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M.A. Olympic Studies

**Spectators Experience in  
Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games**

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## **Introduction**

The spectator is one of the fundamental elements of a great world event. However, the spectator can't be considered as a specific being and studied in an individual way, so it must be done as a being with a composite psycho-social personality that represents the society (Howard, 1912). Since the beginning of the Olympic Movement, the spectator has improved its importance. For Coubertin, founder of the Olympic Movement, the spectator is indispensable to preserve the sport in the level of valorization that has been already reached (Müller, 2000). More than that, the spectator is necessary for spread of Olympic and Paralympic Values around the world.

In 2016, the XXXII edition of the biggest sporting events in the world happened, the Olympic and Paralympic Games. In the first time in history, a city in South America hosted these major events, Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil (Macur, 2009). This milestone in South American continent's history has come to consolidate many years of the presence and importance of these countries in the Olympic Movement. Additionally, it has become the beginning of a new age for many young athletes and sportsmen who one day dream to becoming Olympic or Paralympic athletes.

Among many features that were part of the preparation and implementation of the Rio de Janeiro Games, the spectator and his experience of participating in these great events has gained prominence. Behind this, there was a concern about the spectator and his relation with several other parts of the Games, such as the Organizing Committee, Athletes and Government. However, one of the most important aspects of the preparation and realization of the Games that directly affected the spectator was the transition between the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games.

With deep research in recent newspapers and personal experience of a Venue Operational Manager who worked before and during the Rio2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games, this essay highlights the different aspects which characterize the differences between Olympic and Paralympic spectators. Also all the preparation and concern of the organizers with the spectators, either present in the arenas or thousands of miles away, had a unique experience living the Olympic and Paralympic environment

as well as all the values spreading with the realization of this mega events which go beyond sports competitions. The methods used for this research were Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) for description of the personal experiences in Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games and Hermeneutics (Abulad, 2007) for systematic analysis of newspaper articles.

### **Preparation of the Games of Rio**

Brazil has been living a difficult political, economic and social moment (Mataruna, 2016). The Brazilian people have experienced numerous events which have directly impacted their life way, such as impeachment of the president, fall in acquisition of power, economy stopped growing and political war. However, these difficult scenarios did not make the Brazilian people lose their passion for sports. Since Rio de Janeiro won the possibility of hosting the Games they learned more about the Olympic and Paralympic sports and became interested in following them closely.

Brazil already has an Olympic and Paralympic tradition. Brazil has been consistently between 15th and 30th position in the medal table in the Olympic Games. In recent years, the Brazilian Olympic Committee has developed a strategic plan where the main goal is to become top 10 in the medal table of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games medal table. It was reached the 22th position in London 2012. For Paralympics, Brazil reached 7th place in the medal table of the London Games and developed excellent works throughout the country, such as School Paralympic Games. The Brazilian Paralympic Committee also developed a strategic plan with the goal of being placed 5th in the medal table of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. However, the Olympic Brazilian Team ranked 13th and the Brazilian Paralympic team ranked 8th in respective medal table, thus failing to reach the planned goals, nonetheless a unique development in the Olympic and Paralympic was reached in the Brazil's history. This development was the result of the investment made in Olympic and Paralympic sports in the last years in an attempt to reach these goals. A significant annual percentage of the federal lottery had been made available for the development of Sport Confederations and the National Olympic and Paralympic Committees. With this, Brazil started to develop athlete development projects never seen before in its history.

Besides that, we had the efficient work of Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games Organizing Committee, which even with visible financial constraints, reached a good level of Games management, by reducing 69.4% of the cost of Games when compared to the London Games and below of the average cost of Games in the last 50 years (Flyvbjerg, Stewart, Budzier, 2016). Even so, in preparation for the Games, the biggest number of test events was done for any edition of Olympic and Paralympic Games. There were 44 events held between 2014 and 2016, in which 7.000 athletes helped to test the competition venues with the presence of invited spectators or ticket sales (Mirás, Minete 2016).

Amongst numerous projects to bring the Olympic and Paralympic Games closer to the Brazilian population, and especially to youth, the Rio Games Organizing Committee created an Olympic Education project, called Transforma Program. Through a large number of online materials and events within schools, the program has brought Olympic and Paralympic education to more than 12,000 private and public schools in almost all Brazilian states, directly and indirectly reaching about 6 million people (International Olympic Committee, 2016). The main objectives of the program were to get students, teachers and parents to experience Olympic and Paralympic values, as well as to try out new sports and get in touch with the festive and ingratitute atmosphere of the Games. Through training courses for multipliers, the program was able to spread knowledge of sports, experiences and values of Olympic and Paralympic Movements to the rest of the school. In 2014, the Paralympic sport was strongly inserted in the program with the launch of the "Paralympic School Guide", a publication that showed the history of adapted Games and suggests activities to be applied in schools. As such, many young people were able to know about the Paralympic sports and to experience the values of both Olympic Movement and Paralympic Movements, for the first time.

### **The programs of the Olympics and Paralympics**

Rio de Janeiro is a city with a lot of natural places. The integration of these natural characteristics with the sports competitions have made the Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games an event with characteristics unique in the history of the Games. With ceremonies (opening and closing) and soccer in the Maracanã stadium, Beach

Volleyball and the Aquatic Marathon in Copacabana beach, Speed Canoeing on Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon, Sailing in Guanabara Bay and Road Cycling on the Rio de Janeiro coast, spectators of these great events could simultaneously watch the Rio 2016 Games and get an amazing tour of the City. Additionally, all other modalities, except for the soccer competition, were played within the city of Rio de Janeiro, which facilitated the displacement of athletes, delegations and spectators. Many tourist attractions besides the sport, such as the Cultural Festival, Porto Maravilha, Museum of Tomorrow, Christ Redeemer and Sugar Loaf were opened 24 hours for visitation and were important parts of all historical and cultural context experienced by those who live and who visited the city. Moreover, structures built specifically for the Games have become tourist attractions of the city, like the Olympic Park in Barra da Tijuca where not only 9 competition arenas for 16 Olympic and Paralympic modalities were held, but also it had areas for shows and cultural attractions.

Other characteristics worth highlighting are happiness and receptivity of the Brazilian people, especially the people of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Before the beginning of Games, more than half of the Brazilians supported the event. According to research commissioned by the Brazilian government, about 65.9% of the Brazilian population supported the Games (Portal Brasil, 2016). In another survey commissioned by the Rio 2016 organizing committee, about 57% of the population supported the event (Planeta Olímpico, 2013). Also in this last survey, about 63% of the interviewees declared themselves proud to receive the Games in Brazil. In end of competitions, of 1.17 million tourists who visited the city during the Games, about 760 thousand were Brazilians (Corrêa, 2016). These characteristics could also be found in staff and volunteers who worked in operations directly linked with spectators. Furthermore, the competency and warmth of the volunteers made the spectators arrival and departure to the competition areas much more calm and orderly.

During the Olympic and Paralympic competitions, fair play by Brazilian fans was observed. In isolated situations, there was an excess of nationality, as when Brazilian fans booed the French athlete in the final dispute of the pole vault against the Brazilian who won the gold medal. This action was condemned by Mr. Tomas Bach, International

Olympic Committee President, as an attitude "Unacceptable in the Olympic Games" (Slater, 2016). Moreover, research done during the Modern Pentathlon showed that nationalism among spectators was a big concern. About 31% of Brazilian spectators and 15% of International spectators answered that increasing Nationalism is one of the biggest dangers of the Olympic Games in the next 20 years. (German Sport University Cologne, 2016). The Olympic Movement should continue this discussion for the next several years, because even though the Nationalism can bring unity and identity for a country, it can bring separation and exclusion from other countries (L'Hoeste, McKee, Poblete, 2015).

Regarding security, there were isolated security incidents, but that did not cause any big problems. The security controls were managed by the security department of the Organizing Committee together with the Brazilian National Force. For the Paralympic Games, there was a great reduction of the effective security at the venues. Almost all the security department from the Rio 2016 Organizing Committee was demobilized and the Brazilian National Force became responsible for the operations. As the characteristics of the Paralympic Games being more friendly and with less visibility, this reduction did not have any impact on the operation of the Games, especially with respect to the spectator controls.

New lines of integration of fast buses (BRT) throughout the city and a new metro line connecting some regions of competition were created to improve the spectators transport. With this, the transport worked without problems, but sometimes it did not support large number of spectators, such happened in the end of the day when competitions finished in the Olympic Park. According to data from the city of Rio de Janeiro, the BRT system carried 11.7 million passengers, and approximately 2.2 million people used BRT Rio's special services, created to attend trips to Olympic venues. The Rio Subway (MetrôRio) hit record users on August 17, when it carried 1.121 million passengers. During the Olympic Games, the subway transported 13.9 million passengers (Corrêa, 2016) where it was done a special scheme with exclusive street lanes and increase in the effective number of public transport, but for the Paralympic Games was not in the plan of the city to repeat it.

One of the challenges of Rio de Janeiro to host an edition of the Olympic and Paralympic Games was the accommodation of everyone who came to accompany and work during the events. The hotel network had to multiply to meet the demand established by the International Olympic Committee during the application to become the host city. However, Rio de Janeiro achieves this demand, but this had a high cost that was later passed on to viewers who came to Rio. In a survey, an increase of up to 3.289% in the value of the lodging was detected in comparison to the normal rates. In the same survey, a considerable increase in the value of air tickets during the Games was also observed. Some airlines had even raised the price of tickets by up to 598% during the Games. Some government economic inspection agencies had notified and fined some of these hotels and airlines for charging much more than those charged (Magalhães, França, 2016).

In the beginning of the Olympic Games, some issues about the price, quality and distribution of spectator food in the venues happened. The sale of food products was not prepared to receive the expected public and the price was so expensive. The food providers presented low level of services in the attendance besides other problems related to the logistics of delivery to the venues. Therefore, the ticket and spectator service operations suffered some changes with the event in progress, because it was necessary to allow the spectators to leave and return to the venue, even within a single session of the competition. The logistics problem was corrected by the end of the Olympic Games, arriving at the Paralympic Games with a smaller impact for the spectators. However, the prices remained high and the impact on the Paralympics was even greater because it received the spectators with lower purchasing power compared to the Olympic Games (Branch, 2016).

Regarding ticket services, a true record of sales for the Paralympics in the week after the Olympics ended was observed. In the last week of the Olympic Games, only 12% of tickets to the Paralympic Games had been sold (Petroff, Brocchetto, 2016). However, due to the success of the Olympics, in two weeks almost all tickets to the Paralympics were sold. During this period, there were times when more than 130 thousand tickets were sold in one day on the internet (International Paralympic Committee, 2016), a

record in the history of the Paralympic Games. But also another factor was essential for this to happen, cheaper and available ticket for the Paralympic than Olympic Games. Some Paralympic tickets was being sold for R\$ 10.00 (USD 3.00) (Globo, 2016), while the cheapest Olympic ticket was being sold for R\$ 40.00 (USD 13.00) (Globo, 2014). Another striking fact in relation to the number of spectators in the Games happened on the first Saturday of the Paralympic Games. On this day, according to data from the Organizing Committee of the Games, the Olympic Park of Barra received 167 thousand spectators, more public than any other day of the Olympic Games. The previous record happened on the second day of Olympics with 157 thousand spectators (Boeckel, 2016). This change also impacted the already planned operations of the park, mainly in the areas of security, spectator services and ticket, but no problem happened in these operations.

One of 40 recommendations of the Agenda 2020 (International Olympic Committee, 2014), the engage with communities also was a great moment during the Olympic and Paralympic Games. An example of that happened with the Rio Se Move project, developed between Sport Department of Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro and some German Organizations which have supported social projects in all of Latin America. They leaded about three thousand children to see the competitions inside the venues. These children came for all parts of Rio de Janeiro, like poor areas and favelas. (Schüttler, 2016) This way, they had the unique experience to participate and feel the atmosphere of the greatest sport events in the world.

## **Conclusion**

The Rio 2016 Games highlighted some of the differences between Olympic and Paralympic spectators. Before and during the Games, there were several attempts to reduce these cultural differences of spectators such as the largest number of test events ever performed in a game edition. This served not only to test the venues operations, but also to get the public to know the Olympic and Paralympic environment and sports closer. During the Paralympic Games, the great presence of young students and children at events was observed. In the period of Olympic Games there was a school vacation and because of the high price of tickets many families sought other leisure



alternatives for their families. During the Paralympics, the school vacation were over, making many public and private schools take excursions to see the Games with much cheaper tickets compared to the Olympic Games. Moreover, many schools have won tickets from the Games Organizing Committee.

Other important characteristic showed during the events was the purchasing power between the Olympic and Paralympic spectators. Somehow, it was directed for Rio 2016 Organizing Committee and also for public policies with concern on big events those the city received. For the Olympic Games, we saw a greater focus on tourism and spectators reception from out of the city of Rio de Janeiro. These spectators arrived in the city with the intention of not only spending money on food and transportation, but eating well and getting to know the city of Rio de Janeiro. The people who came to watch the Paralympic Games were a "home" spectators. It was people who live of the city of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil. The prices of transport tickets and booking accommodation reduced. Furthermore, the difference of ticket prices, 4 times lower for the cheapest ticket compared to the cheapest ticket of the Olympic Games, attracted more this type of spectator. The focus here was to get the family to live a great event or to be close family members of the Paralympic sports.

One of biggest challenges for the future editions of the Olympic and Paralympic Games will be to integrate the touristic potential of these events with the image and values provided when the Olympic and Paralympic Movement approaches society. The first step has already been taken with the recommendations of the Agenda 2020 (International Olympic Committee, 2014). However, the countries and local organizing committees need to observe these recommendations in order for the goals to be reached.

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