



## **The Class of London 2012: Some Sociological Reflections on the Social Backgrounds of Team GB Athletes**

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### **Abstract**

This rapid response article briefly examines one feature of the relationship between social class and elite sport: the social backgrounds of the Olympians who comprised Team GB (Great Britain) at the 2012 London Olympics Games, and especially their educational backgrounds, as a means of shedding sociological light on the relationship between elite sport and social class. It is claimed that, to a large degree, the class-related patterns evident in the social profiles of medal-winners are expressive of broader class inequalities in Britain. The roots of the inequalities in athletes' backgrounds are to be found within the structure of the wider society, rather than in elite sport, which is perhaps usefully conceptualized as 'epiphenomenal, a secondary set of social practices dependent on and reflecting more fundamental structures, values and processes' (Coalter 2013: 18) beyond the levers of sports policy. It is concluded that class, together with other sources of social division, still matters and looking to the process of schooling and education, whilst largely ignoring the significance of wider inequalities, is likely to have a particularly limited impact on the stubborn persistence of inequalities in participation at all levels of sport, but particularly in elite sport.

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**Keywords: Social Class, Inequality, Olympics, Education, London 2012, Sport**

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### **Introduction**

**1.1** The complex relationship between sport, social class, and status exclusivity is a longstanding one that has been extensively researched by sociologists (e.g. Bourdieu 1978; Gruneau 1999; Bairner 2007). The class-related features of the historical development of modern sports such as rugby union, cricket, and rowing as middle-class pursuits in the English public schools, and other sports such as football and rugby league which developed initially as popular pastimes among the working-classes, is now well documented (e.g. Gruneau 1999; Dunning & Sheard 2005). The findings of the voluminous literature that has been produced on leisure-sport participation has also clearly indicated that the social profile of participation is becoming increasingly unequally distributed, particularly in more unequal societies (including Britain), but is much less pronounced in more equal and democratic societies (such as the Nordic countries) (Coalter 2013). Studies have also indicated that leisure-sport participation declines continuously with age (especially for males), with the heaviest drop-out occurring during youth and young adulthood (Roberts & Brodie 1992; Birchwood et al. 2008; Haycock & Smith 2012). Among adults, those who are more likely to participate overall, more frequently, and spend more time participating in a wider range of activities tend to be young, white, non-disabled males drawn from higher up the social scale and living in geographical locations with little socio-economic deprivation (Roberts & Brodie, 1992; Haycock & Smith 2011).

**1.2** An additional feature of the relationship between social class and elite sport – athletes' social backgrounds and its assumed relationship with, among other things, class privilege and education – found particular expression in recent discussions about the London Olympic and Paralympic Games, which were held in London, England, between 27 July and 9 September 2012. Drawing on publically available data (Channel 4 News 2012; Sutton Trust 2012), the central objective of this article is to briefly examine the social backgrounds of the Olympians who comprised Team GB (Great Britain) 2012, and especially their educational backgrounds, as a means of shedding sociological light on the relationship

between elite sport, social class and broader class relations in Britain.

## **The educational backgrounds of Team GB 2012**

**2.1** In the immediate build-up to the London 2012 Olympics several prominent figures in Britain rehearsed the longstanding argument that athletes who are educated at independent fee-paying schools are more likely to succeed in elite sport, and be over-represented among medal-winning athletes in global competitions, including the Olympic Games.<sup>[1]</sup> For example, echoing the view of the Prime Minister, David Cameron, Lord Moynihan, the then Chair of the British Olympic Association, claimed that the high proportion of privately-educated medal-winning athletes at previous Olympics is 'one of the worst statistics in British sport' (BBC News 2012). In particular, he noted that 50 per cent of gold medal-winning athletes at the 2008 Beijing Olympics attended private education (which caters for around 7 per cent of British children), and that one-third of Britain's athletes went to independent schools (representing approximately 37 per cent of British medal-winners) (BBC News 2012). Among the most well-known, privately-educated, medal-winning athletes in Beijing included the sailor, Ben Ainslie (who attended Truro School, Cornwall), the cyclist Chris Hoy (educated at George Watson's College, Edinburgh), and Heather Fell, who won the modern pentathlon and previously attended Kelly College in Tavistock.

**2.2** Notwithstanding the success of high-profile state-educated athletes such as Jessica Ennis, Bradley Wiggins, Andy Murray, Victoria Pendleton, and Mo Farah (Harris 2012), similar class-related inequalities were evident in the educational backgrounds of those members of Team GB who participated at the London 2012 Olympics. Data from a study conducted by the Sutton Trust (2012), for example, indicated that in 2012 athletes who attended independent schools were more than five times over-represented amongst the Team GB medal-winners relative to their proportion in the population. While the proportion of state-educated gold medal-winners was similar to previous Games, as in Beijing four years earlier, 37 per cent of British medal-winners in the 2012 Games had previously attended private schools (Sutton Trust 2012).

**2.3** Among the 2012 medal-winners was the British cyclist and twice gold-medallist, Sir Chris Hoy, whom as we noted earlier previously attended the private George Watson's College in Edinburgh, Scotland, where in 2012/13 annual fees for each year of senior school were set at £9,837 (George Watson's College 2012). The cost of educating a child throughout the junior and senior school years was considerably higher, standing at £109,890 (George Watson's College 2012), which is over four times the average annual wage in Britain. Set within 50-acre grounds, the College recently opened a Centre for Sport, which complements existing first-class facilities that include all-weather football and hockey pitches, an athletics track, and squash and tennis courts (Daily Record 24 August, 2012). Among the Centre's new sports facilities – funded largely by private donations – are: a swimming pool, fitness rooms, a multi-gym fitted with integrated media for the purpose of entertainment and monitoring of sports performance, as well as gym halls, modern changing rooms and a viewing gallery for spectators (Daily Record 24 August, 2012). Evans and Bairner (2012) also cite Wellington College in Berkshire, England, which charges annual fees of around £30,000 as another example of the kinds of first-class sporting facilities available to young people who are able to draw on substantial economic capital to facilitate their attendance at fee-paying schools elsewhere in Britain. The school, they note, has '16 rugby pitches, two floodlit astroturf pitches, a state-of-the-art sports hall, 22 hard tennis courts, 12 cricket pitches, an athletics track, two lacrosse pitches, six netball courts, a shooting range, and a nine-hole golf course' (Evans & Bairner 2012: 144). Sports facilities of these kinds make an undoubtedly important contribution to the likelihood that already privileged athletes from private schools, in particular, will succeed at the highest level. Indeed, many privately-educated athletes, including those who comprised Team GB, are considerably more likely to benefit from supportive sporting networks (including specialist sports coaches), are often educated in large physical education (PE) departments with low teacher-pupil ratios which enable teachers to focus their time on developing athlete success, and are better able to take advantage of other specialist sports science services available within elite sport contexts to assist their preparation for, and performance in, elite competition (Green & Houlihan 2005; Bloyce & Smith 2010).

**2.4** The provision of first-class facilities, infrastructure, and resources in fee-paying schools help produce and reproduce class patterned, and differentiated, opportunities that enable many aspiring athletes from higher up the social hierarchy to enhance their chances of elite participation and success. In addition to various other constraints including those associated with schools' sporting traditions and concern with boosting their position within the education market, these provisions may also help explain why the inequalities in athletes' educational experiences were not observed uniformly across all of the sports included in the London 2012 Olympics and in previous games. For example, in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, British athletes who were privately-educated were disproportionately represented in particular sports, including rowing and sailing, where 50 per cent of medal-winners were previously privately-educated, while every athlete in equestrian events were former members of independent schools (Hope & Magnay 2012). Athletes from more privileged backgrounds similarly dominated the squad composition of other sports, including horse riding and tennis, while higher proportions of state-educated athletes were prominent in events such as athletics. Similar sport-specific patterns can also be identified in the educational profiles of medal-winners at the 2012 Olympic Games. Higher proportions of medal-winning athletes in sports such as rowing, sailing, triathlon, and hockey were formerly educated in private fee-paying schools, many medal-winning track and field athletes had previously been educated in state schools, while medal successes in sports such as boxing and taekwondo were almost exclusively concentrated among state-educated athletes (Sutton Trust 2012). Thus, it might be tentatively suggested that privately-educated athletes are more likely to be able to take advantage of more widely available first-class facilities and resources (including teachers and coaches) often associated with sports in which their schools typically specialize (e.g. rowing, sailing, equestrian events), and which are not always considered vital to elite success in other sports where public school-educated athletes do not dominate (e.g. athletics, boxing, taekwondo).

## The social backgrounds of Team GB 2012

**3.1** The educational backgrounds of Team GB members are only part of the explanation, for other dimensions of their biographies play an equally important role in enabling them to reach the highest levels of elite sport. As research produced by Channel 4 News (2012) indicates, the non-educational features of an athlete's social background and its associated privileges are also crucial to understanding their predispositions towards sporting success and inclusion in Team GB at the 2012 Olympics. In an analysis of the birth-places of those athletes (n=542) who comprised Team GB, 471 athletes were born in England, 42 in Scotland, 24 were born in Wales, and for 5 athletes, Northern Ireland was their place of birth (Channel 4 News 2012). When regional, rather than national, variations are considered, it is also clear that some of the most affluent areas of the UK – notably, the south-east and parts of London – contributed the majority of Team GB's athletes (30.3 per cent). Just over one-in-ten athletes were born in the south-west (11.4 per cent) and north-west (11.4 per cent, particularly in Manchester and Liverpool), while few athletes were born in those areas that are among the most deprived in the UK (Marmot 2010), namely, the West Midlands (6.9 per cent), East Midlands (4.9 per cent), and the north-east (4.1 per cent) (Channel 4 News 2012). Although many athletes are now geographically mobile and undertake much of their training and performance outside the UK, data reported by Channel 4 News also indicated that the relationship between athletes' birth-places and the sports in which they competed during the 2012 Olympics varied geographically. Cycling, for example, was the only sport represented by athletes from the Isle of Man, three of Northern Ireland's Team GB members were rowers, those who competed in water polo tended to be drawn from regions between the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales and in and around Greater Manchester and Leeds, three of the seven-person judo squad were from Shropshire, and athletes competing in shooting were almost exclusively from south-west England (Channel 4 News 2012). These differences in the home towns of Team GB athletes, and the sports in which they competed, suggests that participation at the London 2012 Olympics was closely associated with athletes' social locations and were expressive of particular geographical sporting cultures and traditions rooted in the historical development of sport (e.g. Gruneau 1999; Dunning & Sheard 2005; Bairner 2007).

**3.2** Another crucial, but sometimes over-looked, source of class-related inequality of relevance to understanding the predispositions for those from particular social backgrounds to succeed in elite sport is their childhood socialization. As we have noted in more detail elsewhere, those whose childhood sports socialization included being brought-up in families with two sports active parents, with few financial and transport constraints, and with parents who sought to pass on their 'love' of sport and encourage participation for enjoyment by purposively investing (e.g. emotionally, financially, culturally) in their offspring, were among the pre-conditions necessary to maximize their future sports participation and success (Haycock & Smith 2012; Hulme & Smith 2012). More specifically, it is clear that childhood and youth is for many people an important life-stage in which sporting dispositions and habits became deeply embedded and internalized in their emerging habituses, or personality structures (Haycock & Smith 2012; Hulme & Smith 2012). An important part of the process of habitus formation, it seems, is the way in which families of different types and structures differently invest their offspring with different kinds of 'ability' through the cultural transmission of various forms of capital and sporting dispositions which help distinguish themselves and the sports they play from other groups (Bennett et al. 2010; Evans & Davies 2010; Evans & Bairner 2012). As Evans and Davies (2010) have noted, more middle-class families are often better able to invest significant amounts of time, money, energy and socio-emotional development in their children, and reinvest their offspring with symbolically significant forms of social, cultural, physical and economic capital to support participation when young in the context of family leisure. Although influenced by key life-transitions (Roberts & Brodie 1992; Haycock & Smith 2011), existing research suggests that the construction of sporting biographies and differential experiences of sport socialization that disproportionately advantage sports participants from more privileged backgrounds are also often relatively fixed by age 16, and continue to make a difference to present-day sporting experiences (Birchwood et al. 2008; Haycock & Smith 2012). It might be hypothesized, therefore, that many of the social differences evident in elite athletes' backgrounds have their roots in advantages that first emerge during childhood, often outside education, and typically persist throughout their careers. Indeed, as Evans and Bairner (2012: 153) have noted, many of the class-based resources associated with sports performance and other social activities are 'to a large degree, acquired tacitly, outside education's domain but actualised within the privileging practices of the school', and especially the kinds of schools typically attended by elite athletes. Accordingly, it might be argued that while Team GB's athletes' educational backgrounds are important, they are to a large extent an expression of the valuable stocks of economic, social and cultural capital they had already begun to acquire and accumulate within their particular social milieu and networks of relationships outside of education before embarking upon a career in elite sport. This is not to suggest, of course, that class-based experiences and opportunities generated in sporting and educational contexts are not important. They clearly are. Rather, the extent to which particular groups of athletes were represented in Team GB is likely to have been significantly influenced by the ways in which their class-based identities, habits and predispositions are shaped in the context of their social relations (particularly during childhood and youth) and by the prevailing structural conditions thought to enhance their ability to succeed in the exclusive world of elite sport.

## Conclusion

**4.1** In this article we have sought to briefly explore the sociological significance of the social backgrounds of athletes who comprised Team GB at the London 2012 Olympics. We have argued that, to a large degree, the class-related patterns evident in the social profiles of medal-winners are expressive of broader class relations in Britain associated with prevailing economic inequalities. Indeed, since 'class divisions that arise in economic life are liable to spill over into people's minds and wider social relationships' (Roberts 2011: 17) and commonly favour already privileged groups, the observed inequalities in athletes' backgrounds are not sociologically surprising. The social backgrounds of elite

athletes, like many other occupational groupings, are expressions of 'the scale of material inequalities in a society ... (that provides) the skeleton, or framework, round which class and cultural differences are formed' (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010: 28). It might be hypothesized, then, that many of the roots of these inequalities are to be found within the structure of the wider society, rather than in elite sport. This is because sport, and particularly elite sport, is perhaps usefully conceptualized as 'epiphenomenal, a secondary set of social practices dependent on and reflecting more fundamental structures, values and processes' (Coalter 2013: 18) beyond the levers of sports policy. Thus, in contrast to much conventional analyses of sport, it might be argued that various aspects of social inclusion and related features of class inequality typically precede sport participation and help produce clear social gradients, including in elite sport (Coalter 2013). This is a significant point in policy terms because, as is so often common in conventional analyses of sport, the provision of state school PE and sport and a re-thinking of sport policy was typically cited as being among the ingredients for re-dressing the social skewing of Team GB and elite sport participation. Although the range and quality of available sports resources and facilities are, of course, significant for enhancing pupils' participation in and experiences of sport participation, the simple promotion of state school PE and sport as some kind of quick-fix for deeply embedded social inequalities ignores the part these subjects, and schools generally, 'play in the production and reproduction of social hierarchies and inequalities' (Evans & Bairner 2012: 147). Class, together with other sources of social division, still matters and looking to the process of schooling, whilst largely ignoring the significance of wider inequalities, is likely to have a particularly limited impact on the stubborn persistence of inequalities in participation at all levels of sport, but particularly in elite sport.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Data from the Sutton Trust (2012) also indicate that the disproportionate concentration of privately-educated people in higher social positions is not exclusive to sport, for they are also over-represented in other professions including journalism (54 per cent), and among judges (70 per cent) and Members of Parliament (MPs) (35 per cent).

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