

Sport and its impacts

Introduction

Whether it's passion for one, a love for many or an indifference to most, sport plays a significant role in today's society. With events such as the Olympics, Paralympics, Euros, and the T20 Men's and Women's World Cups, 2024 has been a remarkable year for a wide range of sport.

This resource explores the impact of sport on various aspects of modern society, with a particular focus on less-frequent events like the Olympics.

Sport and society

The active participation in sport offers a wealth of health and social benefits including improving self-esteem and confidence. On a wider scale, sport can be a major influence in social solidarity and representation.

Football (or soccer) is the largest globally viewed sport in the world. 1.5 billion people watched the Men's Football World Cup Final in 2022 ¹ alone. Sport provides an opportunity for countries, communities, and individuals to come together in shared celebration—or commiseration—of their teams. This unity through sport can greatly impact national pride and foster a strong sense of community. Therefore, the potential for social cohesion through sport is extensive.

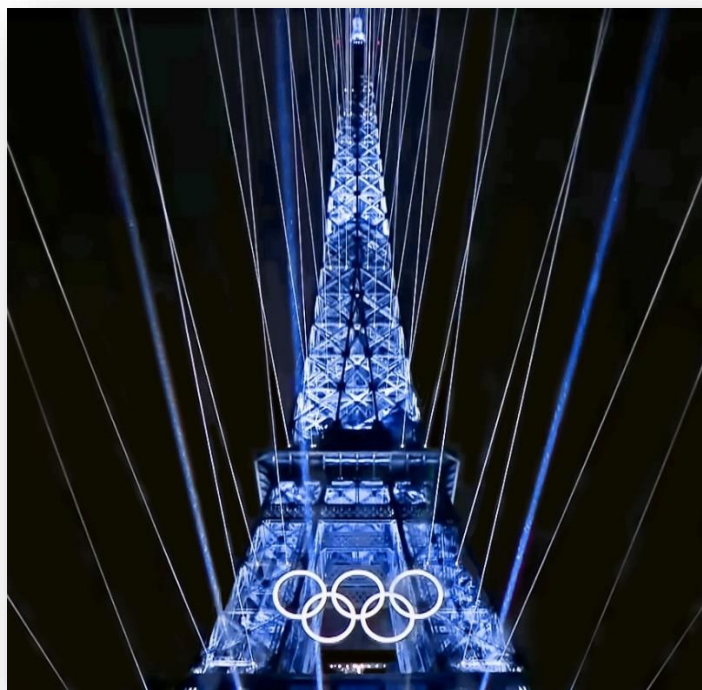


Figure 1: Eiffel Tower lit up in celebration at the end of the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games, Paris 2024 © Ron Cogswell Flickr

¹ [Inside FIFA](#)



Sport, the economy and legacy

Sport is a major global industry, generating over \$403 billion of revenue in 2022². In the same year, a report from the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, revealed that it contributed to just over £18 billion to the UK Economy, accounting for 0.8% of the nation's total economic activity³. In addition, the sector supports over 550,000 jobs in the UK. Much of the money is generated through sponsorship and membership however, merchandise sales and media subscriptions also contribute to the generated income.

Given these figures, it seems logical to assume that hosting large-scale sporting events would be economically beneficial for any nation. However, this is not always the case, particularly in the short term. Many large sporting events run at an initial financial loss to the host nation, including events such as the Olympics and the Football World Cup. This is largely due to the substantial investment required for infrastructure and sporting venues. As a result, events like the Commonwealth Games are increasingly under threat, as many nations do not consider themselves to be in a position to fund the significant upfront costs.

However, a shift towards more economically sustainable events could be approaching. According to the report from the [Conversation](#) in July 2024, by utilising existing infrastructure, building temporary venues and changing the bidding process, the recent Olympics in Paris might in fact turn a profit. The same approach is proposed for the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles. If the positive correlation of profit or breaking even continues, it could reengage more nations in putting their cities forward in the future.

The long-term economic benefits of hosting can also be significant. Continued tourism to the area and the ongoing use of the sporting facilities can bring financial gain. Although this is harder to attribute to the event itself, the added income can contribute to a positive multiplier effect in the area. For example, Barcelona's Anella Olímpica (Olympic Ring), the site of the 1992 Olympic Games, continues to be used for athletics, football tournaments, concerts, and community activities over 30 years later. This sustained use honours the legacy of the original construction.

² [Statista: Sports industry revenue worldwide.](#)

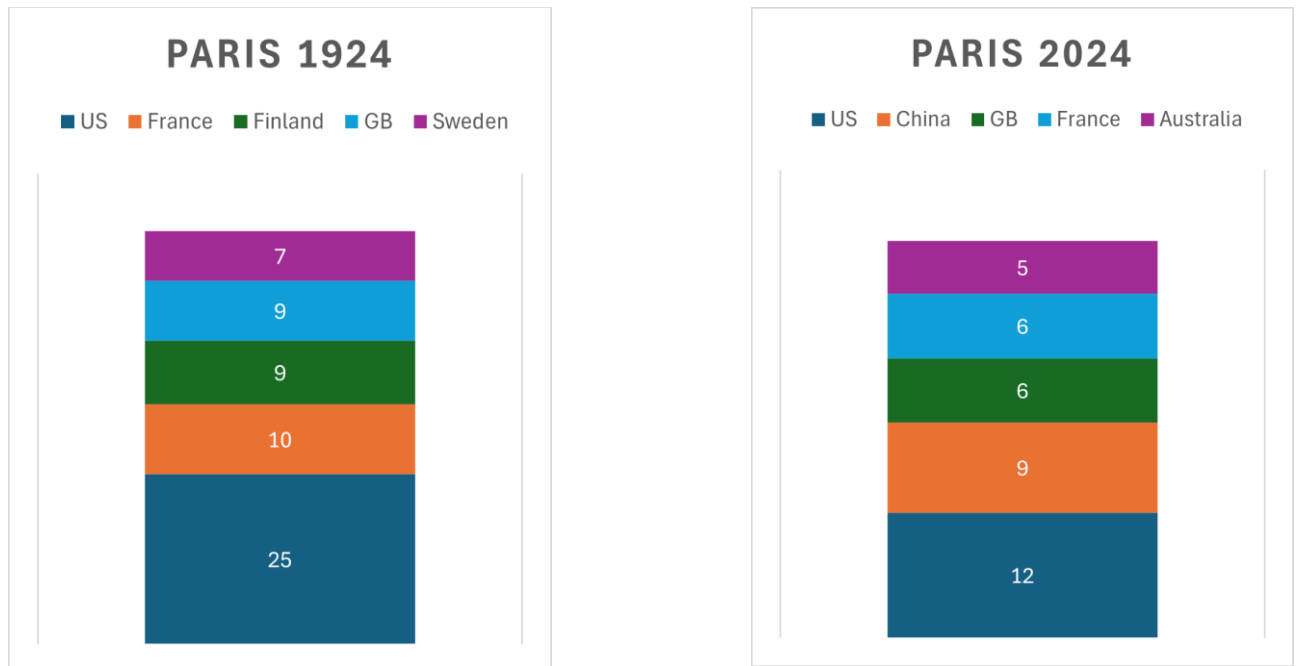
³ [Houst of Lords Library: Contribution of sport to society and the economy, 13th May 2024](#)



Figure 3. Anella Olímpica, Barcelona © Kris Arnold Flickr

Although the initial outlay of sporting events can be costly, the legacy it leaves can be one which benefits the community for decades through the repeated use of the facilities and improved infrastructure. If constructed with sustainability at the forefront, the event could also be profitable.

Sport and politics



Figures 4 and 5: Percentage of total medal count for the top five highest total medals won
SOURCE: [Olympics.com](https://olympics.com) © RGS

Looking at the data over the past 100 years; the countries that win the most Olympic medals have remained relatively consistent. While there have been fluctuations, the United States has consistently ranked in the top two at almost every Summer Olympic Games, except for two – one of which was due to the U.S. boycott.

The medal table subtly reflects the influence of 'soft' economic power. Those countries who have the financial resources to invest in training centres, specialist coaching and medical teams tend to dominate the overall medal counts. Similarly, the location of the Games over the last century have predominantly been held in high-income countries mainly due, in part, the bidding process being an assurance that the hosting country can pay for the Games. As a result, only wealthier nations are likely to bid, leaving low-income countries with fewer opportunities to host.

This economic dynamic has led to a reliance on more developed nations to repeatedly host the Games. For instance, Los Angeles in 2028 will become the third city, after Paris and London, to have hosted the Games three times in the past century.

While the Olympics are often celebrated as a symbol of global unity and cohesion, they have not been immune to political implications. For example, the 1980 Moscow Olympics was boycotted by the US and 60 other countries in protest over the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The following Games were held in Los Angeles where the USSR did not compete due to fear of retribution from their American hosts. Indeed, Russia (or the Soviet Union) has been one of the biggest countries who are sanctioned from attending the Games due to their military hard power involvement meaning that their athletes, if they choose to compete, do so under a banner not affiliated with their country. This highlights the intersection of politics and sport.

Analysing the total medal table changes from 1924 to 2024 provides a snapshot of shifting global power dynamics. During the Cold War, the U.S. and USSR vied for dominance at the top of the table – a symbol of bi-polar powers. More recently, China has risen into the top five, indicating the emergence of other powers and a shift towards a possible multipolar world.



Further Reading

[Geography, Identity and Football, David Goldblatt, RGS](#)

[The World Cup in Qatar: what is the Kafala system? RGS](#)

[London 2012, RGS](#)

[Ranking the medal table by gold, total, or most medals per capita – who actually won at the Olympics?, The Guardian 12th August 2024](#)