The Olympics, FIFA, and why we love sports: Crash Course Games #17

Crash Course: Games
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John: Hello and welcome to Crash Course Games. I'm John Green. Andre is out at a Comic-Con this week, so I'm gonna be your substitute teacher. I know what you're thinking: I also wish Andre was here. So, today we're gonna do our best to tackle a huge topic. You might guess it from the word tackle. I'm talking about sports, a multi-billion dollar industry. Now, of course, we can't get to all of it, there are just so many facets of sports, from AFC Wimbledon to Liverpool Football Club to presumably other things. Brandon just pointed out to me that there's also for instance, the Olympics, which start today, so we're gonna get into the history of that event and lots of others. It's all a bit daunting, but if Serena Williams can win 22 grand slam titles, four Olympic gold medals, and find time to star in a Beyoncé video, then I guess I can probably survive sitting in this chair and talking about sports for a while.

(Intro)

Sports seem to have been around for at least as long as civilization has. Like, in Mongolia, there's a cave painting from around 7000 BCE that depicts a wrestling match surrounded by crowds, and in a cave in Egypt, there are paintings on rocks from at least 6000 years ago that seem to depict humans swimming and doing archery. Now, of course, with swimming and archery and wrestling, it's hard to know if these were sports exactly, because these were also things that people did, you know, to survive. Wrestling might just have been a relatively nonlethal form of combat, which goodness knows early humans needed, given their astonishingly high homicide rates. But then again, from swimming to running, we're still making sports out of everyday activities.

In Ancient Sumer, around 2100 BCE, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* gave us one of the first written accounts of sports actually being played. The sport was belt wrestling. And around the same time in Egypt, monuments to pharaohs indicate that a number of sports were being played, including wrestling, weight lifting, long jumping, swimming, rowing, and fishing. And that brings us to Ancient Greece and the Olympics, which were first held in 776 BCE on the plains of Olympia. These proto-games are believed to have been festivals that the city-states Elis and Pisa held together as part of a peace inducing agreement, and a part of that agreement described the Olympiad, or the four year time period between the games, which still dictates, you know, when we play them today.

Historical retellings of the first official games state that the only event that actually took place on site was a 200 yard dash, but in later events, more racing was added, followed by wrestling events, and it's believed that part of the appeal of the early Olympics was that it encouraged men to get in shape so they could be better soldiers, like, running in particular was very valuable.

By 708 BCE, what came to be known as the Pentathlon was added. This consisted of throwing discuses and javelins, wrestling, leaping, and of course, running. All good skills for a soldier. Winners of events were given wreath crowns made out of the branches and leaves from a sacred olive tree, and this tree was said to grow behind the local temple of Zeus. It had been planted there supposedly by Hercules himself. Hercules was also seen as the founder of the original festivals that became the Games, but the Eleans, from the city of Elis, also believed that the Olympic Games were founded by their king, Iphitos, and that he had been guided to plant an olive tree that the Delphi oracle told him to plant in the same place. It's a little bit confusing, but then, you know, so is most of Greek mythology.

Of more concern to us, the Games were almost never interrupted. They survived during the Persian Wars of 480 BCE, and even though they weren't officially called the Olympics during the time the Arcadians captured the site, they were still held. The Games only halted when in 393 CE, the Christian Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I declared them a pagan sport and banned them. The Olympics then took about, you know, 1500 years off, before being reinstated by Baron Pierre de Coubertin of France. This happened at an interesting time in world history. Like, Coubertin was committed to the idea of health through physical education. He saw the Olympics as a dynamic way to inspire youth to be healthy, but it also created national pride. And the end of the 19th century was also a time when Europe especially was focused on nation building. So two years after he initially proposed the idea, he was given permission by the French Union de Sports Athlétiques to run them, and the first modern Olympic Games were held on Sunday, March 24th, 1896 in Athens, Greece.

But the Olympics didn't achieve mainstream popularity until around 1924. The '24 Games, held in Paris, had about 3000 athletes from 44 different countries. For perspective, at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, England, there were about 10,700 athletes from about 204 nations.

So there are lots of reasons people participate in the Olympics and watch them, but I wanna focus on national pride, because it was important to Coubertin and it's still important to us today. In 2011, the BBC Global Poll surveyed over 21,000 people from 21 different countries about the Games, and in 18 of those countries, the majority of people surveyed claimed that their team's performance at the Olympics affected their national pride. And it's important to many athletes as well. Like, in 2012, 5000 meter runner Lopez Lomong wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* on this topic. Lomong is from South Sudan, and he lived in Kenya as a refugee for 10 years, and then moved to the US when he was 16 years old, and eventually, he started competing for the US Olympic team. In his essay, he wrote, "The Olympics is the ultimate show of national pride and identity. For me, competing in the Olympic Games has been an opportunity to thank a country that opened its arms to me 11 years ago, showing me that I mattered."

In the end, nations are constructs. That doesn't mean they aren't real, but it does mean that they were invented by people. And the Olympics is one way among many that we acknowledge and affirm our nation, but also acknowledge and affirm other nations. If you've ever watched our Crash Course: World History episode on Nationalism, you'll already know that national pride is a loaded phrase and that nationhood is a messy business, like, as Bloom famously said in *Ulysses*, "A nation is the same people living in the same place, or also living in different places" and the Olympics is one of the ways we try to firm up what we mean when we talk about our country, or also other countries.

But of course, the Olympics are also about something else. They're about selling a lot of Coca-Cola and Visa cards. If commerce makes the contemporary world go round, it also makes the contemporary sports world go round, so let's talk about the biggest business sport of them all: soccer. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Soccer, otherwise known as football or futball, is the largest and most popular sport worldwide. The Federation Internationale de Football Association, or FIFA, reports that over 240 million players exist across the planet in over two hundred countries. The earliest evidence of a game like soccer comes from around 2,000 years ago, during the Han dynasty in China. People played with small leather balls and kicked them into nets, and the Greeks and Romans played a similar game, but they never considered it to be an official sporting event. Soccer persevered into the middle ages, but was eventually banned by King Edward III in 1365 BCE, and by that time, it had become pretty violent, with players frequently punching and biting one another, you know, as opposed to the contemporary game where players almost never bite each other.

Also, soldiers became so engrossed in football that they missed

drills and practices. It would be banned again in 1424 by King James I of Scotland due to similar troubles. But soccer wove itself in and out of culture over the years, until 1815, when a decisive set of laws governing the sport, known as the Cambridge Rules came into being. The rules divided people. Some stuck with the set rules and played soccer as we know it today, while others preferred a more physical contact version, which came to be known as rugby. In 1863, eleven clubs and schools from London set up basic rules to govern all aspects of soccer, and that's considered the official origin of modern football, and then, in 1904, FIFA was formed, and then just 89 short years later, in 1993, the *FIFA* video games were invented and changed my life forever, but anyway, thanks, Thought Bubble.

So soccer has proved to be a cultural link for many nations. Like, during the World War I 1914 Christmas truce, both the German and British troops put aside their weapons and played a friendly soccer match. Even Mahatma Gandhi regularly attended football matches. In fact, when he lived in South Africa, he created soccer clubs in cities such as Pretoria, Durban, and Johannesburg before he traveled to India to lead the fight for independence. Each of those clubs was named the Passive Resisters Soccer Club, and by the way, women's soccer isn't anything new either. According to an 1869 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, women were encouraged to take part in kickabouts in pick up games. Between 1881 and 1897, we have records of over 120 organized women's soccer matches. But women's soccer didn't debut in the Olympics until 1996, when the US Women's Soccer team won the gold medal that year in front of record breaking crowds of over 76,000 people. All in all, soccer has been called the world's game for a reason. No other sport is as widely recognized. There are more than 3.5 billion soccer fans. To put that in perspective, that's over 8 times the fanbase of American football.

And speaking of fan bases, fans can be enthusiastic for lots of different reasons beside the national pride we talked about earlier. Like, there have been lots of research papers on why we love watching sports so much. They give us a sense of community, they boost self esteem, they make us happy, and so on. Of course, they also make us miserable, but it turns out some of the reasons might be purely physiological. Like, according to a 1998 study, male sports fans actually experience an increase in testosterone when their team wins. They also experience a decrease after a loss, so loving Liverpool is literally bad for my health. In another study, passionate University of Florida football fans, both men and women, were monitored while observing three different types of pictures: animal attacks, erotic scenarios, and Gators in game-winning situations. That is, you know, the team, the Gators, not actual physical alligators.

In each of those three situations, the fans had high physiological arousal as evidenced by their heart rates, brain waves, and perspiration, and some experts believe that the brains of spectators actually go through very similar things as the brains of players. Like, one study showed that the same neurons fire when you're watching someone take a free throw as when you actually take a free throw. But of course, there's also a wonderful community aspect to fandom. You find people who can share with you in your joy and sorrow, experiences that are usually socially unacceptable, like hugging strangers or weeping in public are suddenly okay, and at their best, sports also unite nations and bring players and fans together and teach us not just how to win well, but also how to lose well, and how to empathize with the experiences of our opponents, whether it's in the Olympics or the World Cup or Little League Baseball.

Andre's talked a lot in this series about communities that form around card games like *Pokémon* or board games like *Settlers of Catan* or video games like *Halo*. I guess the big difference between *Halo* fans and Liverpool fans is that, like, *Halo* fans are playing *Halo*, whereas most Liverpool fans never actually play for Liverpool Football Club. But I'd argue that sports fans are a part of the game. They make themselves part of the game by singing and chanting and cheering, and they're the ones who collectively decide and continue the culture and traditions of a sports team. And sports are also important because so often they serve as a microcosm to the failures and successes of the social order in which they are played.

I think we like sports and games in general because they aren't like life, because they aren't as random and arbitrary as life often feels. And plus, just like wrestlers tens of thousands of years ago, when sports work, they give us this non-lethal way of having arguments, of creating tribes, of getting mad at each other, of feeling the joy of winning and losing without having lethal violence. That's my halfhearted defense of my all-encompassing love of football. At least I'm not killing anyone!

Thanks for watching. You'll see Andre next week.

Stan: Crash Course: Games is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana, and it's made with the help of all these nice people. If you'd like to keep Crash Course free for everyone forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Speaking of Patreon, we'd like to thank all our patrons in general, and we'd like to specifically thank our High Chancellor of Knowledge, Morgan Lizop, and our Vice Principal, Michael Hunt. Thank you for your support.