

It's all about the sports, dammit

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Could we be upfront about this? The Gay Games are a sports event, through and through, and the World Outgames are not. It is because of that difference, and the disregard or even contempt many of the World Outgames organizers hold for sports, that is the fundamental reason why these two should never consider merging events or organizations.

When the late Olympian Dr. Tom Waddell conceived of the Gay Games, which he initially called the Gay Olympic Games, he envisioned them as a "vehicle of change."

The vehicle he chose was sports - the field that had brought him the most acclaim. He knew what it was like to endure the sacrifices and discipline that sports competition demanded, and knew how much more fulfilling and rewarding that experience could be if he could be honest about who he was rather than a shadow hiding in a closet. What he created was not an elitist, gay replica of the Olympics, whose motto is "Faster, Higher, Stronger," but an egalitarian world built on "Participation, Inclusion and Personal Best."

"The Gay Games are not separatist, they are not exclusive, they are not oriented to victory, and they are not for commercial gain," Waddell later wrote. "They intended to bring a global community together in friendship, to experience participation, to elevate consciousness and self-esteem, and to achieve a form of cultural and intellectual synergy. We have the opportunity to take the initiative on critical issues that affect the quality of life."

Over time, that mission statement was codified into the Federation of Gay Games bylaws, which states the FGG's purpose is "to foster and augment the self-respect of gay men and women throughout the world and to engender respect and understanding from the non-gay world, primarily through an organized, international athletic and cultural event held every four years commonly known as the 'Gay Games.' "

The FGG is run entirely of volunteers who come principally from LGBT sports organizations, where they either discovered their passion for sports or rekindled it. They're the kinds of volunteers who have given back to their communities by coaching others and organizing tournaments or buying uniforms. The kinds of volunteers who, having found joy in their local teams, have gone on to help build their LGBT international sports organizations or city-based teams.

For them, sports end up providing the life-changing experiences they are seeking and wish to share with others. They're sports people, dammit.

Which is why I find it amusing when folks try to compare the World Outgames - which were started in 2006 by fiscally misguided Montreal organizers to compete with the Gay Games - with the Gay Games. The Gay Games try to advance LGBT rights through sports; the World Outgames say providing people with the opportunity to compete as openly LGBT individuals is not enough: you don't advance human rights unless you hold conferences and workshops.

Time and time again, representatives of World Outgames or their licensing body, the Gay and Lesbian International Sports Association, have expressed their disregard for the value of sports in the human rights movement. The final status report from the 2009 Copenhagen World Outgames speaks of "prioritizing the cultural program and the human rights conference" over sports. In an email to me that year, Uffe Elbaek, CEO of the 2009 World Outgames, wrote that he hoped the World Outgames and Gay Games become unified, but without the sports focus of the Gay Games.

"I only hope this, if the 'new games' have a broader perspective than just sport," Elbaek wrote. "Because if human rights are not the core of the event, I honestly think the game will end up being a club only for gay men from U.S., Canada, North Europe, and Australia."

And yet that is precisely what the World Outgames are: overpriced sports events accessible primarily to the privileged classes. The focus on human rights is not greater at a World Outgames than a Gay Games - it is merely taken out of sports and diffused across more disciplines and more identities. The effect is to reduce the overall sports experience, and as a result, their human rights impact.

Think the sidetracking of funding from sports into other components doesn't hurt the human rights element of the sports experience? Ask lesbian soccer player Dikeledi Sibanda of South Africa, who competed in the 2013 World Outgames. In August of that year, she wrote a blog post on inkanyiso.org about her frustrating and disappointing experience of winning a gold medal while playing for a Belgian team. She said repeated efforts and applications to obtain sufficient World Outgames scholarship funds had failed, resulting in her being assigned to an otherwise all-white team rather than being able to play for her South African team.

"We wrote to the WOGA organization and explained our situation and our grievance fell on deaf ears," Sibanda wrote. "The whole experience of struggling with financial backup showed that we still have a long way to go when it comes to accessing services for black lesbian athletes in South Africa. It's even worse now that I am here. The welcoming was cold. The place that I am hosted at is not a good space. The sports tournament is too white and discriminating. I felt that white people enjoyed certain privileges more than the minority blacks. There's nothing good, friendly, or equal about the 2013 World Outgames. [They] are not well organized, and people who needed support the most were not given [it]."

Sibanda said the racism was palpable.

"Queer sport spaces are not yet accommodative when it comes to black LGBTs, especially for black lesbians," she wrote. "The spaces are predominantly white and male dominated. The absence of black queers in the organization of the Outgames, I feel, is the cause of this racial division within, expecting white people who do not relate to issues we deal with as black queers is illogical; but then again, if us as black people we don't involve ourselves in such spaces such divisions will always be felt."

It was a sharp contrast to what she had experienced years earlier when she competed at the Gay Games with her exceedingly out team, Chosen FEW.

"I first attended Chicago Gay Games in 2006 and for me that was a lifetime experience and it will never be the same again," she wrote. "Those games had brought people together, we shared our stories with other countries, and we were well received and our presence there was greatly appreciated compared to what I am experiencing here now. I sometimes ask myself what's the meaning of the World Outgames and what purpose do they serve? I feel the absence of Chosen FEW at the World Outgames, considering the fact that it is the only 'outspoken' black lesbian soccer team I know off from the African soil. Their presence would have made queer, political statements of inclusivity and equality like they did in all previous Gay Games we attended."

Fact is, budgetary decisions are made to prop up the non-sports components of World Outgames. In Copenhagen, the volleyball competition brackets were collapsed into what Outsports.com referred to as a "clusterfuck." In the 2013 event in Antwerp, wrestling and martial arts were collapsed into mutual workshops and tournament competition eliminated.

In 2010 I talked with GLISA co-president Julia Applegate about the sports experience provided by the World Outgames. Applegate is a swimmer who spoke warmly of the life-changing experience she had when she competed in the 1998 Gay Games in Amsterdam. I mentioned that in 2009, the World Outgames collapsed the eight wrestlers competing in the tournament into a single round-robin weight class, ranging from a wrestler who weighed about 128 pounds to heavyweights well over 200 pounds. Those are unsafe conditions, which would never be allowed in any other sanctioned event. I mentioned the lack of runners in the road races and swimmers in the pool lanes. She told me she didn't think the unsafe conditions or the reduced competition lowered the sports experience at all. She also said she didn't think less diversity of sports options reduced the sports experience.

The message I get from the World Outgames is that we are just dumb jocks who should shut up while they hold their conferences. Which is not what I got through the Gay Games and its member organizations. Through them I was able to get on a wrestling mat when I was no longer able to run and my kidneys were failing, and I was able to excel as an openly gay athlete, much as I had done in my closeted youth. I was able to make the connections to enable me to coach dozens of young persons of color and dozens of gay, lesbian and transgender athletes - and earn the respect of countless straight athletes.

At the 2002 Winter Olympics, Kofi Annan, then the secretary-general of the United Nations, said that sports "can play a role in improving the lives of individuals. Not only individuals, but whole communities. The time is right to build on that understanding."

The Gay Games are built on that understanding, and for all their shortcomings, they're the best vehicle of change in sports that we have. They should not let the World Outgames make them lose their focus. It's all about the sports, dammit.