



BEYOND PASSIVE NEUTRALITY: SAFEGUARDING THE OLYMPIC ARENA AND REJECTING COLLECTIVE SANCTIONS

Abstract - This contribution, conceived as a corollary to previous analyses on the dynamics of exclusion and sports activism, explores the need to redefine the concept of political neutrality within the Olympic Movement. The central question is how the International Olympic Committee can reconcile its institutional stance against human rights violations with the vital need to preserve the integrity and inclusivity of the Games. Through a re-reading of Rule 50 and the observation of recent dissent, it is argued that the ban on propaganda on the field is not censorship, but a safeguard for athletes and the neutrality of the arena. Concurrently, the prolonged exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes is examined as an inequitable collective sanction that borrows from the logic of political isolation. While the shift to an “active and functional neutrality” paves the way forward, the task for the future is to consolidate this paradigm through clear operational criteria. This article proposes such criteria to ensure the universal application of regulations in view of future Olympic cycles, starting with Los Angeles 2028.

Keywords: Active neutrality; Rule 50; collective sanctions; sports activism; Olympic Movement; Individual Neutral Athletes (AIN).

ALÉM DA NEUTRALIDADE PASSIVA: PROTEGENDO A ARENA OLÍMPICA E REJEITANDO SANÇÕES COLETIVAS

Resumo - Esta contribuição, concebida como um corolário de análises anteriores sobre as dinâmicas de exclusão e o ativismo desportivo, explora a necessidade de redefinir o conceito de neutralidade política dentro do Movimento Olímpico. A questão central é como o Comitê Olímpico Internacional pode reconciliar a sua postura institucional contra violações dos direitos humanos com a necessidade vital de preservar a integridade e a inclusividade dos Jogos. Através de uma releitura da Regra 50 e da observação de dissidências recentes, argumenta-se que a proibição de propaganda no campo de jogo não constitui censura, mas sim uma salvaguarda para os atletas e para a neutralidade da arena. Simultaneamente, a prolongada exclusão de atletas russos e bielorrussos é examinada como uma sanção coletiva iníqua que se apropria da lógica do isolamento político. Embora a mudança para uma “neutralidade ativa e funcional” prepare o caminho a seguir, a tarefa para o futuro é consolidar este paradigma através de critérios operacionais claros. Este artigo propõe tais critérios para assegurar a aplicação universal dos regulamentos, tendo em vista os futuros ciclos olímpicos, a começar por Los Angeles 2028.

Palavras-chave: Neutralidade ativa; Regra 50; sanções coletivas; ativismo esportivo; Movimento Olímpico; Atletas Individuais Neutros (AIN).

MÁS ALLÁ DE LA NEUTRALIDAD PASIVA: PROTEGIENDO LA ARENA OLÍMPICA Y RECHAZANDO LAS SANCIONES COLECTIVAS

Resumen - Esta contribución, concebida como un corolario de análisis previos sobre las dinámicas de exclusión y el activismo deportivo, explora la necesidad de redefinir el concepto de neutralidad política dentro del Movimiento Olímpico. La cuestión central es cómo el Comité Olímpico Internacional puede reconciliar su postura institucional contra las violaciones de los derechos humanos con la necesidad vital de preservar la integridad e inclusividad de los Juegos. A través de una relectura de la Regla 50 y de la observación de disidencias recientes, se argumenta que la prohibición de propaganda en el campo de juego no constituye censura, sino una salvaguarda para los atletas y para la neutralidad de la arena. Simultáneamente, la prolongada exclusión de atletas rusos y bielorrusos se examina como una sanción colectiva inícu que se apropia de la lógica del aislamiento político. Si bien el cambio hacia una “neutralidad activa y funcional” prepara el camino a seguir, la tarea para el futuro es consolidar este paradigma a través de criterios operativos claros. Este artículo propone dichos criterios para asegurar la aplicación universal de los reglamentos, con vistas a los futuros ciclos olímpicos, comenzando por Los Ángeles 2028.

Palabras-clave: Neutralidad activa; Regla 50; sanciones colectivas; activismo deportivo; Movimiento Olímpico; Atletas Individuales Neutros (AIN).

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To the athletes of every nation, guardians of the Olympic flame. To you, who inhabit the sacred space of the game and protect it from the clamor of history. May the Los Angeles 2028 Games finally welcome you all, without distinction, celebrating a humanity that does not judge, but reconciles.

Introduction: moving beyond passive neutrality

The debate regarding the use of sporting spaces to convey political messages necessitates a profound rethinking of the concepts of neutrality and apoliticism. This essay builds on previous analyses published in this journal, further developing the conceptual framework of active neutrality and collective sanctions^{1,2}.

Being neutral does not mean retreating into passive indifference or failing to distinguish victims from perpetrators in the face of blatant violations of human rights, as enshrined in Fundamental Principle No. 1 of the Olympic Charter³. Since the IOC is a recognized international legal entity and a Permanent Observer to the United Nations, it must adopt inescapable positions on global issues⁴. However, apoliticism remains a vital ‘soft power’ strategy essential for promoting peace.

The necessary paradigm involves distinguishing a clear institutional condemnation of violations from the sporting moment itself. This method prevents the arena from being transformed into a courtroom, preserving the Movement's mission: to reconcile positions and celebrate humanity united around the Olympic flame.

Methodology and selection of the analytical corpus

This study adopts a qualitative approach of a theoretical-normative and institutional nature, based on a systematic documentary review of Olympic regulations³ and international resolutions⁴. The analyzed corpus includes recent versions of the Olympic Charter³, the IOC Athletes' Commission recommendations⁵, UN General Assembly resolutions⁴, and the operational guidelines for Individual Neutral Athletes (AIN)^{6,7}.

The selection of case studies (México1968⁸, Qatar 2022⁹, Milano Cortina 2026) follows a criterion of systemic relevance established in previous stages of this research^{1,9}. Specifically, the inclusion of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 is justified by its media and social weight, which is comparable to the Olympic Games⁹. This analysis builds upon the findings of previous research published in this journal, which, through the examination

of the German national team's 'silent' protest and the Iranian anthem controversy, demonstrated the objective difficulty of confining the competitive moment within a strictly sporting perimeter, highlighting the limited efficacy of Rule 50 in preventing extra-statutory interference⁹.

The reference to Milano Cortina 2026 continues this line of inquiry by focusing on the specific case of the Ukrainian skeleton athlete Vladyslav Heraskevych. This episode is analyzed as a further limit case of 'individual memorialization' that challenges the procedural objectivity of institutions^{1,3}.

The genesis of Rule 50: the boundary between safeguarding and censorship

Within the logic of functional and active neutrality, Rule 50 is not an act of censorship but a tool for safeguarding the Olympic mission. Studies by the IOC and the Athletes' Commission⁵ clarify that a primary objective is to protect athletes from the stress of being pressured to take public stances on world conflicts during competition⁵.

The limitation of expression on the field is a safeguard for the integrity of the competitive experience championed by the athletes themselves^{3,5}. According to the 2021 IOC Athletes' Commission consultation, two-thirds of athletes believe that the field of play and the podium are not appropriate venues for expression, and 40% explicitly state that such demonstrations would detract from their Olympic experience⁵.

This perspective expands upon considerations regarding the Qatar 2022 World Cup⁹ and the evolution of Rule 50¹. Since no tool exists to universally determine what is 'just' in an ethical sense, the 'purity of the arena' remains the only guarantee against behaviors perceived as divisive by other participants^{1,9}.

Analogous to a cinema audience watching a romantic film who would find a sudden interruption in the middle of the screening for a conference or a lecture on social ethics to be an inappropriate breach of the communicative frame, the athlete has the right to compete in a setting dedicated exclusively to sport. By shielding the stage of sporting celebration from non-technical exploitation, Rule 50 preserves the 'sovereignty of the gesture' and ensures that narratives which have no place in the agonistic moment do not pollute the competitive focus.

The paradox of historical rehabilitations and the objectivity of the arena

Detractors often justify protests by citing past acts subsequently re-evaluated by history, such as the 1968 podium protest⁸. However, as seen in the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022⁹, creative activism can generate new complications. This was exemplified by the Iranian national team, which initially chose not to sing the national anthem; although this technically did not violate ceremonial regulations, the subsequent match saw them forced to sing due to external political coercion, illustrating the ‘descent’ of a national government into the competitive arena⁹.

As argued in previous research, the fact that symbolic behaviors are later hailed as inspirational does not retroactively validate the use of the Games for externalizing personal ideas. A positive retrospective judgment does not justify the use of the arena for non-sporting purposes at the time of the event, primarily because the objective of Rule 50 is to ensure an experience without divisive disruption. This neutral perimeter protects participants from being pressured into public stances and prevents the athlete from becoming, against their will, a target for external political exploitation.

In the arena, the aspiration for objective enforcement evokes the dynamics of the Video Assistant Referee (VAR), designed to correct ‘clear, obvious, and relevant’ errors by compressing reality into binary, measurable outputs^{1,9}. Much like in football, the protocol avoids intervening in minor, venial infractions to prevent the competition from losing its essential flow. However, the institutional application of Rule 50 functions like a VAR that remains silent—a ‘silent check’—unless a disruptive element is detected¹. Technical irregularity may exist formally, but if it remains unremarked, the game is allowed to flow^{1,9}. This does not imply literal regularity—as the equipment technically breached the Byelaw to Rule 50^{1,3} - but rather that the irregularity had no disruptive impact¹].

Furthermore, an extra-sporting manifestation produces irreversible harm: if the gesture distracts the opponent, competitive integrity is compromised^{5,9}. There is no ‘VAR protocol’ capable of restoring stolen focus⁵. Transforming the arena into a courtroom would pollute the event, exposing the Movement to the risk of ‘ideological sympathy’^{1,5}.

The technical binary of equipment and the threshold of propaganda

In the case of the Ukrainian athlete at Milano Cortina 2026, the IOC was forced to strictly apply the Byelaw to Rule 50 (paragraph 1) of the 2026 Olympic Charter³. This

provision mandates that no form of ‘propaganda, commercial or otherwise’ may appear on equipment, with the sole exception of the non-conspicuous identification of the manufacturer³.

The practical complexity of this enforcement is illustrated by the equipment of Federico Tomasoni and Federica Brignone¹. These marks technically exceed authorized identification³, yet they remained below the threshold of institutional notice because no formal objections were raised. The system did not require an intervention simply because those signs were not perceived as disruptive¹.

The Movement, therefore, does not judge the sign's moral value, but rather the intentional rupture of the communicative frame¹. When a gesture is publicly weaponized, it becomes a ‘clear error’ that the institution must ‘correct’ to preserve the procedural objectivity of the arena^{1,3}. This prevents the ‘sovereignty of the gesture’ from being usurped by an external political narrative¹.

The inequity of collective sanctions: a ruling towards future cycles

The admission of Russian and Belarusian athletes must distinguish political responsibility from individual rights^{2,10}. A clear institutional stance against violations must not translate into an indiscriminate sanction against individuals. The following points are established:

- The 2022 exclusions were temporary measures for safety and integrity^{11,12};
- Applying non-sporting criteria to punish an entire group is a form of collective punishment criticized in international law¹⁰;
- For an athlete, such exclusion effectively amounts to a functional life ban for the typical duration of an Olympic career (8 years/2 cycles), depriving them of their competitive peak².

This is consistent with CAS jurisprudence applying, *mutatis mutandis*, the *nullum crimen, nulla poena sine lege* principle to sporting sanctions¹³. It is consistent with the Olympic Charter³ and recent IOC guidelines^{6,7} to reject structural exclusion and implement neutral athlete programs.

Operational synthesis: the IOC's ‘master messages’

Table 1 illustrates the correlation between statutory intentions and concrete actions, showing the link between principles and practice.

Table 1 - Correlation between statutory intentions and operational actions.

Intention (institutional objective)	Resulting action (practice and regulations)
Preserve active neutrality	Condemn violations institutionally, separating this stance from competitive proceedings ³ .
Protect athletes from stress	Apply Rule 50 on the field; provide ample compensatory spaces elsewhere ⁵ .
Ensure objectivity and equity	Refuse discretionary exceptions (e.g., helmets); apply regulations universally ^{1,9} .
Safeguard inclusive vocation	Readmit athletes for future cycles, rejecting collective punishment ^{6,7} .
Pursue global reconciliation	Use the Olympic space as a tangible example of coexistence.

Source: the author

Conclusion

The defense of neutrality, reinterpreted in a proactive key, is the method through which sport contributes to peace. The arena must remain protected, refusing to become a geopolitical megaphone or a tool for inequitable sanctions. Looking ahead, Los Angeles 2028 will serve as an operational test for the application of these criteria on Rule 50 and the AIN programme. The ultimate hope is for truly universal Games where full participation fulfills the mission: not to judge intentions, but to reconcile positions.

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