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Equestrian arts make Olympic cut, others hope for the same

My May column addressed the controversy over the future of the equestrian sport of three-day eventing's inclusion in the Olympic Games. It appears that, at least for now, this sport is safe and will remain an Olympic sport.

Equestrian sport, as a category, is one of the 25 core sports recommended for inclusion in the 2020 Olympics and will consist of three equestrian disciplines: dressage, jumping and three-day eventing. However, as of 2020, all sporting disciplines are said to be "up for review" after each Olympics.

Notably, "exceptional circumstances" are required for a core discipline to be dropped from the Olympic program, such as a drug scandal, corruption or, more relevant to this discussion, a significant drop in popularity. Therefore, new and more popular sports could be included and others eliminated by a simple majority vote and dropped based solely on a massive drop in viewer attraction.

Many sports have tried and failed to get into the Olympics, a feat that is expensive, convoluted and a political minefield. Yet it is a herculean effort that many enter willingly and repeatedly, despite the inevitable setbacks, to demonstrate their sport to the world and obtain the surge of interest that often follows.

The Olympic Agenda 2020 formalized the ability of local organizing committees to push favored sports in their country with reduced bidding costs, a digital Olympic channel and a more flexible program allowing for the introduction of new and possibly different sports.

This local process makes hosting the Olympic Games more desirable at a time when

many cities are wary to make Olympic bids due to the costs. The other and more traditional path to inclusion is the sport's international federation's petition to the International Olympic Committee.

Recognition by the IOC requires an international federation overseeing the sport and adherence to the World Anti-Doping Code. The federations fill out questionnaires that can run 100 pages long with information on considerations such as gender equality, global participation and passion by fans as measured by TV audiences, social media, event attendance, infrastructure and operational costs, complexity, the youth appeal of the sports and the legacy value of adding them to the Olympic Games.

Campaigning is lengthy, difficult and costly. The application requires the production and submission of promotional films and booklets, personal presentations in front of the IOC and then the inevitable voting process.

The Olympic program is reviewed after each Olympics by the Olympic Programme Commission, made up of IOC members and representatives of the National Olympic Committees, international federations and athletes.

This group evaluates each sport's "value" to the Olympic brand and mission and then does the same for any IOC recognized sports that are campaigning for inclusion. The committee makes its recommendations to the IOC, whose members vote on whether to include them during its general meetings. It is this vote where Olympic dreams are ignited, extinguished or rekindled.

The IOC vote approved five new sports last month for the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. Baseball/softball, karate, skateboarding, sports climbing



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and surfing were added to the existing 28 Olympic sports. However, these new events are one-offs for Tokyo only and will not be a permanent part of the Olympics unless and until they are selected for longer term inclusion.

Any of these new sports could potentially be added on a more permanent basis, as well as other equestrian sports aggressively campaigning for inclusion and desperate to be a part of the Olympics such as polo and jousting. These decisions are typically made seven years ahead of the next Olympic Games.

As mentioned in the May Sporting Judgment piece on this issue, the IOC has a keen eye on the "younger market" — the millennials, described by Olympic sponsors as the 18- to 34-year-old audience. The IOC's President Thomas Bach said in a news release about the new sports' Olympic inclusion that the committee wants to "take sport to the youth."

He pointedly remarked that, "We cannot expect that they (the youth) will come automatically to us (to the Olympics). We have to go to them. Tokyo 2020's balanced proposal fulfills all of the goals of the Olympic Agenda

2020 recommendation that allowed it. Taken together, the five (new) sports are an innovative combination of established and emerging, youth-focused events that are popular in Japan."

Take for example baseball and softball which teamed up on 2011 to make a stronger joint bid to return as an Olympic sport. They were not selected for the 2016 Rio Olympics, but the committee recommended their inclusion for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics presumably given baseball's huge popularity and existing fields in Japan, not to mention the lucrative professional league here in the United States.

Other sports did not fare so well such as squash, wakeboard, wushu (commonly known as Chinese martial arts), dancing and bowling.

The 2024 hosting city short list includes Los Angeles, Rome, Paris, Budapest and Hamburg. The winner will be selected in 2017. Any sport seeking inclusion may have to capitalize on its affinity with the host nation. Sports seeking inclusion for each Olympics will also have to drum up enthusiasm with whomever the 'youth of the day' is by that time.

For the equestrian sport of eventing, that is likely to be the teams and individuals contesting events such as the European and North American Young Rider Championships, as well as the national and international divisions for Juniors and Children.

Awareness and support for eventing was extensive for Rio and such increased recognition is necessary to generate greater youth inclusion and sponsorship funding, not to mention imperative to remain a core sport of the Olympic Games. As the CEO of the World Squash Federation pointed out when addressing the importance of Olympic inclusion

for any sport, “You can never underestimate the exposure for a sport being part of the Olympic Games where so many people who don’t actually follow the sport watch it for that two-week period.”

He suggested that the requisite rises in funding that come with Olympic status would have profound effects on the sport it-

self. He opines that, “National committees target sports that are in the Games, therefore, there is more money to support training and preparation and everything else.”

This necessity explains the motivation behind the international federation overseeing equestrian sports, known as the International Federation for

Equestrian Sports, encouraging rule changes and proposing format revisions focused on making the sport of eventing easier to understand, more attractive to younger and larger audiences, broadcast-friendly and accessible by more nations for representation at the Olympic Games.

The flames of the controversy over the proposed changes (de-

tailed in the May 2016 Sporting Judgment) will outlast even the Olympic torch. However, the future inclusion of eventing, while safe for Tokyo 2020, must remain focused on sustainability if enthusiasts, professionals, amateurs and others passionate about the sport and those who want to continue to see this sport take its place on the podium.