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# How sports get chosen for the Olympics

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Rugby sevens: on the Olympic programme in Rio. Mai Groves/www.shutterstock.com

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A spokesperson for the ancient sport of jousting recently made a case for its inclusion in the Olympic Games based on the technical skills and physical prowess required to be successful. She suggested these were as high or higher than many sports already included in the programme. If only it was that simple.

Inclusion in the Olympic programme is a fast-track to popularity with increased participation, television exposure, more sponsors and increased income. So it is hardly surprising that sports are keen to get in on the action. In Rio, golf and rugby sevens will be the new sports on the block.

The choice of which sports take part in the Olympics is up to the 90 members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) who make the decision on the basis of proposals from each games' local organising committee, via the Olympic Programme Commission.

### The criteria

These proposals are evaluated against five categories, split into 35 criteria:

1. Olympic proposal: history of the sport, whether it has been included in the programme before, the number of affiliated national federations and the level of participation in world or continental championships.

2. Institutional matters: financial status of the sport, its governance, gender equity and strategic planning.
3. Value added to the Olympic movement: the sport's image and whether it represents Olympic values.
4. Popularity: how many spectators it will draw, sponsorship, media interest and whether the best athletes will compete at the Olympics.
5. Business model: the income the sport generates, the costs of staging the sport and its financial status.

All fairly straightforward – but there are a number of things that make some of these categories much more important than others. For example, in terms of value added to the Olympic movement, the IOC is increasingly emphasising the importance of sports with youth appeal, leading to the inclusion of a number of “youth sports” in the Tokyo 2020 programme. The remit of the Olympic Programme Commission requires it to include sports that keep the Olympic Games relevant to young people. This is despite some included sports, such as skateboarding and sport climbing, scoring low in categories one, two and five.

## Popularity and cash

And then there is the issue of popularity. This could be interpreted as a requirement for the sport to be played across the globe and by both men and women. Yet, when the criteria included in this category are considered, popularity comes down to watching rather than taking part – and the commercial value of the sport.

There is an emphasis on spectators, media interest, television rights and sponsors, which explains why we will see rugby sevens and golf in Rio and not squash – despite a global campaign to get it included. Rugby sevens has a strong commercial case based on popularity, sponsorship and advertising. Squash has had little to offer in the way of popularity when compared to golf, as it is of considerably less interest to spectators, sponsors and the media. The sport itself has limited popular following – can you name the current squash world champion? (For men, it's France's Grégory Gaultier and for women, Egyptian Nour El Sherbini.)

## Never safe

It's also not a permanent process. The Olympic Programme has about 25 core sports, such as basketball, hockey and athletics. Other sports are subject to regular review with those that are included at the promotion of the local organising committee of a particular games in a particular year (such as London or Rio) susceptible to removal. For example, softball and baseball were included until 2008 and then were dropped for London and Rio. They are to be included in the Tokyo Games as one of the sports chosen by Tokyo's organising committee.

For golf, it is the first time the sport has been played at the games since 1904. But who knows what will happen to golf after Tokyo 2020: from the number of top male golfers who won't be attending the games citing fears over the Zika virus, it's clear many do not feel that the Olympic Games is the

pinnacle of their sport. (Though in the women's game, nine of the world's top ten will be competing in Rio.)



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Some sports are spending a huge amount of resources to be considered as potential additions to the Olympic programme. Lobbying for inclusion is done by each sport's international federation. IOC governance and ethical policies mean that they can't directly approach the 90 IOC members, who make the final vote; so large delegations from the sport visit the five continental general assemblies, where representatives of the sport meet annually. Their lobbyists pitch to each general assembly and also meet individually with delegates and host lavish social receptions.

Ultimately, however, it's the IOC members, not the continental general assembly members, who get to choose if a sport makes it to the programme or not. All the work that sports do in putting together a proposal and lobbying at continental meetings cannot guarantee a positive outcome, as they can't directly lobby IOC members.

Rugby and squash are perfect examples of the vagaries of the selection system. Rugby, a team sport which increases the number of athletes at the games significantly and is only played seriously in ten

nations, was always going to make it onto the programme as it was one of the sports of Jacque Rogge, the outgoing IOC president.

And as for squash, well it's a puzzle. It should be in as it is the sport of Prince Tunku Imran, the IOC member from Malaysia, and it meets all of the criteria for selection. It was derailed when the decision for Rio was made in 2009 by the popularity and income generation potential of golf, but continues to be unpopular with IOC members who recently rejected another bid for inclusion in the 2020 games. They chose to support sports which meet very few of the criteria such as sport climbing and skateboarding.

Squash may make it in the future. Jousting, however, has no chance.

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