



Title: What it takes to be an athlete.

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What it takes to be an athlete

A central platform of sociological thinking, articulated most famously by C. Wright Mills, is making the familiar strange; to purposefully take a different perspective on conventional wisdom. To do so requires thinking critically about not only what people do, but also how and why they do it. Such processes enable new or fresh insight. Said differently, a successful sociologist will be able to take their object of focus and see that which seems natural or obvious, is neither of those things.

In this regard, the Winter Olympics provide a head start in critical thinking because, for most people, the events are unfamiliar. Indeed, even for many ardent sport fans, the Winter Games seem 'strange'. As such, the Winter Olympics provide an entry-point for reconsidering many of the assumptions held dear of competitive sport generally and the place and purpose of hosting of large-scale sporting events specifically (Clift & Manley, 2016).

For many, there is still a romantic notion of the training involved in being an elite athlete; that champions are produced through the singular focus, drive, sacrifice, and dedication of individuals. Here I am reminded of Muhammad Ali for whom 'the fight is won or lost far away from witnesses – behind the lines, in the gym, and out there on the road, long before I dance under those lights.' In the Winter Olympics the sheer equipment intensity of the events starts to show just how much high-performance sport requires support far, far beyond the individual athlete.

To blend boxing and the Winter Olympics we can think of the juxtaposition in the film *Rocky IV* with the hi-tech, scientific 'new school' approach of Ivan Drago versus the 'old school' of Rocky. Virtually all Winter Olympics events are totally reliant on very specialised and very expensive equipment. In the public imagination, conventional wisdom is that champions are made primarily through sacrifice and deep drive the combined overcome even the biggest obstacles. This is the fundamental appeal of the Rocky films. The reality of elite sport, however, is different. Modern elite sport is a data intensive integration of people and things (Kerr, 2016). The Winter Olympics bring into sharper relief that modern high-performance athletes are, like Ivan Drago, cyborgs (Haraway, 1990): an intimate and essential connection between humans and machines forged in the furnace of what Jean-Marie Brohm described as 'scientifically-endorsed legalised torture'.

The cyborg nature of the Winter Olympics, then, demonstrates to me that elite sport is not as accessible as we wish it to be because of the intense specialisation of athletic training, the network of support staff around an athlete, and the equipment required, not only in competition but also training. It is impossible to imagine the Winter Olympics having an equivalent remotely close to Abebe Bikila winning the Olympic marathon barefoot. For one, it is impossible to ski, slide, board, or skate without equipment. Secondly, access to any of these sports is not only cost prohibitive but also geographically exclusive. The Winter Olympics are undoubtedly exciting and captivating. Ultimately, for me, the Winter Olympiad is a bunch of rich cyborgs playing in the snow.

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