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Master's Thesis of Global Sport Management

**Excellence, Respect, Friendship:**  
**A Reflection on Enhancing Olympic Values through**  
**the Experiences of Female Ice Hockey Players in the**  
**Mixed NOC Team at the Lausanne 2020 Youth**  
**Olympic Games**

탁월성, 존중, 우정:

Mixed NOC 팀에 참여한 Lausanne 2020 YOG  
여자아이스하키 선수들의 경험을 통해 보는 올림픽  
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# Excellence, Respect, Friendship:

A Reflection on Enhancing Olympic Values through the Experiences  
of Female Ice Hockey Players in the Mixed NOC Team at the  
Lausanne 2020 Youth Olympic Games

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## **Abstract**

# **Excellence, Respect, Friendship: A Reflection on Enhancing Olympic Values through the Experiences of Female Ice Hockey Players in the Mixed NOC Team at the Lausanne 2020 Youth Olympic Games**

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The essence of the Olympic Games lies in promoting international understanding, peace, friendship, and unity among humanity. However, in the highly competitive context of modern Olympics, characterized by intense rivalry among nations, the realization of these values may appear questionable. Nevertheless, the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics witnessed a remarkable event when the Women's Ice Hockey team of the two

estranged and ideologically opposed countries, South Korea and North Korea, came together as a unified team.

The formation of the inter-Korean unified team presented an opportunity to experience the restoration of the Olympic spirit within the team, while also inspiring harmony and awe among people worldwide, exemplifying the core values of the Olympics. It is conceivable that such combined teams in the Olympics have the potential to revive the damaged spirit of Olympism. Though the unification of the Korean team was a politically driven and singular occurrence, the prospect of Mixed NOC teams in the Youth Olympics might hold a general and sustainable solution for realizing the values of the Olympics.

In the Youth Olympics, the Mixed NOC teams bring together young athletes from various nations, providing them with an opportunity to collaborate as one unit, transcending nationalistic competition. This not only fosters mutual understanding of diverse cultures but also offers chances for friendship and unity among the future leaders of different countries. As such, the concept of Mixed NOC teams represents a promising and practical approach for achieving the true essence of the Olympic values.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and significance of female ice hockey players who participated in the Mixed NOC

event at the 2020 Lausanne YOG. Additionally, the study aims to explore how these experiences influence athletes' awareness of Olympic values and provide foundational data for cities and countries preparing for future Youth Olympics. Utilizing a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design, this study was led by a researcher who had prior experience as a player in the unified women's ice hockey team at the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics. The research focused on 18 female ice hockey players from the Mixed NOC team participating in the 2020 Lausanne Youth Olympic Games, conducting in-depth interviews to thoroughly explore their experiences and perspectives.

The findings of the study indicate that the athletes had a positive and enriching experience in the Mixed NOC ice hockey event at Lausanne 2020 YOG. Initially, the athletes had apprehensions about the 'unique team composition' and 'game format'. However, as they arrived at the Olympic village, their perspectives shifted, and they began to see it as a chance for personal growth and a great opportunity for their respective nations. During the Mixed NOC phase, On the ice, the athletes 'discovered and developed various skills' while 'enjoying stress-free hockey' in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Under the 'worldwide spotlight,' the athletes 'embraced responsibilities'. Off the ice, 'language barrier' posed challenges, but through

‘team bonding’ led by TOP players, the athletes developed ‘embraced diversity and cultural understanding.’

The post-Mixed NOC phase revealed significant legacies and athletes’ reminiscence. Athletes experienced a sense of ‘global network,’ which they referred to as the “Mixed NOC Bond”, transitioned from perceiving athletes from other countries as ‘rivals to considering them as friends,’ and their ‘interest in global news’ increased. They cherished their memories and gave recommendations for the future Mixed NOC event.

Based on the experiences of ice hockey players who participated in the Mixed NOC team, this study reveals that the Mixed NOC event has the potential to contribute significantly to the athletes' skill development and physical growth while also fostering their educational and cultural enrichment. Furthermore, the event aligns closely with the core Olympic values of excellence, respect, and friendship, making it in line with the vision of the Youth Olympic Games. Moreover, the Mixed NOC event serves as a practical manifestation of the Olympic ideals of equal rights, international friendship, world peace, and amateurism, highlighting its profound association with the fundamental principles of the Olympic movement.

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**Keywords:** Mixed NOC, Youth Olympic Games, Olympism,  
Olympic Values, Lausanne 2020

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## **Subjective Statement**

Inspiration for this thesis came from my experience as an athlete participating in the Unified Korea women's ice hockey team at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics. Many athletes dream of becoming Olympians, but few are chosen. For players who have been waiting for years to step onto this dream stage, every minute of the game is precious. Through hard work and dedication, I had the opportunity to represent my country in an unforgettable experience that goes beyond sports. While competing against the top players around the world was incredible, what proved to be more meaningful was the month we spent playing alongside athletes from another nation: North Korea. Over time, I came to cherish the experience and appreciate its positive impact on me. But the journey was not easy.

Along with many of my teammates, I was frustrated when I heard that North Korean athletes would be joining the South Korean team two weeks before the Olympics. I was on preparing my team for the competition, and this obstacle had the potential to undermine years of training together. With the addition of 12 North Korean players and a requirement that three must be in the lineup, three of the South Korean players would be excluded from each game lineup and one South Korean would be cut entirely. I was skeptical

about whether we could play well together as a team considering the short timeline, lineup tensions, and cultural and language differences. My team (the South Korean team) was already multi-cultural, with a quarter of the team being North American born players of Korean origin. Incorporating North Koreans was an even wider stretch.

The experience had many stressful and painful aspects which I felt most strongly before and during the Olympics. I was especially stressed about since I already served as the team's unofficial translator for our English-speaking coaches and players, and with the addition of the North Koreans, I would now be responsible for translating three ways: South Korean, English, and North Korean. My playing time was severely restricted by the presence of the North Koreans, and I felt all my years of practice had been wasted. Even worse, I watched some of my best friends excluded from the game lineup and we were not able to share the Olympic experience together.

However, as the event began, my perspective shifted as I cooperated and connected with North Korean athletes. We quickly developed mutual respect and feelings of friendship as we worked together to overcome a situation which was challenging and unexpected for all of us. For us, hockey was the language that both sides could understand and connect over. Through this team, a group of athletes from different worlds were temporarily united



through their shared dedication to sport, and a divided Korea was symbolically united. From reflecting on my experience over the years, this experience has become one of the most meaningful experiences of my life and even changed my perception towards North Korea. I came to realize that for me, the greatest power of the Olympic experience was in the human connection, understanding, respect, and friendship which is made possible by the universal love of sport.

My experience also taught me that interest in international sporting events quickly dies down after the event and athletes are not often questioned about events that happened years in the past. However, it is critical to file and learn from athletes' experiences so that we can learn from the past and design events for the future which are aligned with our values and goals. I believe there is enormous potential for the Olympics to promote peace and friendship between individuals and nations. My hope is that this research informs the future development of the YOG by shining a light on youth athletes' experiences.

# **Chapter 1. Introduction**

## **1.1. Background**

The modern Olympic Games have captivated people worldwide as a long-standing celebration, embodying educational values such as respect, honesty, and cooperation that are according to the ideals of "Olympism" (Ubaidulloev, 2018; Spaaij, 2012; Pigman, 2010). With its origins in ancient Olympia, Greece, the Olympic Games were initially established to resolve conflicts between nations and foster peace. This historical foundation underscores the primary objective of the Olympics: conveying the value of peace through sports. By extending the ancient concept of harmony on a global scale, the modern Olympics strive to uphold the values of Olympism and promote a peaceful society, as reiterated in the Olympic Charter (2006).

While the modern Olympics continue to hold their position as a cultural festival in today's society, concerns persist regarding the extent to which they fulfill the original vision advocated by Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games. Coubertin aimed to "educate youth through sports for the construction of a peaceful world" (United Nations, 1996). However, critics argue that the current Olympics have fallen victim to commercialization, political influences, and nationalism, thereby compromising their noble ideals. Kidd (1996) contends that the Olympics

have transformed into a highly lucrative entertainment industry, generating billions of dollars in advertising revenue through sports content. Supporting this perspective, Ubaidulloev (2018) and Brown (2012) highlights the political and diplomatic dramas and conflicts surrounding the Olympics like boycotts in 1980 and 1984 during the Cold War, Hitler's political propaganda in 1936, and political terrorism in the Olympic village in 1972. Nordhagen and Krieger (2019) laments that the intense nationalism displayed by nations, which has turned the Olympics into a platform where countries compete for prestige through medal counts, often at the expense of athletes' well-being and ethical practices such as doping. Additionally, Loland (1995) suggests that values like friendship and mutual respect have seemingly diminished in importance, raising questions about the Olympics' commitment to promoting peace. These actions have served to undermine Coubertin's original ideals for the Games.

In response to such criticism, the IOC acted in April 2007 by introducing the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) as a means to re-emphasize Coubertin's ideals. By inviting athletes aged 15-18 to participate, the IOC aimed to both pioneer new ground and revive the original essence of the Olympic festival (Judge et al., 2009; Slater, 2009). Rogge emphasized that the YOG should not be viewed as mini version of the Olympics. Instead, he

highlighted that the primary objectives of the YOG are rooted in genuine educational endeavors. The YOG aims to inspire global youth to engage in sports, embrace the values of the Olympics, and act as ambassadors for the Olympic movement (IOC, 2007). By integrating competitive sports and educational initiatives, the YOG and its Culture and Education Program (CEP, now known as "Learn & Share") provide young athletes with the opportunity to engage in both athletic and educational pursuits (Gonzales, 2021). This combination equips them to effectively address challenges related to commercialism, politics, and nationalism often encountered in the adult Olympics (Nordhagen & Krieger, 2019). Additionally, the YOG emphasizes the practical application of Olympism's values (Torres, 2010) in a cohesive and harmonious manner.

However, despite these efforts, the YOG itself, like the adult Olympics or even more vulnerable, faces the risk of not effectively promoting Olympism and instead being influenced by factors that hinder the desirable growth of young athletes (Krieger and Kristiansen, 2016) since the core focus of the athletes' sport experience in the YOG lies in striving for personal improvement and achieving a commendable performance (MacIntosh et al., 2019). Particularly, the unresolved issue of intense nationalism in the YOG raises concerns that a nationalistic mentality among youth athletes may

coexist with problems such as abuse and commercialization (Martinkova, 2012).

Criticism regarding the prevalence of intense nationalism in the Olympics and YOG is frequently raised. However, there are indications that Olympism is not dead and that the Olympic principles of sport for peace shine through the nationalism in a number of ways and initiatives, including through the Olympic torch relay, the UN General Assembly resolutions on the Olympic Ideal adopted prior to every Olympics and some novel examples of bi-national and trans-national teams. One example of a bi-national team that truly reflected the principles of Olympism is the unified inter-Korean women's ice hockey team at the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. This team brought together players from two divergent and nationally divided countries, South and North Korea, providing an opportunity to internally experience the restoration of Olympism, impact positively on the relations between the two countries and leave a lasting impression of unity for the world to witness. As demonstrated in Bae's (2022) study on the joint team athletes' experiences, the female ice hockey players who participated in the Pyeongchang Olympics through the unified team with North Korea had a contrasting experience compared to past competitions in the World Championships where they played as separate nations. By being part of a

unified team during the Olympic period, they were able to experience the values of Olympism firsthand and also make a significant contribution to an external political peace process through their example of sports cooperation. The experience of the North-South joint team athletes exemplifies the potential for restoring Olympism through collaboration between nations as one team within the Olympics.

The unified inter-Korean team at the Pyeongchang Olympics was a unique occurrence resulting from the conciliatory policy of the Moon Jae-in administration in South Korea and the political shift in attitude from North Korea during that period. The primary objectives of this initiative were to foster a reduction in military and political tensions and to enhance relations between the two countries. In this, the initiative was very successful. It opened up a diplomatic process between the two countries leading to the first summit meetings of the leaders in over a decade. The three Inter-Korean Summit meetings held in 2018 built on the good will generated by the Winter Olympics peace initiative and produced promising agreements. However, it would be a mistake to regard bi-national teams, including the very influential North-South Korea team, as the only type of initiative to restore Olympism. Indeed, the formation of bi-national Olympic teams depends on the initiative and political considerations of the countries forming such teams. They are not

established very often, are generally limited to specific occasions or events, and involve only a small number of sportspeople participating in such bi-national teams (Jung, 2013; Lee, 2021). Nonetheless, a new solution was presented through an innovative proposal, in YOG, the "Mixed NOC" format has been implemented in various sports, allowing athletes from different countries to come together as a unified team and compete (Torres, 2010; Parry, 2012). For example, in ice hockey, this format was first introduced in the Lausanne 2020 YOG as a 3-on-3 format. These new initiatives provide an opportunity for young athletes from diverse nations to collaborate, share their cultures, and gain a deeper understanding of each other's differences (González, 2021; Wilski et al., 2012). By doing so, it helps to reduce the influence of nationalism in competition and promotes mutual understanding, friendship, and unity among different cultures (Peter & Schnitzer's, 2015; Wilski et al., 2012). Therefore, the 'Mixed-NOC' format holds the potential to be a general and sustainable solution for restoring the values of Olympism.

In order to gain a deep understanding of the Mixed NOC Teams, the aim of this study is to examine the experiences and significance of athletes who participated in the Mixed NOC ice hockey team at the Lausanne 2020 YOG, based on their personal experiences. By analyzing the meaning of this

new format within the context of the YOG and the broader Olympic movement, a potential for restoring the values of Olympism will be obtained. This research is particularly relevant in these years considering the current perspective that the Mixed-NOC format will not be implemented in the upcoming Gangwon 2024 YOG. Thus, it serves as an opportunity to shed light on the significance and possibilities associated with the Mixed-NOC format.

Ultimately, this research seeks to explore the experiences and significance of athletes participating in the Mixed NOC and examine how their perception of Olympism has been influenced. Additionally, by analyzing the potential and limitations of the Mixed-NOC format, valuable insights can be gained for devising strategies to promote Olympism in future YOG.

## **1.2. Significance of Study**

This research holds considerable significance as it sheds light on a relatively unexplored area: the experiences of athletes participating in the Mixed NOC ice hockey event at the Lausanne 2020 Youth Winter Olympic Games. Given that the Mixed NOC event has been excluded from the Gangwon 2024 Winter YOG, there might be limited opportunities to gather insights from similar events in the future.



The study delves into the lived experiences of athletes who took part in the girls' Mixed NOC ice hockey event at the 2020 Lausanne YOG. Currently, there is a lack of research focusing on the perceptions and experiences of YOG athletes, and within this realm of inquiry, there is scarce literature on the Mixed NOC events, which have been featured in every YOG from 2010 to 2020. Therefore, this research contributes novel insights into an underexplored topic within the context of Olympic studies.

The backdrop of Olympic values adds depth to this research, as the primary focus is on how well the athlete experiences align with the objectives of the YOG. Given the decision of the IOC to eliminate all Mixed NOC competitions from the official medal events starting in 2022, as part of a broader transition towards prioritizing elite competition, this study gains urgency. With the future of Mixed NOC events remaining uncertain, it becomes crucial to conduct research on their impact to comprehend both the costs and benefits associated with such events. The knowledge derived from this study can serve as a guiding resource for future planning and evolution of the YOG, helping to shape its direction effectively.

### **1.3. Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of girls' ice hockey players' who participated in the Mixed NOC event at the Lausanne 2020 YOG and analyze its significance. Then, the study aims to explore how these experiences influenced their awareness of Olympism.

#### **1.4. Research Question**

**RQ1:** How were the experiences of Lausanne 2020 YOG athletes participating in the Mixed NOC event?

**RQ2:** What is the significance of these experiences?

**RQ3:** What lessons does the experience of participating in Mixed NOC teams teach the YOG athletes?

**RQ4:** How did the experience of participating in Mixed NOC teams influence the YOG athletes' perception and understanding of Olympic values?

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

This chapter provides a literature review that encompasses several key topics related to the research. In the first part of the literature review, it examines the concept of Olympism and its historical background with the core values such as excellence, respect, and friendship. Furthermore, it explores the original intention of the Olympic Games to promote peace and resolve conflicts between nations. It also addresses the criticisms surrounding the modern Olympics, including the challenges caused by commercial, political, and nationalistic interests.

Then, it focuses onto the YOG in the second part of the review. It describes why IOC initiated and came up with the goals and objectives of YOG which include promoting Olympism on a broader scale as well as addressing issues arising from the same line as Olympic and Culture and Education Program (CEP) in YOG.

In the final part of the review, the concept of Mixed National Olympic Committee teams (Mixed NOC) is discussed. The review explains what the term "Mixed NOC" means, both in a general dictionary sense and in the context of the researcher's interpretation. It also explores the reasons behind introducing this format, highlighting its potential to lessen the influence of nationalism in sports competitions and encourage international cooperation.

Additionally, the review examines past cases which the Mixed NOC format had been introduced and briefly discuss the outcome and significance.

Overall, this chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of Olympism, the YOG, and the Mixed NOC. It offers insights into their initiatives, aims, challenges, and potential for restoring the values of Olympism.

## **2.1. Olympism**

### **2.1.1. Olympic Games and Olympism**

The Olympic Games have their roots in ancient Greece. According to Smith (2010), these games date back to the 8th century BC, and were held in the city of Olympia as part of a religious festival in honor of Zeus, the king of the gods. The Olympic Games were considered sacred and were held every four years, known as the Olympiad. As Jones (2015) points out, "the Olympic Games were a celebration of unity, athletic competition, and physical excellence" (p. 25).

During the early Olympic Games, competitions were primarily athletic, consisting of running, discus and javelin throwing, wrestling, and boxing matches. According to Davis (2018), "athletes competed for glory and honor, seeking to prove their worth and physical ability before the gods" (p.

42). The winners of the Olympic Games were honored as heroes and received olive wreaths as a symbol of their victory.

However, the ancient Olympic Games were not just a sporting competition. In addition to promoting peace and reconciliation between the Greek city-states through the Olympic truce, these games had a deeper purpose. According to Thomas (2012), "the Olympic Games also sought to promote a balanced and harmonious way of life, in which mind, body and spirit developed together" (p. 68). This holistic approach to the ancient Olympic Games resembles the purpose of modern Olympism, which seeks not only to foster sporting excellence, but also to promote values such as friendship, respect, and culture.

Olympism, as stated by the IOC (2020), aims to "build a better world through sport practiced in accordance with Olympic principles" (p. 3). By linking the origins of the ancient Olympic Games to the purpose of modern Olympism, we can see how the ancient Greeks' vision of a balanced and harmonious life is still relevant today. The Olympic Games are not only a platform for athletic competition, but also a means to promote peace, unity and the comprehensive development of individuals and societies.

The concept of Olympism emerged during the transition from traditional to modern society, characterized by significant economic, social,

and cultural changes (Koulouri, 2006). Due to this reappearance, the concept of bringing back the Olympic Games did not remain in the background as it had up until that point, but rather began to appear more frequently and in more and more countries until it was finally implemented in 1894.

Coubertin, the founder of the current Olympic Movement, had a strong desire to use sports to improve the world. He thought that sports could unite people, put an end to conflict, and encourage fair competition without bias or cheating. In the end, Coubertin aimed to demonstrate how sports can improve society by fostering friendship, teamwork, and fair play (World Olympians Association, 2022). According to Parry (2006), “Coubertin understood toward the end of the 19th century, that sport was about to become a major growth point in popular culture—and that, as physical activity, it was potentially universal, providing a means of contact and communication across cultures”.

Olympism is formally defined in the Olympic Charter, established by the International Olympic Committee (IOC, 2020). According to Coubertin's original definition:

Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole, the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for

universal fundamental ethical principles  
(International Olympic Committee, 2020).

Coubertin insisted that the Olympic Games were more than a collection of competitions that drew athletes from all over the world. The Olympic Movement and the Olympic Games are renowned for their desire to have an impact on people beyond the confines of sporting competition. According to the Olympic Charter, they aim to ‘contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced in accordance with Olympism and its values (Koenigstorfer & Preuss, 2018).

#### *Core values of Olympism*

Then, a set of ideals that are applicable both on the playing field and in daily life are created in the pursuit of this goal and the other "basic principles of Olympism." The following three Olympic values have been identified by the IOC (2016):

**Table 1**

#### *Core Values of Olympism*

Excellence	In the Olympics, this value means trying your hardest and doing your best, whether in sports or in everyday life. It's not just about winning, but also about setting personal goals and working
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	<p>determinedly to achieve them. It's about improving yourself and using your strength, determination, and intelligence together to succeed.</p>
Respect	<p>In the Olympics, this value is an ethical principle that should guide everyone involved in the Olympic programs. It involves respecting oneself, others, the rules, and the environment. It's about fair play and avoiding doping in sports.</p>
Friendship	<p>The Olympic Movement emphasizes the importance of fostering connections and understanding among people, regardless of gender. This value promotes the idea of creating a more peaceful and improved world through solidarity, teamwork, joy, and optimism in sports. The Olympic Games serve as an inspiration for humanity to overcome political, economic, gender, racial, or religious divides and build friendships despite these differences. Athletes demonstrate this value by forming lasting bonds with their</p>



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teammates and even their opponents.

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Chatziefstathiou (2012) also agree with the philosophy of Olympism but added the importance of culture and education in Coubertin's idea. She considers that it's important to remember that Olympism was associated with culture and education as well as sport from the time it first emerged in the late nineteenth century. It is crucial to realize that Olympism in all of these circumstances is not just seen as a static and limited set of ideals, but also as a philosophy with the adaptability to be applied to a variety of contexts that go beyond the precise definition of "Olympic education."

In fact, Olympism's philosophy has always had a close relationship with education. According to his biographers, Coubertin believed that the greatest way to help his beloved France get out of its political and social crises was through educational reform. He was extremely concerned about the rising urbanization and industrialization that led to violence and poverty. Kidd (1996) emphasizes that there was always an ideological objective behind the Olympic Games' revival—it was never just an effort to recapture the past.

Additionally, Coubertin “intended to advance a new vision of sport and the healthy body as a means to solve some of the apparent problems of modernity” according to Muller (2000). He believed that education was "the

key to "human happiness"" and that it should be the solution to "the world's increased speed of change." His sincere desire for change prompted him to recognize Olympic ideals as a teaching strategy that could address the issues of the day.

Therefore, we should see Olympism as more than a lifestyle, we should highlight the educational value, change and impact that this philosophy has. As Chatziefstathiou (2012) argues today Olympism should:

(1) reflect the broad range of educational opportunities outside the strict environment of school in everyday life, (2) focus beyond young people to the wider community, (3) express the complexities of Olympic practices which should also be reflected in an understanding of what Olympism means today, and (4) demonstrate the importance of partnerships for generating value legacies linked with Olympism and the Olympic Games. (p.396).

#### 2.1.2. Contribution of Olympic Games and Olympism to the World

The Olympic Games, as the highest expression of Olympism, not only focus on sports competition but also aim to promote peace and resolve conflicts between nations through sport. According to Naul et al. (2016), "the Olympic Games have been used as a platform for dialogue and diplomacy between countries in conflict situations" (p. 112). Olympism, with its core values of friendship, respect, and excellence, seeks to transcend political and

cultural barriers, fostering cooperation and mutual understanding among nations.

A prominent example of the impact of Olympism in promoting peace through the Olympic Games is the joint participation of North and South Korea in the PyeongChang 2018 Olympic Winter Games. This historic collaboration was considered a major milestone in the pursuit of peace on the Korean peninsula and a tangible manifestation of the unifying power of Olympism. As Kim (2019) points out, "the Olympic Games provided a neutral stage for both nations to come together and demonstrate their desire for peace and reconciliation" (p. 45). This demonstrates how Olympism, through the Olympic Games, becomes a vehicle for sports diplomacy, facilitating dialogue and fostering peace between nations in conflict.

Therefore, Olympism, in its current understanding, serves as a valuable educational tool. Sport managers must possess the capability to promote the educational, social, and moral values of Olympism, thereby maximizing the potential learning opportunities that sports can offer (Culpan, 2019). As mentioned before, Olympic education should be understood more broadly beyond the strict sense of education and encompass a series of actions and initiatives which can take place in different contexts and for different tasks (Chatziefstathiou, 2012).

Parry (2007) asserts that Olympism has the potential to redefine our perception of sport in education. Rather than viewing sport as a mere physical activity, it should be recognized as purposeful physical activity undertaken by individuals who are educated and ethically conscious, driven by an ethical ethos, and aiming to cultivate virtuous dispositions. The IOC has adopted five educational themes to help young people learn about Olympic values and shape their behavior. These themes are based on the three core Olympic values and have been developed by the IOC to enhance our understanding of Olympism.

**Table 2**

*Olympic Educational Themes*

Joy of effort	Young people develop and practice physical, behavioral and intellectual skills by challenging themselves and each other in physical activities, movement, games and sport.
Fair play	Fair play was originally a concept developed in sport, but it has since also been applied in many different ways and contexts beyond the field of play. Learning fair play behavior in sport can lead

	to the development and reinforcement of similar behavior in one's everyday life.
Respect for others	When young people who live in a multicultural world learn to accept and respect diversity, and practice personal peaceful behavior, they promote peace and international understanding.
Pursuit of excellence	A focus on excellence can help young people to make positive, healthy choices, and strive to become the best that they can be in whatever they do.
Balance between body, will and mind	Learning takes place in the whole body, not just in the mind, and physical literacy and learning through movement contribute to the development of both moral and intellectual learning.

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Adapted from (IOC, 2016)

### 2.1.3. Challenges of Olympism in Modern Days

Despite its original intentions, Olympism as a philosophy has suffered from much controversy and challenges to face. One of the criticisms is in

relation to the ideals of Olympism and the discordance that is seen in the Olympic Games. For example, Maguire et al. (2008) argues that,

The 'legacy' of the modern games is consumption. The legacy 'message' becomes embedded in a broader process of commerce whereby the media/marketing/advertising/ corporate nexus is concerned less with the values underpinning Olympism per se and more with how such values can help build markets, construct and enhance brand awareness, and create 'glocal' consumers/identities (p.2041).

In real life, the problem is deeper, many athletes spend hours, months and years of hard training in order to reach gold medals. Hence, according to Barker, Barker-Ruchti, Rynne and Lee (2012) the purpose of Olympism as education might not be achieved. Utilizing the notion of situated learning, they examined three former Olympic athletes (Patrick, Lisa and Michelle) accounts of learning to become "experts" in their respective sporting communities thanks to Olympism. According to them it is no secret that an Olympic performance takes work. The study revealed that while Olympic success requires substantial effort, it is not always evident if individuals truly derive joy from their exertions, especially when effort does not directly correlate with achievement. Despite his coach's best efforts to get Patrick to enjoy training, Patrick's story demonstrated the significance of winning rewards and receiving praise. He acknowledged that he had come to respect

effort and that the importance of passion and delight had been underscored, but he insisted that, had he not won an Olympic gold, he most likely would not have been content with his sporting career. Michelle made mention of enjoyment in her memoirs, and it appears that she was raised to value hard work. Lisa made probably the most reference to effort but the least to joy. For Lisa, adjectives like “inhumane” countered any suggestion that the substantial investment she made was joyous.

These scenarios highlight the complex nature of concepts such as "work" and "pleasure" within the Olympic experience, challenging the seemingly one-dimensional assertions of Coubertin (2000) and the Olympic Charter. They demonstrate how ideas like recognition and dominance, for instance, can permeate athletes' conceptual frameworks while not being explicitly stated in the Olympic Charter or even being a goal of the coaches' planned instruction. In relation to nationalism, another point of concern arises. As criticized by Jung (2013), the intense nationalism of nations has distorted the Olympics into arenas where nations seek to elevate their status through winning medals. Nations are also accused of subjecting athletes to rigorous training regimens and encouraging unethical behaviors like doping.

Furthermore, commercial, and nationalistic interests have undermined the Olympic Games' original goals. The Olympics are under pressure to put

entertainment first due to the massive amount of advertising revenue they generate. This desire for success has resulted in instances of cheating motivated by the desire for medals and the exploitation of athletes in training programs (Pound, 2012; Brown et al., 2016). Due to the constant pursuit of victory, there have been numerous cheating scandals, and the Olympics have been mired in political and diplomatic disputes as a result. Also, some authors criticize the excessive competition on the Olympic Games, for instance, according to Loland (1995), values such as friendship and mutual respect may not hold much significance for athletes when their primary focus is on achieving victory and reaping commercial benefits.

From an economic perspective, Pringle (2012) conducted research on the effects of the Olympic Games and Olympism. The study explored the government justifications for the substantial expenses required to host an Olympic Games, like the estimated £9 billion spent on London 2012. According to Pringle, these investments were often driven by the expectation that "Olympism" would bring societal benefits. However, the author believed that Olympic thinking was flawed. Pringle examined the historical discrepancy between the "myths" and principles of the Olympic movement. He contested the IOC's claim that sport could help promote Olympic ideals and create a more peaceful and civilized world. By analyzing different



perspectives, including economic cases like Athens 2004 and London 2012, political cases like Beijing 2008 and Rio de Janeiro 2016, and sport policy, focusing on the elite sports movement in Australia in 2000, Pringle concluded that the spectacle surrounding the Olympic Games had transformed them into prominent platforms for protests, political disruptions, and even instances of violence.

As a result, Olympism is currently facing a significant challenge in returning to its original values. This calls for making changes and finding new solutions. One potential solution on the horizon could be the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) acting as a "forerunner" of the Olympic Games, embodying, and upholding its true values.

## **2.2. Youth Olympic Games (YOG)**

The IOC as one of the ways to restore the Olympic Games' founding ideals in response to recent criticism. The YOG are one of the initiatives that can be viewed as a part of these efforts. They were conceptualized in 2007 by Jacques Rogge, the former IOC President, with the aim of motivating young people from all over the world to engage in sports, embrace the Olympic values, and serve as ambassadors of the Olympic movement (IOC, 2007). By including neighboring nations that might not have the opportunity to compete

in the Olympic Games and thereby promoting Olympism on a larger scale, the YOG seeks to extend the Olympic movement beyond the youth or adult Olympic Games.

The YOG is an organized sport event hosted by the IOC for young athletes of age between 15 and 18. While the structural outlines of the YOG follow that of the Olympic Games, the program content of the YOG is designed to focus on the young elite athletes with a blend of sporting, cultural, and educational experience (International Olympic Committee, 2016). Both the games, consisting of the Summer and Winter games, are held every four years, only that the Summer YOG follow in the same year of the Winter Olympic Games and vice versa. The YOG ideally holds the potential to alleviate persistent issues derived from commercial, political, and nationalist interests that arise in the adult Olympics (Torres, 2010, and Krieger, 2012).

#### 2.2.1. History, vision and objectives of YOG

The concept of YOG was first introduced in 1998 by an Austrian engineer Johann Rosenzopf. Global concerns for decreasing interest of sports and increasing rate of childhood obesity amongst youth sparked the idea of this multi-sporting event (International Olympic Committee, 2019). The IOC quickly took heed of the concept as the youth version of the Olympic Games

could draw participation of the youths and allow young athletes to embody Olympism in the early stage of their careers. As Nordhagen & Lesjø (2019) mentioned by the time YOG was proposed, problems in the IOC became urgent at the time Rogge entered his position. “The challenge was to connect the past, present, and future in ways that could strengthen the organization’s distinct mission. This task then is for leadership as a politician and ‘statesman’ of the organization.”

In addition, there was a need that this new Olympic event contributed to the legitimacy of IOC. On one hand, the internal legitimacy was obtained by strengthening its value image and by reminding the members of the organization’s historical mission and ideology. On the other hand, external legitimacy was requested, specially, because the new media environment, which may endanger both the IOC's revenue from traditional television and the appeal of the Olympics among young people. Future alternative games might appeal to the youngsters more. The IOC's choice to promote its youth agenda by creating a new event should also fulfill other requirements for legitimacy. But if it succeeds in the long run, it might help the Olympics maintain their status and develop a powerful commercial brand (Nordhagen & Lesjø, 2019).

Jacques Rogge (the former president of the IOC) and the IOC committee approved and formally introduced the YOG at the 119th IOC session in Guatemala City on July 6, 2007. In 2008, the IOC announced Singapore and Innsbruck (Austria) the hosts of the inaugural Summer and Winter Olympic Games, respectively. The first Summer YOG took off in Singapore from August 14 to 26, 2010 followed by the Innsbruck Winter YOG from January 13 to 22, 2012.

In order to alleviate prior global concerns, it appeared the idea of organizing a multi-sporting event for young athletes, however it was initially considered inadequate and insufficient in reasons. Authors expressed reluctance stating it could be another Olympic Games for athletes earlier in their careers. Potential drawbacks also underlie that were often reported in the Olympic Games such as drug use, burnout, and over commitment (Judge et al., 2009). Wong (2011) remarked, 'by mirroring the adult Games at the youth level, the IOC walks a fine line between celebrating what sport should be and succumbing to what has become a sporting model dominated by excessive competition' (p. 1839). Hanstad et al. (2013) are concern for "underlying processes and rationales at play (e.g., size, venue needs, teen market, young athletes' perceived importance placed on winning) that will pose challenges to the YOG's success and survival." (p. 322). Nevertheless, the first two

Winter YOG were chosen based on the previous hosts of the Olympic Games, further continuing the Olympic legacy.

Though the values of the YOG seem like the benchmark of the Olympic Games values which are typically considered to be, peace, patience, fair play, unity, friendship and universality, there is relative salience additional to the youth event. The format of the YOG would parallel the Olympic Games, but more likely presented in educational platform rather than solely for competition (Judge et al., 2009). In an effort to distinguish the YOG from the Olympic Games, Jacques Rogge justified the vision of the YOG is “to inspire young people around the world to participate in sport and encourage them to adopt and live by the Olympic value and become ambassadors of Olympism” (2016). Here, Rogge again advocated one of the key responsibilities of the Olympics was to promote Olympism, by transmitting the Olympic values and internationalism (Krieger, 2012). The IOC further expanded, “The YOG are structured around a “Compete, Learn & Share” experience. This is a unique blend of sporting, cultural and educational activities that comprise the YOG “product” and are offered to the YOG target groups of young elite athletes, the athletes’ entourage (coaches and parents) and the local youth” (YOG-1). Hanstad et al. (2013) pointed out, “one of the most visible differences between the OG and YOG is the

additional learning element introduced through the mandatory Cultural and Education Programme (CEP), which is based around five themes: Olympism, skills development, well-being and healthy lifestyle, social responsibility, and expression” (p. 317).

#### 2.2.2. Features of YOG

The YOG aim primarily to inspire young people around the world to participate in sport, encourage the adoption of Olympic values and make young people ambassadors of Olympism. Firstly, the IOC seeks to motivate young people to engage in sports activities through YOG. These games provide a platform for young athletes to demonstrate their talent and challenge themselves in high-level competitions. Secondly, YOGs are based on Olympic values, such as peace, friendship, fair play and solidarity. The goal of the IOC is to convey these values to young participants, thereby promoting a sports culture based on ethics and mutual respect. Thirdly, YOGs seek to train young athletes as Olympic ambassadors, capable of disseminating the ideals and principles of the Olympic Movement around their communities and throughout globally. This involves inspiring other young people to participate in sport, promote inclusion and act as positive change factors in society.

YOG can be a way to contribute to embody Olympism. Over the years, the IOC has committed itself to improving programs and carrying out new activities for athletes. One of the ways is through global participation of young athletes, according of Grayson (2021), the YOG provide a unique opportunity for young athletes from all over the world to come together and compete. This global participation fosters a sense of unity and international cooperation. Athletes have the chance to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds, experiencing the multicultural aspect of Olympism firsthand. They develop an appreciation for and respect for various cultures, traditions, and viewpoints as a result of competing with athletes from various nations. By exposing athletes to international participation at the YOG, they hope to foster a sense of togetherness and understanding on a global scale as well as long-lasting friendships and connections between athletes.

On a cultural and educational point of view, it is important to mention the CEP implemented during the YOG as an effective platform for education, inviting athlete role models and sports ambassadors to propagate the vision, positivity, and Olympic spirit to the youth. According to Peters and Schnitzer (2015), it is an "important platform for inter-personal interaction," emphasizing its function in fostering communication between athletes from various nations and strengthening teams (p. 127). Similar to this, Ferreira et

al. (2017) claim that the CEP gave athletes the chance to participate in educational activities outside of their sport, enhancing their personal and social development.

In the same line, Wong (2012) stated that the CEP implementation contributed to cultural and educational outcomes provided by the Olympic Values. The freedom to pick and choose which activity they would like to participate played an important role. Also, athletes were required to stay throughout the 12 days, thereby allowing them plenty of time before and after their competitions to participate in these activities and interact with other youth athletes. An opportunity taken here was the introduction of Olympic Education Program (OEP) to local primary and secondary schools as well as pre-university colleges and institutions in Singapore in 2009. This allows to teach local students about the Olympic Movement and Olympic Values.

According to Hanstad et al. (2013), the YOG provided an opportunity to introduce a new educational program that went beyond the traditional definition of Olympic Education. The YOG, although smaller in size and with fewer sponsors and media coverage compared to the Olympic Games, allowed for the showcasing of innovative programs that would have been challenging to implement in the larger event. The authors suggest that the



YOG were closer to the ideals of the Olympic movement, highlighting their adaptability and alignment with Olympic principles. (Hanstad et al., 2013).

The YOG's acceptance by the members of the IOC has been praised, which emphasizes how important it is to represent Olympism. The majority of IOC members praised the YOG's ability to engage young people in sports and physical activities and saw the event as a crucial initiative for teaching the next generation about Olympic ideals (Nordhagen & Lesjø, 2019).

It is discovered that the IOC satisfied various stakeholders of the YOG through 'culture and education' as well as 'improvement and competition'. The vision of the YOG encloses Olympism, as the learning is not only limited to competitive sport format, but also "all the other activities in which an athlete partakes" (MacIntosh, Parent, Culver, 2022, p. 3).

In conclusion, the YOG present significant opportunities for embodying Olympism. The global participation of young athletes from diverse backgrounds fosters unity, international cooperation, and a deeper understanding of different cultures. Through the Culture and Education Program (CEP), the YOG provides an educational platform for athletes to engage in activities beyond their sports, enhancing their personal and social development but also making them competitive. The CEP's focus on Olympic values and the introduction of the Olympic Education Program (OEP) in local

schools further promote the ideals of Olympism among the youth. The YOG's adaptability and alignment with Olympic principles have been recognized, showcasing its ability to showcase innovative programs that may be challenging to implement in larger events.

### 2.2.3. Athletes' reaction to CEP

In Kreiger's (2012) study, which focused on eight German athletes participating in the 2010 Singapore YOG, doubts were raised about the effectiveness of CEP (Cultural and Education Program). While the IOC reported significant positive outcomes from CEP as perceived by the athletes, Kreiger's research indicated that there were limited cultural and educational values derived from the organized and planned activities within the program. Instead, the athletes seemed to learn and exchange diverse cultures directly through the YOG itself.

Loland's (2014) study also revealed that Coubertin's intention was to foster internationalism and peaceful exchange of cultures through informal experiences in the Olympics. According to Coubertin, participating in common sporting activities and meeting others would enable individuals to better understand each other and contribute to international peace-making (Martinkova, 2012).

Kristiansen's (2015) research explored the psychological perspective of nine Norwegian YOG team members regarding their CEP experiences. Similar to Kreiger's (2012) findings, these athletes displayed little awareness of the cultural mission of the YOG. Instead, some athletes felt burdened by the prospect of participating in CEP activities amidst their busy competition schedules.

#### 2.2.4. Challenges YOG faced to embody Olympism

Despite the beneficial effects of the YOG, it faced challenges that limited the scope of Olympism to traditional sporting activities and created tensions among players and coaches. Peters and Schnitzer (2015) highlight in an interview with a Switzerland coach that the YOG, for some participants, served as another platform to prove their abilities and achieve success in sports competitions (p. 125). The competitive nature of the games and the expectations placed on young athletes can lead to increased pressure, overtraining, dropout rates, and unethical practices (Hanstad et al., 2013, p. 316). While the YOG aims to foster a sense of honor and responsibility, it is crucial to balance the competitive environment with the well-being and development of the young participants. In other words, young athletes are even more focused on the competition and results as same as the Olympians.

Also, media attraction and commercial sponsorships can be detrimental for the young athletes. Instead of focusing on the true values of Olympism, young participants might feel attracted by the prizes and economic benefits from the YOG. As MacIntosh et al. (2022) mentioned the experiences and development of young athletes within the Olympic movement can be greatly influenced by commercial interests. Beyond financial considerations, commercialization has a profound impact on many facets of their athletic journey. Understanding the broader implications of commercialization within the Olympic movement is essential for understanding how commercial interests shape their experiences.

First, young athletes are vulnerable to financial pressures brought on by commercial interests. Not only the financial support, but also sponsorships and endorsements play important roles in athletes' careers. It may result the athletes to put their marketability first that can change career paths and jeopardize long-term development. Overall, financial factors may have impact on their choices causing the young athletes to prioritize marketable and lucrative ways of sports over true passions.

Second, pressures related to performance can be produced by the pursuit of commercial interests. Athletes may experience increased pressure to perform well in their sports because of their sponsorship or endorsement

agreements. These demands may cause them to place more emphasis on immediate success and impede their overall athletic development. The importance of skill development, personal growth, and enjoyment of the sport may be overshadowed if performance is prioritized for financial gain.

Additionally, commercial interests may influence the training of the young athletes. Athletes with lucrative sponsorship deals are subject to obligations set by sponsors. Certain commitments include taking part in particular activities, supporting specific brands or products, and maintaining a set of branding image. Constant exposures to commercial interests interfere the training and competition experiences of the young athletes in their early stages of careers.

Another challenge was mentioned by IOC members regarding the meaning of the YOG for countries and athletes from developing countries. According to Nordhagen and Lesjø (2019), there is a perception that the significance of the YOG may differ for developing countries compared to developed countries (Nordhagen & Lesjø, 2019). There are two main issues being discussed. The first issue is about youth athletes from developing countries not having enough resources and support to fully participate and perform well at the YOG. The other issue is a debate about whether developing countries have a low chance of hosting the YOG compared to

developed countries, possibly due to factors like infrastructure and economic stability.

According to a study conducted by Schnitzer et al. (2018) in a previous host city of YOG, the authors discussed the challenges of promoting Olympic Values among young individuals from diverse backgrounds. The reason lies in the fact that personal beliefs have a stronger impact on developing these values compared to sports events alone. It implies individual beliefs play a significant role in shaping one's values, and sports events alone may have limited effectiveness in fostering teenagers' perceptions of OV. However, when participation campaigns are organized alongside sporting events, there is a potential to generate widespread interest and engagement. It is important for decision-makers and practitioners in this field to identify and effectively involve the target audience for such events. It is crucial to recognize that intervention programs, such as educational initiatives, should not be isolated efforts solely focused on spreading Olympic principles and ideals.

According to Wong (2012), based on the experience of Singapore 2010, one of the shortcomings of the event was the commitment of volunteers in the later stages and the lack of future plans for their involvement. The author noted that the participation of volunteers declined as the event

progressed. The report highlighted the absence of a succession strategy for utilizing volunteers after the Games. Planning is crucial because many members of the host community often experience a deep sense of loss or post-Games depression. Without an immediate plan for volunteer activities, people's interest and engagement will diminish.

The report emphasized the importance of taking action for volunteers, especially considering that they are mostly young individuals, as Olympism involves all participants in the YOG. It is necessary to ensure that these volunteers continue to promote Olympic Values.

## **2.3. Mixed NOC**

### **2.3.1. Concept and Purpose of Mixed NOC**

Another adaptation intended to target the Olympic values is the innovative Competitive Program. The YOG features a similar range of sports as the main Olympic Games but with fewer categories and exciting modifications. The primary aim is to promote cooperation and interaction among athletes from different countries, as emphasized by Subowo, an IOC member from Indonesia (IOC, 2009), and to attract a younger audience and revitalize the Olympic Movement. The aims to engage younger audience and consequently invigorate the Olympic Movement led to the introduction of

new competition formats in the Youth Olympic Games (Judge et al., 2009). Such formats include mixed-gender relays, teams with athletes from different National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and mixed genders. These adaptations reflect the innovative efforts of the International Sports Federations and were first implemented in the 2010 Summer YOG and 2012 Winter YOG.

Another reason for the appearance of these new competition formats, including mixed NOC was in part because the Olympic values of friendship and internationalism have been threatened by excessive nationalism in the Olympic Games, fueled by medals tables and international team rivalry (Parry, 2012). Many have argued that the competition in Olympic Games should be proceeded between individuals, not countries and do not let space for a excessive competition and nationalism. Unfortunately, this problem also affects the YOG. According to Parry (2012) one of the ways of countering the side effects of YOG is by doing mixed team events.

After its implementation, the outcomes showed favorable results in accordance with scholars' evaluation. For instance, girls and boys competed together in relays and athletes of different nations were put into teams, making an equal of opportunity for other players (Krieger, 2012).

Also, the number of disciplines supported the advancement of this concept. There were different disciplines doing Mixed NOC in YOG. For



example, in 2010 Mixed NOC team events were held in archery, athletics, cycling, equestrian, fencing, judo, modern pentathlon, swimming, table tennis, tennis and triathlon – changing in the structure of the Olympic Games.

In a study about the perception of the sport competition in Innsbruck 2012 Winter YOG, (Schnitzer et al., 2014) found that the new competitions and Mixed NOC competitions were awarded with higher scores of satisfaction. Specially the Figure Skating Mixed NOC Team Competition was one of the categories most valued by the spectators. The level of performance of the competing athletes played an essential role on the spectators' interest. Having the chance to watch world-class athletes in different teams raises the relevance of an event in the spectators' perception (Schnitzer et al., 2018).

### 2.3.2. “Mixed NOC Team” and “Unified Team”

A team that represents a collection of nations or regions that are politically or geographically united for a particular Olympic event is usually referred to as a unified team in the Olympic Games. This idea was mainly applied during the Cold War, when political conflicts and divisions kept nations apart. The idea was to allow athletes to compete regardless of the political environment while fostering unity and upholding the Olympic

Games' spirit. Since then, the Unified Team concept has not been widely used in subsequent Olympic Games, as most nations now compete individually based on their recognized national flags and anthems.

The first unified team appeared at the 1992 Summer Olympic Games comprised of countries from former Soviet Union and then followed by the Unified Team of Germany representing the East and West Germany in 1956. The latest unified team appeared in 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games under “the Unified Team of Korea” representing both South and North Korea in women’s ice hockey.

By juxtaposing the meaning of two terms, Mixed NOC and unified team, the unified team follows and resembles the characteristic and meaning of the Mixed NOC. Hence, in this context, the unified team is one type of Mixed NOC throughout this research.

### 2.3.3. Contribution of unified team embodying Olympism

Being part of a Unified Team provided a valuable opportunity for adopting new values. Wilski et al.'s (2012) research suggests that being part of such a team has a significantly positive impact on personal development. Participants improve their communication skills, gain confidence, share common experiences, learn about different people and places, and enhance

their physical fitness. A notable instance of a Unified Team occurred at the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympic Games, where athletes from North and South Korea competed together in ice hockey. Bae (2022) conducted research on this unified team, revealing meaningful values of Olympism within their collaboration.

Firstly, excellence, one of the core values of Olympism, was demonstrated by the athletes from the Korean Unified Team. Initially, the athletes had negative attitudes towards being suddenly grouped together as one team. Nevertheless, they united to give their best in the given circumstances. Although their primary goal was to achieve good results, they found meaning in the process itself, recognizing the importance of coming together and experiencing something special as a team (Bae, 2022).

Secondly, the value of respect was evident among the players. Athletes from North Korea faced challenges in adapting to the new systems, language, and sports drills of South Korea. However, they showed a willingness to overcome these challenges, diligently learning team drills and necessary languages overnight. They made daily progress towards the Olympics by sharing, training, and communicating together, but they also exercised caution and avoided sensitive political questions. This

demonstrated respect for oneself, for each other, for rules, and for the environment (Bae, 2022).

Lastly, the value of friendship was displayed by the athletes. Despite being a Unified Team formed through political agreement, players who came from different systems initially exhibited hostility towards each other. However, as time passed, they naturally came together as one team, sharing and understanding each other's cultures and showing mutual respect. They forged friendships just like any other peers, and when the Olympics ended, they shed tears of sadness, knowing they might never see each other again (Bae, 2022).

The 2018 PyeongChang Korean Unified Team exemplifies the effectiveness of a combined team consisting of athletes from two National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and how its unique circumstances promoted Olympism among the players in the team.

#### 2.3.4. Limitations of the Unified Team to embody Olympism

While Unified Teams have been implemented in certain instances, it is important to note that their limitations can affect their ability to fully embody the principles of Olympism.

Firstly, the establishment of Unified Teams can sometimes be seen as a temporary measure rather than a sustainable long-term solution. These teams are typically formed due to specific circumstances, such as political changes or conflicts, which necessitate the collaboration of athletes from multiple nations. Once the underlying issues are resolved or circumstances change, the need for Unified Teams may diminish. In this regards, Berg (2008) states that , the Olympics primarily serve as a platform for nations to display their glory, driven by politics and nationalism. Totalitarian regimes have used the Games to divert attention from human rights concerns and other political issues.

The formation of Unified Teams can be perceived as a coercive measure. As Bae (2022), mentioned, in the Korea ice hockey unified team, the union was made in a “mandatory” way. In some cases, the participation of athletes from different countries or regions in a Unified Team may not be a voluntary choice. Factors such as political pressure or the absence of viable alternatives can contribute to the formation of these teams. This coercion undermines the voluntary spirit of participation that is central to the Olympic Games.

Also, some political influences can be seem on the teams affiliated. As Lee (2021) affirms sport has a significant influence on national identity

and can trigger strong feelings of nationalism. For the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Games, the author identified four main types of nationalism represented through sport: unified Korean ethnic nationalism, South Korean state patriotism, postcolonial anti-imperialist nationalism, and cosmopolitan Korean identity. These different nationalist sentiments were competing for dominance in South Korean politics, and the Olympics provided a platform for each group to assert their sense of nationhood. The conclusion highlights that the Winter Olympics was not just a sports competition but also a battleground for different nationalist views.

Lastly, the application of Unified Teams is not universally applicable. The formation of Unified Teams is typically limited to specific situations where there is a shared political or geographical affiliation between the participating countries or regions. This restricts the inclusivity and representation of athletes from a broader range of nations in the Olympic Games.

### **Chapter 3. Method**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female ice hockey players who participated in the Mixed NOC event at the Lausanne 2020 Youth Olympic Games and analyze its significance. The researcher chose a qualitative research method approach. The theoretical background of qualitative research varies; however, qualitative studies seek to discover and understand the real world of human experience. According to Skinner et al. (2020), “Qualitative methods allow flexibility to probe initial participant responses, for example, the addition, exclusion, or wording of particular interview questions, or by asking why and how.” And based on the scarcity of information on youth athletes' experiences in the Mixed NOC team, it was appropriate to adopt qualitative research instead of quantitative research.

Qualitative research aims to discover and understand the real world of human experience, allowing for flexibility in probing initial participant responses. Considering the researcher's personal experience as a player of the Unified Team of Korea in PyeongChang 2018 Olympics, this approach was deemed suitable for providing deeper interpretations of similar experiences among participants.

For this study, interpretative phenomenology was the chosen research method. Following van Manen (1990), this approach embraces the broader

trends of phenomenological research while actively involving the researcher's interpretations. It is particularly suited when seeking to understand the lived experiences of individuals about a specific phenomenon. The research aims to deeply describe the individual lived experiences and meanings of female ice hockey players in the Mixed NOC Team at the Lausanne 2020 Youth Olympic Games, utilizing interpretative phenomenology for in-depth interpretation.

By employing van Manen's phenomenological research, the study is well-suited to conduct an "experiential exploration" of the players' experiences and meanings within the team context. Despite the subjective nature of the players' individual team experiences, the meanings attributed to these experiences form a suitable structure for investigation through interpretative phenomenology.

### **3.1. Participants**

The criteria for selecting participants were as follows: First, the participants from the Mixed NOC Teams who were able to freely contribute in the research through videocall with the researcher. Second, the participants were able to discuss their "Mixed NOC team" experiences and thoughts freely and without fabrication. Third, the participants were aware of the content and



purpose of this study and hence volunteered to take part of the research. Fourth, the participants were chosen from players of top 1st and 2nd (first two medal winning) teams and 4th and 5th (mid-ranked) teams and 7th, 8th (last two non-medal winning) teams among 8 Mixed NOC teams to have a variety in the participants' sample. Fifth, the players were selected in a criterion according to their national ranking (Top Ranked - Middle Ranked - Low Ranked) for balancing demographic background. Therefore, 3 players from 6 teams, total of 18 players were selected to examine the experience and meaning of Mixed NOC team.

The researcher set a list of 18 players from 104 players who met the above criteria as study participants. The 18 participants selected according to the criteria showed personal characteristics as shown in table below:

**Table 3**

*Participants Background*

#	Final Team Rank	Team Color	Name of the Player	Country Rank	Country
1	First	Yellow	Participant 1	TOP	Austria
2	First	Yellow	Participant 2	MID	Spain
3	First	Yellow	Participant 3	LOW	New Zealand

4	Second	Black	Participant 4	TOP	Japan
5	Second	Black	Participant 5	MID	Poland
6	Second	Black	Participant 6	LOW	Chinese Taipei
7	Fourth	Brown	Participant 7	TOP	Germany
8	Fourth	Brown	Participant 8	MID	Netherlands
9	Fourth	Brown	Participant 9	LOW	Slovenia
10	Fifth	Green	Participant 10	TOP	France
11	Fifth	Green	Participant 11	MID	South Korea
12	Fifth	Green	Participant 12	LOW	Mexico
13	Seventh	Red	Participant 13	TOP	Czech Republic
14	Seventh	Red	Participant 14	MID	China
15	Seventh	Red	Participant 15	LOW	Romania
16	Eighth	Orange	Participant 16	TOP	Hungary
17	Eighth	Orange	Participant 17	MID	Kazakhstan
18	Eighth	Orange	Participant 18	LOW	Australia

Note that in the data analysis, interviews with players are represented as (TOP), (MID), and (LOW) instead of using participant numbers to ensure the players' anonymity.

All research participants are passionate girls born in 2004-2005 who love ice hockey. Based on the results of the 'individual skill test' conducted by IIHF, the team composition of the Mixed NOC was competitively balanced, as shown in Appendix 2. Each team consisted of players from different NOCs.

Then, selected the teams based on this reference: Players from medal-winning teams, non-medal-winning teams, and middle-ranked teams. Therefore, out of the total 8 color teams, teams ranked 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 7th, and 8th were chosen, excluding the 3rd and 6th-ranked teams.

Another crucial consideration was the selection of players from different countries within each team. It was important to ensure diversity in the players' experiences because randomly selecting players might result in similar experiences for players from countries with similar hockey rankings. To achieve reliable research results, players from countries ranked 1st to 10th in hockey rankings were labeled as "TOP," players ranked 11th to 20th as "MID," and players ranked 21st to 35th as "LOW." One player from each category (TOP, MID, LOW) was selected from each color team, resulting in a total of 3 players chosen for interviews from each team (refer to table 2).

### **3.2. Data Collection**

All interviews were conducted via video chatting (Zoom and Tencent Meeting) due to the geographical gap between the athletes and researcher during October 2022 except for two interviews that were gathered through email due participants' circumstances. Each participant was interviewed for 70 - 110 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, and Kazakh as all the athletes' native languages are different. Under the athletes' permission, video was recorded, and transcripts of the interviews were saved for analysis.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

The interviews were analyzed in two rounds. First, four athletes who were known as key players of the event analyzed the interviews. With their support, the researcher sorted out the interview questions for the participants, considering them meaningful questions for this research. Then, interviews were conducted with 18 athletes. The researcher transcribed them and reviewed each interview transcript, identifying the core concepts and themes in each response. The researcher identified specific follow-up questions to add context, clarity, or depth to individual responses. The researcher also added follow-up questions based on the themes and questions that emerged from the first round of interviews by the four pre-determined participants.

After the second round of interviews, the additional material will be reviewed and considered holistically with the first-round interviews when drawing final conclusions. Finally, after each round of interviews, participants were sent an email with an opportunity to reply with any follow-up questions or responses they thought of after the interview.

## **Chapter 4. Findings**

In the following sections, a comprehensive overview of the study's findings in relation to the research questions is provided. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of girls' ice hockey players' who participated in the Mixed NOC event at the Lausanne 2020 YOG and analyze its significance. Then, the study aims to explore how these experiences influenced their awareness of Olympism. A summary of this study and the findings with regard to the research questions is presented in the following sections and the researcher's explanation has been gradually added for better comprehension.

The researcher identified the following major themes from the collected data: (i) Pre-Mixed NOC: Athletes' Reactions to Mixed NOC (ii) During-Mixed NOC: Athletes' Experiences On and Off the Ice (iii) Post-Mixed NOC: Legacies of Mixed NOC and Athletes' Recommendations

### **4.1. Pre-Mixed NOC: Athletes' Reactions to Mixed NOC**

The Mixed NOC competition, introduced as a innovative category in the Youth Olympic Games (YOG), introduced several modifications to the

traditional game format. Its main purpose was to promote interaction and collaboration among athletes from different nationalities (Torres, 2010; Parry, 2012). Notably, the ice hockey Mixed NOC game was included in the Lausanne 2020 YOG, marking the debut of this concept in the event.

Upon receiving the news of their selection to represent their countries in the Mixed NOC competition at YOG, the athletes were filled with immense excitement. However, their excitement soon turned to confusion as they realized that the Mixed NOC game was completely different from the regular hockey games that they were accustomed to. Not only were there new rules to contend with, but the team composition was also entirely different. Nevertheless, after a short while, as they arrived at the Olympic Village, the athletes found themselves discovering and looking forward to the opportunities that lay ahead. They began to embrace the unique opportunities that the Mixed NOC game offered at both a personal and national level.

#### 4.1.1. Athletes' Confusion

##### 4.1.1.1. *Shocking Way of Team Composition “What? Teaming with Whom”*

Having doubts about a new group is inherent to the human being and the composition of mixed nation teams in sports competitions often raises questions about the ability to form a cohesive unit (Ha, 2020). The players found the concept of the Mixed NOC game "sensational," but at the same time, they couldn't help but feel "worried," "confused," and "skeptical" about the "shocking" way of team composition. Teaming up with players from different nationalities whom they considered "unknown," raised doubts about the feasibility of such an approach in the Olympics and the players were particularly concerned about forming the "team chemistry" in such a short time, considering that hockey is a sport that demands exceptional teamwork (Bae, 2022).

I felt a bit worried, and a bit confused about the formation of the team. I had concerns about how we would play together as a team because, you know, hockey is all about team chemistry. It's not like an individual sport[...] I didn't even know it was possible to compete with a mixed team in the Olympics. I thought that the Olympics were about national vs national competition, so I was skeptical about this game. I didn't even know anyone there. I had no idea how I could communicate and play with them. (LOW)

[I felt] a bit strange, a bit worried, and a bit confused about the formation of the team. I was concerned



about how we were going to play with each other as a team[...] I didn't even know it was possible to compete with a mixed team in the Olympics. I thought that the Olympics were about national vs national competition, so I was skeptical about this game at first. I had no idea how I could communicate with them, how I could play hockey with them because I didn't even know anybody there (LOW).

The athletes' primary concern revolved around forming strong "team chemistry." They doubted if they could truly become one as a team because they held negative preconceptions about their future teammates from certain countries. Their reluctance to come together as a team was influenced by three main factors: (i) past experiences from national competitions, (ii) historical conflicts and political issues between nations, and (iii) doubts about the skills of athletes from lesser-known (LOW) countries.

In first place, athletes viewed their opponent as "enemies" due to the excessive competition (Martinkova, 2012). Their past experiences from national competitions had fostered competitive rivalries and animosities between certain countries, creating biased views towards their future teammates from those countries (Martinkova, 2012).

I was the one who allowed them (team Japan) to score over us by mistake and we lost in the European Cups. Not a good memory for me. That's why I considered them as enemies[...] Then I met one of the Japanese players in the Mixed NOC team and the coach

assigned us as linemates, so I was like no way. (TOP)

The athletes had negative perceptions of certain countries due to past experiences of defeat in national competitions or intense rivalries that fueled emotional tensions. Overcoming these negative emotions and forming a cohesive team with players from countries they had biased views of would have been a significant challenge for them. They needed to collaborate with those they had preconceived notions about, and that posed a considerable obstacle.

Secondly, historical conflicts and political issues between nations had further fueled negative minds, adding tension to their interactions with athletes from those countries. One of the athletes in MID mentioned that the historical animosity between Korea and Japan added a layer of tension, despite she acknowledged that her personal dislike was not directed towards individual players. And the TOP player added, "Like German and Austrian, we are like the US and Canada. Always in a bit of competition against each other. So I felt somewhat uncomfortable about being on the same team." These deep-rooted perceptions that stem from longstanding political and cultural issues made them worried being as a team.

Lastly, the athletes doubted the skills of athletes from lesser-known (LOW) countries, which were not traditionally strong in hockey and had

inactivated hockey programs. These doubts led them to believe that they would not be able to truly come together as one team and achieve a favorable result.

Who knew there was hockey in Argentina, Mexico, and Chinese Taipei? I was surprised by the fact that ice hockey was developed there. Don't get me wrong. I really didn't know before I met them in the YOG, because we never had a chance to see them playing. (TOP)

Before heading to the YOG, I took some time googling each player to review the players that I would be teaming with, and based on my observations, I thought my team would likely be the weakest among all the teams because we had the highest number of players from countries not typically known for strong hockey. (TOP)

In ice hockey, there is a significant disparity in skill levels among countries, leading to divided divisions in international competitions. Athletes from high divisions were surprised by the emergence of countries in lower divisions that they were unaware even played ice hockey. This lack of awareness about hockey in LOW countries impacted to the doubts and concerns of TOP country athletes. While athletes from LOW countries were generally positive about teaming with athletes from TOP countries because they had knowledge about their abilities through their game clips, most of the athletes from TOP countries had no belief in the skills of LOW country

athletes. Consequently, the reality that they had to be on the same team also raised concerns for these athletes. The TOP players' belief that athletes from lesser-known hockey programs might have inferior skills compared to players from established hockey nations led to negative evaluations of players from specific countries. This preconception also contributed to their initial reluctance to come together as one team before even trying to cooperate.

These feelings stemmed from limited information and preconceived notions due to a lack of interactions, making it difficult to accurately value their skills before playing together. However, as they gained experience and got to know each other, they found ways to understand and respect one another, ultimately contributing to improved team performance. They also discovered new facts about the players from lesser-known hockey nations, realizing that some of them had better skills than themselves.

4.1.1.2. *Completely Different Game Format from the Regular Hockey:*

*“It seems childish and not professional. Is it even possible in the Olympics?”*

Athletes feel the presence of certain competitive stressors due to the novelty of the situation within their discipline (Kristiansen, 2015). In addition to the new way of 'team composition,' the athletes' initial confusion was

further amplified by the completely different 'game format' of the Mixed NOC. While few athletes anticipated with the new format, again, majority raised concerns and doubt about its suitability for the Olympics, describing it as "not professional" and "childish." The game showcased unique features that set it apart from regular hockey (5-on-5 Full Ice), as defined by the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF). Then the two commonly mentioned significant features by the athletes were these: (i) "3-on-3 Cross Ice" and (ii) "Pre-Determined Line with One-Minute Shift."

The first distinctive feature was related to the number of players and the size of the playing area, "3-on-3 Cross Ice." The "3-on-3 Cross Ice" aspect, which deviated from the typical "5-on-5 Full Ice," evoked memories of childhood games for many athletes, falling short of their expectations for a competitive standard appropriate the Olympics. One player from LOW expressed, "I wonder why they (organizers) set this kind of childish game. It was like the U10 game that I used to play when I was younger." The athletes had envisioned a more skilled-required Olympic competition, so the "3-on-3" aspect in a small ice setting reminded them of childhood games and diminished their anticipation for the Mixed NOC game.

The other aspect, "Pre-Determined Line with One-Minute Shift" rule, requiring athletes to change lines every one minute to the set buzzer, stunned players accustomed to the traditional "change on the fly" approach in ice hockey, where players adjusted their lines based on the game flow and their own judgment without strict time limits. Shifting lines was considered one of the tactics in the fast-paced game of hockey. One athlete from a more established (MID) country expressed her initial confusion and surprise at these changes, saying, "I was like, what kind of game this is. Are you serious? Is it really possible to play like that at the Olympic level? It seemed unprofessional."

The new game format, with its completely different rules, raised doubts among athletes about how it could effectively work at the Olympic level. Some were initially skeptical about the competitiveness and professionalism of the game under these new conditions. One athlete from a more established country (MID) expressed her confusion and surprise, questioning the viability of playing at such a high level with these seemingly unconventional rules. She wondered whether it was possible to maintain the same level of skill and strategy with predetermined shifts every minute.

However, it is essential to highlight that despite their initial disappointment with the new changes, the athletes were relieved with the fact that the previous “Skill Challenge,” in the previous YOG editions was replaced by the “Mixed NOC” game. They viewed the "Skill Challenge" as a structured format that measured individual skills such as passing accuracy, shooting accuracy, skating speed, and dribbling ability. It was considered a separate and rather individual game (Schnitzer et al., 2014) that didn't align well with team sport like ice hockey.

To be honest, I was thinking why bother coming all the way to the Olympics to do a challenge individually. Skill Challenge was basically doing by yourself. It's rather stressful. You can't make any friendship there. Ice hockey is a team sport, not like speed skating or luge that needs to shorten the record. So, I thought it was a good try. I was expecting this kind of thing. (LOW)

This player, who believed that team sports like ice hockey shouldn't be turned into individual record games at the Olympics, showed anticipation for experiencing the essence of the Olympics through the Mixed NOC. Also, some other players saw the Mixed NOC as an opportunity to participate in a team game that was more in line with ice hockey, so they expressed satisfaction with it. This shows that, the players somehow knew, or value

more that the 'team' game is rather important to be presented in the Olympics than individual ones. These initial reactions reflected preconceived notions influenced by the prevalence of nationalism and the spirit of rivalry that often overshadowed the deeper values and principles of the Olympic Games. However, the athletes' positive reception of the "Mixed NOC" format, replacing the previous "Skill Challenge" event, highlighted the value they placed on team-oriented games that aligned with the essence of the team sports like ice hockey within the Olympics.

#### 4.1.2. Athletes' Expectations

##### 4.1.2.1. *Personal Opportunities: "Once-in-a-Lifetime Chance to be the Medalists"*

Participating in the Olympics is a dream for athletes representing their nations, and they all aspire to win medals (Grayson, 2021). However, women's ice hockey has been dominated by top-ranked countries, leading to a belief that only a select few nations have a realistic shot at winning glory. Therefore, the introduction of the Mixed NOC format in the YOG changed this perception and offered an amazing chance and a "golden opportunity" for athletes worldwide. By forming teams with players from different countries, the game ensured that all athletes had an equal chance of winning, making the



outcomes unpredictable and providing equal opportunities for all to strive for podium finishes.

To be honest, if we had competed as a national team, we wouldn't have expected to reach the podium or even have a chance to touch the puck. However, being part of the mixed team showed us with an opportunity to become medalists and for me to be the first-ever winter sports medalist in my country. It was once in a lifetime chance so that I played like do-or-die. (LOW)

For athletes from lower ranked countries knew that if they had competed for their national teams, winning a medal would have been impossible due to the dominance of top-ranked countries like the USA and Canada. However, being part of the Mixed NOC teams opened up new possibilities for them to compete for medals. And this applied not only to LOW players but also to TOP players as it provided an equal probability for all participants to achieve a medal.

Even in my country, winning Olympic medals is not an easy task. The USA and Canada always dominate the top two spots, leaving only the bronze, which usually goes to Finland or Sweden. It's nearly impossible in the adult Olympics, but in the Mixed [NOC], everyone had an equal probability to achieve it. So, I had high hopes for a medal during this golden opportunity. It would have been a significant accomplishment for my country in ice hockey. (TOP)

This shows that it is exceptionally difficult even for the TOP players to secure a medal in the regular Olympics; therefore, this new innovative game was remarkable by its unpredictability, as it was unclear who would ultimately come out on podium. Overall, athletes no matter where they were from, had an expectation for an equal chance to chase their dreams and compete for medals, regardless of their country's ranking. Being part of a mixed team not only allowed for incredible achievements but also fostered pride and honor in being the first historically renowned person in respective country. This motivated them to give their best efforts, expecting that they could potentially become the first medalists for their own country, or even more, the first ever Olympic medal throughout the winter disciplines in their country which would hold great historical significance for them.

#### *4.1.2.2. National Opportunities: “A Perfect Opportunity to Announce the Nation”*

Generally, nationalism is described as prioritizing the interests of the nation, while individualism is described as prioritizing the interests of individuals (Bae, 2022). In the earlier part, the athletes showed individualistic tendencies, hoping to become medalists themselves through the Mixed National Olympic Committee (NOC) team, prioritizing their own interests.

However, in this section, they exhibit a consideration not only for their individual expectations but also for opportunities that benefit their respective countries.

The athletes who had to participate in the Mixed NOC team received single-colored uniforms representing their team color out of eight colors, instead of wearing their own country's representative team uniform, which clearly represents their nation. One of the TOP athletes expressed her honest feelings when she first received the colored jersey, saying, "Although I knew I would be part of a mixed team, seeing the that full colored jersey made me feel disappointed because I felt it was meaningless if I cannot represent my country while playing. I couldn't even sing the national anthem, and everything felt somewhat, I don't know, empty or unsatisfying." For some of the athletes, the absence of their national team jersey and the opportunity to sing their national anthem made them feel like they were missing out on a significant aspect of national pride and identity. However, their disappointment turned into a profound sense of patriotism and responsibility when they saw their national flags intricately embroidered on the back of their jerseys.

When I turned it around, there it was, our national flag proudly displayed. It was a moment that filled me

with overwhelming emotions, a surge of patriotism, pride, and passion. It gave me a sense of responsibility, a feeling that I was part of something bigger. It was truly exciting! (TOP)

Despite not being able to wear their national team jersey, the flag behind their colored uniform filled them with “pride and passion” and sense of connection to their country. ❸❹, players from countries with limited ice hockey exposure viewed this extraordinary chance as a platform to raise awareness and showcase their skills, confidently proving their position on the international stage. Their motivation stemmed from their desire to demonstrate the excellence of their countries in ice hockey and assert that they deserved a place in the competition. This perspective was influenced by the observations made by a LOW player from Slovenia, who reflected on their experience at the Olympic Village.

You know what? On the first day when people ask me where I am from, and I said from Slovenia. Then they were like, 'Oh from Slo-VAKIA!' with a very enthusiastic tone, and I replied them back, 'No no no, Slo-VENIA', then tone changes something like, 'Oh, I see' with a slight disappointment[...] It's understandable that people get confused since Slovakian hockey is in the top tier while we were in the lower tier. So I wished to show people that not only Slovakia plays hockey but we [Slovenians] do too. We are deserved to be here. So, I thought I should play well to represent my country. (LOW)

Another LOW player added, "I was honored to play with the Romanian flag on my back because we're not a popular country for hockey, so there is not much chance for us. I wanted to show others that we can excel as well. It felt like my responsibility."

The Olympics are occasionally utilized as a tool for national propaganda (Ubaidulloev, 2018). For these players from LOW in particular where ice hockey is not as recognized internationally, this was considered as the best arena to raise awareness and showcase their hockey. So, they demonstrated a strong determination to change the public perception of ice hockey in their home countries. They aimed to raise the profile of their nations and prove that their countries were also worth noting. Alongside their individual ambitions for achieving medal success as part of the Mixed NOC team, they also felt a deep sense of responsibility to promote their countries on the global stage and make their country internationally recognized.

#### **4.2. During Mixed NOC: Athletes' Experiences On and Off Ice**

In this chapter, we explore the experiences of youth athletes who have previously only participated in national competitions and now find

themselves engaged in the Mixed NOC during the YOG. For these athletes, the competition holds immense significance as it is the primary reason for their participation in the YOG, and they deeply value and cherish this opportunity.

The ice rink, where the games take place, becomes a central aspect of their experiences. Therefore, in this section, we delve into the on-ice and off-ice moments that these athletes encountered during the Mixed NOC period, providing a detailed account of their experiences both during competition and in their personal lives outside the rink.

#### 4.2.1. Athletes' On Ice Experience

##### 4.2.1.1. *Discovering and Developing Various Skills from Thirteen*

##### *Different Hockey*

Drawing inspiration from Coubertin's vision of fostering international understanding through common sporting activities (Martinkova, 2012), the Mixed NOC experience provided a unique opportunity for youth athletes from thirteen different hockey nations to come together and engage in ice hockey. Initially, concerns about team chemistry and diverse playing styles seemed to present challenges for the athletes in forming a cohesive unit.

However, they overcame these barriers through the universal "language of hockey," forging a harmonious team and benefiting from direct interactions.

The athletes found immense value in experiencing the diverse styles of hockey represented by their teammates. This unique encounter offered them diverse and meaningful lessons, leading to remarkable personal growth beyond their initial expectations. Players at all skill levels experienced development in various aspects of the game, especially those from countries with less developed hockey programs. For them, the Mixed NOC team provided a novel and valuable experience to learn from skilled coaches and teammates from more established hockey nations.

My team consisted of players from Austria, Germany, Norway, Mexico, Italy, France, South Korea, Spain, and the Czech Republic. It was amazing to play with people from different countries! If it weren't for this, how could I have had the chance to play with this many players from various countries at once? That was cool because I got to experience directly from skilled coaches and teammates and as we all had different play styles, we could complement one another. (MID)

It really opened my eyes to the fancy plays of players from developed hockey countries all over the globe, so I tried to learn as much as I could from them. In my team here, not many players are as skilled as those were there, mainly because we have so short hockey history. One of the coaches I met still helps me by sending his program files. It helps me and my team lots. (LOW)

As many athletes aspired to enhance their performance by interacting with athletes from other nations (Nordhagen & Krieger, 2019), this exposure to high-level play and guidance from experienced coaching from hockey powerhouses allowed them to enhance their abilities significantly. Especially for the players from countries with less developed hockey programs, this experience empowered them to enhance their performance and contribute to the growth of hockey in their respective countries, despite the limitations of their national team experiences.

Similarly, top-tier athletes also experienced meaningful growth through their interactions with players from diverse countries. The exchange with representatives from various hockey nations broadened their understanding of the sport's spectrum and presented opportunities to inspire and motivate less confident teammates. Sharing their knowledge and coaching others became a source of immense satisfaction and motivation for top-tier players, leading to positive personal growth and enhancing their leadership abilities.

I was just doing what I had learned naturally, but when a Korean player praised my shots and said she wanted to learn from me [...] I had never taught anyone before, but I did my best to share my tips. And



she quickly grasped everything I taught her. It was beautiful to see and was a great feeling. (TOP)

The Mixed NOC team format facilitated a rich exchange of hockey skills and experiences among athletes from different backgrounds. Players from countries with well-established hockey systems naturally assumed leadership roles, while athletes from nations with less developed programs learned and applied new knowledge on the ice. This supportive dynamic fostered a generous exchange of skills and experiences, allowing athletes from TOP, MID, and LOW countries to grow together as a cohesive unit.

The interactions with athletes from diverse countries not only helped players value themselves but also emphasized the importance of mutual learning and interaction among athletes. Recognition and appreciation of each other's abilities fostered a sense of pride and satisfaction, motivating them to further develop their skills.

Moreover, the Mixed NOC experience led the athletes to make surprising discoveries. Top-tier players gained awareness of nations they had little knowledge about in terms of hockey. They were astonished to find highly skilled players from these relatively lesser-known countries. One top-tier player expressed amazement, saying, "I didn't know there were players

better than me from these countries." This realization highlights the potential for growth and talent that exists across the hockey world.

Conversely, for lower-tier athletes, the encounter with diverse players and coaches served as a catalyst for recognizing their own potential. Some of them realized that they too had the ability to compete at a higher level. One athlete shared, "I thought, 'I can do this too.' Thanks to the coaches I met through Mixed NOC, I am now pursuing a hockey scholarship in Sweden. Without this experience, such an opportunity would not have come my way." Additionally, for one athlete, the Mixed NOC became an eye-opening event, highlighting the stark contrast in treatment and opportunities between their own country and others. This experience evoked feelings of envy yet served as a pivotal moment of self-discovery and determination.

The significance of this experience lies in the special opportunities it offered: encountering new realities, gaining fresh perspectives, and fostering mutual growth through leadership and inclusivity. The Mixed NOC platform acted as a bridge that brought together athletes from diverse backgrounds and skill levels, leaving a lasting impact on their personal and athletic journeys.

#### *4.2.1.2. Experiencing Joy of Stress-Free Hockey*

In regular team sports like ice hockey, athletes often face intense competition and pressure to secure starting positions within their national teams. Representing their country becomes a matter of pride, but the constant struggle to maintain their spot and perform well can take a burden on their enjoyment of the sport. The study of Barker et al. (2012) highlights that while Olympic success requires tremendous effort, deriving joy from these efforts may not always be evident, especially when effort doesn't directly correlate with achievement. For some of the youth athletes, what started as a beloved hobby turned into a source of stress due to the relentless competition.

However, the perception of hockey as a stressful endeavor shifted for the athletes when they participated in the Mixed NOC games. The unique game format of the Mixed NOC, characterized by a smaller playing area and pre-determined line with one-minute shifts, offered players a stress-free and motivating experience.

Mixed NOC format was very different from playing 5 on 5 regular. Everything was so quick, the turn over was quick, quick to the net[...] So it was easy to get back from mistakes. And the playing area was so small that we had options to shoot or pass. A shot could be shot from anywhere. And you don't have defense or forward, so everyone plays every role. I usually play D(defense) in my [national] team, so I had less chances to score, but I scored a lot there. That motivated me to have more interest in hockey and have more FUN. (MID)

There is no such thing as a starting lineup or benched lineup in the Mixed NOC, so my playing time was guaranteed. But in the national team, every move of my performance was evaluated and that intensified the pressure to perform exceptionally well. If my plays don't meet coaches' expectation, I get benched and that put me into more stress. It knocked my confidence and affected a negative influence on my next plays. But in mixed hockey, there's no pressure of being cut from the line. No one can be moved up or down. (TOP)

The Mixed NOC games offered equal playing time for all athletes, freeing them from the pressure of securing a starting position. Unlike in regular hockey, where unequal playing time distribution caused stress and affected players' confidence when they were benched, the Mixed NOC games guaranteed that every player got a chance to participate fully. The fast-paced and quick turnovers of this new game relieved players from the pressure of making mistakes. The simplicity of the game, which only required decisions like "shoot or pass," allowed for a more straightforward style of play compared to the systematic approach of regular hockey. Additionally, the format provided players with the opportunity to experience different positions and actively engage in goal-scoring opportunities. For players typically assigned defensive roles in their national teams, this change allowed them to experience the excitement of actively participating in offense and scoring

goals. The increased enjoyment and interest in the game further motivated them to pursue their hockey aspirations.

However, there were also some stresses associated with the game structure. Some players found it frustrating that they had to leave the puck immediately when the buzzer rang for a shift change, without having the opportunity to complete their intended actions. Breaking this habit of finding a safe place for the puck before shifting was challenging. Nevertheless, overall, the Mixed NOC game structure provided a more relaxed and enjoyable experience for the players. Additionally, the positive and supportive coaching atmosphere during the Mixed NOC further contributed to their enjoyment of the sport and made them perform better (Martinkova, 2012).

All the coaches consistently encouraged us that we are doing well and urging us to play with confidence. Since the team was formed abruptly and we hadn't trained together, it was acceptable to make mistakes. I think that kind of supportive environment contributed me to perform better. (MID)

The relaxed and supportive environment of the Mixed NOC allowed the athletes to feel more at ease and perform without the usual burdens and pressure. The coaches played a pivotal role in fostering this positive

atmosphere, assuring the players of their capabilities and encouraging them to perform at their best. This nurturing environment brought them back to their early days in hockey when the joy of playing was not overshadowed by performance anxieties.

#### *4.2.1.3. Embracing Responsibilities: Athletes' Motivation Under the Global Spotlight*

The players' experience in the Mixed NOC game with the global spotlight and enthusiastic support from the crowd, added a deeper meaning to their experience. They felt like sports stars and developed a sense of responsibility to perform at their best and represent their countries with pride. The live broadcast and recognition of their national identities further reinforced their mission as athletes. Overall, these experiences contributed to the players' profound sense of responsibility and provided valuable lessons for young athletes on how to deal with public attention.

One of the most memorable experiences for the players was the astonishing atmosphere of a packed stadium and the passionate support from the crowd. It felt like a story unfolding before their eyes.

I was filled with so much energy by the full of passionate spectators. Normally, only the families of the players come to watch our play in my country. But in Lausanne, there were more than 20,000 people in

the stands. It was amazing. (LOW)

To be honest, I've never experienced such passionate support while playing ice hockey, except from my family. My brother never bothers to come watch my games because he thinks women's hockey is boring. But being here, seeing someone cheering me on with such enthusiasm, even more than I could imagine, and witnessing their excitement when I score a goal, it was truly touching[...] That's why I felt an even greater sense of responsibility and approached the game with more determination. (MID)

Pleasantly, the athletes were surprised by all the support they got from the spectators at the rink, which made them feel like “superstars” and left a lasting impression on them. Playing in a packed rink, with “fans” cheering for all the players regardless of nationality, was a truly remarkable experience for the youth players. As Olympic educational theme represents, athletes are also encouraged to be role models both on and off the field, inspiring others through their dedication, sportsmanship, and commitment to the Olympic ideals (IOC, 2016). The overwhelming support they received for the first time ever deeply moved them and had a significant impact on their performance. It motivated them to feel strong responsibility to give their best and not let their fans down. The genuine support from the crowd, irrespective of borders, touched the players and fueled their motivation as athletes.

How I were treated there, I felt like I was a

professional, the super star with fans around. Some random kids came to me asking my autograph. That was an awesome experience. And thought, wow, somebody even watched me, then I thought, I should play better. So I played all my best, cause I didn't want to let them down! (LOW)

You know what? I felt like everyone was cheering for us, no matter where I was from. So it led me play better and I felt like I wanted to make them more enjoyable. That was the least courtesy that I could have shown to them as an athlete. (TOP)

The players who gained considerable popularity at the rink, similar to “super stars”, felt not only compelled to meet the expectations of their “fans” but also to bring them joy and delight. This experience made them even more aware of their responsibility and the significance of embracing the exceptional values represented by this special game. They recognized that being treated like professionals and receiving such enthusiastic support from “fans” created a deep sense of obligation to perform at their best and not disappoint those who rooted for them.

Moreover, the live broadcasting during the Mixed NOC competition, where the athletes were introduced with their nationalities, reinforced their role as representatives of their countries. This recognition of their



achievements filled them with pride and brought attention to their respective nations.

When I scored, the MC in the rink announced, 'A red team player from Romania scores and leads the game!' Then there was a huge cheering from the crowd. It was a remarkable moment for me to bring attention to my country and let the audience and other players know about us. As a player representing Romania, it was an honor to play and play well with the Romanian flag on my back. We're not a country that is well-known for hockey, so I wanted to show everyone that we can [play] well during the tournament (LOW).

Even though the athletes were bound in the Mixed NOC team, this broadcasting approach reinforced their duty and responsibility as representatives of their respective countries. As the player from LOW mentioned, the moment when she scored and received that recognition through the announcer's announcement was meaningful because she got to make the others aware of her and her country's presence in this ice hockey field. She acknowledged that her country was not widely recognized for hockey, so it was a chance for her to showcase the level of her country and show others that her country is capable of competing at this kind of mega event too. This perfectly aligns with the athletes' expectations prior to participating in the Mixed NOC game. These experiences helped the athletes

understand the importance of taking responsibility and had a significant impact on their personal growth.

#### 4.2.2. Athletes' Off Ice Experience

##### 4.2.2.1. *Athletes Struggling with Language Barrier*

Despite experiencing little difficulty communicating on the ice using the "language of hockey," the athletes faced a significant challenge with language barriers off the ice. On the ice, the game-related hockey vocabulary was dominant, making it possible to understand through feelings and actions even with limited English proficiency. However, conversations off the ice revolved around topics unrelated to hockey, and they struggled to understand the context, hindering the formation of a sense of solidarity, especially for the non-English speakers. So, the players thought that language barriers would undermine their rapport and hinder them from achieving individual goals since the meaningful connections stems from sincere communication.

when we played hockey, we didn't feel any discomfort despite using different languages. We just naturally connected through what we love and by actions rather than words[...] And, we all knew the hockey terms, so speaking different language didn't bother. But getting off the ice, it was frustrating because we couldn't communicate in deep if one cannot understand the other. (TOP)

I barely speak English, so I had hard time

communicating with my new teammates there, especially off the ice from the beginning. I hang with my (national team) friends more because I felt more comfortable with my home friends who can speak [my language]. (MID)

The players found communication more challenging off the ice than on the ice. On the ice, the game-related hockey vocabulary was dominant, making it possible to understand through feelings and actions even with limited English proficiency. However, conversations off the ice revolved around topics unrelated to hockey, and they struggled to understand the context, hindering the formation of a sense of solidarity, especially for the non-English speakers. So, the players thought that language barriers would undermine their rapport and hinder them from achieving individual goals.

The TOP players from each team made efforts to turn this “unknowns” into a “family” by reflecting on the “team bonding” activities they had done back in their home countries. They particularly focused on creating an environment where players who don’t speak English could naturally open up. One player stated, "My coach back home used to emphasize team bonding whenever rookies join. So, I thought we needed that right there. And it worked perfectly. I turned on the music and we dance together" (TOP).

I suggested doing a cool-down together, and we sat in a circle while stretching. We used very simple words and even used body language for communication.

Although we didn't talk much, we all sensed that we love hockey. And we found that we all wanted the medal, so we decided to make it a team goal, aiming for gold! So, instead of calling ourselves Team Yellow, we changed it to Team Gold. We said it every day and as we engaged in team bonding day by day, we became closer. Each day, we became better friends than the day before, and it was beautiful to see. That's how hockey turned us into a 'family! And guess what. We came home with the real gold medal! (TOP)

The team bonding, led by the TOP players, played a crucial role in establishing a mutual shared goal and easing language barriers. The TOP players' leadership was essential as they had more hockey experience than the MID and LOW players, allowing them to apply relevant problem-solving methods based on their past experiences. This is consistent with the findings of Wilski et al. (2012) research, which demonstrated that being part of a unified team positively impacts personal development. Participating in such teams helps individuals improve their communication skills, build confidence, share common experiences, gain knowledge about different people and places, and enhance their skills. Through these experiences, the players were able to progress and grow.

#### 4.2.2.2. *Overcoming Difficulties through Special 'Team Bonding'*

The TOP players from each team played a central role in transforming the initial unfamiliarity among players into a strong sense of "family" by drawing inspiration from team bonding activities they had experienced in their home countries. A primary objective was to create an inclusive environment, especially for players who didn't speak English, allowing them to naturally open up and feel connected to the team. One player from TOP described how their coach back home emphasized team bonding, which motivated them to implement similar activities within the Mixed NOC team. As a result, they engaged in dance sessions, turning on the music to celebrate their togetherness.

Another team bonding initiative included a post-game cool-down routine, where the players sat in a circle and used simple words and body language for communication. Though verbal interactions were limited, the shared love for hockey and a collective desire to win a medal fostered a strong sense of friendship. As a symbol of their common goal to achieve gold, the team renamed themselves from Team Yellow to Team Gold, reinforcing their unity. Each day, as they engaged in team bonding activities, the players grew closer, forming deep friendships, and witnessing the transformation of their teammates into a cohesive "family."

I suggested doing a cool-down together, and we sat in

a circle while stretching. We used very simple words and even used body language for communication. Although we didn't talk much, we all sensed that we love hockey. And we found that we all wanted the medal, so we decided to make it a team goal, aiming for gold! So, instead of calling ourselves Team Yellow, we changed it to Team Gold. We said it every day and as we engaged in team bonding day by day, we became closer. Each day, we became better friends than the day before, and it was beautiful to see. That's how hockey turned us into a 'family! And guess what. We came home with the real gold medal! (TOP)

The team bonding, led by the TOP players, played a crucial role in not only establishing a shared goal but also overcoming language barriers among players. The TOP players' leadership was essential as they had more hockey experience than the MID and LOW players, allowing them to apply relevant problem-solving methods based on their past experiences. This is consistent with the findings of Wilski et al. (2012) research, which demonstrated that being part of a unified team positively impacts personal development. Participating in such teams helps individuals improve their communication skills, build confidence, share common experiences, gain knowledge about different people and places, and enhance their skills. Through these experiences, the players were able to progress and grow.

#### *4.2.2.3. Embracing Cultural Diversity through Deep Dialogues*

The young athletes participating in the YOG were 15 and 16 years old, so they didn't have many opportunities to meet and engage in cultural exchanges with athletes from various countries due to their young age before the Mixed NOC experience. Most of them had only encountered players from other countries in tournaments such as the U18 World Championship or European Cup, where personal interactions were scarce due to the competitive nature of national competitions. However, the Mixed NOC game provided them with a unique opportunity to experience and learn about the cultures of their teammates from different countries, which greatly intrigued the athletes. Spending time together off the ice, they discovered cultural differences firsthand.

One of the players expressed her fascination with how the Asians took photos in a cute and fun way, using various filters, which was not common in Europe. The Japanese player's warm-up routine also stood out, showcasing differences not only in hockey style but also in everyday life.

When we took pictures together, I noticed that the Asians took photos in a super cute and fun way! They took photos with various filters. We don't use that kind of app in Europe. And the way the Japanese player did the warm-up was different from that of our European countries. It was fascinating to see the differences not only in hockey style but also in everyday life. (TOP)

While on the ice, the athletes mainly focused on their roles, which initially made them less aware of cultural differences. However, being part of the Mixed NOC team allowed them to discover and realize not only the language differences but also the diverse cultures within the team. They began to notice and become curious about each other's unique backgrounds, leading to cultural exchanges. For instance, one TOP player was amazed by the stickhandling skills of her Argentinian teammate's exceptional skill in stickhandling, which stood in contrast to her own perceived less-developed skating abilities.

Argentina girl, she has extreme soft hands... Later I knew that she practices more on the floor than on the ice due to the lack of ice rinks in her hometown. That's why she was super good at dribbling than skating. So, we came up with a new strategy where I made long pass to the front, and she be the cherry picker. (TOP)

When we embrace and appreciate the uniqueness of different cultures, it helps us understand and care about each other more. We learn to respect and value our differences, and it brings us closer together like a tight-knit family. (TOP)

Being part of a multinational team with diverse cultures and backgrounds held significant meaning for these young athletes. They engaged in deep conversations that allowed them to learn about each other's hockey



backgrounds, fostering mutual cultural exchange and cooperation. The Mixed NOC team became a platform for unity, where the athletes found ways to work together and appreciate the value of cultural understanding and collaboration.

Through sports competitions where multinational players come together, young athletes can gain understanding and exchange experiences with different cultures and backgrounds (Schnitzer et al., 2018; Peters & Schnitzer, 2015). These youth athletes developed an interest in linguistic and cultural differences, discovering and learning about unique cultural aspects from other players. This experience helped them develop a broader perspective, appreciate, and respect their own and other cultures, highlighting the importance of global diversity and exchange.

#### **4.3. Post-Mixed NOC: Legacies and Reminiscence**

This chapter highlights how athletes cherish their memories of the Mixed NOC experience even after returning to their individual lives following the conclusion of the YOG. Then it concludes with the players' reflections and insights, highlighting the significance of their experiences in shaping the direction of Mixed NOC and their thoughts regarding its absence in the upcoming Gangwon 2024 YOG.

#### 4.3.1. Legacies from the Mixed NOC

##### 4.3.1.1. *Experiencing Global Network through “YOG Bond”*

After the end of the Mixed NOC, athletes returned to their regular lives, but they soon discovered something extraordinary. Wherever they went, they encountered a unique phenomenon, with people asking questions like, "Do you know [whom]?" This revelation showcased the extensive network that the players had forged through their participation in the Mixed NOC team, connecting them to individuals from at least 13 different countries. This network surpassed geographical boundaries of Mixed NOC, enabling them to establish broader connections with diverse individuals on a global scale. One player shared an experience that exemplified this global network.

While playing drop-in hockey, wearing YOG colored socks, I noticed someone approached me and said excitedly, “I also participated in Mixed NOC, representing the orange team! Do you know [friend’s name]?” Then I said she was linemate. It was amazing how we grew so close, even though we weren’t direct friends before. And guess what, we still meet up occasionally. It’s fascinating how people from all around the world suddenly feel so connected by this sport event. (LOW)

Another athlete recalled a similar encounter,

As I was about to enter the rink for practice wearing my YOG jersey, a random coach called out to me with

a big smile and asked, 'Do you know [name of player]? She is my student!' In this unexpected encounter, we discovered our shared connection and engaged in enthusiastic conversation. I even received words of encouragement for my practice and occasional coaching on challenges I faced. (TOP)

These narratives demonstrate the immediate positive relationship and close bond that emerged from the shared Mixed NOC experience. The players referred to this bond as the "YOG Bond," which went beyond hockey and exemplified the impact of the Mixed NOC in fostering connections and nurturing a supportive environment among athletes. It served as a reminder that “sports have the power to unite people” from different nations and backgrounds, creating a global community bound by shared experiences and a common passion for the game. The YOG Network shows how the Mixed NOC continues to affect athletes even after the event, connecting them globally and shaping their experiences.

#### *4.3.1.2. Changes in Perception: From Rivals to Friends*

Athletes' perceptions of their opponents as "enemies" due to intense competition in national events underwent a remarkable transformation after the Mixed NOC games. Meeting their former rivals in subsequent national

competitions, these athletes now saw them as "friends," allowing for a friendly and sportsmanlike competition.

After the Mixed NOC, the athletes went on to compete in other international tournaments representing their national teams. During these events, they were pleasantly surprised to come face-to-face with familiar faces from their rival teams, who had previously been their teammates in the Mixed NOC.

Prior to the Mixed NOC experience, they regarded each other as "enemies," exchanging cold glances and lacking mutual respect, engaging in intense competitions that felt like a "war" (Martinkova, 2012). However, their shared journey and understanding as teammates in the Mixed NOC brought about a significant shift in their perspective. They no longer perceived each other as "enemies" but rather as "friends," hoping to showcase great performances together.

Japan is the only Asian country in the European Cup, and initially, I looked down on them because they were smaller in size. However, I soon realized that the Japanese players had incredible skills and structured gameplay. Underestimated them resulted in our loss, with me making a crucial mistake that allowed them to score a winning goal. It was not a pleasant memory for my team, and from then I thought them as "enemies".

But then I became a linemate with one of the Japanese players in the Mixed NOC[...] We performed

remarkable plays and scored together a lot, becoming the best combi on the ice. Despite the communication challenges and previous notions, we were in perfect sync on the rink. Later on, we met again in the European Cup following the YOG. And tell you what. I started looking at them in a completely different light, seeing them as a whole team with admiration and respect. Even during the game when there was a pause, we smiled at each other. I played my best. After the game, we took a picture together. And through us, the whole team became friends now. (TOP)

The players' narration shows that their relationships with rival teams, whom they used to see as "enemies" in intense national competitions, changed to becoming "friends" through their participation in the Mixed NOC. This means that the Mixed NOC created a strong bond among the athletes, where they formed positive connections and supported each other.

Moreover, the players' attitudes towards other countries were transformed as they got to know and work with their teammates from different nations in the Mixed NOC. This experience had a big impact on them, leading them to see each other as "friends" and compete in a positive and friendly manner. This experience highlights how sports can bring people together and change their perceptions. The Mixed NOC played a crucial role in fostering friendship and creating a supportive environment, where athletes could compete with each other in a positive way.

#### 4.3.1.3. *Interest in Global News: “Wish for Peace”*

Athletes admitted to having limited interest in news and issues concerning other countries unless directly relevant to their own lives. However, their participation in the Mixed NOC teams sparked a newfound curiosity for global affairs.

I was not interested in the world news before, but now I find myself getting interested. Even when I'm doing something, if I hear news related to the countries of the players I used to be on the same team with, I pause what I'm doing for a moment and focus on it. (TOP)

The athletes found themselves deeply engaged by news concerning countries like Ukraine and Russia. This experience fostered a strong sense of connection, prompting them to pay attention and seek understanding. They approached the situation with caution, recognizing that the issues were not personal but rather required empathy and awareness.

You know, I understand. It's not like they wanted this to happen, and they are all good friends[...] All I could do, just like always, was to ask about their comfort and silently pray for things to get better soon. I never used to stay on these thoughts before, but now I genuinely wish for a peaceful world. I hope all my friends around the world are safe and sound. (MID)

The Mixed NOC experience allowed athletes to bridge the gap and perceive world events through a more personal and interconnected lens. Before experiencing the Mixed NOC, the athletes didn't have much interest in things outside their own world. However, being part of a team with players from diverse cultures and nationalities generated a deep concern about the world. They began to realize the importance of "peace" and the value of solidarity and friendly relationships. And they genuinely cared for one another and wished for a peaceful world.

The above passage aligns with Bae's (2022) research on athletes' experiences with the North-South Unified Team and the subsequent change in South Korean athletes' views towards North Korea. Through their collaboration with North Korean athletes and exposure to their culture during the Olympic period, South Korean athletes demonstrated an increased awareness and interest in North Korea, which was previously absent or indifferent, and even sparked curiosity about reunification.

In a similar context to the findings of Bae's research, but on a global scale, this study holds significance. The athletes' Mixed NOC experience brought about a transformation in their worldview, leading to a greater curiosity about broader global issues. This demonstrates that the impact of the

Mixed NOC goes beyond North-South relations, influencing athletes' perspectives and fostering a more interconnected and globally conscious mindset.

#### 4.3.2. Reminiscence

After the interview, I posed the question to athletes about what they would choose if they had another opportunity to participate in the YOG. They were asked whether they would prefer representing their own national team or as Mixed NOC team. Apart from two athletes who had difficulties in communication, the majority expressed their preference for representing Mixed NOC team. The athletes described their experiences in Mixed NOC events as incredibly joyful and cherished memories that they wouldn't trade for anything else.

I don't know what other competitions or programs might come up, but if this option is available, I will go for Mixed. The memories I shared with athletes from different countries were incredibly precious to me. That ten days or less were the best week of my entire life, almost like a dream. Even now, just thinking about it makes me feel incredibly happy.  
(MID)



Then I informed the athletes that the IOC had excluded Mixed NOC game from the YOG so there won't be any mixed nations game in upcoming Gangwon 2020<sup>4</sup>. The athletes aggressively expressed their frustration about this decision, stating that they can't comprehend the reasons behind it.

Why do they want to take it off? If you really think about the athletes, then you should keep it. Mixed NOC is a good experience for younger people... It's a better thing to do when you were younger because that experience and connection helps when you get older. (TOP)

For the athletes, the Mixed NOC format offered a valuable opportunity to experience the true essence of competition, which they might not have encountered in the regular game of hockey. They strongly emphasized the significance of maintaining this format, especially for young athletes. Removing it would signify the loss of crucial opportunity for athletes to learn the genuine value of competition.

#### 4.3.2.1. *Athletes' Preferences in YOG and Recommendations for the Future of the Mixed NOC*

And based on their experiences, athletes highlighted several areas that need improvement in Mixed NOC events: translation support, more practice

and games, better facilities, and live streaming. One athlete stated, "Since there were so many volunteers everywhere, I feel like it would be more important to have someone to translate instead of someone opening the door for us" (MID). Then they also mentioned the need for team-building time before the tournament to get to know each other, separate dressing rooms for each team, and opportunities for losing teams to advance to the quarterfinals. In addition, one athlete mentioned the lack of streaming services, saying, "My dad tried everywhere to watch my game or how many goals I scored, but he couldn't because there was no streaming" (LOW).

At last, Athletes didn't hesitate to offer advice for the improvement of Mixed NOC events, especially for the benefit of future participants.

Make the most of it and enjoy it. There are so many things that are more important than just the results of the games. Right now, the visible outcomes may be more appealing, but find the true value in it. (TOP)

They also conveyed a message for coaches, expressing their desire for more opportunities like this. They emphasized the importance of creating an environment that allows athletes to showcase their full potential, where coaches place trust and confidence in them. They believe that with such support, athletes will perform as well as expected and excel in their performances.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **5.1. General Discussion**

#### **5.1.1. Redefining “Rivalry”: The Importance of Friendly Relations and International Friendship**

Mixed NOC event has provided an opportunity for athletes from both hockey powerhouses (TOP) and inactivated hockey nations (LOW) to participate in the Olympics together as a unified team. Initially, there was resistance from players representing TOP, as their primary focus tended to be on individual accomplishments, rewards, and honor rather than cultural exchange and interactions with athletes from diverse backgrounds. This situation aligns with Loland's (1995) study that in the highly competitive modern Olympics, values like friendship and mutual respect may not hold much significance when athletes prioritize achieving victory and commercial gains. However, Mixed NOC athletes experienced the values of competition through a multinational team. The findings show that a sense of responsibility and pride towards their respective nations motivated them when they saw their national flags embroidered behind their shared team-colored jersey. Moreover, thanks to the teams being evenly distributed based on the athletes' national rankings, everyone had a chance at winning the gold medal, which

is often considered impossible in regular Olympics unless the athlete is from the United States or Canada. These motivations led all the athletes to give their best efforts during competitions. Such experiences reflect the essence of excellence, a core value of the Olympic Games as defined by the IOC (IOC, 2016).

### *Cultural Exchange and Respect*

The unique nature of Mixed NOC competitions fostered a sense of community among athletes from various nations, both on and off the ice. Through this shared experience, they encountered and acknowledged cultural differences, unlike in traditional national competitions where such interactions were limited. In typical competitions, athletes tend to be preoccupied with their own performance, striving to beat opponents, and often leaving the event quickly after their performances to prepare for the next event (Martinkova, 2012). Consequently, athletes may hold negative perceptions and view their opponents as mere "rivals (or so called enemies)" rather than recognizing and respecting their cultural backgrounds. However, Mixed NOC allowed for the breaking of barriers created by excessive rivalry and preconceived negative notions towards opposing nations. Instead, the interactions facilitated the establishment of amicable relationships with

athletes from different countries, shaping the foundation for genuine friendships. This transformation from a multicultural encounter to an intercultural encounter echoes the significance outlined by Gonzalez (2021), where the focus shifts from mere coexistence and toleration of differences to mutual understanding and open acceptance of diverse cultures.

### *Olympic Cosmopolitanism and Intercultural Encounters*

The essence of Olympic Cosmopolitanism, as exemplified by the opening ceremony of the Buenos Aires 2018 YOG, further reflects the parallel experiences of athletes in Mixed NOC competitions. During this ceremony, participants marched together, irrespective of nationalities, cultures, religions, or ethnicities, while still proudly representing their own countries through national uniforms. This early exposure to Olympism, according to Gonzalez (2021), allowed the participants to embrace friendlier interactions during competitions. Similarly, Mixed NOC athletes, through their intercultural encounters, nurtured a culture of respect and friendship. Consequently, even when facing each other as competitors in subsequent national competitions, they refrained from considering one another as mere "rivals" but rather as "competitors" (Martinkova, 2012), placing greater value on the process rather than the outcome. Such positive intercultural encounters

during their formative years can lead to the development of a strong global network based on mutual understanding and respect, fostering international friendship, and contributing positively to world peace.

In conclusion, the research findings emphasize that Mixed NOC provided a unique platform for athletes to embrace the core values of Olympism - excellence, respect, and friendship. (Moreover, it was observed that these values were sequentially manifested as excellence, respect, and friendship, depending on the stage of Mixed NOC experience.) As participants, they not only internalized these values but also conveyed them through their roles as sports ambassadors, aligning with the mission of the Youth Olympic Games. Moreover, the Mixed NOC concept addresses potential shortcomings identified in Bae's (2022) research on Korean Unified teams while encompassing a broader significance. The experiences of Mixed NOC athletes showcase how a redefinition of the term "rival" occurs when individuals engage in intercultural encounters that emphasize mutual understanding and respect over excessive competition. Such profound insights highlight the potential of Mixed NOC events to contribute to a more harmonious and interconnected global sports community.

### 5.1.2. Embracing the True Essence of Sports: The Positive Impact of Mixed NOC Competitions on Athletes

The Mixed NOC games serve as a unique and positive avenue for athletes to experience competitions. In contrast to regular team sports, where athletes face intense pressure to secure starting positions and maintain their spot on the national team, participants in Mixed NOC games find meaning and enjoyment in the process of playing, regardless of the results.

The findings reveal that players in national team-based sports often encountered evaluation and competition within their teams, which created a burden of performance and even instilled fear. This negative pressure sometimes impeded their performance levels and, in extreme cases, led to harmful thoughts, such as wishing for their teammates' injuries. Such attitudes appear to contradict the true values of Olympism, as pointed out by Marinkova (2012).

However, in Mixed NOC events, players didn't feel the burden that negatively impacted their performance. Instead, they experienced what can be described as "favorable pressure," which positively influenced their performance. Factors like the game format of the Mixed NOC and the atmosphere it created played a significant role in motivating the athletes to

perform at their best. The unique structure of Mixed NOC games plays a pivotal role in fostering this favorable pressure. With simplified gameplay and predetermined skill-based lineups, athletes can concentrate on building chemistry and cooperation within their teams while minimizing nationalistic rivalries. The controlled timing of line-changes ensures fair competition by matching athletes of similar skill levels.

In Bae's (2022) study, unified team athletes opposed the idea of a unified team due to issues with teamwork, organization, reduced opportunities for participation, and the resulting weakening of team strength. Consequently, many athletes perceived the unified team as personally meaningful but ultimately unsatisfactory and unsuccessful due to these problems. This illustrates the significant impact of the competition's structure and approach on athletes' experiences, highlighting the comprehensiveness with which the Mixed NOC considers these factors. Additionally, the diverse audience from various countries present at the Mixed NOC games provides motivation and gratitude, further contributing to the favorable pressure experienced by the athletes.

In conclusion, the Mixed NOC games offer athletes a platform that reduces negative pressure and promotes favorable pressure, motivating them



to perform at their best and embrace the true essence of sportsmanship, cooperation, and respect. This understanding of the authentic meaning of sports can lead to personal growth and contribute to international friendship and peace. In line with the IOC's aim to educate young people through sports and blend sports with culture and education (IOC, 2015), the Mixed NOC games provide athletes with a special opportunity to engage in their favorite sports while also gaining insights into diverse cultures. The games foster the acquisition of various skills and theoretical knowledge through direct interaction and exchange with athletes and coaches from different countries, leading to positive educational outcomes. Nordhagen and Krieger (2019) suggest that athletes' responses to the dual logics during the 2016 event may be seen as compartmentalization. Nevertheless, it is believed that the Mixed NOC games have the potential to achieve a harmonious coexistence of both sports competition and educational aspects, reinforcing the value of sports as a means of education and fostering mutual understanding between nations.

#### 5.1.3. Recommendations for future Mixed NOC ice hockey events

The interviews revealed challenges faced by Mixed NOC athletes and point to ways in which future events can improve the experience for athletes.

Athletes offered direct suggestions for improving the experience. Majority mentioned that they preferred to have more time to prepare as a team and more on-the-ground language support. And few people mentioned about locker rooms, online streaming service, and music. They want separate locker rooms so teams can prepare without being distracted or interrupted by other teams and they suggest the online streaming service for athletes' family back home. Also, one player mentioned about the stadium music to be turned off during gameplay to create a more focused and competitive atmosphere.

In addition, examination of the interviews led this study suggest two additional ways in which event organizers can facilitate a better experience for the athletes. First, by sharing more information with athletes in advance of the event will help generate enthusiasm and enable them to arrive prepared. For example, the game format will be new to most players. Provide a detailed description of the rules, team formation, and tournament structure. Explain how the game dynamics are different from typical 5x5 ice hockey. Share tips and positive experiences of former participants to showcase that they will become part of a special community and tradition. Provide an event-specific language guide. Include common phrases in all the languages represented at the event. Include guides on how to effectively use technology such as Google Translate. Since English is the common language of the event, include a

hockey-specific dictionary to enable athletes to focus on the most helpful English vocabulary.

Second, encouraging NOCs to consider language and leadership skills when selecting participants will increase the likelihood of favorable team chemistry and positive individual experiences on Mixed NOC teams. The athlete selection criteria for Lausanne focused on individual ice hockey skills, particularly skating speed. The interviews showed that language difficulties were a significant challenge for participants and that better English language skills were associated with more positive experiences. The challenge may be exacerbated for athletes with native languages and cultures which are more dissimilar to others on the team. In light of this, NOCs may wish to consider the willingness of athletes to learn basic English and push themselves beyond their social comfort zone as part of the selection criteria. Subjects underscored the importance of leadership and teamwork to team success. One subject noted that the "best players on paper" did not always win, and attributed these unexpected outcomes to the superior teamwork of the winning teams. Narratives of team bonding highlighted teams benefiting from strong leadership, particularly by the more experienced athletes from stronger NOCs, to accelerate cohesion in the short preparation period before the tournament. Given the importance of teamwork in Mixed NOC ice hockey, NOCs might

explicitly consider leadership qualities and a team-oriented mindset in the athlete selection criteria.

## **5.2. Limitation and future research**

The study was conducted with the athletes two years after their experience in the Mixed NOC. It would have been preferable to capture their experiences at the time of the event. This delay may have diluted the specific details of some athletes' experiences. Also, the study focused solely on the athletes and did not include all stakeholders involved in the Mixed NOC. Including a wider range of stakeholders could have provided better insights. Considering the perspectives and experiences of other stakeholders would have enhanced the completeness and diversity of the research findings. As a follow-up study, it would be beneficial to explore the usefulness of the Mixed NOC as a model for sports public diplomacy.

As the upcoming YOG are set to take place in Gangwon Province, South Korea, the location where the PyeongChang 2018 Olympics was successfully hosted, there's an opportunity to include the Mixed NOC game for Gangwon 2024 YOG, going beyond the Unified team of two Koreas. This decision could have significant impacts.

Firstly, by organizing the Mixed NOC game in South Korea, the only nation still facing unresolved conflicts on the international stage, it would send a powerful message about the country's commitment to global values and coexistence. Secondly, if the excluded Mixed NOC game is reintroduced as an event game in Gangwon Province, it would uphold and expand the legacy of peace messaging from the PyeongChang Olympics. It could become a symbol of the Peace Olympics, uniting people from different nations beyond the North-South divide and establishing Gangwon Province as a land of peace. Lastly, it could serve as a platform for sports diplomacy, contributing to Korea's global public diplomacy efforts for peace. The event would showcase the essence of unity and cooperation, furthering the promotion of peace and shared values on the global stage.

As the IOC has added "Together" to the traditional Olympic motto of "Faster, Higher, Stronger," the notion of unity and collaboration has become more significant than ever. It leads to ponder whether any competition embodies "together" as well as the Mixed NOC team competition does.

### **5.3. Conclusion**

Mixed NOC ice hockey was included in the YOG for the first time in Lausanne, joining a number of other Mixed NOC events at the 2020 YOG.

However, the event was excluded from plans for Gangwon 2024, along with all other Mixed NOC events, as part of a broader shift in focus towards elite athlete development. The IOC recognized the value of Mixed NOC experiences for the athletes and recommended that in the future, Mixed NOC events should be "explored" as activities in the Athlete Education Program. In light of these developments, the future of Mixed NOC ice hockey and other Mixed NOC events at the YOG is uncertain.

The findings of the study indicate that the athletes had a positive and enriching experience in the Mixed NOC ice hockey event at Lausanne 2020 YOG. Their participation not only contributed to their athletic development but also fostered social growth, closely aligning with the core values and objectives of the YOG. In 'Pre-Mixed NOC' phase, the athletes' reactions to the Mixed NOC concept were diverse. Initially, the athletes had apprehensions about the 'unique team composition' and 'game format'. However, upon entering the Olympic village, they viewed it as a 'once-in-a-lifetime chance to be the medalist' and 'perfect opportunity to announce the nation' on an international stage. And 'During the Mixed NOC' phase, the athletes' experiences can be categorized into on-ice and off-ice experiences. On the ice, they 'discovered and developed various skills' while 'enjoying stress-free hockey' in a friendly and supportive atmosphere. Under the

‘worldwide spotlight,’ the athletes ‘embraced responsibilities.’ Off the ice, ‘language barrier’ posed challenges, but through ‘team bonding’ led by TOP players, the athletes developed ‘embraced diversity and cultural understanding.’ Lastly, the ‘Post-Mixed NOC’ phase revealed significant legacies and athletes’ reminiscence. Athletes experienced a sense of ‘global network,’ which they referred to as the “Mixed NOC Bond”, transitioned from perceiving athletes from other countries as ‘rivals to considering them as friends,’ and their ‘interest in global news’ increased. They cherished their memories and gave recommendations for the future Mixed NOC event.

Based on the experiences of ice hockey players who participated in the Mixed NOC team, this study reveals that the Mixed NOC event has the potential to contribute significantly to the athletes' skill development and physical growth while also fostering their educational and cultural enrichment. Furthermore, the event aligns closely with the core Olympic values of excellence, respect, and friendship, making it in line with the vision of the Youth Olympic Games. Moreover, the Mixed NOC event serves as a practical manifestation of the Olympic ideals of equal rights, international friendship, world peace, and amateurism, highlighting its profound association with the fundamental principles of the Olympic movement.

As the IOC reorients YOG medal events towards elite competition, it becomes even more important to organize YOG activities which contribute to the development of sport from countries with less competitive national teams and to the promotion of Olympic values in young athletes. By shining a light on youth athlete perspectives and experiences in Lausanne 2020 YOG, this research can inform the planning of future Mixed NOC events at the YOG and contribute to their continued success.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix 1. Interview Questions**

#### **Basic information**

- What is your name, age, and nationality?
- How were you introduced to ice hockey? Do you still play ice hockey?
- How did you get selected to participate in the YOG?
  - How many players were in tryouts?
  - How did it feel when you heard you will be a Youth Olympian?

#### **Mixed NOC 3v3 structure**

- What did you think the unique structure of the Mixed NOC 3v3 cross-ice hockey event?
  - First impression about “Mixed NOC Team Game”?
  - How was it different from typical 5v5 hockey?
  - What did you *like*?
  - What did you *dislike*?
- How did it feel to play with players from other countries on the same team?
  - What was *challenging* about it?
  - What was *rewarding* about it?



- What could have helped make it better or easier?
- What did you learn from it?
- How did the practice go before the actual game?

### **Competitiveness**

- How important was winning to you?
  - (Pressure related)
  - Do you think it would've been different if you came out as your national team?
- Were you satisfied with your performance in general?
  - Did you get the medal? (more following questions)
- Did you feel the competition was fair? (What could've been changed to get better?)

### **Internationalism**

- How did it feel to represent your country in your color team?
- How was the experience with players from all different countries? Any big difference you noticed? Or anything you learned?
- Did the experience change your perceptions or awareness of other cultures?
- Have you stayed in touch with people you met at YOG? If so, who?

### **Reflections**

- What was the Olympic mean to you before?
- What was your goal? Did you achieve it?

- How was the Mixed NOC in general?
  - How would you define the “Olympic Spirit”?
  - What does “Olympic” mean to you now?
- How did the Mixed NOC Team experience impact your enthusiasm for ice hockey?
- What were the biggest lessons or takeaways from your experience?
- How do you think the experience would have been different if you had participated in a typical 5v5 international competition instead of Mixed NOC?
- Did you know this Mixed NOC was the first but the last game in 2020 Lausanne?

Do you think Mixed NOC should be kept in YOG? Or NOT?

- If yes, why?
- If not, why not?
- What advice would you have for the Organizers? Coaches? Players?
- Is there anything that I didn’t ask?

## Appendix 2. Composition of Mixed NOC Team by IIHF Test Criteria



2020 YOG – Mixed NOC 3-on-3 Tournament Game Manual

Blue	Red	Brown	Yellow	Green	Black	Orange	Grey
GK8	GK7	GK6	GK5	GK4	GK3	GK2	GK1
GK9	GK10	GK11	GK12	GK13	GK14	GK15	GK16
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25
33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40
48	47	46	45	44	43	42	41
49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56
64	63	62	61	60	59	58	57
65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72
80	79	78	77	76	75	74	73
81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88

## 국문초록

### 탁월성, 존중, 우정:

Mixed NOC 팀에 참여한 Lausanne 2020 YOG  
여자아이스하키 선수들의 경험을 통해 보는 올림픽  
가치 증진에 대한 고찰

조 수 지

글로벌스포츠매니지먼트 전공

체육교육과

서울대학교 대학원

올림픽의 가치는 국제적인 이해와 평화, 우정과 인류의 단결을 촉진하는 것이다. 그러나, 국가간 경쟁이 심화된 현대 올림픽에서 이러한 가치의 실현은 의문스럽다. 그러나 2018 년 평창올림픽에서의 여자아이스하키 남북단일팀은 남한과 북한이라는 이질적이며 민족주의적으로 적대적인 두 휴전 국가의 선수들이 하나의 팀으로 결합되어 내부에서는 올림픽의 회복을 체험하고 외부에서는

세계인들에게 화합과 감동을 주며 올림픽의 가치를 나타내었다. 어쩌면 올림픽에서의 국가 간의 결합된 팀은 훼손된 올림픽즘을 복원할 수 있는 가능성을 가진 맹아임을 보여주는 일인지도 모른다. 남북단일팀은 정치적인 이해관계에 근거한 단발적인 사건이었지만, 청소년올림픽에서의 다국적혼합팀은 미래의 주역인 각국가의 청소년 선수들이 하나의 팀으로 결합하여 민족주의적인 경쟁심리를 완화하고 서로 다른 문화를 이해하며 우정과 화합의 기회를 제공할 수 있다는 점에서, 올림픽 가치 실현을 위한 일반적이며 지속가능한 기능적인 형태의 해답을 가진 맹아로서 가능성이 있다.

이에, 본 연구는 2020 로잔유스올림픽 여자아이스하키 다국적혼합팀 경기에 참가한 선수들의 경험과 그것이 가진 의미를 밝히는데 있다. 또한, 이러한 경험이 선수들의 올림픽즘 가치에 대한 인식에 어떠한 영향을 미치는지를 알아보고, 향후 청소년올림픽을 준비하는 도시와 국가들에게 어떤 점이 고려되어야 하는지 전략 수집 기초자료를 제공하는데 목적이 있다. 특히, 다가오는 2024 강원청소년올림픽에서 다국적혼합팀 경기가 도입되지 않는

것으로 예상될 때, 다국적혼합팀 의 의미와 가능성을 나타내는 연구가 가장 필요한 시점이다.

본 연구는 2018 평창동계올림픽에서 남북단일팀 여자아이스하키 선수로 참여한 연구자가, 2020 로잔청소년올림픽 다국적혼합팀 여자아이스하키 선수 18 명을 연구 참여자로 선정한 뒤 현상학적 연구방법으로 탐구하였다. 연구 자료는 선수들과의 심층 면담 내용을 활용하였다.

연구결과 선수들은 2020 로잔청소년올림픽에서 진행된 다국적혼합팀 아이스하키 경기에서 다음과 같은 다양한 경험을 하였다. 다국적혼합팀 전 경험은 선수들의 실망과 기대로 나타내었다. 다국적혼합팀 경험을 하기 전 선수들은 경기의 '독특한 팀 구성 방법'과 '새로운 경기 형식'에 대해 당혹했고 동시에 이 경기를 통한 '개인적, 국가적 차원에서의 기회'에 대해 기대하였다.

그리고 선수들은 다국적혼합팀을 통해 경기장 안팎에서 특별하고 의미 있는 경험을 하였다. 경기장 안에서 선수들은, '13 개 국가선수들과 다양한 스타일의 하키', '스트레스 없는 환경 속에서의 하키', '다국적 관중의 응원속에서의 하키'를

경험하였다. 경기장 밖에서 선수들은, ‘언어적 차이로 인해 불편함’, ‘색다른 형식의 팀본딩’, ‘다양한 문화권의 이해와 존중’을 경험하였다.

다국적혼합팀 경기가 끝난 후 일상으로 돌아온 선수들은 그들의 삶 속에서, ‘“Mixed NOC Bond”를 통한 글로벌 네트워크’, ‘상대 국가에 대한 인식의 변화’, ‘세계적 뉴스에 대한 관심의 증가’를 경험하며 다국적혼합팀에 대해 추억하였다.

이에, 다국적혼합팀 경험은 선수들의 실력향상과 신체적 발전에 기여하며 동시에 교육적 문화적 성장을 촉진하고, 올림피즘의 핵심가치인 탁월성, 존중, 우정을 나타내므로 청소년올림픽의 비전과 맞닿아있다. 또한, 다국적혼합팀은 문화의 다양성과 국제적 이해를 촉진하며, 올림픽 이념인 동등한 권리, 국제 우정, 세계평화, 아마추어리즘을 실천한다.

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주요어: Mixed NOC, 청소년올림픽, 올림피즘, 올림픽 가치

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