



## The competition and the experience of defeat

Katia Rubio

Series **University Lectures** | 19



**Centre d'Estudis Olímpics**  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

This work has been published as part of the educational project promoted by the Olympic Studies Centre (CEO-UAB), *University Lectures on the Olympics*, within the framework of the International Chair in Olympism (IOC-UAB). The project aims to provide online access to texts covering the main subjects related to the written by international experts and aimed at university students and lecturers.

This work is subjected to the Creative Commons' license Attribution-Non commercial-No Derivate Works 2.5 Spain. You can copy, distribute and publicly communicate this work if you recognize its author and editor, you do not use for commercial purposes or to generate a derivate work.



To cite this work, you can use the reference:

Rubio, Katia (2010): *The Competition and the experience of defeat* [online article]. Barcelona: Centre d'Estudis Olímpics UAB. [Consulted: dd/mm/yy]  
<[http://ceo.uab.cat/pdf/rubio\\_eng.pdf](http://ceo.uab.cat/pdf/rubio_eng.pdf) >

- © Content, 2005 Katia Rubio
- © Edition, 2010 Centre d'Estudis Olímpics (CEO-UAB)

ISBN: 978-84-693-6230-3

# Summary

1. The competition among and against whom .....	1
1.1. The objective of contemporary sport: winning .....	1
1.2. Competition against someone and against yourself .....	1
2. The social function of defeat.....	2
2.1. From losing to being defeated.....	2
2.2. The defeat as a social shadow .....	3
2.3. To overcome, and defeat.....	5
3. The defeat among the Olympic medallist .....	5
3.1. Defeat in amateurism .....	5
3.2. Defeat in professionalism .....	6
4. Final considerations .....	8
Bibliography .....	10



## The competition among and against whom

### 1.1. The objective of contemporary sport: winning

Sport in contemporary society is a comprehensive social phenomenon, from a spectacle point of view as well as professional and commercial activity. As a manifestation capable of provoking great emotion, sport differs from other spectacles in leading performers and audience to position themselves.

According to Mandell (1986), sport in contemporary society appeared during a historical moment marked by particular conditions and was a model which followed principles of a society ruled by the liberal system. Within this condition, victory and not participation were the supreme value of sports competition, because social recognition, money and desire for permanence are related to victory, discarding any other result.

From the point of view of major competitions the unfolding of this logic leads to the devaluation of the silver and bronze medals, prizes dedicated to the second and third places, which stopped being distinctions to become consolation or even prizes of shame. Other positions are not even mentioned in annals or encyclopaedias, threatening one of the Olympic maxims: the most important is "taking part".

Following Skillen (2000), the spirit of competition and achievement are inseparable parts of sport. However, the main contribution of this practice to society is the exercise of skills that could overcome the limit. Thus, sport has the potential to teach how to live within limits, and victory should have the function to indicate this condition by pointing out who among the competitors is more in need of improvement.

### 1.2. Competition against someone and against yourself

According to Yonnet (2004) sports competition could be divided in two systems: the competition against someone else and against yourself.

In the first case, this system includes all competitive sports that in the classical concept of modern sport belonged to amateurs, but nowadays are represented by professional athletes. The elite is formed by individuals selected under the order of excellence, being separated by

short fractions of time or distance, which often cannot be measured anymore by a naked eye or manual chronometer. The frequent need to use more precise equipment increases the sophistication of sports practice and competition, favouring the uncertainty imposed to spectators and confirming the condition of mass spectacle.

The second system, competition against yourself, involves a kind of private fight, intimate, in which the competitor is also their own judge. In this system there is not a division between class or limit. That is because the maximum effort during competition varies from individual to individual, imposing distinct rhythms and achievements on the diverse competitors. Therefore, if on one hand there is an apparent equality among human beings, on the other hand there is a constitutional inequality that leads some to victory and others not. In this system the individual and private technique of competition against yourself demands resources from a kind of individual elevation, deeply rooted in Western contemporary culture.

## **2. The social function of defeat**

### **2.1. From loosing to being defeated**

Sports practice emerges as the essence of the spirit of overcoming limits. This stimulus has been widely exploited according to various objectives and depending on the appeal that the image of a protagonist, such as an athlete, exercises over the population. The exploitation of this image can be associated with the selling and commercialization of many products as well as with a pedagogic or social campaign. According to many sports directors and entrepreneurs, for this to happen, the athlete must be a winner and conquering this condition is not an easy task.

Cagigal (1996) states that the Olympic Games are the synthetic vision, in great and splendid scale, of sport in the world. So, there remains the question: Are all those who do not win in fact losers? The answer suggests that the agonistics and the fight are present in the most varied kinds of competition and that victory cannot be only the conquest of the first position.

As an ideal in contemporary society, the winner is remembered and valued for supplanting the other one, independently of the resources used for this aim (Rubio, 2002). For the defeated remains the shame for the lost target, the confusion with the incapacity and the lack of recognition for the effort made. Comparing the obtained result with the desired one, the athlete's feeling of frustration, anger or maybe deception when the target cannot be achieved is understandable. If competition nowadays refers to the need for victory as an affirmation of superiority above the opponent, it is important to emphasize that we can neither think about competition nor victory without the presence of the opponent. Although the attention of athletes and coaches focuses on overcoming positions and times, it is possible to observe the imperious need of supplanting the one who is able to promote their own frustration, which is the condition manifested in defeat.

## **2.2. The defeat as a social shadow**

The difficulty that sports world protagonists and theorists have to deal with regarding defeat perhaps resides in the position that this condition is assumed in Western contemporary culture. When limited to a model of income-award in which not only material profit is at stake but also the recognition of a result that assures immortality, it is possible to say that defeat is the social shadow of contemporary sport. We understand shadow as the elements of individual and collective psyche that being incompatible with the consciously chosen way of life have not been elaborated, leading them to connect to the unconscious and behave in a relatively autonomous manner, with tendencies contrary to the conscious ones. Thus, we conform to an affirmation of heroic imaginary in contemporary sport, not because of its proximity to overcoming the limits, but because of a unilateral identification with the feats recognized and justified by people considered over humans.

Eitzen (2001) points out that the values promoted by an important part of Western contemporary society are based on excellence and on individual and social motivation focused on production. This way of life facilitates the development of a sports model that prepares children and youngsters for success in a competitive society and develops moral values such as perseverance, sacrifice, hard work, fulfilment of rules, work team and self-discipline. However, these values are responsible for many ethical problems identified in sport, such as the

exaltation of winners and the forgetting of losers. In sport, this situation results in a dehumanization of the athlete and in alienation.

When talking about competitive sport, we deal with people who spent most of their existence involved, at times, exclusively with training and competition. Although victory and defeat are part of the athlete's repertory, those who have been able to reach a national representation level certainly experienced many more situations of victory than defeat. Reinforcing the maxim that victory is not necessary, the moments of defeat are always considered as necessary to evaluate mistakes and re-plan, leading athletes and teams to consider themselves with a double punishment.

According to Garcia, Lagardera & Puig (2002), a victory does not equal success, nor is defeat an experience of failure. The experiences of success appear when the desired performance was obtained or surpassed. The experiences of failure are found in the negative difference between the expected and obtained result.

Neither the physical or mental preparation from exhausting training, nor the use of scientific knowledge, or the development of materials made by advanced technology, not even the use of doping substances, give the athlete the certainty of guarantying victory. "To be a good loser" is one of the characteristics attributed to "sports lifestyle", although it is more a manner of expression than an effective disposition.

Consequently, defeat can lead the athlete to develop two kinds of conduct: either a burnout of competitive life or a reinforcement of attitude. According to Cagigal (1996), defeats and feelings of inferiority crystallise in permanent frustration to produce a reorganization of personal forces; and here is the surpass principle. Overcoming defeat represents personal enrichment. In a prepared personality this antithesis arouses new energies, enables the discovery of unexpected skills, opens horizons, bring about a reorganization of mechanisms and enriches the differentiations from which the personality becomes stronger.



### **2.3. To overcome, and defeat**

People who defend the benefits of sport for character development affirm that athletes learn to overcome obstacles, to cooperate with colleagues, to develop self-control and to persist in the face of defeat. The sports practice arises as a spirit for overcoming limits and this attitude is considered a positive ideal for the individual development; thus the importance of sports as socializing agent. Cagigal (1996) develops this discussion by affirming that “being a good loser”, and from a pedagogic perspective “teaching to be a good loser”, do not necessarily mean defeatism nor fatalism. To the author, the truly triumphant people in humanity are not always winners, but in fact those who have fully assumed their human condition.

## **3. The defeat among the Olympic medallists**

It might seem paradoxical to study the function of defeat among the highest representatives of contemporary competitive sport. Nevertheless, through primary research (Rubio, 2004) it was possible to verify the strong feeling of frustration lived by athletes that despite being winners did not conquest the highest point of the podium, that is, those winning silver and bronze medals. Besides reporting dissatisfaction regarding the conquest, they pointed out the difficulty in dealing with unexpected results both from an individual as well as social point of view. It is important to emphasize that this feeling is shared more among athletes who belong to the last two decades of the last century than in earlier times.

### **3.1. Defeat in amateurism**

The hypothesis reached through this analysis is that before the advent of professionalism in sport, particularly in Brazil, undertaking regular competitive sports practice was a privilege of some altruistic people counting on family support or some of kind of patronage, which guaranteed the satisfaction of the basic daily and sports-specific material necessities. In all of these cases, to participate in the Olympic Games and win a medal meant crowning the effort of many years of work undertaken in precarious conditions and directed related with leisure and pleasure. This whole situation leads the sports practice to a relation of fondness with the most important sports value at that time: amateurism.

The ideal of amateurism is, for Donnely (1995), the base of Olympism. Its development took place under the quite specific English Victorian's morality context and suffered authentic mutation with the establishment of the causal relation between money and sports performance. For this reason, Olympism is to this author, an attitude under threat of extinction in the Olympic world, more than solidarity and mutual respect.

During the strict amateur period, the conditions of training and competition imprinted a way of life with limited duration. It was known that it was not possible to survive with this practice that was not professional and socially reinforced as a leisure activity. As it was desired that a child became an adult following a personal and professional trajectory by the family and society, the sports career that until now has been considered short, finished prematurely because other demands in life had to be satisfied. This situation could be prolonged if the professional activity was associated with sport, for example, in the role of physical education teacher. This was the only alternative.

By finishing prematurely the sports activity or being associated to it, though in a differentiated condition, the Olympic medallists of that time, and curiously all those winning bronze medals, considered themselves winners mainly by having overcome the adverse conditions of their times. Undoubtedly, to be a medallist in Brazil in the decades of amateurism was more difficult than nowadays. Perhaps this is the answer to the feeling of victory and accomplished obligation.

### **3.2. Defeat in professionalism**

The discourse changes radically when the protagonists of the sports spectacle belong to another generation. Professionalism began at the Olympic Games and athletes received this news as an aspired and desired condition. Rubio (2004) defines this stage of the Olympic Movement as a professionalism phase that started in the Seoul Olympic Games and has lasted until nowadays.

In the internal logic of contemporary sports, specialisation and professionalisation are inevitable. Since the athletic capacity in a variety of sports became incompatible with high performance, specialisation is inevitable.

With the end of amateurism, sport turned into a way of life and a professional activity: human beings with exceptional talents for fighting or racing start receiving high financial sums to achieve certain performances. Attempting to meet these demands, in the last years the champions of sport were transformed into profitable items that are sold and negotiated in many places of the world (Thomas, Haumont & Levet, 1988; Rubio, 2003; Silva & Rubio, 2003).

High performance athletes, as well as the most detached professionals in other professions, remain in a constant fight for their positions. What differentiates them from the other categories is interdependency between their performance, which has to be maximized in short periods of time, and the capacity of their bodies, considering the brevity of their careers (Garcia & Duran, 2002).

During the transformation process from amateurism to professional condition, not only the noble and aristocratic values were lost. The creation of a new Olympic order indicated that the 20th century world had been through great and deep changes of practical and moral order.

The professional athlete is not only the one who receives money for his work, but the victorious representation of brands and products that want to be linked with victory, with the conquest of results.

Guttman (1978) perceived that professionals can be defined as those who receive an economic compensation for their activity because their life is led by the sports practice. For a long time specialisation, nickname of professionalisation, was the result of tensions generated by the need to disguise the amateur condition under the kind of secondary profit as scholarships, governmental support and generous patronage instead of salary.

During the sports career, athletes will compulsorily live two basic conditions that mark their trajectory: victory and defeat. There is no one who has not lived the winner condition during years of training and competitions. It is basically in the attribution of meaning to this process that everyone creates and develops the coping strategies to that which, in the eyes of many people, is the painful moment of a trajectory.

In the case of Olympic medal contests, this interpretation can be much more complex. Because, even though the importance of medals is given by the metal as co-sign, gold, silver and bronze, there is the competitive situation that contests this graduation. In the case of achieving the silver medal there is an expressed situation of defeat that permitted the opponent to take the first place. In other words, the silver medal is the reward for defeat. But, in the case of the bronze medal, there is a situation in which the medallist is the one victorious in the competition and can be double rewarded, both for the victory itself as for the conquest of the medal.

As this representation varies among the medallists - groups belong to and lived historic moment- it is possible that defeat can be experienced with a paradoxal meaning, full of ambivalences, involving a subjective evaluation of the athlete in an absolute opposite reference from that built socially. What to the public can appear as honour and glory, to the competing athlete can seem shameful or almost impudence.

#### 4. Final considerations

The difficulty in finding theoretical reference about a reflective approach to defeat and its social representation is odd. During the passage of this research many databases, virtual and presential libraries and bookshops were consulted. Curiously, when the theme was presented by keywords, the references that appeared were almost all about overcoming or avoiding defeat, about how to become a winner or only methods and techniques for self-help.

If it was not for this search blended with a reflection about a singular subject it would be possible to affirm that little was produced about this theme. Nevertheless, when search concentrated on ethic and moral aspects of competition, the subject defeat emerged. This situation leads us to think about a direct link between both themes, but also about the imperious necessity to separate them, because in many situations, even a situation of victory although not in the highest place of the podium, can be represented as a defeat. This situation was observed among the Brazilian Olympic athletes who won silver and bronze medals,

distinction awarded to a very small group of athletes that considered their feats as less important for not reaching the first place.

This situation meets Skille's (1998) thinking who states that sport is a producer of self-esteem, although this only occurs if transformed into an object of merit, in other words, the pride of sports achievements does not reside in victory alone, but in the athlete's perception of feeling among the best. In theory, this affirmation corroborates to the Olympic ideal that "the most important is to compete", meanwhile the logic and the practice of competitive sports suffered severe transformations along the 20<sup>th</sup> century imposing a diverse representation of the social role of the athlete and the sports spectacle.

If in the genesis of the contemporary Olympic Movement there was a victory and coronation, at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century victory prevails at all costs, for only it has the power to eliminate the shadow of high performance sport defeat. In this sense, mechanisms such as doping and corruption became as valuable to some athletes as the physical and psychological preparations themselves, demanding more efforts from the professionals involved in the competitive preparation.

Therefore, this situation cannot be analyzed and evaluated isolated, but as one more product of contemporary society, which is able to transform sport into one of the main contemporary cultural phenomenon, as a privileged vehicle of social projections.

## Bibliography

- Cagigal, J. M. (1996): *Obras selectas*. Madrid: Comité Olímpico Español.
- Donnelly, P. (1995): "Sport Monoculture: crisis or opportunity?" in *Proceedings of the 35th International Session*. Ancient Olympia: International Olympic Academy.
- Eitzen, D.S. (2001): "Ethical dilemmas in American sports: the dark side of competition", in D.S. Eitzen (ed.) *Sport in contemporary society*. New York: Worth Publishers.
- García Ferrando; Lagardera Otero, F. & M.; Puig Barata, N. (2002): "Cultura deportiva y socialización", in García Ferrando; M.; Puig Barata, N. & Lagardera Otero, F. (comp.): *Sociología del deporte*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, pp. 69-98.
- García Ferrando, M. & Durán González, J. (2002): "El deporte mediático y la mercantilización del deporte: la dialéctica del deporte de alto nivel", in García Ferrando; M.; Puig Barata, N. & Lagardera Otero, F. (comp.): *Sociología del deporte*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, pp. 221-247 .
- Guttman, A. (1978): *From ritual to record*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mandell, R.D. (1986): *Historia cultural del deporte*. Barcelona: Ediciones Bellaterra.
- Rubio, K. (2002): "O trabalho do atleta e a produção do espetáculo esportivo", *Revista Eletrónica de Geografia y Ciências Sociais*, Universidad de Barcelona, vol. VI (119 (95), Agosto).
- Rubio, K. (2003): "The professionalism legacy: the impact of amateurism transformation among Brazilian olympic medallists", in Moragas, M; Kennett, C. & Puig, N. (eds): *The legacy of the Olympic Games 1984-2000. Lausanne: International Symposium, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> November 2002*. Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, pp. 165-169.
- Rubio, K. (2004): *Memória e imaginário de atletas medalhistas olímpicos brasileiros. Tese de livre docência*. São Paulo: Escola de Educação Física e Esporte. Universidade de São Paulo.
- Silva, M.L.S. & Rubio, K. (2003), "Superação no esporte: limites individuais ou sociais?", *Revista Portuguesa de Ciências do Desporto*. vol. 3 (3), pp. 69-76.
- Skillen, A. (2000): "Sport is for losers", in McNamee, M.J. & Parry, S.J. (eds.): *Ethics and sport*. London: Routledge, pp. 169-181.
- Thomas, R.; Haumont, A. & Levet, J. L. (1988): *Sociologia del deporte*. Bellaterra: Ediciones Bellaterra.
- Yonnet, P. (2004): *Huit leçons sur le sport*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

## The competition and the experience of defeat

Considering the needs of high performance imposed on athletes nowadays, overcoming the limits has become a principle and a recurrent issue among those who achieved the most: the winners. In their discourses, these athletes refer to the importance of having persisted, persevered and sought alternative ways to the difficulties imposed to build a victorious trajectory along their careers. In the structure of contemporary sport we observe a reproduction of the liberal model which privileges victory, although the three prizes are awarded in Olympic contests. This situation very often leads the silver and bronze medal winners to feel defeated, denying their feat, which is worthy of historical record. The unfoldings of defeat have not been studied properly, which contributes to an attitude of denial towards this situation, from both athletes and professionals that work in the sports universe. The aim of this paper is to present the living experience of defeat to Olympic medal winner athletes as well as its various representations in the contemporary social context.

**Katia Rubio**  
Universidade de Sao Paulo, Brasil



Centre d'Estudis Olímpics  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Edifici N. 1a. planta  
08193 Bellaterra (Barcelona)  
Spain

Phone +34 93 581 1992  
Fax +34 93 581 2139

<http://ceo.uab.cat>  
[ceioe@uab.cat](mailto:ceioe@uab.cat)