John Gleaves

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**SPEAKERS**

John Gleaves, John Torpey

**John Torpey** 00:05

There's been a good deal of controversy about the upcoming Tokyo Olympic Games and whether it is safe to hold them despite the risks presented by the coronavirus. If it is unsafe to hold them, why are they going forward?

**John Torpey** 00:19

Welcome to International Horizons a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**John Torpey** 00:41

Today we discuss the upcoming Tokyo Olympic games with John Gleaves, professor of kinesiology and co-director of the Center for Socio Cultural Sport and Olympic Research at California State University-Fullerton, which I've always known as CalState Fullerton, but either way, it's the same place. He's also associate editor of the Journal of Olympic Studies. And his research focuses on the cultural, social, historical, and ethical dimensions of international sport. Thanks so much for taking the time to be with us today, John Gleaves.

**John Gleaves** 01:20

My pleasure.

**John Torpey** 01:22

Great to have you. So let's launch right in. Japan has been a difficult and complicated case with regard to its handling of the coronavirus. And this is obviously raised lots of questions about whether it's feasible and safe to be running the Olympic Games in Tokyo, which have already been postponed for a year. How were the conditions for the Olympics, as far as you're concerned in terms of the virus? And can the games be held safely?

**John Gleaves** 01:57

Well, let me of course preface I'm not a medical expert. So I'm going off of the research that I've done looking at public health. There's two real important components here to the question about can the games be held safely and what's happening in Japan. First there's the issue of the virus on the ground in Japan. Japan's had a slower than expected rollout of their vaccine rates and that's created a lot of anxiety among the public about this becoming a super spreader event.

**John Gleaves** 02:29

But we know the Olympic Games is an international sporting event; we have athletes from every continent coming together. So the issue for the coronavirus in the Olympic Games is going to be inherently what's the coronavirus doing globally. Because even if Japan is having its own issues, what's happening in Uganda is just as relevant as what's happening in the United States, because we will have athletes from around the world coming into the Olympic Village competing together in these events.

**John Gleaves** 03:03

So for that reason, a lot of the current concerns around the Delta variation of the coronavirus are as relevant for the Olympic Games as they are for any other public health issue that we see right now. So there's very big concerns.

**John Gleaves** 03:18

Now, there has been partnerships with making vaccinations available to athletes globally. But that's not going to ensure that we have 100% vaccination among every single person in the Olympic village and the journalists. So yeah, there's quite a bit of complication, both what's happening in Japan itself, but then also with the international Olympic athletes as they come into the Olympic Village. So these are going to be two competing issues, if you will.

**John Torpey** 03:56

So, there's a lot of talk about, you know, the role of money in an event this size, and in the construction of the stadia and other facilities that are necessary to house and accommodate all these people. Maybe you could talk a little bit about how you think the role of money is playing out in this particular Olympic Games? Because a lot of people, I think, think that's really driving things and it's even at the cost of putting athletes and other people at risk.

**John Gleaves** 04:29

Yeah, money is huge. And there's several dimensions to which the financial implications are probably weighing in on the decisions that are being made. Tokyo as an organizer has an estimated $10 million budget, sorry, $10 billion budget has been spent on organizing the games themselves that they need to recoup by hosting it.

**John Gleaves** 04:56

Now, there's the possibility of insurance if the games were canceled to mitigate some of those costs, and IOC, mitigating some of those costs. The IOC also has insurance if they're not able to hold the games. But even if insurers were to, for example, financially make both parties whole, there's the knock-on effect. And there's actually a great article by the leading sports economist in the world, Andrew Zimbalist, that we published in the Journal of Olympic Studies, looking at not just the immediate financial implications of hosting or not hosting the game, but the future effects. So the changes on insurance premiums going forward will make it very expensive for both the host cities and the IOC to insure the games.

**John Gleaves** 05:45

There's also the effect on the relationships with the sponsors. Now, the Olympics has developed the Olympic partnership sponsorship program, which is where we see Johnson and Johnson, or major companies like McDonald's, that are year-round sponsors of the Olympics. And this is a very elite level, you know, the diamond level sponsorship. Now, these sponsors have spent a lot of money on sponsorship, if the games were not to go forward, it creates a little bit of tear in that relationship and the IOC is certainly going to be very worried about, going forward, the messaging that it sends to its sponsors about this level of participation if we can't always guarantee an Olympic Games.

**John Gleaves** 06:38

And from the IOC's perspective, it's not just about what if there's a future pandemic, but it's all of the other ways that the Olympic Games can be interrupted: whether it's a terrorist attack; whether it's a climate related weather event; whether it's an earthquake. These kinds of concerns the IOC is very mindful of, when it comes to keeping its relationship with its sponsors, and reputation of "we can always deliver the games". With the exception of World War One and World War Two, the Olympic Games has always been held. This is the first time it's been delayed by a year. But it's very important to the IOC that it can continue that level of reliability, if it's going to keep asking its top sponsors to stay partners with the Olympic brand. So yeah, basically, money is so very important.

**John Torpey** 07:32

Right. So how are the athletes feeling about this? I mean, just as you say, the postponement by one year is itself unique. But yeah, these athletes prepare for a particular date. And this is only only comes around every four years and they spend a lot of their lives getting ready for this event. And you know, to cancel it to postpone it is got to be a big problem for them. On the other hand, they got to be worried about the risks that they're taking by going. So can you give us a sense of how the athletes are dealing with the situation?

**John Gleaves** 08:12

Yeah, it seems by and large, the vast majority of athletes are very eager to see these Olympic Games go forward, with the exception of a few areas where the visibility and profit are larger outside of the Olympic Games, for example, professional basketball, professional tennis. For most of the athletes outside of those sports, they want the games to happen, they need the games to happen. And they probably don't have another shot at a second games. Their windows where they're at their peak are very small, and even if it's waiting three years, since you've already delayed it a year, the likelihood that some of these athletes are going to be in their competitive prime is lower.

**John Gleaves** 08:59

So for the athletes right now, that would be punching a ticket to Tokyo to compete, they want to go and compete. There are some athletes that have expressed ambivalence or not wanting to compete, but most of them are, again, in professional soccer, professional basketball, professional tennis, where they have more revenue, more fame generated by the other aspects of their sport.

**John Gleaves** 09:01

Now, there are athletes that have expressed a lot of concern around some of the protocols that they're going to have to be followed. And there's certainly a lot of anxiety around, you know, for example, "what if I test positive the day before my event, but I've already been vaccinated, I don't have any symptoms". I mean, and these are going to be issues that may be very interesting to play out. But I think from an athlete's standpoint, you see a lot of willingness to want the games to go forward.

**John Gleaves** 09:55

That's in stark contrast to where the Japanese public is at the moment. I saw a recent survey that over 80% of the Japanese population do not want to be hosting the games. So these are the citizens that are putting out the money to have the games be hosted in Tokyo not wanting them to be there, because of the concerns that the Olympics is going to have on their community. In a lot of ways, the Olympics is like that circus that comes to town and then leaves, but if you live there, that's still your town. And so if the Olympics come in, the virus takes off. Well, for the citizens in Tokyo and the broader community in Japan, there's a lot of concern that the circus is going to leave something behind that is not desirable. So for as much as the athletes want the games to go forward, there's there's a lot of unease among the the Japanese citizens about hosting the games at the moment.

**John Torpey** 10:52

So we talked a little bit before we started about the political dimensions of the Olympic Games, and maybe, obviously, this plays together with the questions of coronavirus risk, but also the financial, the monetary, economic kinds of investments that have been made and the consequences of holding the games. I lived in Vancouver until 2005 and sold a house, the value of which was apparently much inflated by an Olympic games that was happening, I think, now I've forgotten...

**John Gleaves** 11:34

Yep, the 2010 Vancouver games.

**John Torpey** 11:36

...years down the road. So obviously, this is not just an athletic event; there's a lot more going on. And I wonder if you could sort of comment on, perhaps, particularly the political dimensions of all this.

**John Gleaves** 11:51

Yes, the Olympic Games is a magnifying glass into what's happening in international politics, but also what's happening in national politics around the world. The Olympics is always revealing in the way it highlights or magnifies what's happening internationally, but also what's happening in athletes' home countries. If we can think back to the last Winter Olympics with Korea and North Korea, we saw a lot of the inter-Korean politics playing out in that Olympic Games.

**John Gleaves** 12:33

We're going to see the same way the coronavirus, magnified the cracks in our societies and the cracks in our public health, we're going to see the ways in which the coronavirus is going to magnify the difference in political resources that different countries have. But we're also --to sort of change gears-- we're going to see the issues around human rights, civil rights coming to the fore. In the last year, we've seen the Black Lives Matter protests and there are going to be a lot of athletes who will be using their platform for political statements in ways that likely we haven't seen since 1968.

**John Gleaves** 13:22

I mean, the closest example that we can think back to is the famous Black Power salute with Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the '68 Olympics. So there's going to be elements of the politics with regarding coronavirus, but it's all of these other things that have been taking up the media in the last year: whether it's LGBTQ rights; whether it's civil rights for athletes of color; whether it's economic disparity, these are going to be coming through and so you're going to be seeing athletes. And athletes are very creative and how they decide to make the Olympics political, but no doubt we're going to see these elements coming to the fore.

**John Gleaves** 13:37

But from an international perspective, we're going to see athletes from other countries making protests about causes that we might be largely unaware of. I would not be surprised to see statements about what's happening to Uighur populations in China coming to the fore especially because Beijing is looking to host the Winter Olympics in 2022. So many of the international issues, many of the human rights issues around the world, I would not be surprised to see athletes making political statements in support or solidarity with important causes that may be local for them, but they use the stage to make international statements or to raise awareness.

**John Torpey** 14:52

Right so you raise as a point of comparison the 1968 Olympics' Tommie Smith and John Carlos, which I remember watching as a confused nine-year-old kid. And so it sounds like it really is the case that this is quite new in maybe an international sport, but certainly, I think in the United States in sports. So maybe you could talk about a little bit about what's new? Why is this happening now? And who likes it? And who does it turn off? I mean, I think there are some people who really just kind of don't want sport politics in their sports. So maybe you can say a little bit about why this is happening now and how people are reacting to it.

**John Gleaves** 15:44

Yeah, I think I would actually probably disagree a little bit on it being new. And I would, I would actually go the other direction and argue that we have a far longer history of the Olympic Games in particular being a source of political protests. So I made the comparison with with 1968, specifically regarding race and black rights. But if we look back again throughout the Olympic Games, we've seen athletes making political statement about national identity. We've seen one of the more famous issues came up in 1936 with the Olympic Games being held in Nazi Germany. And the question of whether or not countries would lower their flag as they would pass the head of state and the question of, will we dip the flag in front of Hitler.

**John Gleaves** 16:44

Many of these kinds of political issues have come up over the years in different ways. Soviet satellite states opposing the USSR during the Cold War, one of the most famous waterpolo matches involving Hungary and the Soviet Union. They talk about the water turning red because it basically became a proxy war for the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

**John Gleaves** 17:13

So I think what we've seen is that athletes cannot help but bring with them the political baggage that they have in their home life, and then finding that platform to express themselves. Now, there's been other ways that this has come out through history, and the International Olympic Committee does not like athletes using the games for political protests. And it finds itself in a very difficult situation, because on the one hand, part of the Olympic brand is that it is this force for human rights; it is this uplifting ennobling spirit that sees a quality in the human condition. It just doesn't want athletes reminding people about it when they're on the medal stand.

**John Gleaves** 18:06

And it's a, some might say, a fine balance, others might say a hypocritical situation where they want to be on the right side of politics, they just don't want to be taking any stands. So, this has put the IOC in a very difficult position. I can tell you that it's highly likely the IOC has issued very specific instructions to all of the different National Olympic Committees, such as the United States Olympic Committee, about what it will allow and what it will not allow in terms of athletes and protest.

**John Gleaves** 18:44

So I wouldn't be surprised if it allows athletes to, for example, wear something that might show support for LGBTQ like a rainbow emblem. But if it becomes an overt statement, on the medal stand, for example. Or if it becomes something that interrupts the performances, you will see athletes like what happened to Smith and Carlos removed from the Olympic Games. It'll be very interesting these questions around, for example, whether athletes will take a knee during anthems. I wouldn't be surprised if they allowed an athletes to take knees at the start of a match. But if athletes were to say, take a knee on the medal stand, it might be a different reaction. So I wouldn't be surprised if there are communiques going around with the different National Olympic Committees to sort of tell athletes, "Here's where you're allowed to push the boundary. But here's where we're going to draw the line in terms of these political protests."

**John Torpey** 19:49

So this gets at a certain issue that may be a particularly American concern, and that has to do with this question of the amateur status of the athletes. And there's just been a decision --and I guess there's another one coming-- around the freedom of, you know, college football players, basketball players to essentially commercialize their image like name, image and likeness.

**John Torpey** 20:16

And this seems like it's going to open the door and Brett Kavanaugh's opinion, dissent or concurring opinion, basically said, "these people are not paid market value for their work." And so you get the sense that the Supreme Court really wants to open the door to these athletes who do bring in enormous amounts of money to lots of universities in the US to sort of make them into professionals, in effect. But that would presumably, I mean, it may not matter in football, but undermine their amateur status for purposes of the Olympics. So maybe you could talk a little bit about the developments in American, in the status of American --whatever, semi-pro athletes, amateur athletes-- and how this affects the Olympic Games. Because I would guess, in the end, not very many countries in the world actually have professional sports of any real significance; that it's primarily a problem or an issue of the United States and a number of European countries, but not much beyond that.

**John Gleaves** 21:27

So, the Olympic Games has not required amateur status since 1988. And by 1992, it had been completely removed the requirement to be that old Victorian ideal of it as an unpaid advocate for their sport. So what has happened with the Olympic Games is that they'll allow athletes to be paid. So LeBron can be an Olympian, if LeBron wants. Serena Williams can go to the Olympics with her million dollar Nike endorsement.

**John Gleaves** 22:04

But the International Olympic Committee has put very strict regards around the commercialism, so what brands or the size of the logo. So if you'll notice, actually, in the Olympics, they limit the size of the logos, and they don't allow any sort of advertisement on a player's uniform, and the logos are actually smaller than you might typically see at other times. So, the Nike swoosh might be a little bit smaller, the Adidas emblem a little bit smaller, and you won't see a Visa splashed across the front of the US jerseys. You won't see Coca-Cola on this on the arm patch of of the basketball team or the soccer team.

**John Gleaves** 22:46

So they really tried to limit the commercial side of it, while, a lot saying to the athletes, such as we don't care what you're making outside of the Olympics but when you come here, just come here to play. What were the financial arrangement that you're, you know, whether a gold medal is going to get you another million dollars from Chevy, we're not going to worry about that.

**John Gleaves** 23:07

I wouldn't be surprised if the NCAA doesn't take a page out of the Olympic Games, and how the Olympic Games unwound its amateur policies while still retaining some of its core values. And I think that's been the secret sauce in the Olympic brand. It's that, well, yes, it's about great sport. There's the heartwarming side of things. There's the idea that athletes are there for the love of the game, not to promote their corporate sponsors. That it's not like a professional sporting event where you've got billboards, and flashing lights, and these kinds of commercial endeavors.

**John Gleaves** 23:45

And I think that I could see the NCAA following along with what the IOC has said, which is to say "what you do outside of the student athlete arrangement is not our concern. But when you're here, you're wearing our uniform; You're behaving in this way; Here's the size of the Nike swoosh you can have on your running shoes." You wouldn't see some of these kinds of policies emerge as the NCAA tries to figure out, how do we stay true to our idea that we're somehow a mission driven enterprise about supporting athletes while allowing for athletes to capitalize on names, images and likenesses.

**John Torpey** 24:27

Interesting. Obviously, I've got forgotten about the dream team that played in Barcelona with Michael Jordan's image plastered across the six storey building, when he was arguably the most famous person on the planet. So in any case, what should viewers, fans be looking for and watching and who should they be watching and looking out for? And I'm sort of curious about a couple of sports in particular, that I have a more than a passing interest in, namely ultimate frisbee and surfing. So surfing I think is now for the first time going to be part of this competition. Is that right?

**John Gleaves** 25:11

Yes. And it's really interesting; you raised several questions. Is the changing of the Olympic program to include these new sports? And you know, with the inclusion of sports like surfing or competitive rock climbing, we're seeing what's been sort of a growing trend --and this goes back to the the influence of financial revenue on the International Olympic Committee and the Olympic Games, the Olympic movement-- to bring these new sports in that will appeal to a younger demographic.

**John Gleaves** 25:48

There's no dispute that the Olympic Games has a demographic problem. And in it's struggling to appeal to the X-Games, millennial generation that have grown up with sort of different sports. And so there's a desire to bring in skateboarding into the LA Olympics, as well as these other alternative sports that are going to capture viewers, eyeballs, advertising dollars that are not necessarily drawn to track and field or fencing or badminton.

**John Gleaves** 26:26

So there is certainly an effort by the IOC to incorporate in some of these newer emerging sports that might have large viewership numbers. So this has opened the door to questions about would ultimate [frisbee] become a sport? I love ultimate. One of the issues that ultimate has is around whether it's gonna stay true to it's self-officiating model, and how does it want to sort of conform, if you will, a sport that's sort of known for having its own ethos.

**John Gleaves** 26:58

So ultimately, as a community, has this balance of staying true to its own identity, or sort of joining with other international sports and just being one of many team sports. But this is also where you see the rising debate on whether e-sports will become part of the Olympic movement. The e-sports question is probably the billion dollar question for the IOC. Should people be winning gold medals for playing video games? And this is currently a debate that the IOC is having with itself and with the video game companies, whether e-sports will become part of the Olympic program.

**John Gleaves** 26:59

There's some issues around around the this conversation. E-sports being, sometimes, involving violence; the Olympic Games and said "that's a non-starter, we don't want violent video games being in the Olympic program". However, these are the largest platforms in which most e-sports competitors are playing. Also, there's a very interesting dilemma where e-sports seem to be doing very well both as an industry and in terms of its viewership without the Olympic Games. I've heard it described to me by an executive in the e-sports industry that we don't need them, but they need us.

**John Gleaves** 28:15

And so there's certainly an ambivalence by like EA Sports, the makers of FIFA soccer or Madden football, whether or not they really need to join the Olympic movement, because they're doing quite all right on their own. It's the Olympics that wants to bring in the e-sport gamer demographic into the Olympic movement. So, the Olympic program, which has always been in flux, it's never been the same. It's never been that two Olympics have the exact same sports in them. There's always evolution in the Olympic program. So we're seeing again that ongoing evolution in the Olympic program with the inclusion of surfing and rock climbing, but also the questions about these new sports and whether we bring them in.

**John Gleaves** 29:05

One of the major issues around the program is the size of the Olympic Games. There's a lot of concern that the Olympic Games is getting too big, both from a venue standpoint and the cost of building the venues, but also from a housing and a logistics standpoint. The number of athletes at the Olympic Games has been capped for the last 20 years. And so with the idea of anything new coming in, it's what is going to go out and what's going to get dropped.

**John Gleaves** 29:40

And the IOC has tried to balance that historic continuity of traditional sports with the inclusion of new sports, but there was a lot of backlash, especially when wrestling was potentially going to be dropped from the Olympic program. How could you drop wrestling? Wrestling goes back to ancient Greece. Yet, wrestling doesn't have a big audience. Only a handful of countries still really care about wrestling, primarily Central European countries. And wrestling has had historically doping issues for performance enhancing drugs and steroids in sports. So these tensions are definitely going to play out as they think about what new sports to bring into the program and what sports will they want to take out of the program.

**John Torpey** 30:28

Interesting. So, I mean, you use the term at one point, the Olympic movement. And I wonder if you could say a little bit more about what that means. I mean, obviously, when we were talking about amateur status and that sort of thing, that was a key component of it, but that's obviously sort of come and gone. I mean, in what sense is it still a movement that seeks broader political goals, perhaps, of unity or comity among nations and that sort of thing? I mean, is that sort of notion of a movement, is that really still alive?

**John Gleaves** 31:05

Well, for the people in the International Olympic Committee, I think, to a large degree, yes. The Olympics, going back to its founding, has seen itself as being more than just about determining who is the best in their sport; that there is a progressive notion of human rights and self-improvement, but also egalitarianism, and equality, and pacifism; countries, athletes from the world coming together in harmony to compete, to understand each other's cultures, to become friends.

**John Gleaves** 31:47

So there's always been a view that the Olympic Games has sort of a movement or an ideology behind it. And this ideology will sometimes be called "olympism"; it's this notion of how to behave in international sport, or what international sport can do to improving the human condition. And where we really do see the IOC living up to the standard is in its demands and expectations around gender equality, and requiring now every country to send at least one female athlete to the games and saying really, "you can't be involved in the Olympic movement, if you're not showing some level of respect for genders."

**John Gleaves** 32:37

But similarly, the inclusion of diverse peoples, peoples of color, peoples from different continents, different socioeconomic status, the Olympic Games has really tried to say this is that sport is for all and they want the Olympics to reflect that. Now, that's not to say, the economic inequalities, the political realities come through, as George Orwell famously said, "sports is war minus the shooting." There's ways in which the inequalities and differences come to manifests itself. But the Olympics as a brand, as an entity as a, as a corporation, organization does really try to identify these areas of human rights and live up to them or ask its athletes to live up to them in various ways to the best of its abilities.

**John Gleaves** 33:31

So, you know, I think the idea of the Olympics as a true religion, no, I don't think anyone believes that. But I think there are a lot of people who do see the Olympic Games as a force for good. That the world is a better place politically, in terms of peace, harmony, free trade, exchange of ideas, because we have a sporting environment where athletes come together, live together in a village, come to understand each other, and do for a moment emphasize values beyond simply getting the W, being the best, getting a gold medal, and then cashing in on that.

**John Gleaves** 34:16

So we can be cynical and debate to what degree is the Olympics really living up to its own ideals, but I think there are a lot of people that do try to look at the Olympic Games, and the Olympic Games does fulfill their vision, that it's about more than sport. And there are certain principles underlying the Olympics that for example, separates it from ordinary world championship or a World Cup, or something along those lines; that there's more going on than just sport.

**John Torpey** 34:48

Great. Well, that's a fascinating overview of the status of the Olympic movement, as it exists today. I want to thank John Gleaves for his insights about the past and future of the Olympic Games.

**John Torpey** 35:02

Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance and to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song International Horizons as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons. Thanks again, John Gleaves.

**John Gleaves** 35:31

Thank you.