

# Ringleaders

## Olympic Athletes who Donned, Inked, and Embodied the Olympic Logo in the Cold War

Jordan Koch & Douglas Brown\*

*Today, Olympic tattoos and bits of jewellery are as ubiquitous in the Olympic Games as mascots. Recently in Vancouver and Beijing, athletes both famous and infamous displayed their body projects openly on the playing fields of International sport. This has not always been the case. While conducting interviews for a study on Cold War sport, two trends unexpectedly emerged as part of the Canadian athlete experience during the 1970s: the fashion of tattooing the Olympic logo on one's body and donning a ring that incorporates an unauthorized reproduction of the logo. Besides owing their origins to a unique generation of Canadian athletes, these now commonplace rituals were the product of a particular historical context – a context in which athletes' tattoos and rings might be interpreted as political performances and assertions of their stakes in a field of cultural production that more often than not ignores the validity of the individual. In this article, we draw from a series of oral history interviews with Canadian Olympic athletes from the 1970s and 1980s to explore the stories behind these popular trends. Our analysis of the Olympic rings and tattoos are considered more critically through a theoretical lens that is honed by the ideas of Victor Turner. Specifically, Turner's anthropological concepts of communitas and ritual are used to help explain the emergence and evolution of these traditions with sensitivity to the complex relationships between human agency and institutional power.*



### Introduction

*It takes a special form of communication to express the limits, internal mechanisms and fundamental beliefs of a socio-cultural system and the 'language' of adornment is uniquely suited to this task. By means of ... tattoos or scars cut into the skin and bits of jewellery ... added on to the body, the patterns and structures of a way of life can be mapped out and made explicit.<sup>1</sup>*

Since the early 1980s, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has made no secret of its intention to restrict unauthorized use of the symbols of its corporate identity. The Olympic rings and other symbols of the Olympic Movement have been systematically registered as the exclusive property of the corporation.<sup>2</sup> Unauthorized appropriation of these symbols is an offence that

\* Jordan Koch is a PhD student in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. Douglas Brown is an Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Undergraduate Program, in the Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

the IOC is more than willing to challenge in courts of law. In *Selling the Five Rings*, Robert K. Barney, Stephen Wenn, and Scott Martin illustrate how the past twenty years constitute an era of unprecedented corporate wealth, as well as moral and ethical bankruptcy in the history of the Olympic Games.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have discussed the historical and cultural significance of the Olympic rings in the logo-laden age of postmodernism. Rob Van Wynsberghe and Ian Ritchie, for example, investigate the historical context and affiliation between corporate commodities and the interlocked rings. They argue that “the Olympic rings do not represent ideals inherent to the Games, but are the product of a carefully cultivated media endeavour.”<sup>4</sup> For the most part, social and cultural historians have focused on the IOC’s near-manic efforts to preserve the institutional integrity of their five-ring logo and the seemingly insatiable appetite of global media and corporate marketers to consume the logo. In doing so, an interesting chapter in the history of the Olympic Games has been overlooked: a humanistic chapter that illustrates how athletes asserted individual and collective identities that reflected their sense of ownership in the international Olympic Movement. While conducting interviews for this study, two practices unexpectedly emerged as part of the Canadian athlete experience during the 1970s: the fashion of tattooing the Olympic logo on one’s body and donning a ring that incorporates an unauthorized reproduction of the logo. These trends have since evolved into traditional rites of passage, or what Dayna Daniels might call “transformative act[s]” entrenched in ritual, sacrifice, and cultural identity.<sup>5</sup>

Although sport, in general, is a field of cultural production rife with ritual, sacrifice and other transformative moments, the innovative appropriation of the Olympic logo by Canadian athletes in the 1970s and 1980s was the product of a particular historical context – a context in which these athletes’ tattoos and rings might be interpreted as political performances and assertions of their stakes in a field of cultural production that more often than not ignores the validity of the individual. In the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, the voices of athletes and their individual athletic experiences were often, if not always, obscured by political and diplomatic interventions into sport. Through the spectre of boycotts, terrorism, systematic state-sanctioned doping and heightened sensitivity towards universal human rights, Olympic athletes were often subjugated by the organizations that managed international sporting competition. For Canadian athletes, the culmination of this subjugation was undoubtedly the government-enforced boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. Still, despite the apparently oppressive political climate of the late 1970s and early 1980s, several Canadian athletes asserted their identities within the Olympic Movement in a very public performance. Quietly, with their bodies, they claimed the venerable Olympic rings as their own, using tattoos and customized jewellery to do so. Ironically, this practice of tattooing the

Olympic rings onto one's skin and wearing unauthorized Olympic rings evolved into a widely-recognized Canadian tradition during the period when the IOC's corporate control of the logo reached some of its most absurd and petty heights.

The history of this unsanctioned use of the Olympic logo reveals a number of interesting paradoxes. First, it reveals the extent to which the so-called "official" logo of the IOC could still serve a positive constituting function for Canadian athletes at a time in international sport when they were frequently objectified by the institutions they represented. Furthermore, this history of Olympic rings and tattoos reveals divergent commitments and adherence to the ideology of the Olympic Movement among its stakeholders: athletes, sport bureaucrats, government officials, corporate sponsors, etc. More importantly, it raises questions about who are, in fact, legitimate stakeholders in this field of cultural production and the extent to which they have access and entitlement to the sources of capital generated within the field.<sup>6</sup> Finally, this history of the Olympic rings tells us something about the construction of individual and community identity in sport at a pivotal time in the history of the Olympic Games in Canada. Through simple gestures like wearing an unauthorized ring or tattooing a corporate logo on one's skin, this generation of athletes explored the context and authenticity of their identities as elite international athletes within the Olympic Games.

This article derives from a series of ten oral history interviews collected in Calgary between May and July 2006. Participants in the oral history project were Olympic-level athletes during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>7</sup> The objective of the oral history project was to generate data that would expose ideas about identity and agency within the context of Cold War sport. The participants represented swimming, basketball, and volleyball. The interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured and typically lasted 1 to 3 hours. The athlete participants reflected and commented on their experiences within the highly politicized climate of international sport during this era. The open-ended nature of the interviews proved valuable in an unanticipated realm of experiences. Specifically, a non-verbal cue in the form of an Olympic ring on the finger of our first participant took the interview on an unexpected and yet provocative tangent. The interviewer asked the participant about his ring and quickly discovered that the origins of what is now a familiar tradition among Olympic athletes seemed to be rooted in this volatile era of international sport. Subsequent interviews with the remaining nine participants substantiated the interviewer's hunch. Indeed, the interviewer learned that not only Olympic rings, but also Olympic tattoos, owe their origins to this generation of Canadian Olympic athletes.

Using excerpts from these interviews, we endeavour to explore the history of these sporting trends. In a manner similar to how the Olympic tattoos and

bits of jewellery functioned as a site of discourse in our interviews, we use these traditions as a point of departure for a larger theoretical discussion about the identity of Olympic athletes from this era and their expressions of community within this cultural field. The story of the Olympic rings and tattoos is considered more critically through a theoretical lens that is honed by the ideas of Victor Turner. Specifically, Turner's anthropological concepts of *communitas*<sup>8</sup> and ritual are used to help explain the emergence and evolution of these traditions with sensitivity to the complex relationships between human agency and institutional power. This allows us to explore how tattoos and Olympic rings helped athletes to imagine themselves as members and gatekeepers of a special community; ironically, it was a community that became as intensely guarded as the institutional setting in which they competed.

### **Historical Context: The Cold War Sporting Arena and the Birth of New Traditions**

From its inception in the late 1800s, Olympic officials promoted sport as an instrument to advance international peace and unity. An oft-cited line in the *Olympic Charter* states: "The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity."<sup>9</sup> In the century that followed the evolution of the modern Olympic Games, the IOC and its National Olympic Committees have struggled to sustain this ideology in the face of innumerable international conflicts including two world wars. The 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s were challenging years for international sport. On a global scale, this was a period of considerable volatility. Social, ethnic, religious, and economic conflict resulted in wave upon wave of military violence in the Middle East, Latin America, and Southern Asia. These regional conflicts presented unique challenges to the Olympic Movement and its mission to promote international peace.<sup>10</sup> But it was the Cold War between the United States and the Soviets that generated the greatest cynicism. From the 1950s through to the 1980s, the tensions between the Soviet Union and the USA tested international diplomacy as well as the viability of international organizations like the United Nations, UNESCO, and the International Olympic Committee. Commonly referred to as the "age of boycotts" in international sport, these decades forced Olympic Games officials and national governments to acknowledge the extremely tenuous, and occasionally impossible, ideal of using sport as a mechanism for bringing different nations together in sport as the embodiment of global peace, cooperation, and understanding.<sup>11</sup> When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1980, Olympic officials had to admit that sport alone was not enough to forge a common identity beyond the

divisive discourses of the Cold War and other emerging national conflicts. The United States along with its sixty-four allied countries refused to send teams to the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980.<sup>12</sup> In a retaliatory gesture, the Soviet Union led an Eastern bloc boycott of the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984. Finally, this era witnessed an integrated international campaign to force the abolition of apartheid in South Africa. As a result, many nations sacrificed prosperous economic relationships with South Africa to present a collective front that could more effectively promote political change in the name of universal human rights.<sup>13</sup>

Due in part to the turbulent international context of this period, the ideal of creating “unity through sport” was apparent at the domestic level in Canada in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s.<sup>14</sup> This was a pivotal time in Canadian history. Canada celebrated its centenary in 1967, but politicians, intellectuals, and common citizens struggled to articulate a Canadian identity that reflected membership in a strong national community, as well as a strong and cooperative international community. Topics of national identity and nationhood were prominent in public debate. This was an era where definitive federal programming was intended to foster national unity through the creation of new cultural institutions.<sup>15</sup> The Canada Games, an Olympic-style competition for provincial-level athletes, were inaugurated in the centennial year. The *Report of the Task Force on Sports for Canadians*, released in 1969, cited a “crisis in our national life” and urged federal leadership to become more involved with high performance sport as a means of nourishing a sense of national unity and pride through visible spectacle.<sup>16</sup> Undoubtedly, the FLQ crisis in Quebec in the late 1960s and the emerging assertion of regional identity and desire for fiscal autonomy in western Canada fuelled an overall national anxiety about the possibility of an authentic and cohesive national identity.<sup>17</sup> Donald Macintosh, Tom Bedecki, and C.E.S. Franks explain that “sport had come to be seen as an instrument which could be used to promote national unity. Government involvement increased [in the 1970s] and by the 1980s the federal government was gradually increasing the funds that it directed towards the support of elite athletes and the construction of sports facilities.”<sup>18</sup> A centralized national sport program grew rapidly in Ottawa throughout this period and an intense focus on high performance sport and international results followed.

International sport also gained a great deal more exposure in the 1970s with increased television coverage. Historians of sport, notably Bruce Kidd, have referred to this era as the beginning of the sport-media complex.<sup>19</sup> In response to the tense social and political environment, and the high visibility and appeal of international sport, Olympic officials and Canadian federal leadership looked to sport as a way of reducing conflict and forging a strong sense of national identity at home and abroad.<sup>20</sup> Sport officials and politicians were intent on using sport to foster a spirit of internationalism and patriotism in a

period of turbulence. In effect, Canadian political leaders as well as officials from the modern Olympic Movement expected Canadian athletes to fulfill a unique athlete-diplomat role. Athletes and their performances were expected to advance the interests of a national agenda while, at the same time, advancing the internationalist “harmonious” ideals of Olympism. The federally-funded Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC) also brought an element of theatricality to this endeavour. On an unprecedented scale, international television broadcasters recognized the sheer entertainment value of trying to broadcast these Olympic ideals in a world where international diplomacy seemed to be failing miserably.<sup>21</sup>

Within this climate, the ability of athletes to express their autonomy and agency was questionable. The extent to which governments had controlled participation in the Olympic Games was certainly a topic of discussion in the media, particularly in countries that were politically aligned with the US. In Canada, prominent athletes were called on by the media to express their views about the boycott and the incursion of global politics in sport. For example, in a CBC interview, Olympic pentathlete and medal hopeful Diane Jones Koniowski expressed the helplessness that she believed most Canadian athletes shared in response to the government-imposed boycott in 1980. Indeed, a discourse of victimization dominates her interview.<sup>22</sup> In another CBC broadcast, Canadian athletes expressed disappointment, heartbreak, and resignation, and let their frustration with their lack of agency and influence in decision making be known by saying they were “bowing to the inevitable,”<sup>23</sup> thus acknowledging they had little choice in the matter. Since the boycotts, sport historians have focused on the 1980 and 1984 Olympic Games as evidence of the unavoidability of global politics in elite international sport.<sup>24</sup> The impossibility of the ideals of Olympism has been chronicled within the discourse of political realism. Thus, scholars have framed Olympic athletes as objects of manipulation within the classic sociological debate between structure and agency. And, for most sport historians and popular journalists of the period, structure trumped human agency during the era of Olympic boycotts.<sup>25</sup> Drawing heavily on tropes of athletes as “victims,” “dominated,” and “powerless,” scholarly and popular discourses have typically characterized athletes as passive objects in a highly-regulated and controlled environment. The same pattern generally holds true for Canadian athletes, who have been characterized as voiceless pawns of the political super powers that defined the Cold War.<sup>26</sup> Largely overlooked, however, has been the ability of Canadian athletes to negotiate positive and fulfilling individual and collective identities as agents within the Olympic Movement in spite of the institutional structures that prohibited them, or the ability of athletes from the Soviet bloc, Africa and Asia, to meet without political obstruction at the Olympic Games in 1976, 1980, and 1984.

The ideas of French sociologist, Michel de Certeau, have prompted us to consider the *poetry* of Canadian athletes' lives during this era.<sup>27</sup> Our interviews exposed the subtle tactics used by Canadian athletes to negotiate membership in an Olympic Movement that existed "beyond the boundary" of the formal organization with its sanctioned accreditation cards, athletes' village, and Olympic Games festivals.<sup>28</sup> The remainder of this article thus offers a unique contribution to the history of the Olympic Games; the story of Olympic tattoos and personally commissioned rings provide a window into an aspect of athlete identity that is all-too-often overlooked by scholars. This is a story and analysis of athletes asserting agency and forging community at a time when participation at Olympic Games appeared to be completely determined by outside forces. In short, it is a story about the actors themselves, their perspectives, experiences and the *poetry of their athletic lives*.

### **Athletes Appropriating the Olympic Logo with Customized Jewellery**

Tattoos that incorporate the official Olympic logo are as ubiquitous at an Olympic Games as the mascots that adorn Olympic souvenirs. In Beijing 2008, athletes displayed their tattoos on the pool deck, gymnastic apparatus, or any other venue that allowed for this body marking to be publicly consumed. Indeed, some athletes have actively encouraged such public consumption. For example, in *GQ Magazine*, 2008 "Men of the Year" issue, Michael Phelps' Olympic rings are seen tattooed on the front of his right hip. It is strategically located so that the only way to expose the logo is to peel down the already minuscule Speedo that is, in fact, not able to completely conceal the rings. In the *GQ* photograph, Phelps's torso is the focus of attention, as he seductively pulls down the front of his swimsuit with his thumbs and invites the reader to study the five interlocking rings – as well as his chiselled chest, abdomen, and barely concealed pubic area.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the ritual of tattooing the Olympic rings on one's body and wearing bits of Olympic jewellery seems rather mundane. For Olympic icons like Phelps, they are also provocative and sexy fashion accessories. However, this has not always been the case. Before tattoos, Olympic athletes marked their bodies with gold and silver rings that they commissioned from a variety of sources.

Mike Blondal, who, at present, is a swimming coach at the University of Calgary, was the first participant to be interviewed for this project. Serendipitously, he came to the interview wearing his Olympic ring on his right hand index finger. At the beginning of the interview, the first author (Koch) noticed the ring and asked Blondal about its history. He offered the "long story" of his ring, which included colourful anecdotes.<sup>30</sup> He was a national level swimmer in the 1970s and had qualified to compete at the 1975 Pan American Games in

Mexico City. According to Blondal and subsequent participants, 1975 marks the approximate beginning of the Olympic ring tradition. While its origins are difficult to trace precisely, what is clear among the athletes interviewed is that it was around the late 1960s and early 1970s that rings bearing the Olympic logo came to be noticed in high performance sport. Reflecting on its origins, Blondal recalls that some Canadian swimmers had heard about a Mexican jeweller who could cast rings with the Olympic logo. Apparently, the jeweller had made a variety of rings for a small group of athletes who had competed in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. Some of the rings displayed the athletes' initials, while others displayed the Olympic logo. The jeweller had been one of the official race starters for the swimming competitions at the Mexico Olympic Games. Canada's premier female diver, Beverly Boyes, was one of the athletes from 1968 who passed on the jeweller's contact information to Canadian swimmers competing at the 1975 Pan American Games.

Former national swimmer and coach, Dave Johnson, corroborated much of Blondal's story and elaborated on the details. For example, Dave described how the first Olympic rings were made through the "lost-wax" process.<sup>31</sup> Apparently, the first generation of Olympic rings purchased by Canadian athletes were mostly hand-tooled and therefore strikingly individual. As the popularity of obtaining Olympic rings increased over the next two decades, the production of rings with the Olympic logo became more refined and mass-produced. In essence, the evolution of Olympic ring production mirrors the evolution of the tradition from a relatively local, spontaneous type of gesture to a formalized, institutionalized performance.

Johnson's recollection of the ring's history also reveals how this gratifying and spontaneous ritual was gradually politicized by sport organizations and changing attitudes towards the value of the ring as a symbol of membership. For example, he described how, over time, athletes, coaches, and administrators were confronted with questions of legitimacy when it came to donning an Olympic ring. Who was entitled to wear an Olympic ring? What did it symbolize? Dave explains,

*It became a tradition that if you made the Olympic team, we gave you the ring. Then the politics and all of that stuff got into it where people were saying that, "You shouldn't get another one because you've already got one," or "You don't get one because you're the coach and they should be just for the athletes." It was pretty much an Ontario-parochial mindset that evaded commonsense. That sort of prevailed through '88 and so forth. The irony was that this was just a fun thing that we did and people started to see it all around the world.<sup>32</sup>*

Several athletes spoke about the eventual politicization of the Olympic ring ritual. For example, former Olympic swimmer and swim coach Wendy Johnson



(wife of Dave Johnson) rejected the principle that wearing an Olympic ring ought to be the exclusive privilege of Olympic athletes, though she recalls her ring fulfilling a heightened satisfaction after she competed at the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976.<sup>33</sup>

Wendy remembers how the institutionalization of Olympic jewellery was accompanied by a gradual interest in Olympic rings from athletes and coaches in other sports disciplines. She recalls,

*The swimmers have really been the only ones that have had Olympic rings for many, many years; given to them for making the Olympic team. It has been a special source of pride for the swim team. And then a lot of other sports have decided to do the same thing; get the Olympic rings made for their team. But not all sports. Dave [Johnson, her husband] has an aunt that lives in California. She married very late in life to a guy who was a jeweller and he made these rings for Dave. Dave had like the weightlifting coach say, "Can I get an Olympic ring," you know ... and I think that Birks charged an arm and a leg or they just brought out the mould every four years or something. Anyways, Dave would get all of these rings from his uncle in California and sell them to the different people from different sports who also wanted to have an Olympic ring.<sup>34</sup>*

As such, Dave Johnson may have been the "ring leader" as people from other sports began approaching him and inquiring about how to obtain the coveted piece of jewellery. However, as revealed in the above quote from Wendy Johnson, it is clear that the means of obtaining an Olympic ring has changed considerably. The mode of production or manufacturing of Olympic rings worn by Canadian athletes has varied widely, including being produced by a Mexican jeweller/swim official, Canada's iconic Birks jewellery store, and the husband of Dave Johnson's aunt. Indeed, even today, athletes and participants in Olympic Games obtain commemorative rings through various sources. Swim Canada, the national administrative body for the sport, distributes the rings to Canadian swimmers who have qualified for the Olympic team.<sup>35</sup> This certainly adds a level of formality to the ring-wearing tradition and allows an official organization to set the protocol that defines who they believe merits a ring. Other Olympic sports now follow a similar process for distributing "official" commemorative rings to qualified athletes. It is important to recognize that qualifying to compete at an Olympic Games is markedly different than actually competing at an Olympic Games. And, this distinction factored prominently into the athletes' sense of membership. Athletes who qualified for the 1980 Games in Moscow maintained their sense of membership because the opportunity to compete after qualifying was beyond their scope of control; they were not especially conflicted about wearing the logo in spite of the government-enforced boycott that kept them from competing. When we considered the interview transcripts as broad narratives on identity and membership

within the Olympic Movement, the participants revealed varying degrees of concern about maintaining the distinction between qualifying and competing as criteria for wearing the Olympic logo – a pattern that is especially evident in the following section which explores the tradition of tattooing the Olympic logo onto one's body as a sign of membership.

The ambivalence about the distinction between qualifying and competing also extended to coaches and support staff who adopted the ring ritual. Blondal started thinking about getting an Olympic ring when he was an athlete but odd circumstances prevented him from doing so until he was an established high performance swim coach. He swam on the Canadian Pan American team in 1975 (the Pan American Games are an IOC sanctioned Regional Games). He explains how his search for an Olympic ring was thwarted by the unexpected death of the Mexican jeweller/swim official:

*All of the swimmers went out and got Olympic rings made. I got a silver one made with a gold top. It cost me a whopping 12 bucks. I was being cheap. The gold ones were 25 dollars and I didn't think I could spend that much money. I didn't really know what I was doing. ... So, it came and it was too big. I got it ... and then this other guy wanted to buy it so I sold it to him because I had talked to the guy who had made it and he said that he could re-make me another one. But he had a heart attack and died overnight. So, he took my 25 dollars. ... he was dead, right? So, I didn't have my Olympic ring and ... this was really the start of the Olympic ring phase in Canadian sport. If not, at least in Canadian swimming. I know that it is now across all sports. But we really started it at that competition in 1975 in Mexico City. That's where we started the trend.<sup>36</sup>*

As with any reflection on the “origins” of something, Blondal recognizes a general timeframe as marking the onset of the Olympic ring phase across Canadian sport, not an exact one. Blondal's quest for an Olympic ring speaks to a fairly loose or casual relationship between the Olympic Games and his identity as a high performance (and non-Olympic) athlete in Canada. In 1975, Blondal was not troubled by the fact that he and his teammates had appropriated the Olympic symbol for participation in an event that was not the Olympic Games. While the Mexican jeweller/swim official's death prevented him from obtaining an Olympic ring, at the time he did not feel prohibited from seeking out another jeweller to produce one for him. For Blondal, the Olympic ring seemed to be contextualized within an easygoing “nonchalant” attitude toward the symbol and his athletic identity. Even though Blondal had been part of the initial ring purchases at the 1975 Pan American Games, the American-led boycott of Moscow in 1980 meant that he never did participate at an Olympic Games. After this disappointment and the passage of time between the Pan American Games and the Moscow boycott, his understanding of the significance of an Olympic ring changed: he no longer believed he merited one.

However, after the Games in Moscow, Blondal's wife had a ring commissioned as a gift for her husband – the ring sat untouched in his dresser drawer for about six years. It was not until Blondal had helped coach an athlete onto the Olympic team that he felt deserving enough to wear his Olympic ring: "I felt that that was adequate enough ... than I could put it on ... chasing the dream long enough. That's the story about my Olympic ring."<sup>37</sup>

By the late 1980s, Canadian athletes were still obtaining Olympic rings from a variety of sources. Olympic volleyball player Al Coulter (who competed in two Olympic Games, 1984 and 1992) explained how he had received a ring from the Province of Alberta to celebrate his membership on the national team and another one from his wife, Michelle Cameron (a gold medalist in synchronized swimming at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea) to commemorate his Olympic experiences. Michelle had had a ring made for herself at the Games in Seoul. She bought him an Olympic ring after he competed in the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, using a contact she had made through the Canadian swim team. In Coulter's view, the ring obtained through the swim team was much nicer than the ring that Cameron had made for herself in South Korea. Coulter explained that he wore the Olympic ring his wife bought him (not the ring from the Province of Alberta) to match his wife's ring. This suggests that, for Coulter at least, the ring has more to do with his relationship to his wife, and having shared a common experience with her (both being Olympians), than being about the Olympic experience alone. In this case, the experiences of 'unity' normally associated with the Olympic Games extend beyond the formalized relations between teammates, countrymen, and internationals. Coulter's ring commemorates a more personal, intimate unity for both he and his wife.<sup>38</sup>

Bill Humby also has a unique story about his Olympic ring. As a national level swim coach, Humby obtained his ring as a gift from one of the two athletes who had qualified and competed at the Paralympic Games in 2000. It is worth noting that, at that time, Canadian Paralympic swimmers were given Olympic rings through Swim Canada. Since then, the protocol has changed and Paralympians receive a distinct Paralympic ring, with the Paralympic logo instead of the Olympic rings.<sup>39</sup> This shift in protocol speaks to the political-historical relationship between the Olympic and Paralympic Games' movements. The inclusion of events for athletes with disabilities in the Olympic Games is an on-going dilemma in the relationship between the IOC and the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). The Paralympic ring, with its IPC specific logo, marks its wearer as a Paralympic athlete – as well as a non-Olympic athlete. The backstory to Humby's account is that, prior to receiving the gift, Humby was in the process of commissioning a Toronto jeweller to make him an Olympic ring. To Humby, this was a way of celebrating his success as a coach and the success of his Paralympic athletes. This backstory leads us to

question the significance of the Olympic logo signifier. Humby and his successful athletes were celebrating their achievements in an event that is completely separate from the Olympic Games. And yet, it was the Olympic logo that symbolized that success. This calls into question the power of official organizations like the IOC and the IPC to enforce their separate and unique systems of signification on their most valued and sacred commodities, their corporate logos. Furthermore, it speaks to the worldwide recognition of the Olympic rings as a signifier of what “success” looks like, even among Paralympians and their coaches, at least until the tradition was altered. Finally, it complicates the actual properties of distinction between Olympic and Paralympic events by blurring and, therefore, challenging the relationship between able-bodied and disable-bodied athletes. In other words, despite involvement in two separate (Olympic and Paralympic) sporting events, through their customized jewellery, able and disable-bodied athletes and their coaches were effectively – and identically – branded as ‘Olympic’.<sup>40</sup>

Collectively, these subtle differences in athletes’ stories about the Olympic rings and how they were obtained offer important insight into the nature of this ritual in Canadian sport. The divergent means of obtaining an Olympic ring exposes an organic or spontaneous evolution to this tradition. Similarly, the varied justifications and rationalizations for wearing the ring reveal a rather fluid logic of signification. In other words, we have seen that opting into this Olympic ring tradition was initially athlete-centric and the parameters of legitimacy for wearing an Olympic ring were self-governed and wide-ranging. A later section of this paper elaborates on the paradox of this organic origin of the Olympic ring tradition in Canada and the dogmatic control of the logo by the IOC and the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC).

The impetus to wear the Olympic logo as a ring begs some consideration of what, or if, it signified collectively. We have introduced the notion that owning and wearing an Olympic ring signified membership, or at least a type of experience, in the Olympic Movement. Specifically, it signifies participation in the Olympic Games and that participation embodied values that athletes, coaches, and support staff associate with the Olympic Games. Indeed, discussions about the rings led interview participants into similar reflective tangents. When asked about the Olympic ring and its meaning to them, most participants recited a memory, an anecdote, or a particular moment in time when they shared a passionate bond or sporting experience that seemed to transcend the tense political environment of the 1970s and 1980s. For example, in his discussion about the Olympic ring, Olympic swimmer and bronze medalist, Cameron Henning, reflected on the larger community of athletes that he associated with through his participation in the 1984 Olympic Games, as well as at various other high performance sporting competitions during the 1980s. Henning spoke at length about the community of athletes with which he

became connected through sport and reflected nostalgically upon the international relationships and experiences that shaped the trajectory of his professional and personal life during and after sport. For Henning, the signifying potential of the Olympic ring as a symbol of “unity” and “togetherness” can also be seen in the gesture of gifting his ring to his then girlfriend as a sign of their engagement to be married (Henning jokes about his being a “poor athlete” at that time and not being able to afford a more traditional or expensive engagement ring).<sup>41</sup> Henning’s use of the ring in this fashion mirrors that of Al Coulter and his wife Michelle Cameron (described above) and is further evidence that the experiences of unity commemorated (and perhaps generated) through the Olympic ring extend beyond the arena of sport and the community of athletes.

Other participants expressed different meanings for wearing or not wearing the ring. John Paulsen, a volleyball athlete who competed at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, admitted that he does not like to wear jewellery and wears his Olympic ring only periodically: “Yeah, I have an Olympic ring and I wear it proudly ... [but] I don’t walk around and go [show them] the way some people do. I think if people want to know, that’s cool. That was part of my life. I don’t want people to necessarily think anything different of me because I was an Olympian. I like people to like me for me.”<sup>42</sup> Paulsen’s discourse is interesting. He wavers between describing the Olympic ring as a type of public performance and as an intimate and self-empowering experience: “It represents, more than anything else, I think it represents personal achievement. At the end of the day, who’s going to care or know that I played in the ’76 Olympic Games? But the biggest thing is ... the important thing is that you’ve got to get up every morning and look in the mirror and you’ve got to like what you see.”<sup>43</sup> Paulsen dismisses the idea that his self-worth is somehow wrapped up in being an Olympic athlete and having people recognize him as such. He, instead, emphasizes that his periodic wearing of the Olympic ring is to commemorate the deeply personal struggles and pride that he derived from training for, and competing at, the Olympic Games. In some ways, Paulsen’s use of the ring to commemorate the ‘personal’ complicates the overtly performative ‘public’ nature of the Olympic Games during the Cold War and present-day. At a time when athletes’ were/are expected to be ‘role models’ for the nation, Paulsen’s humility and discretionary use of the Olympic ring speaks to the varying levels of signification on which it operates. Beyond its performative function, and the collective identity or ‘unity’ it commemorates, the Olympic ring also operates on a much more private level: a level that commemorates the private struggles of its bearer.

This exposure to the early history of the Olympic ring tradition in Canada is striking because it speaks to an athlete-driven movement to commemorate an athletic achievement and membership in an exclusive athletic community.

Athletes in the 1970s and 1980s decided that a ring with the IOC logo was a meaningful way to mark their Olympic Games-related experience through an enduring medium. The Olympic rings thus served a broad range of signifying functions. For some, the ring reminds them of a long career that took them to the far reaches of the globe for athletic competition, a career in which they felt part of a larger athletic fraternity of international athletes. For others, the ring offers a personal reminder of their achievements in sport, achievements whose meanings have since developed in relation to other achievements and experiences that have occurred post-athlete career, as with the coaches, for example. Still, for other athletes, the ring marks an even more intimate ritual, signifying one's commitment to family unity (recall the gift of the ring from Michelle Cameron to her husband Al Coulter and Cameron Henning using it as an engagement ring). In all cases, the rings have allowed these athletes to mark their bodies with a symbol (logo) that is more widely recognized across the world. The next section of this article reveals how this same generation of Olympic athletes also introduced another tradition of commemorating an Olympic Games experience; this was a tradition where marking the body with the Olympic logo was in the form of a tattoo.

### **Athletes Appropriating the Olympic Logo and Canadian Maple Leaf via Tattoos**

In 1978, Graham Smith medalled six times at the Commonwealth Games in Edmonton, Alberta. He was unquestionably the most familiar Canadian swimmer of his generation. Two years earlier, he had won a silver medal at the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal. Between these two major events, Smith's image had changed. Canadian spectators were introduced to Smith's tattoo, a maple leaf inked onto his left chest. What spectators did not know was that Smith's tattoo marked (quite literally) one of the earliest known instances among the athletes interviewed of someone fully committing to branding their body with the Canadian maple leaf, an act eventually ritualized by Canadian Olympians in commemorating their sporting achievements. The tradition is especially interesting because its production and consumption work on at least two separate but related fronts. First, the act of permanently scarring one's skin with an emblem such as the Canadian maple leaf constitutes a gesture enshrined with intimacy, requiring the consumption of the image and what it signifies on a personal level. Second, the tradition marks an equally public gesture in that its visibility – especially during athletic competition when athletes like Smith donned their swimsuits – constituted a public performance, where the audience consuming the tattoo did so by baring witness to it. The tattoos of maple leaf and IOC logo that are ubiquitous among the present generation of Canadian athletes apparently have roots in both the personal and public

inspiration of Smith and other Canadian swimmers in the 1970s and 80s. The following section describes this history as recollected by the Canadian athletes themselves, specifically those interviewed for this study.

In a telephone interview, Graham Smith described a series of events that led him to be one of the first Canadian athletes ever to tattoo a Canadian maple leaf on his body. "I was *the* first to get a tattoo."<sup>44</sup> Smith was tattooed in Edmonton a couple of months prior to the Commonwealth Games. Apparently, his decision was not at all spontaneous or impulsive. He described himself as a "pretty patriotic Canadian at the time" and had contemplated the tattoo for several months before actually going to the tattoo parlour.<sup>45</sup> According to Smith, it was his photograph on the cover of a 1978 *Maclean's Magazine* that sparked the interest of two other national team swimmers. Bill Sawchuk and Andy Richie, both teammates of Smith, thought Graham's tattoo was "cool" and decided to try something along the same lines.<sup>46</sup> Rather than a simple maple over the heart, Sawchuk and Richie selected to tattoo a Canadian flag on one of their shoulders. Given the context of elite sport, and the historic association of tattooing as a mark of deviance in Western cultures, one might think that the prominently located tattoo on a high performance athlete might have evoked criticism from sport officials who, we might assume, would have preferred that high profile athletes represent a wholesome image for national, international, and especially Olympic sport.<sup>47</sup> Smith does not recall any such criticism. In fact, he does not recall ever receiving feedback (negative or positive) from Swim Canada or any other sport governing body. However, at the time, he imagined that Swim Canada Officials and the Commonwealth Games Association of Canada saw his gesture in a positive, patriotic light. In Smith's mind, the tattoo stood in total alignment with his perception of the patriotic agenda advocated by Swim Canada in the late 1970s.

Smith's story was corroborated by other athletes from this era. Like the history of the Olympic rings, Bill Sawchuk's story reveals how the tattooing tradition among Canadian athletes was athlete-driven. In the case of tattoos, however, this is not surprising. Where one can imagine Olympic rings being given out as mementos from a sanctioning organization like Swim Canada or the COC, the gift of a tattoo ... well? What Smith did not anticipate was the speed with which other similarly patriotic athletes would make this gesture a trend that is now considered commonplace in several sporting contexts in Canada and across the world. Within only a few years of Smith's alleged inaugural tattoo, Canadian athletes from sports other than swimming found equal pride in tattooing their bodies with the maple leaf for a variety related reasons: qualifying for a national team sporting event; departing for an international athletic excursion of some kind; and eventually tattooing the Olympic logo on their bodies upon qualifying for the Olympic Games.

Sawchuk's story provides a fuller elaboration on the motivation and significance of the tattoo:

*Graham Smith had got a Canadian flag tattooed and Andy Ritchie got one too. The three of us kind of started a little tradition on national swim teams that once you made the team and you made an international tour, you went and got yourself a Canadian flag tattoo. I think that the tradition is still alive today. It started way back in '78.*<sup>48</sup>

Smith, Ritchie, and Sawchuk acted with a combination of bravura, passion and patriotism. Very quickly, the tattooed athlete evolved from being a simple statement of one's pride of nation to a rite of passage in the world of high performance sport. For example, Sawchuk explains the origins of his first tattoo. Inspired by Smith's maple leaf, Sawchuk waited until an important moment had occurred in his athletic career to get a Canadian flag etched onto his right shoulder:

*The first tattoo I got, the Canadian flag, I had that tattooed on my right shoulder after we had had a dual meet with the Russians in Etobicoke. We beat them. It came down to the last relay and it was real exciting and I felt very patriotic. I'm a pretty patriotic guy. That was my ... my motivation for swimming was always to swim for my country. The medals and that sort of thing were kind of a bonus. Representing my country was always my real passion.*<sup>49</sup>

In recalling the past, Sawchuk reflected on the present state of affairs among Olympic athletes relative to the tattoo tradition. The ritual dimension of the tattoo has certainly evolved since its inception among his generation of Canadian athletes and in many ways mirrors the rituals associated with the ring. Indeed, one might argue that the ritual act associated with the Olympic tattoos is even more rigidly defined than that of the rings because with the tattoo, the athletes apparently police each other – and themselves. Sawchuk reflected:

*Yeah, there have been all kinds of stuff added to it, but it basically just started out with us getting our Canadian tattoos and then adding some rings and that sort of thing. The kids today have actually taken it quite seriously. If somebody tries to get that flag before they make the team it's a pretty big faux pas. (...) Yeah, I know that some kid a few years ago got the flag before he was actually on the team and some of the National Team boys were not too pleased about it (laugh). (...) Well, it has just become such a tradition that you didn't get that tattoo until you got on the team; in the swimming community. I'm sure there are sailors and army guys and those kinds of people who also get it but if you were getting it because you were a swimmer you only got it when you made the team and you only add the rings when you make the Olympics. It has become a fairly good little tradition. It's kind of neat.*<sup>50</sup>



Today, not surprisingly given the invasiveness of tattooing and the permanence associated with this act, the athletes themselves monitor the ritualistic dimension. In other words, it is a tradition that has remained free of bureaucracy. Swimmer Cameron Henning even described the intensity of the ritual by relating the tradition of Olympic tattooing to the initiation rituals of street and motorcycle gangs.<sup>51</sup> Using Olympic and national qualifying standards as the technical basis for legitimating an athlete's right to participate in this ritual act, tattooing one's skin in a fashion that marks one's acceptance into the elite sport community has become a tradition with which the athletes alone have been empowered to preserve. Tattoo scholar Victoria Pitts explains, "Body modifiers often argue that the individual can author her identity through altering the body and symbolically changing its meanings and significance."<sup>52</sup> Acting as the gatekeepers for Olympic identity, the athletes have, at least symbolically, displaced the authority of National Sporting Organizations and later the IOC to define the sport community.<sup>53</sup> Although there are clear technical requirements for making a national or Olympic team, the athlete-driven nature of the ritual and the sheer intimacy of the act itself emphasize its significance as an assertion of agency within this highly regulated field of cultural production.

Sawchuk and Paulsen were similarly ambivalent about the personal and public meaning of the Olympic tattoo when discussing the Olympic ring. Each wrestled with the notion that the general public would perceive the tattoo as pretentious, whereas both Sawchuk and Paulsen saw it as an intentional mark of distinction. As Sawchuk stated:

*Nobody knows it's there unless I choose. I don't walk around going, "Hey, look at this. Look at this," right? I never do that. I never do that. To me, it represents the fact that I busted my ass, I made it, I did a lot of the stuff that I set out to do, and I'm quite proud of that fact. If somebody else sees it and asks me ... you know what? That's good. I'll tell them the story. But that's not my motivation. I think that the ring was a little advertisement sort of thing; "Hey, look at me. I made the Olympics." That's probably part of why I never got it repaired and wear it anymore. But this part is ... it's internal, you know?<sup>54</sup>*

This statement suggests that at times athletes shared divergent commitments to the meanings of these rituals and what they signified. For Sawchuck, the ability to cover his tattoos underneath clothing made it more personal than the ring. That is, he alone had the power to disclose its meaning. In spite of this rationalization, it is difficult to ignore the overtly performative act of an athlete acquiring a tattoo on a location of the body that is especially visible during their sport performances.

In either case, these athletes implicitly acknowledged a connection between the personal/public and consumptive/productive functions at play with their body projects: their athletic performance and their tattoos worked in tandem. For this generation of high performance Canadian athletes, the tattoos punctuate their athletic performance as ‘elite,’ and amplify their personal commitment to participation in high profile sporting events like the Olympic Games and their performance in these events. But beyond the athletic performance, the experience of obtaining the tattoos symbolized among a generation of athletes a new way of forming a community with common values and a common outlook on sport and life. All of the participants in the study commented on the speed with which athletes across sports began to participate in the tradition of tattooing and contributed to its evolution. It began with maple leaves and Canadian flags and ultimately grew to incorporate a variety of other elements, particularly the IOC logo. Historically, this is interesting when we remember that this generation of Canadian athletes’ careers were influenced by numerous external forces (political agendas). Political incursions like the boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow impacted upon the sporting experiences of these athletes in ways that consistently undermined the community with which they had sacrificed much to join. Yet despite the regulated context in which athletes competed (or did not compete), they conceived of, and performed their identities as members of a distinct community. In so doing, they used tattooing and body ornamentation for its most “primal” and “primitive” function, which Michael Atkinson describes “as symbolic acts of cultural cohesion and group identity.”<sup>55</sup>

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Cultural cohesion and group identity are fascinating concepts to consider for this generation of Olympic-level athletes. As discussed in the early pages of this paper, the US led boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow produced the most obvious (non)sporting event that contributed significantly to the individual and group identity of this generation of Canadian athletes. Collectively, Canadian athletes experienced the disappointment of not competing in the event. Whether or not all of these athletes felt victimized by such a blatant incursion of politics in the Olympic Games is not the point. Rather, the idea of group identity among this generation of athletes was simply that their careers intersected with several major transitions in the modern Olympic Games. More than anything, the era exposed how an athletes participation in the Olympic Games was governed by complex bureaucratic and political issues. For international-level athletes like swimmers Dave Johnson, Bill Sawchuk, and Mike Blondal, as well as volleyball player John Paulsen and basketball player Rommel Raffin, the anticipation of competing at the Olympic

Games in the 1970s would have been shaped by the knowledge of the Munich massacre in 1972, where 11 Israeli athletes and coaches, 1 West German police officer, and 5 Palestinian terrorists lost their lives.<sup>56</sup> With the 1976 Olympic Games taking place in Canada, this group of Canadian athletes must have been acutely aware of the magnitude of international, national, and provincial political influence on sport. Beyond the very public scrutiny of the cost of the Games and the fear that a building strike would leave some Olympic venues unfinished in Montreal, these athletes would have known about the many international issues that threatened the integrity of their field of competition.<sup>57</sup> For Canadian swimmers like Graham Smith, Mike Blondal, and Bill Humby, basketball player Tom Bishop and volleyball player Al Coulter, this reality played out as they prepared – and were then prohibited – to compete at the Olympic Games in 1980. Even the Canadian athletes who were able to compete at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles had their competitive playing fields significantly diluted by the absence of Eastern bloc countries. Undeniably, this was a generation where many of the lofty humanistic ideals of the Olympic Games came crashing down.

The work of several critical social and cultural historians has explained the underlying conflicts that confronted the IOC, National Olympic Committees, nation states, and, ultimately, international level athletes of this period. Through the 1960s, 70, and 80s it was very clear to everyone that staging the perfect Olympic Games was virtually impossible. This scepticism was rooted in the knowledge that what the IOC hoped to achieve was likely impossible. Perhaps naively, officials from the Olympic Games have long claimed that the principle objective of the Games is to advance global harmony and peace while, at the same time, allowing nation states to strengthen their own unique sense of identity. This philosophy has been called Olympism or Olympic Internationalism.

Historians like Richard Mandell, John Hoberman, Dietrich Quanz, and Sigmund Loland have all described the tensions and complexities concomitant with the dual (national and international) character of the Olympic Games. These authors point to the inherent contradictions in using sport to advance the agendas of both internationalism and patriotism.<sup>58</sup> Hoberman writes, “the basic contradiction of the Olympic Movement [is that] it claims to be international, but relinquishes moral authority to national governments.”<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Mandell has argued that, from its very inception, the Olympic Games expose a kind of ideological paradox:

*Another enduring, if dubious, contribution of Coubertin was the tenet that might be called ‘the Olympic paradox’ (his quotation marks). This is the contradictory notion, stated repeatedly by Coubertin and maintained by the priests of modern Olympism ever since, that international sporting competition both intensifies patrio-*

*tism and prevents political friction owing to opposed nationalistic ambitions – that, in other words, the mixing of patriotism and competition will somehow further universal peace.<sup>60</sup>*

The pessimistic reading by these scholars has not prevented others from trying to circumvent the apparent contradictions in Olympic sport. Indeed, the cultural turn in sport studies in the 1980s and 1990s has prompted some scholars to reflect on the paradox in other ways. Rather than focus on the tensions, these scholars emphasize the *consistencies* between the objectives of politicians, sports people, and the general public. Precisely, they point out that a key premise shared by all stakeholders in the Olympic Games is the explicit desire to generate a sense of unity through sport. In other words, all take for granted the idea that sport, festival, and spectacle can in fact help to cultivate feelings of togetherness, community solidarity, and cultural camaraderie. For example, John J. MacAloon's anthropological analysis of the Olympic Games highlights the individual athlete (experience) in a more dynamic role. MacAloon—who was mentored by Victor Turner—draws on theories of cultural performance and introduces the notion of sport as a vehicle for the production of communities, or *communitas*. According to MacAloon, Olympism, an ideology that has grown out of 19<sup>th</sup> century internationalism, provides a master example of what Victor Turner calls *ideological communitas*, as it attempts to use the Olympic Games as a means of achieving these unifying experiences and thereby, the argument follows, contributing to the advancement of global harmony and peace.<sup>61</sup> As such, sport is regarded as potentially a transformative event where identities are confirmed through active participation.

Citing the work of Victor Turner and Terence Turner, MacAloon explains how, from the perspective of cultural anthropology, events with transformative expectations fall into the category of ritual:

*The basic principle of the effectiveness of ritual action ... is its quality as a model or embodiment of the hierarchical relationship between a conflicted or ambiguous set of relations [i.e. internationalism and patriotism] and some higher-level principle that serves, at least for ritual purposes, as its generative mechanism or transcendental ground.<sup>62</sup>*

Hence the Olympic Games, as a sport festival, have been constructed as a “ritual” that literally embodies two conflicting agendas in the name, or rather pursuit, of some “transcendental ground.” In the case of the Olympic Games, the “higher level-principle” described by Victor Turner and Terence Turner is the cultivation of unity, what John J. MacAloon describes as an appeal to “humankindness.” In essence, the appeal to establish community through sport provides the ritual purpose which serves as the generative mechanism and/or transcendental ground for the Olympic spectacle.<sup>63</sup> In the social and political arena, therefore, the spirit of “humankindness,” “Olympism” or “*communitas*”

is alleged to trump superficial competition between athletes of different nations, cultures, and socio-political orientations. In other words, the effort to resolve conflicting relations (i.e., the Olympic paradox) – in the pursuit of humankindness or some generic human bond – is precisely what constitutes the higher-level principle of Olympism. On paper then, at least, the IOC and national governments seemed to share the same goal of achieving this higher-level principle. However, in the socially and politically turbulent period of the Cold War, the ability of nation state politics and institutional sport organisations to generate a sense of unity or “humankindness” through the Olympic Games seemed highly untenable.

Interviews with athletes of this period reveal how they mimicked, or rather embodied, the same quest for the experience of social unity that had failed to be recognized at the more official levels of Olympic sport. One might see that the athletes’ experiences paralleled and embodied the same paradox of achieving this higher-level principle Olympism. In fact, ritual activity is exactly what the participants in this study describe. At a time when participation in an “official” Olympic community was rigidly defined by national political agents and international sport federations, Canadian athletes took the dominant logo used by each of these groups – the Canadian flag and Olympic rings, respectively – and made them their own *collective* signifiers. In the form of tattoos and customized jewellery, they used these logos and established their own, self-defined, self-policed community of athletes. In a fashion similar to how official discourses describe the transformative function of Olympic ritual, Canadian athletes invented their own ritual with its own transformative function. No one can dispute the potency and transformative impact of the ring ritual in Western European marriage traditions. The athletes designed, produced, and then donned rings with a specific symbol that carried the necessary cultural, social, and historical gravitas to establish a sense of community. In many respects, this impetus to define a community of Olympic athletes at a grassroots level is logical given the context. Athletes during this era could not have found themselves in a more precarious relationship with the Olympic Games, the Olympic Movement, and the ideological paradox described above. Their commitment to the ritual is awkward from today’s perspective as some of them lost their chance to participate in the Olympic Games because of the administrative and political failure to resolve (the paradox of) Olympic Internationalism. Nevertheless, were these rituals authentic? Were they transformative? The answer lies in the interpretation of MacAloon’s references to a higher-level principle and its generative mechanism. For the athletes like Mike Blondal and Bill Humby whose sporting careers did not culminate at the Moscow Olympic Games, participating in the Games themselves was apparently not essential as a generative mechanism. In other words, both athletes self-identified with the Olympic Movement without having actually competed on

the hallowed Olympic Games playing field. As we discussed previously, neither athlete allowed themselves to engage in the ritual transformation without considerable self-reflection and even a bit of social negotiation. Recall that Blondal's wife bought him an Olympic ring in 1996, but he refused to wear it until he had coached one of his own athletes to the Olympic Games.

The tattoo tradition started by Graham Smith can be interpreted in more or less the same context. But Smith is really part of the pre-history. Although Smith also experienced the 1980 boycott, he had already competed and won a medal at the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976. And, his very public display of pride and nation was not the Olympic logo but a maple leaf over his heart. In his telephone interview, Smith described his pride as a Canadian athlete who had competed at the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, and at international swim meets generally. Was his tattoo a ritual act? Was it effective? We argue that it is difficult to identify his gesture with an embodiment of the hierarchical relationship that speaks to the Olympic Movement. It is difficult to define how Smith was transformed once the maple leaf was inked on his chest. Any direct references to any social or political institution do not exist in his tattoo. The maple leaf is a relatively generic reference to Canadian citizenship, but that is self-evident as Smith was already a well-known Canadian athlete. From a different angle, however, one can see an element of transformation in his act. We see the conflict or ambiguity centred on his athletic body.

According to Michael Atkinson's historical reflections on tattooing in the West, around the time tattooing emerged in Canadian sport, the social perceptions of tattooing was experiencing significant change in North America. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s, tattooing was used almost exclusively by "prisoners, motorcycle gangs, deviant youth subcultures, and political protesters" as a means to express discontent with social regulations, the late 1970s saw tattooing increasingly being used by the more mainstream, middle-class populations.<sup>64</sup> As such, tattooing had begun to shed its image as the almost exclusive domain of criminals and deviant outlaws. Tattoo scholar Margo DeMello references this era as the "Tattoo Renaissance."<sup>65</sup> However, according to DeMello, the use of tattooing as a signifier of deviance was not lost on this generation of North Americans. In the 1970s, several members of the alleged counterculture used tattooing as a sign of resistance to "heterosexual, white, middle-class values."<sup>66</sup> It might be said, then, that at the time of Smith's inking, the act of tattooing harvested dense and mixed emotions across North America. Atkinson explains, "[t]hroughout the 1970s and 1980s, more North Americans sought out and embraced tattooing as a personal form of expression than in any other historical period."<sup>67</sup>

In Smith's era, an athlete with a tattoo was unusual to say the least. While Smith appears to have been on the cusp of newer social attitudes toward tattoos, in the highly disciplined context of amateur sport in the 1970s, this overt

display of body modification must have been interpreted by at least a few observers of international sport as a rebellious or “edgy” endeavour. In essence, the act of tattooing problematizes the real athletes’ body with the pristine and disciplined “ideal” body of Olympic athletics. In this sense, Smith’s act was both explicitly and implicitly transformational. The explicit transformation cracked the ideological veneer that defined Olympic culture. But implicitly, this transformation symbolized a degree of autonomy (even corporeal authority) by an Olympic athlete at a time when their sporting performances were increasingly monitored and controlled by state governments and international sporting federations.

Athletes like Bill Sawchuk responded to Graham Smith’s tattoo. Some facet of Smith’s gesture and performance resonated with athletes who were preparing for the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. But Sawchuk and Andy Ritchie did not copy Smith’s tattoo exactly—they copied the act of tattooing, but incorporated a very different type of symbol, the Canadian flag and on a different place on their bodies, their shoulders. This ritual act can be read much like that of Smith’s. However, many years later, Sawchuk added another element to his Canadian flag tattoo. Several years after his swimming career ended, he added the Olympic logo and a stylized Olympic flame to his original tattoo. Was this an extension of the original ritual act or was it separate? As an effective ritual, inking the Olympic logo onto one’s body reads very differently from a national emblem like the maple leaf. Sawchuk’s Olympic logo tattoo suggests a direct relationship between their athletic bodies, athlete identities, and a very tangible event (the Olympic Games) with a very specific corporate body (the IOC). In the case of this athlete, did the act of obtaining this tattoo resolve a conflicted or ambiguous relationship between the athlete and a higher-level principle, or transcendental ground? Sawchuk had already competed at the 1976 Olympic Games and could unproblematically self-identify as an “Olympian.” However, it is the timing of his second transformative act that is interesting within the context of this paper. On the one hand, his Olympic logo tattoo is a personal/public gesture of affiliation with the Games, the International Movement and the IOC. On the other hand, this relationship is more ambiguous when one considers the severed relationship with the Games and the IOC in 1980. Still, Sawchuk did not see this as problematic (or an impediment) in terms of what he wanted to express through his act of tattooing the Olympic logo on his body.

The athletes interviewed for this project revealed that identifying with a community of international sportsmen and sportswomen was not necessarily impossible. In spite of the overwhelming pessimism that engulfed the idea of the modern Olympic Games, from their personal (sometimes intimate) experiences, Olympic athletes recognized a type of “humankindness” as their sporting careers unfolded during this turbulent era and they found ingenious

ways of communicating this experience. They *chose* to wear rings with unsanctioned Olympic logos. They *chose* to tattoo the Olympic rings on their athletic bodies. But, the unity of the Olympic community that they were celebrating was not an “official” IOC sanctioned community. It was an Olympic community that emerged in spite of the political crises that brought the IOC and NOCs to their knees. It also formed in spite of the IOCs growing concern about the unauthorized use of their corporate logo. This was a grassroots-type of movement where athletes like Sawchuk, Ritichie, and Wendy Johnson did not need these organizations or even an Olympic Games experience to confirm their membership in this community – an organic, spontaneous *communitas*.<sup>68</sup> If we follow the theoretical proposition of MacAloon, it was the experience of “humankindness” among teammates and competitors that represented the high-level principle (the ideal) that inspired them to decorate their bodies with these logos.

A critical reading of the conviction with which athletes believe in these ideals might suggest a naivety to the larger context in which their performances took place. Effectively, they served an institution that denies political incursions only – and inevitably – to be exploited by the very politics it denies. An extension of this reading would point out that athletes’ commitment to the ideals of Olympism allowed them to be more effectively manipulated by the very institutions they sought to represent – the complete side-walling they expressed in reaction to the 1980 Olympic boycott comes to mind. However, such an account of athlete experience is too deterministic. It denies the lived subjectivities of these athletes. Curiously, our interviews reveal that these Canadian athletes may have been more effective at reconciling the tenuous paradox of Olympism than the official organizations (IOC and COC) and specific nation states that were asserting near totalitarian authority over the Games, their future, and the corporate logo. In small and subtle ways, Canadian athletes performed their identities as members of an Olympic community outside of the purview of the organizations and bureaucrats that controlled their very participation in this field of sport production. These performances were local in the most intimate sense – their bodies inscribed as Olympic membership cards. This generation of Canadian Olympic athletes originated a tradition of body modification and personal adornment that involved tattooing their skin and wearing personally-commissioned Olympic jewellery as a means of celebrating their collective achievements and outwardly expressing their experiences and stake in the Olympic Games. Herein lays the irony. In an era where Canadian athletes were pawns in an international boycott movement, they ingeniously invented a tradition where they asserted their Olympic athlete identities with their bodies beyond the stadia of the Olympic Games from which they had effectively been excluded by their governments. More-



over, these trends reflected precisely the nuances, tensions, rewards, and paradoxes inherent in Olympic ideology and practice.

## Endnotes

- 1 Ted Polhemus, *Body Styles* (Luton: Lennard Publishing, 1988), 41.
- 2 For example, section seven of the *Olympic Charter* reads: “The Olympic symbol, flag, motto, anthem, definitions (including but not limited to “Olympic Games” and “Games of the Olympiad”), designations, emblems, flame and torches, as defined in Rules 8-14 below, shall be collectively or individually referred to as “Olympic properties.” All rights to any and all Olympic properties, as well as all rights to the use thereof, belong exclusively to the IOC, including but not limited to the use for any profit-making, commercial or advertising purposes. The IOC may license all or part of its rights on terms and conditions set forth by the IOC Executive Board.” IOC, *The Olympic Charter* (Lausanne: IOC, 2010), 20.
- 3 Robert K. Barney, Scott Martyn and Stephen Wenn, *Selling the Five Rings: The International Olympic Committee and the Rise of Olympic commercialism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2002).
- 4 Rob Van Wynsberghe and Ian Ritchie, “(Ir)relevant Rings: the Symbolic Consumption of the Olympic Logo in Postmodern Media Culture,” in: *Critical Reflection on Olympic Ideology: Proceedings from the Second International Symposium for Olympic Research*, eds. Robert K. Barney and Klaus V. Meier (London: Centre for Olympic Studies, 1994), 136-145.
- 5 Dayna Daniels, “The Mark of an Athlete,” *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* 13, no. 2 (2004), 61.
- 6 The reference to concepts such as fields of cultural production and stakeholders is not coincidental. Though we do not extend theoretically upon such concepts in this article, these short references are intended to acknowledge the impact of Pierre Bourdieu’s relational sociology on this project. See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).
- 7 It is significant to note that the oral history methodology used in this thesis was vetted through the Ethics Department at the University of Calgary. See Jordan Koch, “Sport and Politics during the Cold War: Reflections on Agency and Identity by Canadian Olympians, 1970s to 1980s” (Master’s thesis, University of Calgary, 2007).
- 8 In his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Victor Turner introduced the concept of *communitas*, which he defined as an experience that “breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferior-

- ity ... [and] transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships..." Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 128. To elaborate on this concept, Turner uses Martin Buber's 1961 definition of community – altered to read *communitas* – which Turner feels provides a more effective illustration of what he is trying to convey through *communitas*: "Communitas is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but *with* one another of a multitude of persons." Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 127. More succinctly, Ingham and McDonald summarise Turner's concept as "a special experience during which individuals are able to rise above those structures that materially and normatively regulate their daily lives and that unite people across the boundaries of structure, rank, and socioeconomic status." Alan G. Ingham and Mary G. McDonald, "Sport and Community/Communitas," in: *Sporting Dystopias: The Making of Urban Sport Cultures*, eds. R. Wilcox, D.L. Andrews, R. Pitter, and R.L. Irwin (Albany: State University of New York), 26.
- 9 IOC, *The Olympic Charter*, 2004, 10.
  - 10 Alfred E. Senn, *Power, Politics and the Olympic Games: A History of the Power Brokers, Events, and Controversies that Shaped the Games* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1999).
  - 11 Ibid., 156.
  - 12 Jane Crossman and Ron Lappage, "Canadian Athletes' Perceptions of the 1980 Olympic Boycott," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 9, no. 4 (1992), 358.
  - 13 Douglas Booth, *The Race Game: Sport and Politics in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).
  - 14 Incidentally, "Unity through Sport" served as the motto for the first ever Canada Games in 1968, held in Québec City. That these games took place in Québec City at a time when tensions between Francophone and Anglophone nationalisms were at its peak is no coincidence.
  - 15 An emphasis on formalizing cultural "industry" was fuelled by the Quiet Revolution in Québec and ultimately the new aggressive federalism of Pierre Trudeau. Achieving national unity was also associated with achieving international prominence in Canadian cultural pastimes. Fostering human accomplishment in the arts and sciences and celebrating international success was perceived as a measure of Canada's maturity and significance as an agent in international society. Historically, this commitment to national unity is identified with several monumental events. In 1967, the country celebrated its centennial and Montreal hosted an international exposition, EXPO 67: Man and his World. The first definitive work discussing federal government involvement in Canadian sport is Donald Macintosh, Tom Bedecki, and C.E.S. Franks, *Sport and Politics in Canada: Federal Government Involvement since 1961* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987). Other major scholarship that has since explored the relationship between government

- and sport in Canada includes Donald Macintosh and David Whitson, *The Game Planners: Transforming Canada's Sport System* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).
- 16 Task Force Report, *Report of the Task Force on Sports for Canadians* (Ottawa: Department of National Health and Welfare, 1969), 7.
  - 17 The *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ) was a radical French Canadian separatist organisation that used terrorist tactics to generate public awareness of their cause for change in Québec society in the late 1960s. Reacting to abductions and murder by the FLQ, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau declared a "state of apprehended insurrection under the War Measures Act." See J. M. Bumsted, *The Peoples of Canada: A Post Conference History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), 303.
  - 18 Macintosh, Bedecki, and Franks, *Sport and Politics in Canada*, Front Cover.
  - 19 Bruce Kidd, *The Struggle for Canadian Sport* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 4. Noteworthy is that the term 'sport-media complex' to which Kidd is referring is a term originally coined by Sut Jally, "Cultural Studies and the Sports/Media Complex," in: *Media, Sports and Society*, ed., L.A. Wenner (Newbury Park: Sage Publications Inc., 1989), 70-93.
  - 20 Macintosh, Bedecki, and Franks, *Sport and Politics in Canada*, 1-2.
  - 21 Stephen Wenn, "Riding in to the Sunset: Richard Pound, Dick Ebersol, and Long-Term Olympic Television Contracts," *Bridging Three Centuries: Intellectual Crossroads and the Modern Olympic Movement, Proceedings of the Fifth International Symposium for Olympic Research*, eds. Kevin B. Wamsley, Scott G. Martyn, Gordan H. MacDonald, Robert K. Barney (London: International Centre for Olympic Studies, September 2000), 37.
  - 22 Diane Jones Konihowski, interview by Tom Leach, *Newsmagazine*, *Olympic Boycott a 'Tragedy.'* Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, April 22, 1980.
  - 23 Cheryl Gibson, interview by Brian McDonald and Sheldon Turcott, *The National*, *Canada boycotts Moscow Olympics.* Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, April 22, 1980.
  - 24 See Cesar Torres and Mark Dyerson, "The Cold War Games," in: *Global Olympics: Historical and Sociological Studies of The Modern Games*, eds., Kevin Young and Kevin Wamsley (London: Elsevier, 2005), 59-82.
  - 25 For example, on an episode of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) nationally renowned segment *The National*, a variety of Canadian athletes were shown expressing their disappointment and powerlessness in response to the federal government's decision to boycott the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. See *The National*, *Canada boycotts Moscow Olympics.* Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, April 22, 1980.

- 26 Our reading here mirrors that of Jane Crossman and Ron Lappage in Crossman and Lappage, "Canadian Athletes' Perceptions of the 1980 Olympic Boycott."
- 27 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1984). The reference to 'poetry' is significant for De Certeau (and for us) as it emphasises the creative, inventive, and generative practices exercised by social agents in everyday living, in our case within the arena of high performance sport during the Cold War era.
- 28 C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1963).
- 29 "Men of the Year," *GQ Magazine*, December 2008.
- 30 Mike Blondal, interview by Jordan Koch, transcribed tape recording, University of Calgary, Alberta, May 8, 2006, 33-35.
- 31 Dave Johnson, interview by Jordan Koch, transcribed tape recording, University of Calgary, Alberta, June 1, 2006, 38-39. The "lost-wax" is a process involving a wax mould for the manufacture of various shapes out of metal. The mould is made, hot metal poured in, and the crucible broken once the metal has cooled so as to retain the shape of the mould.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Wendy Johnson, interview by Jordan Koch, transcribed tape recording, University of Calgary, Alberta, June 7, 2006, 60-64.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 As we prepared this paper, we informally interviewed a wide range of Canadian athletes and coaches (male and female) who have participated at Olympic Games since the 1960s and who wear rings with the Olympic logo. From these conversations with more than 15 athletes and coaches from six different sports, we discovered that the manufacturers and origins of the rings vary widely.
- 36 Mike Blondal, interview by Jordan Koch, 33-35.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Al Coulter, interview by Jordan Koch, transcribed tape recording, University of Calgary, Alberta, June 13, 2006, 17-18.
- 39 Bill Humby, interview by Jordan Koch, personal communication, University of Alberta, Edmonton, July 26, 2010.
- 40 The 'common sense' distinctions between able and disabled-bodied athletes in high performance sport has been challenged even further in recent years by the contentious debates surrounding the eligibility of athletes such as Oscar Pistorius (commonly known as the "blade runner") in Olympic Games competition.
- 41 Cameron Henning, interview by Jordan Koch, transcribed tape recording, University of Calgary, Alberta, June 23, 2006, 23-25.

- 42 John Paulsen, interview by Jordan Koch, transcribed tape recording, University of Calgary, Alberta, June 27, 2006, 14-36.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Graham Smith, telephone interview by Jordan Koch, July 30, 2010.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 According to tattoo scholar Margo DeMello, in the 1950s and 1960s, a more confrontational form of tattooing emerged. Biker groups, hippies, gangs, and prison (sub)cultural communities all took to tattooing and developed their own unique forms and styles of imagery. It was mainly in this period that postwar society's negative view of tattooing became solidified. Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: a Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 66-70.
- 48 Bill Sawchuk, interview by Jordan Koch, transcribed tape recording, University of Calgary, Alberta, June 9, 2006, 2.
- 49 Ibid., 1.
- 50 Ibid., 2-3.
- 51 Cameron Henning, interview by Jordan Koch, 25.
- 52 Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 16.
- 53 The authors are unclear about how the tradition of tattooing in Canadian sport relates to athletes competing in the International Paralympic Games. Informal conversations with a select few Paralympic Games athletes suggests that a similar tradition exists, but broader comments on its practicing cannot be substantiated at this point in time.
- 54 Bill Sawchuk, interview by Jordan Koch, 54-55.
- 55 Michael Atkinson, *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 45.
- 56 A good introduction to the Munich Massacre is Simon Reeve, *One Day in September* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000).
- 57 For example, threats of Soviet withdrawal from the Games due to an Eastern bloc athlete's alleged defection to the West; systematic state-sanctioned doping programs in the East; and the last minute withdrawal of 26 African nations in protest of a New Zealand rugby tour with the apartheid regime of South Africa were issues that certainly shaped the climate in which athletes experiences took place at the Olympic Games in Montreal.
- 58 See Richard Mandell, *The First Modern Olympics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); John Hoberman, *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics and the Moral Order* (New York: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1986); Dietrich Quanz, "Civic Pacifism and Sports-based Internationalism: Framework

- for the founding of the International Olympic Committee,” *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* II (1993), 1-23; Sigmund Loland, “Coubertin's Ideology of Olympism from the Perspective of the History of Ideas,” *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* IV (1995), 49-78.
- 59 John Hoberman, *The Olympic Crisis*, 30.
- 60 Richard Mandell, *The First Modern Olympics*, 72.
- 61 John MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals toward a theory of Cultural Performance* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 266. Victor Turner explains that *ideological communitas* is a “label one can apply to a variety of utopian models of societies based on *existential communitas*.” He writes, “*Ideological communitas* is at once an attempt to describe the external and visible effects – the outward form, it might be said – of an inward experience of *existential communitas*, and to spell out the optimal social conditions under which such experiences might be expected to flourish and multiply.” This can be contrasted against what Turner calls *existential communitas* (or *spontaneous communitas*). Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 132.
- 62 Terence Turner, “Transformation, Hierarchy, and Transcendence: A Reformulation of Van Gennep's Model of the Structure of Rites of Passage,” in: *Secular Ritual*, eds. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Amsterdam, 1977), quoted in MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle*, 251.
- 63 MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle*, 251.
- 64 Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 41-42.
- 65 DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 71-84.
- 66 *Ibid.*, 71-84.
- 67 Atkinson, *Tattooed*, 46.
- 68 For Turner, *spontaneous communitas* represents the spontaneous and immediate character of unification. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 132.