

Sports Diplomacy: Lessons and Reflections from American Ambassadors

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Diplomacy encompasses many things: politics, economics, culture, and more. At its core, though, diplomacy is about connection, finding ways to see eye-to-eye despite the man-made borders that separate us from one another. One way American foreign service officers attempt to unite cultures and countries is through sports. Members of the American Academy of Diplomacy reflect on the role of sports in their careers as well as global politics. They share lessons learned and predict the role of sports in foreign affairs to come.

Unlike some other aspects of the Foreign Service, involvement in sports often begins long before one's professional career does. A love for a game can translate into a lifelong passion and role in one's job, as Ambassador Thomas Schieffer, former U.S. Ambassador to Australia and Japan, can attest. Prior to his diplomatic service, Ambassador Schieffer was a partial owner of the Texas Rangers Baseball Club, serving as President of the franchise from 1991-1999. Though Ambassador Schieffer was no longer officially tied to the Rangers by the time he became Ambassador, his love of baseball remained and developed into an essential part of his public persona. After attending a baseball game upon his arrival in Japan, the Japanese media perceived Ambassador Schieffer differently. He says, "It was a nice way to introduce myself, to say, 'I'm not just here as some American; I'm like you. I like baseball like you like baseball.' I think that was a very helpful opening."



**Ambassador
Thomas Schieffer**

Ambassador Schieffer's attendance at baseball games garnered widespread coverage in the Japanese press, and through baseball, he cultivated a more personal relationship with the Japanese people.

The Department of State commonly integrates sports into its official programs as well. In fact, the State Department founded a Sports Diplomacy Division in 2002 that encompassed four pillars: Sports Envoys, Sports Visitors, International Sports Programming Initiative, and Global Sports Mentoring Program. Despite these efforts, according to sports diplomacy consultant Edward Elliott, "sport remains an untapped 'goldmine' in the United States as policymakers arguably undervalue its capability to influence foreign strategy." Ambassador Bernadette Allen saw firsthand the benefits of American diplomatic sports initiatives. She recalls a campaign to promote tolerance during her time as Ambassador to Niger, stating that when working with youth, "Sports was the logical vehicle." Through soccer, basketball and wrestling, Ambassador Allen and her colleagues "emphasized the importance of communicating with fellow citizens across the country."



**Ambassador
Bernadette Allen**

In addition to localized initiatives, global sporting events can play a large role both in establishing diplomatic ties among officials as well as cultivating cultural understanding and relationships among individuals. Political science expert Michal Marcyn Kobierecki examines sports diplomacy in two frameworks: positive and negative. "*Positive sports diplomacy* is about using sport in order to build international bridges," he says. Ambassador Liliana Ayalde attests to the power of sports in deepening bi- and multilateral relations (that is, diplomatic ties between two or more states) as she reflects on her time as US Ambassador to Brazil.



**Ambassador
Liliana Ayalde**

Ambassador Ayalde witnessed both the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympics and Paralympics in Brazil and as a result became familiar with the processes of implementing international sporting events. U.S.-Brazil relations were fraught leading up to the Olympic Games, but Ambassador Ayalde and the Obama administration used the event to facilitate connection. Similarly, there was a large public health issue at the same time with the Zika epidemic; already focused on the international sporting events, the United States was able to engage the Center for Disease Control and provide assistance to Brazil. Ambassador Ayalde says, "These mega events really provide a way to also energize the country team internally and get everybody working together around something very positive. Here we had something concrete that we all could come together around and coordinate our communications. Those patterns of communication and coordination actually stick around. There were certain lessons that we were able to maintain that were very real, and it improved our efficiency and our impact."

Ambassador Ayalde and her colleagues, like many others during sporting events, connected with other global leaders to advance American values and interests abroad and developed long-lasting connections in Brazil and beyond.

Whereas *positive sports diplomacy* unites, *negative sports diplomacy* is conducted as a means of striking international opponents through, for example, a boycott or isolation. One of the most famous sports boycotts in American history was the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow. Amidst the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, the United States Olympic Committee voted to support President Jimmy Carter's call to boycott the Games. Ambassador Charles Ries, then early in his Foreign Service career, was assigned to join the Olympic Boycott Task Force in order to design an alternative sports competition for the athletes who would no longer attend the Moscow Olympic Games. With no previous knowledge of the sport, Ambassador Ries organized a field hockey tournament in cooperation with the United States Field Hockey Federation. The Olympic Boycott Task Force also supported a boxing tournament in Nairobi, Kenya, as well as other events. Ambassador Ries says of the experience, "It was a crash course. It was aimed at trying to deal with the very valid concerns of particularly Americans, but also those in other countries who had joined us in the boycott and of the very real human cost of such a boycott." In developing substitute events for the athletes who worked tirelessly to join in the Olympic Games, Ambassador Ries and his colleagues addressed the athletes' needs and allowed them to compete in their sports.



**Ambassador
Charles Ries**

One scenario in which states may choose to engage in *negative sports diplomacy* is when they suspect a country of *sportswashing*, when an actor uses sport to redirect public attention away from immoral or unethical behavior. When states suspect others of improper conduct, as seen in recent years with the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar and the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, diplomats must decide if and how to conduct discussions with their host nation counterparts. During the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, athletes engaged in state-sponsored doping. During the 2022 Winter Olympics in China, there was a significant push in Congress for a statement or boycott of the event, as many people were concerned about China's human rights violations. That same year, the FIFA World Cup garnered international attention when concerns rose about Qatar's treatment of migrant workers and unfair labor practices. Ambassador Barbara Bodine spent much of her career focusing on the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf, a region often accused of *sportswashing* because of their controversial human rights and labor practices. She says, "*Sportswashing* is kind of the dark side... It's borderline disinformation, a knockoff of legitimate sports diplomacy." As countries, leaders, and professional athletes around the world engage in increasingly globalized sports, Foreign Service Officers promote American interests (and condemn practices they oppose) through sport and public diplomacy.



**Ambassador
Barbara Bodine**

Despite the challenges athletics can pose to diplomatic efforts, sports are ultimately a powerful tool in the realm of international affairs. From localized, cultural programs such as Ambassador Allen's tolerance initiative in Niger to massive international events like the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, sports are both a tool and an asset to diplomacy. Even when faced with conflicting cultural values and political goals, states can, and should, use athletic platforms to combat sportswashing and other international affairs of America's concern. Whereas many diplomatic efforts are limited in scope – language and cultural differences are among frequent barriers – sports offer the unique opportunity to connect people from around the world, regardless of background. In a variety of ways, American Foreign Service Officers and political leaders around the world enhance understanding and prosperity through shared passions for athletics. The importance of sport globally cannot be understated, and it is critical American diplomats continue to utilize its power in their work. Whether the goal is to strengthen a Foreign Service Officer's relationship with a population, bridge a community divide, or make a statement against a state's actions, sports are an effective component of diplomacy. Simply put, sports connect individuals and nations by transcending culture and conflict and continue to serve as an infinite resource for American foreign policy.

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