

Understanding Olympic Diplomacy: The Refugee Team at the 2020 Tokyo Games*

Comprender la diplomacia olímpica: el equipo de refugiados en los Juegos de Tokio 2020

Comprender a diplomacia olímpica: a equipe de refugiados nos Jogos de Tóquio 2020

[Artículos]

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Abstract

At the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, 29 athletes competed for the Refugee Olympic Team (EOR). It was the second time in the history of the Summer Olympic Games that athletes from different origins who lived under refugee conditions competed under the same flag. This article aims to analyze the composition of the Refugee Olympic Team, identifying the connections between the athletes' origins, their countries of residence, and the official refugee data from around the world. As a result, it was observed that the Refugee Olympic Team has played an important role in giving visibility to social displacement, which is an expensive issue nowadays and enables high-performance athletes

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not to be excluded from the Olympic Games due to their political circumstances. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) also plays an important political and diplomatic role, which allows the presence of refugee athletes and competitors from the same countries of origin. In addition, there are still challenges that need to be addressed, such as the distribution of refugee athletes' destinations since most of them are currently concentrated in Europe, while other continents only host a small number.

Keywords: Migration, Immigration, Olympic Games, Olympic Studies, Refuge.

Resumen

En los Juegos Olímpicos de Tokio 2020, 29 atletas compitieron por el Equipo Olímpico de Refugiados (EOR). Esta fue la segunda vez en la historia de los Juegos Olímpicos de Verano que atletas de diferentes orígenes que vivían en condiciones de refugiados compitieron bajo la misma bandera. Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar la composición del EOR mediante la identificación de los vínculos entre los orígenes de los atletas, sus países de residencia y los datos oficiales de refugiados de todo el mundo. Como resultado, se observó que el EOR ha jugado un papel importante en la visibilización del desplazamiento social, que es un tema costoso en la actualidad y que permite que los atletas de alto rendimiento no queden excluidos de los Juegos Olímpicos por sus circunstancias políticas. El Comité Olímpico Internacional (COI) también juega un papel político y diplomático relevante, lo que permite la presencia de atletas refugiados y competidores provenientes de un mismo país. Además, todavía se presentan desafíos que deben abordarse, como la distribución de los destinos de los atletas refugiados, puesto que la mayoría de ellos se concentran en Europa en la actualidad, mientras que otros continentes solo acogen a un pequeño número de inmigrantes.

Palabras clave: migración, inmigración, Juegos Olímpicos, estudios olímpicos, refugio.

Resumo

Nos Jogos Olímpicos de Tóquio 2020, 29 atletas competiram pela Equipe Olímpica de Refugiados (EOR). Esta foi a segunda vez na história dos Jogos Olímpicos de Verão em que atletas de diferentes origens que viviam em condições de refúgio competiram sob a mesma bandeira. Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar a composição da EOR através da identificação dos vínculos entre as origens dos atletas, seus países de residência e os dados oficiais de refugiados em todo o mundo. Como resultado, observou-se que a EOR desempenhou um papel importante na visibilização do deslocamento social, que é um tema relevante atualmente, e permitiu que atletas de alto desempenho não

fossem excluídos dos Jogos Olímpicos devido às suas circunstâncias políticas. O Comitê Olímpico Internacional (COI) também desempenha um papel político e diplomático relevante, permitindo a presença de atletas refugiados e competidores do mesmo país. Além disso, ainda existem desafios que precisam ser abordados, como a distribuição dos destinos dos atletas refugiados, uma vez que a maioria deles se concentra atualmente na Europa, enquanto outros continentes abrigam apenas um pequeno número de imigrantes.

Palavras-chave: migração, imigração, Jogos Olímpicos, estudos olímpicos, refúgio

Introducción

National representation is one of the paradigms of the Olympic Movement. Since the Antwerp Olympic Games in 1920, the entries of athletes have been conducted by National Olympic Committees (Almeida y Rubio, 2020). However, under the flag of the International Olympic Committee, twenty-nine athletes from different parts of the world competed in Tokyo, for the second time, as a non-national delegation. The Refugee Olympic Team (ROT), which had been launched in 2016, flourished in the Olympic games and brought worldwide attention to the issue of persons displaced from their countries of origin.

In 2020, the presence of refugee athletes served not only to include individuals who were prevented from representing their own nations, but also to demonstrate that the International Olympic Movement was not alien to what was happening around the world. According to data from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 2021), more than 82 million people had become refugees or had been displaced from their hometowns or countries of origin in 2021.

The unprecedented presence of a refugee athletes' delegation at the 2016 Olympic Games – with ten athletes in three sports – helped to intensify the academic production on the relationship between sports and migration, as can be seen in the works of Abd Rahim *et ál.* (2018), Waardenburg *et ál.* (2018), and Xavier y Marinho (2020). Furthermore, the even bigger presence of the team in Tokyo – which had 29 competitors in 12 sports – opened the possibility for a greater analysis.

It is crucial to emphasize that the profiles of the athletes within the refugee delegation are not homogeneous. Instead, there is a diversity of people connected to the social issues that permeate the Olympic sports universe. Therefore, this article aims, first, to conduct a qualitative analysis of the athletes' profiles who participated in the refugee team in the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo. Then, a

discussion based on the quantitative data provided by the International Olympic Committee in its media channels and in surveys carried out by the authors will be promoted. When carrying out a study on migration and sports, several variables must be considered, as highlighted by Waardenburg *et ál.* (2018), such as time (when people migrated) and geography (departure countries and places of residence at the time the Olympic Games happened).

Methodology

This is an analytical-descriptive article built on data collected from official sources (reports made available by the IOC on athletes) and information from tertiary sources (news websites). The theoretical framework perspective chosen was multidisciplinary and involved authors who have analyzed migration from sociology, such as Boaventura Sousa Santos (2002), philosophy, such as Zygmunt Bauman (2008), and geography, such as Milton Santos (2000).

It is valuable to highlight that, according to the concepts of Ato and Benavente (2013), when the objective of the research is descriptive, the researcher does not usually raise specific hypotheses to submit to empirical testing and will present results that appropriately describe behaviors or mental processes, either with descriptive statistics or with other more sophisticated analytical techniques (p. 1053).

The table below presents data provided by the IOC and gathers information about the sports, countries of origin, and places of residence of the athletes who were part of the ROT at the Tokyo Olympic Games.

Table 1. Athletes' profiles (IOC)

Name of the athlete	Gender	Sport	Country of origin	Country of residence in 2020	Age
Aker Al Obaidi	Male	Wrestling	Iraq	Austria	21
Sanda Aldass	Female	Judo	Syria	Netherlands	31
Masomah Ali Zada	Female	Cycling	Afghanistan	France	25
Ahmad Alikaj	Male	Judo	Syria	Germany	30
Kimia Alizadeh Zenooin	Female	Taekwondo	Iran	Germany	23
James Nyang Chiengjiek	Male	Athletics	Southern Sudan	Kenya	23
Muna Dahouk	Female	Judo	Syria	Netherlands	25

Name of the athlete	Gender	Sport	Country of origin	Country of residence in 2020	Age
Hamoon Derafshipour	Male	Karate	Iran	Canada	28
Dina Pouryounes Langeroudi	Female	Taekwondo	Iran	Netherlands	29
Jamal Abdelmaji Eisa Mohammed	Male	Athletics	Southern Sudan	Israel	27
Saeid Fazloul	Male	Canoe sprint	Iran	Germany	28
Tachlowini Grabriyesos	Male	Athletics	Eritrea	Israel	23
Dorian Keletela	Male	Athletics	Congo	Portugal	22
Anjelina Nadai Lohalith	Female	Athletics	Southern Sudan	Kenya	26
Paulo Amotun Lokoro	Male	Athletics	Southern Sudan	Kenya	29
Javad Mahjoub	Male	Judo	Iran	Canada	30
Aram Mahmoud	Male	Badminton	Syria	Netherlands	24
Yusra Mardini	Female	Swimming	Syria	Germany	23
Alaa Maso	Male	Swimming	Syria	Germany	21
Popole Misenga	Male	Judo	Congo	Brazil	29
Lokonyen Rose Nathike	Female	Athletics	Southern Sudan	Kenya	28
Wessam Salamana	Male	Boxing	Syria	Germany	35
Abdullah Sediqi	Male	Taekwondo	Afghanistan	Belgium	24
Eldric Sella-Rodriguez	Male	Boxing	Venezuela	Trinidad and Tobago	24
Nigara Shaheen	Female	Judo	Afghanistan	Russia	28
Wael Shueb	Male	Karate	Syria	Germany	33
Luna Solomon	Female	Shooting	Eritrea	Switzerland	27
Cyrille Tchatchet II	Male	Weightlifting	Cameroon	England	25
Ahmad Badreddin Wais	Male	Cycling	Syria	Switzerland	30

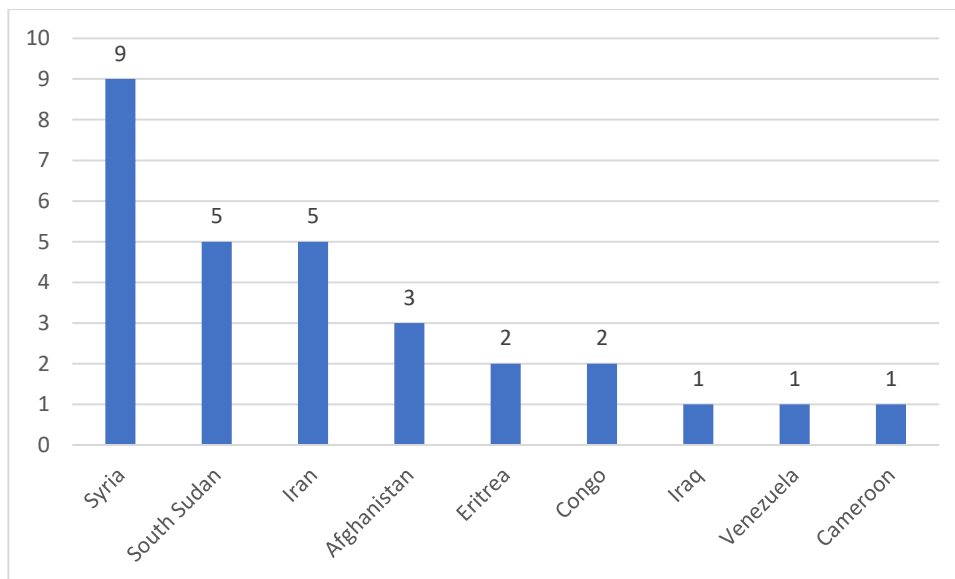
Source: Elaborated by the authors

The Macro View: Analysis of the Refugee Olympic Team

The analysis of migration, particularly in sports, requires special care. As indicated by Almeida (2021), paying attention only to the origin and the final places of residence of a migrant's trajectory can lead to incomplete or hasty conclusions, given the complexity of the subject. A better understanding of the issue is obtained when seeking a broader dimension of the phenomenon by detailing the trajectories and paths migrants have taken. In the case of refugee

athletes, such consideration is even more relevant, bearing in mind that the places where they lived at the time of the Olympic Games were often still “transitory,” since the conditions of refugees are generally precarious and they are constantly faced with different choices: returning to their places of origin, settling in a new country, or starting a new migratory process.

All things considered, the trajectory of the displacements made by the 29 athletes who competed for the ROT in Tokyo is presented next. Graph 1 shows that the country with the highest number of refugees was Syria, with nine competitors, followed by South Sudan and Iran, with five.



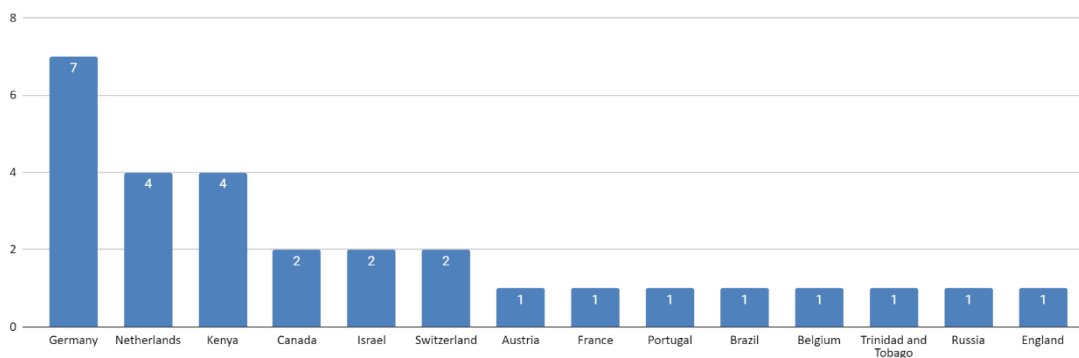
Graph 1. Countries of origin of the Refugee Olympic Team athletes at the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo (IOC)

Source: Elaborated by the authors

The above data was presented by the IOC and confirms what had been already described by the UNHCR (2021): at the end of 2020, Syria was the country with the highest number of displaced people (6.7 million) and was also the one represented by the largest number of athletes in the ROT. The following countries were Venezuela (4 million), Afghanistan (2.6 million), South Sudan (2.2 million) and Myanmar (1.1 million). Venezuela, the second country, had only one representative in the ROT, Iran, which had five athletes in the ROT, was not even included by the UNHCR among the five countries with the highest number of displaced people. At a continental level, it is possible to notice that Asia was the origin of the largest number of refugee athletes (13), led by Syria, followed by Africa (six) and America (one).

Refugee athletes come from nine different countries, but the number of nations that provided them with temporary residence was much higher: 14. It is, once again, worth emphasizing that the athlete's residence place cannot be taken as definitive, since their refugee status does not guarantee them a new nationality. Also, they did not necessarily comply with the legal conditions that would allow them to establish properly in the places where they lived at the time they were called up for the Tokyo Olympic Games.

Germany stands out as the country that had the most athletes living in its territory in the refugee team (seven), followed by the Netherlands and Kenya (four). The chart below shows the details.



Graph 2. Countries where the ROT members lived at the time of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games (IOC)

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Europe is the continent that hosts the highest number of refugee athletes (19), followed by Africa (four) and America (four). Only two athletes lived in Asia, both in Israel. The data on the place where the Olympic refugees lived can be compared with the general data on refugee population provided by the UNHCR (2021). According to the agency, the country with the largest number of refugees in its territory is Turkey, with 3,7 million people, followed by Colombia (1,7 million), Pakistan (1,4 million), Uganda (1,4 million) and, only later, Germany (1,2 million). A cursory look at the ROT can lead to a belief that Germany is the country with the highest number of refugees in its territory, when the country is, in reality, only the fifth.

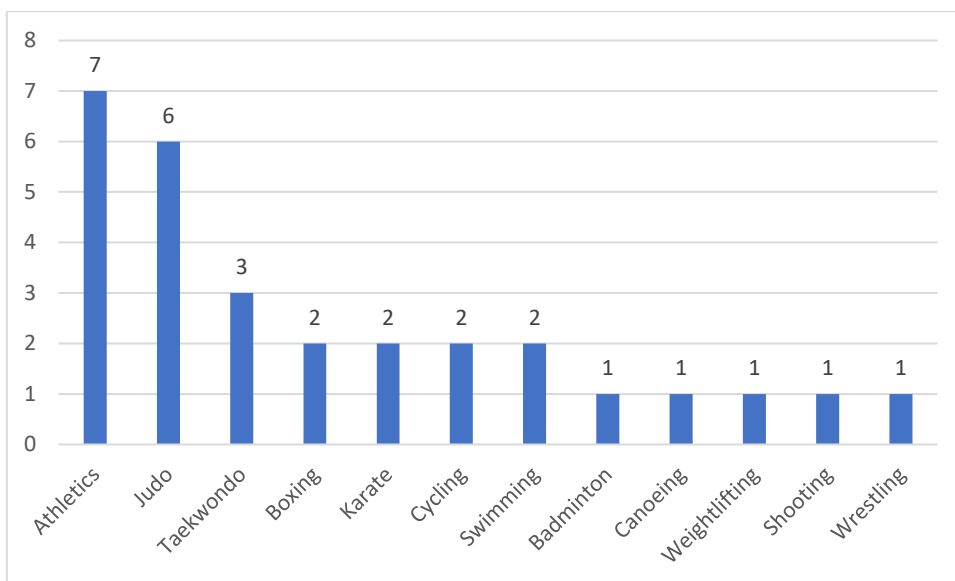
Compared to the size of the local population, the countries with the highest percentages of refugees are Aruba, Lebanon, Curaçao, Jordan, and Turkey, which had no representatives at the ROT. A country whose absence from the UHNCR data deserves attention is Iran. Iran is one of the countries that shelters more

refugees worldwide, with around 800 thousand people. However, it does not have any resident athletes in the country at ROT.

Another relevant fact was the number of refugee athletes living in Africa, who had the same origin and the same country of residence. These four South Sudanese athletes lived in Kakuma, a refugee camp located in the North-western region of Kenya. The camp has existed since the 1990s (Silva, 2016) and shelters more than 100,000 people. James Nyang Chiengjiek, Anjelina Nadai Lohalith, Paulo Amotun Lokoro, and Lokonyen Rose Nathike, the four athletes residing in Kakuma, participated in mid-distance running competitions (800 meters and 1500 meters). Traditionally, the winners in these races are African athletes: in Tokyo, the women's 800-meter competition was won by an American athlete of South Sudanese origin; the men's 800-meter competition had two Kenyans on the podium; the women's 1,500-meter competition was won by a Kenyan athlete and the third place went to an athlete born in Ethiopia and naturalized Dutch; in the men's 1,500-meter contest the silver medalist was an athlete from Kenya.

A fact that is also worth highlighting is that the number of athletes born in South Sudan that competed in the Tokyo Olympic Games representing the ROT was higher than the number of competitors representing South Sudan in the Games. The refugee athletes, who lived in Japan, were five and the national delegation was composed of two athletes. All of them competed in the 1,500-meter athletic events.

Athletics was the sport with the highest number of refugee athletes in Tokyo, with seven in total including the four Kenya-based athletes. Judo was next, with six, then taekwondo, with three. Overall, 12 sports included refugee athletes, as shown in the graph below.



Graph 3. Sports that included EOR athletes in Tokyo (IOC)

Source: Elaborated by the authors

According to IOC (COI, 2021), athletics was also the sport with the highest number of athletes overall in Tokyo (2017 competitors), followed by swimming, soccer, rowing, and judo. The latter was the second sport with the most refugees competing (six out of 393 entries were from the EOR) despite being only fifth in the total number of Olympic athletes. Proportionately, however, karate was the sport with the most registered refugees, with two out of 81 participants, followed by taekwondo (three out of 130 competitors registered for the Olympic Games were from the ROT).

Additionally, in some cases, athletes competed both under the flag of the ROT and their countries of origin. In athletics, in the same event (1,500 meters), South Sudanese, Eritrean and Congolese athletes competed for both ROT and their countries of origin.

The table below indicates sports in which athletes competed for both their countries of origin and ROT.

Table 2. Athletes competing for ROT and their countries of origin (IOC)

Sport	Country	Athletes at ROT	Athletes at National Team
Athletics	South Sudan	5	2
Athletics	Congo	1	1
Athletics	Eritrea	1	9

Sport	Country	Athletes at ROT	Athletes at National Team
Boxing	Venezuela	1	3
Canoe sprint	Iran	1	1
Karate	Iran	1	3
Weightlifting	Cameroon	1	2
Taekwondo	Afghanistan	1	1
Taekwondo	Iran	2	3

Source: Elaborated by the authors

The presence of athletes competing both for their countries of origin and for the ROT is a clear example of how Olympic diplomacy works. Although the international federations – which are responsible for registering athletes in the competitions – recognize the existence of athletes in refugee situations, they do not punish the athletes' countries of origin and allow them to also register competitors under their flags.

The Micro Perspective: An Analysis of Refugee Athletes

The ROT is composed of 19 men and 10 women. Naturally, their profiles are heterogeneous, similarly to the members of the national Olympic delegations, who also have their specificities. Therefore, it is important to describe the athletic careers of ROT members, as similarities and differences provide important information about the relationship between migration and sport.

One important element is the granting of the refugee status and its relationship to practicing a sports. In some cases, an athlete's refugee status is directly linked to their sporting trajectory. Such is the case of cyclist Masomah Ali Zada, who was born in Afghanistan and was given the opportunity to move to France after a French lawyer learned about her and her sister's trajectory as athletes and discovered how difficult it was for them to practice cycling in Afghanistan (Olympics, 2021a). Another example is taekwondo fighter, Hamoon Derafshipour, who left Iran precisely because of the problems raised by being coached by his wife, since women are not allowed to coach men in that country (Olympics, 2021d). Also, even though Iranian canoeist, Saeid Fazloulou, had participated in international events representing his country, he was offered the opportunity to train in Germany, which he decided to accept to later become a refugee in Europe (Olympics, 2021e). It is noteworthy that during the competition

at the Tokyo Olympic Games, Fazloulah had to face both Iranian and German rivals.

The proximity between seeking the refugee status and sporting events is even more evident in two examples from South America. Born in Venezuela, Eldric Sella Rodriguez went to Trinidad and Tobago to participate in a boxing tournament. When he was there, he decided to defect and did not return to his homeland (Olympics, 2021i). In this case, the opportunity to leave the country was directly linked to being an athlete. Something similar happened with judoka Popole Misenga, from Congo. He requested political asylum in Brazil after competing in the World Judo Championship in 2013 (Olympics, 2021g).

One of the great challenges faced by refugees is precisely finding the opportunities to cross the borders of their territory of origin. Both Misenga and Rodriguez used their position as athletes to arrive in a new territory and, from there, ask for refuge from the countries in which they competed. This fact is not unprecedented, and it also happened during the Tokyo Olympics. Athlete Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, who arrived at the country as part of the Belarus delegation, asked for asylum to the authorities of Poland after being threatened with punishment in case she returned to her country. The athlete was taken against her will to the airport because she had publicly criticized the coach and had signed an open letter demanding new elections in the country and the release of political prisoners. The document received two thousand signatures and Tsimanouskaya refused to return to Belarus (DW, 2021)

Another situation that deserves attention is that of the athletes who started training only after leaving their country of birth. They can be considered athlete-refugees, and not refugee-athletes since the refugee condition preceded the practice of sports in their lives. Luna Solomon, born in Eritrea, had never practiced shooting in her native country. She discovered the sport in Switzerland, in the Make a Mark project, maintained by Olympic athlete Niccolo Campriani, who has a history of encouraging refugees to practice sports (Olympics, 2021j). Her experience is similar to Dorian Keletela's, who was born in Congo, but moved to Portugal at age 17. He started practicing athletics in the new country, where he had the opportunity to train at one of the most traditional Portuguese clubs (Oliveira, 2021).

Also, Tachlowini Gabriyesos, born in Eritrea, had to leave his country as a child and moved to Israel in 2012 without the company of his family members. During his provisional stay in the nation, he had his first contact with athletics at 14 years

of age. In 2018 he joined the IOC's support program for refugee athletes (Olympics, 2021f). James Nyang Chiengjiek, Anjelina Nadai Lohalith, Paulo Amotun Lokoro, and Lokonyen Rose Nathike, – the four athletes born in South Sudan, living in Kenya, competing for the refugee team – also had their first contact with the sport after leaving their home country.

It is also possible to observe that the profiles of the athletes in the ROT in the Tokyo Olympic Games are absolutely different. Judoka Nigara Shaheen, for example, was born in Afghanistan, but as a baby, she moved with her family to Pakistan, where she spent her childhood and began training. After a few years, she returned to Afghanistan, where she studied to obtain a degree. Later, she looked for refuge in Russia, where she moved to pursue a graduate degree (Messner, 2021; Person, 2017). Another athlete who had been living as a refugee for many years is runner Lokonyen Rose Nathike. She left South Sudan in 2001, when she was just eight years old. Despite living most of her life abroad, she did not obtain a new citizenship, that fact allowed her to participate in the Olympic Games through the ROT (Olympics, 2021h). Likewise, James Nyang Chiengjiek left South Sudan in 2002 and has lived in Kenya for nearly two decades (Olympics, 2021b).

The situation was quite different for taekwondo athlete, Kimia Alizadeh Zenoorin. She was born in Iran, participated in competitions throughout the country and represented it as an Olympic medalist in the Rio de Janeiro Games in 2016. Four years later, in 2020, Zenoorin fled her home country and said she was “one of the thousands of oppressed women in Iran”. She settled in the Netherlands and later in Germany (Olympics, 2021c). Despite her short time as a refugee, she represented the ROT at the Tokyo Olympic Games. She even became the refugee with the best performance in the competition (fifth place).

Analysis: Dialogues between Migration and Sport

The trajectories of the athletes who made up the ROT is marked by several singularities; they are all as emotionally and dramatically charged as the stories of the members of national teams. Despite representing the same flag, the refugee athletes' stories include individual particularities and minutiae and are also connected between them.

The center of the discussion in this article, however, is based on the Olympic Games core principle: All athletes must be registered by a National Committee, as specified in articles six, 41 and 44 of the Olympic Charter (Committee, 2020).

Garcéz-García (2021) recalls that during the second half of the 20th century and the first half of the 21st century, Europe underwent a major political, economic and social transformation. The emergence of the Olympic Games of the Modern Era was a result of that transformation and reflected it. From its first editions, the dynamic Olympic movement has had to adapt to variable conditions and changing historical contexts and has been able to achieve that thanks to the diplomatic skills of the IOC leaders.

By creating a team that is not managed by a National Committee, the IOC thus broke a paradigm established at the 1915 Olympic Congress in Paris. Talking about such paradigm, Almeida y Rubio (2020) stated that under current conditions, the citizens of a place cannot intend to establish themselves as citizens of the world too because the “world” cannot regulate citizenships. Thus, the expression “citizen of the world” becomes a vow, a promise, a distant possibility. Global actors, then, become ultimately anti-human and anti-citizens because the possibility for a citizen of the world to exist is conditioned by national realities. The citizen is (or is not) only as a citizen of a country (Almeida y Rubio, 2020, p.55).

Without a country to call their own, regardless of their political or social conditions, refugee athletes end up embracing a new flag and making up the refugee team. This new team ends up becoming an “imagined” group, or a community of feeling, as defined by B. S. Santos (2002). The author affirms that for some individuals, the State has become an obsolete entity on the way to extinction, whose capacity to organize and regulate social life is very fragile. For others, the State continues to be the central political institution, not only because the erosion of sovereignty is very selective, as, above all, because the very institutionality of globalization – from multilateral financial agencies to the deregulation of the economy – is created by national States (p. 55).

However, the maximum entity that represents the institutionalization process of the Olympic Games is the IOC and it has assumed a vanguard position: Even though there are athletes who do not fit the model of national representatives, they should not be deprived of participating in the Olympic Games given their sporting technical qualities. Such position demonstrates the IOC’s diplomatic approach (Almeida y Rubio, 2018). The IOC recognizes the issues some athletes have when trying to represent countries such as South Sudan or Syria and opens the possibility for them to participate in the Olympic Games for the refugee team. At the same time, the organization does not prohibit other athletes who have a

better relationship with the organizing entities from their countries of origin, which will allow them to also compete for their national flags.

At this point, we can call upon the thinking of the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2008) to understand that, even though some athletes were born in the same place, the construction of their identities takes place differently. Some of them remain faithful to their places of origin and others search for refuge because they do not feel safe in the same place. According to the author, instead of talking about identities, inherited or acquired, it would be closer to the reality of the globalized world to talk about identification, an activity that never ends and is always incomplete, in which all of us, by necessity or choice, are engaged. (Bauman, 2008, p. 193)

It is precisely this process of identity construction, identification and engagement, which has enabled cases such as the fighter Kimia Alizadeh Zenooin, or the canoeist Saeid Fazloula to become visible. In 2016, they represented Iran, but five years later they had gone through a process of change in their personal lives that made them leave the country. However, being present at sporting events under the flag of a country in which they no longer lived and left for private reasons would be something contradictory in a world in which identities are fluid and can be shaped.

Conclusions

The IOC has demonstrated it is aware of its role by creating a refugee athletes Olympic team. It has also become an agent of sports administration, an entity that has vast representation and is attentive to the facts and conditions of the global community. Creating and supporting the ROT meets one of the principles in the 20+20 Olympic Agenda, by allowing athletes under difficult circumstances not to be deprived of participating in the Olympic Games due to issues unrelated to the sporting sphere.

The importance of the Olympic Refugee Team and its political role is a watershed in the Olympic movement, based on a century on national representations. However, this article evidences that, far beyond an analysis of the number of athletes who formed the group or their sporting results, it is necessary to focus on the legacy left by them, which is making the worldwide social issue of migration the center of the attention and putting it in the agenda of the Olympic movement. Such shift in the analysis represents a vast challenge for students or researchers of

the Olympic movement and sports, since it includes the need for dialogue with other areas of knowledge, such as social sciences and philosophy. In this article, such dialogue is sought through authors such as Anderson (2008), Bauman (2008), Santos (2000) and Santos (2002).

The diplomatic skills demonstrated by members of the IOC, which has enabled the presence of athletes in the refugee team and also allowed them to represent their countries of origin in the Games also must be highlighted. They have proven that the body responsible for the Olympic Games has negotiation skills no other international entities or institutions have.

The fact that the IOC does not exclude the countries of origin of the refugee athletes evidences the diplomatic position of the entity and of the international federations, especially of those that allow, simultaneously, athletes of the same origin participating in the Games under two different flags, the ROT one and the one of their country of origin.

However, it should be noted that building a team with refugee athletes poses serious challenges for the IOC. One of them refers to the actual management of the ROT. It is necessary to define who will be responsible for assembling and coordinating the team and the qualification process for the Olympic Games, given that, in general, the participants of collective sports get selected by continental competitions.

Another point that deserves being mentioned is related to the place where refugees live when they get chosen to be a part of the ROT. The number of refugee athletes in the ROT does not necessarily follow the same population distribution dynamics as the rest of the countries. Most of the refugee athletes who participated in Tokyo lived in Europe at the times of the Olympics, rather than in Asia or South America. The difference in the condition of refugee athletes living in different continents should be the subject of analysis by the IOC.

Even when referring to a country's national team, there are regional discrepancies among the athletes that makes the team not to be a homogeneous group. Those teams are often considered as imagined communities (Anderson, 2008). Such definition is perhaps the closest to what the Refugee Olympic Team is nowadays: It is spread across different parts of the world and its members have different origins and particular histories. Nevertheless, refugees make connections among themselves and turn into a community that deserves to occupy spaces where they can express not only their struggles and dramas but also their talents. One of those spaces is the Olympic Games.

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