance of financial or strategic help, the correspondence finished by stating that the NZ OC were committed to helping these sports organisations and their athletes realise the Olympic 'dream'. Such words do not match with the assurances provided by the IOC staff a few months earlier:

There might be some challenges, but we'll be there to address those challenges. And honestly, we have already started. We have already started to work at national level. Before being elected there are already some questions which are raised at national level, and of course we are always ready to support and address those questions. That's very, very important.

Despite recognition by some IOC staff and IOC members (such as the NZ IOC member cited above) that these sports could not become part of the Olympic family without some support (particularly during the transition period), this was clearly not something all NOCs had agreed to, or even wanted. This prompts us to question: Were the IOC staff aware they would not be able to follow through with these commitments that they were clearly passionate about? What were the



levels of awareness about the challenges for supporting action sports in the transition into the Olympic Games? We can only speculate about the politics behind such unfulfilled promises. However, the process highlights that for the IOC to change the sport programme in any significant way, there needs to be substantial support of its new IFs as well as national stakeholders (i.e. the NOCs). Furthermore, any real transformation in the Olympic Programme requires the longstanding traditional IFs to change their ideologies and models of operation. The IOC have in some cases given them a push (such as via kiteboarding and windsurfing in yachting), but the power of the IFs appears to be largely uncontested with such additions. Ultimately, the IOC Commissions and Executive Committee's that make decisions about which sports to incorporate—or not—include many members of these older established Federations that have been so key to retaining the status quo. As the ISA president put it:

Asking those “endangered Olympic Sports” for a vote approving the inclusion of new, younger sports, when that could result in the termination of the Olympic status of their sport, would be like asking the happy patrons of a club, to “vote” themselves out of the club, while they are having the best time of their lives... Not a very likely outcome.

(Aguerre, 2015)

As our research has revealed, IOC staff have engaged in extensive research and used creative approaches to help shift the attitudes among those on such committees. So long as action sports' status in the Olympic Programme is as temporary sports with no clear future in the Games, however, action sports have no place at the IOC's decision-making table. In the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage, while some key members of the IOC (including President Bach and key staff) are recognising that definitions of sport are shifting, other key stakeholders, and particularly the IFs, remain resistant and continue to have the power to ensure their definitions of sport dominate.

The key point here is that decisions enthusiastically ratified by the IOC Executive Committee, lacked support (both economic and in leadership and mentoring) in the process after the announcement, and have had wide-reaching impacts on action sport organisations at international and national levels, which has filtered down to affect the athletes, their families, the industry, and the action sports landscape more broadly.

### **Shifting sport-media models: challenges for the IOC**

Among the many challenges for the survival of the existing Olympic system is that television-broadcasting revenue continues to be central to the IOC's economic model. Recognising the danger of dependence on a single revenue stream has prompted the IOC to expand commercial opportunities via sponsorship and

new partnerships over the past decade. Such industry-based partnerships were further enabled via Agenda 2020. Numerous examples of such strategic partnerships are evident in the new Olympic action sports, including between International Cycling Union (UCI), BMX Freestyle and the French action sports events company, FISE; between International Surfing Association (ISA) and the professional and commercial World Surf League (WSL); and with skateboarding and US-owned skateboarding event companies (Street League and Vans Park Series). Yet as Horne and Whannel outline (2020), revenue from broadcasting rights still account for 75%–80% of the IOC revenue, half of which still comes from the USA. This economic power of the USA has also long contributed to the Americanisation of the games (Hargreaves, 2000), a trend also evident in the inclusion of action sports. However, online media has drastically shifted the global “media sport content economy” (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010), posing significant new “challenges to the cosy relationship between the IOC and television” (Horne & Whannel, 2020, p. 206). Internet based digital media systems and streaming platforms alter the “structure of national and regional [media] rights markets” (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010, p. 210), and are harder to regulate, and control centrally. Therefore, for both the IOC and long-time media partner NBC, the internet is a threat that could cause “significant audience migration from television without producing the revenue stream to compensate” (Horne & Whannel, 2020, p. 207). The Olympic Channel (launched in 2016) has been heralded by the IOC as a significant development in their emerging digital strategy and for addressing the shifting media consumption patterns of sport audiences, allowing 24/7 viewing and access across a range of platforms. In December 2020, the IOC touted 10.4 million social media followers with “75 per cent of the engagement on social media” being under 35 years of age (Olympic Agenda, 2020). Yet, this development seems to do little to address the fast-evolving ways in which fans across many sports use social media, nor the types of digital media consumption evident in our survey and focus groups. As Horne and Whannel (2020) suggest, the dilemma for the IOC is that it wishes to cash-in on all of the new media resources of the internet and social networking sites to promote the Olympic brand, while remaining in control (p. 213). With action sport industries leading digital innovations in building online communities and audience engagement, and action sport “influencers” touting significant social media followings, the inclusion of action sports in the Olympic Games and attempts by the IOC to work with action sports media partners further suggests the IOC’s efforts to tap into the “nimbleness” of these action sport cultures.

### **The action sports-Olympic Games assemblage**

Our understandings of the complex and dynamic relationship between the IOC and action sport cultures have been greatly facilitated by our longitudinal and multi-method approach. With our research on action sports and the Olympic Games commencing at the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, our research has

expanded and evolved over the past decade. As detailed in Chapter 3, our longitudinal approach consists of various phases, with methods including interviews and focus groups, media analysis, a survey, archival work, and participant-observations at a range of related national and international events. Our Actor Network Theory (ANT) inspired approach encouraged us to trace the various actants in the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage, thus revealing unique and familiar flows of power. This approach also revealed the importance of the IOC staff as an important actor in this network and the development of the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage. Our research has shown that the IOC staff were crucial in providing the “evidence” the IOC executive needed to convince more conservative members of the organisation of the value of action sports. Undoubtedly the staff’s enthusiasm for action sports was important, and their younger demographic helped in creating the relationships required for action sport cultures and industries to lean into Olympic inclusion processes. As one action sport industry cultural intermediary put in; “I do believe they get it. We have a new generation of young people at the IOC” (interview, 2015). In contrast to the older IOC and IF members we met, the younger staff were aware that global sport culture was changing, and the Olympics were no longer considered the pinnacle of sporting performance, spectacle, or audience experience by many. As paid employees they were unable to drive policy change, but their influence was nonetheless considerable. The process of action sports inclusion has highlighted that within the IOC “industry” there are different factions and agendas, that to some extent have been glossed over or ignored in previous research. Our research has also illustrated the many different perspectives within action sport industries and cultures, with a select few—mostly older men with both economic and cultural capital in the action sport industries that are still symbolically and economically tied to the USA—having the power to make decisions that will impact (to varying degrees) the opportunities and experiences of the many (i.e., athletes, company owners and industry workers, recreational participants, consumers).

## Prologue

We wrote this final chapter six months before the re-scheduled Tokyo 2020 Games were due to begin. With the COVID-19 pandemic still raging around the world, and a resurgence in Japan, speculation about whether the Tokyo Games would take place at all, or if so without spectators, was on-going. Within the IOC’s economic model, Tokyo is set to be the biggest losers financially of the postponement or cancellation of the Games (see Boykoff & Gaffney, 2020; Holthus et al., 2020; Horne & Whannel, 2020). In terms of the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage, those actors highly invested in the process (i.e. IFs, some NSO and a handful of athletes, coaches, administrators) will undoubtedly be disappointed; they also have much to lose professionally. However, beyond that, the impact on the action sport cultures and industries will likely be minimal. As the surfers, skateboarders, and sport climbers were so vocal about during the shortlisting process and prior

to announcement of final approval, the Olympics needs their sports more than they need the Olympics. As our survey, interviews, and focus groups showed, the majority of recreational participants and consumers care very little about the inclusion of these sports into the Olympic Games. In the words of France's national skateboarding coach (2018), "the impact it'll have on our culture will be minimal" (Arthur, 2018). Such sentiments are widespread within the broader action sport communities. As the young skateboarders in one of our focus groups reminded us, if it does not impact their everyday lived experiences (i.e., leading to the building of more local skateparks), it is of little significance to them.

While many within the action sport cultural industries have (eventually) got behind the Olympics because it provided an opportunity for economic growth in challenging times, they have repeatedly shown themselves to be nimble and flexible in seeking out the next opportunity. Such responsiveness to change and creativity in navigating challenges is in radical distinction to the Olympic Games which, despite the promise of Agenda 2020, remains a slow-moving machine entrenched in dated top-down hierarchies and structures. As one climbing industry member explained, "I think of climbing as a jet ski and the Olympics as a freighter"; "the IOC is trying to run very fast and of course they have the same problems as any big structure... we're going to run circles around a big freighter that's moving at 10 knots" (interview, 2015).

Action sport cultures and industries have a history of "flexible opposition", working consciously, creatively, and strategically within the structures of late capitalism. The relationship between action sport cultures and industries with the Olympic Games is an exemplar of what Jameson (1991) termed "the cultural logic of late capitalism", with economic and cultural systems intersecting in new ways, and "the aggressive exploitation of cultures as a pivotal source, and process, of capital accumulation" (Andrews, 2009, p. 213). Central to this cultural productivity in late capitalist economies is the "manufacturing of consuming lifestyles" such as through attempts to stimulate consumer desires (Andrews, 2009, p. 213). Surfing, skateboarding, and sport climbing (as well as BMX freestyle, breaking, and more youth-focused sporting activities) represent youthful "cool" lifestyles (and associated practices of conspicuous consumption) along with cultural and digital innovation and a growing influence in the broader youth cultural landscape. For the IOC, the inclusion of these action sports in the Olympics provides important new economic and cultural sources of growth and influence. While there have been many tensions, and we anticipate many more over coming years, there is a strong commitment from both the IOC to protect its hegemonic position and for key agents in the action sport industries to continue to grow and develop their sports. Such ambitions are both cultural and economic, depending on whom you speak to, how willing they are to reveal their truths, and the particular moment in time. Ultimately, understanding such processes—and the contestations over the changing landscape of contemporary sport—require a longitudinal perspective, critically observing changes over time, and creating space for the voices of those involved in various ways, including those with much and little to win or lose.

The complex and dynamic relationship between action sports and the Olympic Games has certainly been a revealing case for analysing and interpreting the “broken promises as well as the utopian projections of Olympism” (Sugden & Tomlinson, 2011, p. 249). Our positioning within and between action sport cultures and the IOC has enabled the insights shared in the book. As feminist researchers, navigating the ethical tensions, cultural and gendered politics, and changing relationships with those in powerful positions, has required us to regularly and reflexively come back to our roles and responsibilities as critical sociologists. We worked to create space for diverse of voices, to seek out multiple truths, and to reveal the complex workings of power within the Olympic Movement in the 21st Century. We hope the insights into the action sports-Olympic Games assemblage prove valuable to both action sports and critical Olympic studies scholarship as we continue to “interrogate the meanings of the Games” amid a changing sporting landscape with new and old operations of power working to (re)define sport for future generations.

## Afterword

We finished writing this book before the Tokyo Olympic Games took place. However, as the book went into production we witnessed many of the trends we had predicted in these pages come to fruition. We saw young girl skaters dominate in the street and park events. Journalists and audiences were wowed when both podium featured only teenage skateboarders, including thirteen year olds Momiji Nishiya (Japan) and Rayssa Leal (Brazil) in the street, and twelve year old Kokona Hiraki (Japan), and thirteen year old Sky Brown (Great Britain) in the park. Street skateboarding also prompted important conversations about the use of pronouns, with non-binary skateboarder Alana Smith (USA) wearing a pin with their pronouns and displaying a skateboard with ‘they/them’ written on the grip tape. In the lead up to and during the Games, important news stories were widely circulated about transgender skater Leo Baker’s withdrawal from the Olympic Games due to the constraints of gender binaried forms of participation on offer, with him ultimately making the difficult decision to prioritise his transition over Olympic participation. Another important yet less visible story was skateboarder Candy Jacobs (Netherlands) testing positive for COVID-19 prior to the women’s street event, documenting her traumatic experiences of the ‘inhumane’ and ‘prison-like’ quarantine facilities in Tokyo via social media, including her leading the quarantined athletes in a ‘strike’ for access to fresh air. At the same time, Sky Brown and Rayssa Leal (and other action sport athletes) posted their excited, joyous, and funny TikTok videos and Instagram posts of their Olympic adventures (i.e., skating the athlete village, singing and dancing with fellow athletes, hanging out with other influencers, such as Tony Hawk), building their online audiences with each post and selling the ‘Olympic dream’ to young followers around the world, as the IOC had hoped.

With Japan winning five of 12 skateboarding medals available (three gold), the country's talent in this urban sport was clearly on display. The hegemonic positioning of the USA (or what some have referred to as the 'Californization' of action sports) was being effectively challenged at the games, with Japan, Australia, Brazil and China all showing a depth of talent and potential in skateboarding, as well as surfing and climbing.

The BMX freestyle riders and sport climbers displayed their incredible athleticism and abilities to read, interpret and respond to the built environment in highly creative ways. Audiences around the world waxed lyrical about the exciting potential of these new Olympic bodies-leaping from boulder to boulder, 'running' up the speed climbing wall, and flipping over and under twisting bikes.

Global audiences saw surfers making the most of the storm swell, with huge emotion on display for both the winners and the upsets in earlier rounds. The surfing podiums showed slightly greater national diversity than the typical World Surf League events, with medal winning nations including Brazil (Italo Ferreira, Gold), United States (Carissa Moore, Gold), Japan (Kanoa Igarashi, Silver; Amuro Tsuzuki, Bronze), South Africa (Bianca Buitendag, Silver), and Australia (Owen Wright, Bronze). At the medal ceremonies, International Surfing Association (ISA) President Fernando Aguerre sported his unique style, including a Hawaiian-style shirt, yellow pants, a straw hat, and wristbands. He made a striking contrast to the IOC representative in a suit and tie on the beach. In this way, Aguerre was making a not-so-subtle statement that surfers could maintain their unique culture and style within the IOC model of surfing.

While our initial media analysis during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics suggests divided opinions within the global action sport communities, the athletes were clearly committed and valued the opportunity. Mainstream audiences also appeared to have enjoyed the events, even if they didn't always fully understand the judging systems or the unique cultural values on display. Whereas some audiences celebrated the camaraderie on display between the sport climbers (i.e., sharing tips before the climbs) and the expressions of friendship and fun at the skateboarding events, others continued to ask whether they are really Olympic worthy sports. The IOC, however, seemed to be pleased with the result, as revealed in an email correspondence with an IOC staff member involved in the process of including the new sports into the Tokyo Games: "The response to the new sports has been overwhelming, globally! From what we have followed through social media, the reaction from the athletes has also been so rewarding – their Olympic experience seems to have meant a lot to them as well despite the current context".

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