

COC Top 12 Criteria Athletes CAN Position Paper

THE ISSUE

The Canadian Olympic Committee (COC), by virtue of its responsibility for all aspects of Canada's involvement in the Olympic movement, is responsible for Canada's participation in the Olympic Games. Athletes striving to represent Canada at Olympic Games must, at a minimum, meet qualifying performance standards set by their International Sport Federation (IF). Additionally, IOC member countries have the right to set specific qualifying performance standards related to their own athletes, based on resources, expectations and other factors.

In April 2002, the COC set the standard for qualification to Canadian Olympic teams as "within the top 12 in the world". In April 2003, Canada was chosen to host the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in Vancouver/Whistler. Subsequently, the COC chose to reset the athlete qualification standard for Olympic Winter Games only to International Sport Federation qualification standards, applying to the 2006 Winter Olympic Games of Torino, Italy and beyond. The impact of this decision is primarily felt by summer athletes, who are extremely alarmed by the timing of this decision and who take issue with the basis for, and inconsistent application of, Olympic qualifying standards imposed by COC.

THE COC POSITION ON TOP 12

The Canadian Olympic Committee has expressed the rationale for this decision in many ways and through different forums. The key points of the position can be summarized as:

"Raising the bar" will motivate athletes to perform"

The COC Athletes Council, which strongly endorsed the top 12 criteria in March 2003, believes that tightening Games standards will provide athletes with added incentive to perform beyond their current level. Karen Purdy, Chair of the COC Athletes Council, has indicated however that there is little or no research to underpin this position.

Olympic excellence, not Olympic participation

It has been expressed within the Olympic community that there are too many tourists at Games and that by raising the entry point, athletes will respond and the overall team size will remain the same. There has been no demonstrated evidence to support this premise which assumes athletes strive only to get to the Olympics and that experience at an Olympic Games has little value other than the chance to medal at those Games.

This decision is about excellence, not resources or dollars

Both Karen Purdy (Chair, COC Athletes Council) and Chris Rudge (CEO of COC) have indicated that the top 12 qualifying standard decision has nothing to do with dollars or resources. Mr. Rudge has noted to the sport community on several occasions, however that if the provinces were to come forward with added resources, the top 12 standard could be reviewed and potentially relaxed.

Top 12 criteria is a predictor of performance and is in line with the approach of other successful countries

The COC has not demonstrated relevant research or information to support this position. Simon Whitfield, gold medalist triathlete from Sydney 2000, is one among many Canadian athletes who were not ranked in the top 12 but who triumphed on the day (or gained valuable experience to later succeed), while Jeremy Wotherspoon, reigning World Champion and ranked as a 2002 medalist in Speed skating, did not. Such is the mercurial and amazing nature of sport.

Multiple Games participation and performance improvement are not linked

COC officials have expressed the view that future performances by Canadian athletes are not affected by prior Games experience or multiple Games appearances. Research by Sport Canada and common sense seem to run contrary to this position. Success in the interdependent nature of team sport (currently a major weakness of our Games teams) requires that core groups of athletes are exposed to multiple “world class” competitive experiences. The successes of Perdita Felicien, Catriona Lemay Doan and Beckie Scott, multiple Games competitors in individual sports, demonstrate the importance of prior Games experience.

THE COC POSITION ON IF STANDARDS FOR WINTER SPORT

The decision to alter the qualifying standard for 2006 and future Winter Olympics to IF standards appears based on developing and preparing athletes for peak performance at the 2010 Olympics, hosted in Canada. The logic goes that by enabling more Canadian athletes to qualify for Torino 2006 and thus gain crucial Games experience, there is an increased likelihood of better “home Games” results. This is in response to the fact that Canada is the only country in Olympic history that has not won a gold medal when hosting the Games.

THE ATHLETES

The impact on athletes striving for the Olympic Games has been profoundly felt and strongly expressed by athletes, including those who have qualified for Athens 2004 and those who will miss out on the Games. Sport partners, government officials at all levels and officials in sport have informed Athletes CAN of their robust opposition to this criteria, as they have no doubt expressed to the COC. The number of legal inquiries and challenges to the COC top 12 standard expressed to the Sport Solution, a legal information service provided by Athletes CAN, is unprecedented and alarming. The general feedback to Athletes CAN and its Board around this COC qualification policy experiment has been negative, and the reputation of COC as a values-based organization appears greatly at risk.

As the collective voice of Canadian athletes and a partner of the Canadian Olympic Committee, our concerns can be expressed as follows:

Values

The Olympic values of fairness, respect, excellence and human development espoused by COC are not fully reflected in this policy. Athletes striving and sacrificing their lives for years to meet internationally agreed-upon criteria find it difficult enough. To then encounter a Games qualification standard imposed by their own country which neither respects nor supports their efforts, and in cases an unrealistic standard for that sport, is unfair and not in the interest of their development as both a human being and an athlete. Further, the effect of this standard on performance excellence or athlete results appears unfounded and unsubstantiated to date

Process

There are serious questions around the process undertaken to adopt the top 12 criteria, as well as the decision to alter standards for winter sport. Athletes have raised major concerns over the way in which feedback was solicited by COC Athletes Council on this issue and the nature of representations on behalf of athletes by this Council to the COC Board and Executive. In addition, the majority of NSO's appear to not have been provided with the opportunity to voice their legitimate concerns over this policy, once the implications were clearer and better understood.

These concerns over process again reflect a departure from the Olympic values of fairness and respect.

Inconsistent Standards and Athlete Development

If the rationale for top 12 qualification standards is to raise the performances of our Canadian teams, then it is patently inconsistent and illogical to use the same rationale to justify a move to IF

qualifying standards for winter sports. The athlete development argument for loosening Winter Games standards fully applies to summer sports and should be reflected in a consistent set of qualifying standards for both winter and summer Olympic Games.

Motivation

The Olympic Games are about dreams. Becoming an Olympic athlete is for most people just a dream but that dream helps keeps children playing, Canadians active and people striving to be better. For those children dreaming and the many Canadian athletes affected by this policy, the knowledge that they must be in the top 12 in the world in their sport, no matter the depth of field, to go to the Games for Canada is having an effect opposite to motivating. Athletes are finding this policy is demoralizing and causing them to question their choice to be an athlete. The value they place on competing for Canada, and all that represents, is being undermined by the message that Canada and the COC do not believe these athletes are worthy to compete at the Games. That experience gained at one Olympics does not serve in the next. Perdita Felicien, 29th place finisher in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and current world champion hurdler for Canada, has gone on record that without her previous Olympic Games experience, she would be a “deer in headlights” for Athens. The tone of the top 12 criteria message is that Olympic experience is not an asset for future performance and that surprise results can not happen at Games. Daniel Igali, Simon Whitfield and Beckie Scott, now Canadian sport icons, would perhaps not agree.

Performance and Research

The COC has not formally demonstrated the research background for the adoption of the top 12 policy. Without a solid research basis of international comparisons, predicting success factors and statistical evidence, the setting of top 12 qualification standards has a credibility gap. The shortsighted top 12 experiment impacts the opportunity and dreams of many deserving athletes, who will very likely pay the price in lost world class competitive opportunity, loss of a life changing Games experience and potential future Olympic medals for Canada.

Fairness, a fighting chance and the Canadian way

The Olympic Games are about creating Canadian ambassadors and heroes. They are about creating athletes role models through their performances, successful or not, and about teaching the values of hard work, team play and effort. Canadians love a winner to be sure, but they also stand for giving everyone a fair chance to be in the fight to win. They value the spirit of competition in our athletes and seeing them represent Canada against the best the world has to offer. Games offer the chance to win, and provide experiences that improve the chances of winning in the future. *But at the end of the day, you have to be there to win*

The policy restricts world class athletes from this country, who have earned the right under the rest of the world’s standards to compete at the Games, the chance to medal for Canada. Had the top 12 criteria been in place for Sydney, Simon Whitfield would not have even gone to the Games... and later gone on to capture the gold and the hearts of Canadians.

Moreover, the Olympic Games are about having the chance to go up against the world’s best and show what you have. We believe that the majority of Canadians would and should be very alarmed by the messages that this restrictive and disincentive-laden top 12 criterion is sending to our own athletes and children.

Athletes are extremely frustrated and down hearted by this policy. Representatives of Athletes CAN have expressed concern over this standard and policy directly to COC leadership and over the past six months, repeatedly to the COC Athletes Council. Extensive discussion over this policy has occurred within the Athletes CAN Board and among athletes and the sport community.

THE POSITION OF ATHLETES

The formal stance of COC on the top 12 issue for summer Olympic Games sports has, to date, remain unchanged. Anticipating that this issue will continue to be a topic amongst athletes for

future Games and a negative concern for COC, Athletes CAN respectfully presents the following recommendations for consideration by COC:

- A consistent qualification standard for Canadian athletes be set for all Olympic Games, beginning in Athens
- COC should set the Canadian Olympic qualifying standard at IF standards
- Athletes who have met IF standards for Athens be allowed to compete for Canada
- COC and partners conduct and publicize qualitative research examining the role of Games standards on Canadian athlete performance
- COC review the role of the COC Athletes Council, ensuring that the new governance structure fairly and effectively represents the interests of all Canadian Olympic athletes

Following the Sydney 2000 Games, Mark Lowry, Director of Sport for COC, remarked “In Canada, we seem to expect excellence from our athletes but we do not plan for or support it”.

In 2004, Ian Bird, a two-time Olympian and past Chair of Athletes CAN said, “The top 12 qualification criterion for summer sport only neither supports Canadian excellence nor builds podium incentive. Changing the nature and level of resources to sport and influencing Canadian culture do.”

The Olympic Games represent for most athletes the pinnacle of their sporting careers. For some athletes, the Games are the most moving and important event of their life. For Canadian kids, the Games represent an ideal and a dream that fires the imagination, inspires outstanding effort and can lead to a lifetime of healthy activity.

Winning is the ultimate achievement and the object of all athlete’s efforts. In our experience, there are no tourists at Olympic Games. While achieving victory is not always there at the end of performance, the result alone does not diminish the effort or the value of the experience. Competing at the Olympic Games, in the cauldron of the world’s best competition, is the ultimate athletic challenge and surprises do indeed happen. Often from athletes not in the top 5, or top 10 or even the top 30. Parity among competitors in Olympic sports, with the depth of field in others, enables longshot athletes to bring career performances to mount the Olympic podium. Examples abound. **In the end, Canadian athletes must be at the Games in order to have a chance to win.**

We do ourselves all a disservice in not assisting and enabling our best athletes and sport ambassadors to, in numbers, reach out for that dream. Until Canadian athletes have the appropriate support to truly pursue excellence and podium performances, restrictive Games qualifications standards is not the pathway to high performance. Experience at Games seeds learning, which breeds wisdom and produces better prepared athletes whose likelihood of later Olympic success cannot help but be enhanced. But in restricting access, we crush the ideals, efforts and Olympic dreams of both this generation of athletes and the next. And in the process, we tarnish the spirit of sport and the values of the founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron de Coubertin, who honored the effort and the ideals of all Olympic sportsmen and sportswomen.

We look forward to the application of a consistent, IF qualification standard for all Canadian Olympic teams.

The Board of Athletes CAN