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# THE POWER OF SPORT

**OUR EXCLUSIVE CHAT WITH JOHN COATES**

# JOHN COATES: THE POWER OF SPORT

*Imogen A. Rose spends time with Australia's main man at the International Olympic Committee.*

**T**here is nothing as powerful as hope. Nothing that quite moves the human spirit like faith and self-belief. Hope is the substance of passion – passion, in the true sense of the word. For passion means much more than that sense of energy, vigour and drive we so often associate with it today. It means the acceptance of great pain and suffering. Passion enables humans to strive for greatness, to push their limits beyond what they thought possible and ultimately, to be victorious!

Sport is one of the most potent ignitions of hope and passion. It is one of the most powerful forces in the world today. So much so that the United Nations has declared that 'sport and play are human rights that must be respected and enforced worldwide'.

Nelson Mandela, one of the most significant figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, proclaimed, 'Sport has the power to change the world'. Mandela maintained that sport was 'more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers'. An extraordinary statement from a man who knew that after a lifetime of fighting for human rights, of imploring passionate, intellectual and philosophical arguments, of challenging and condemning the South African Government and after serving 27 years in prison in the name of freedom – it was Rugby Union that would ultimately prove the racial trump card. Sport played a pivotal role in ending the injustice of apartheid and in helping to prevent a subsequent civil war. This is power.

The United Nations and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) work collaboratively to utilise sport for peace in

the world. IOC Vice President, John Coates, one of the most respected and capable individuals in the world of sport, knows firsthand its incredible power. Born in Sydney, Coates has been a stalwart figure in the development of Australian sport almost his entire life.

He was instrumental in the quest for, and the realisation of, Sydney 2000, hailed, 'the greatest Olympics ever!' He has been significantly involved with the Olympic Games for over 40 years – a remarkable achievement and commitment. Coates has the temperament and presence of a great statesman, yet he is remarkably approachable and considerate. He exhibits a terrific enthusiasm and generates a genuine sense of the true spirit of the Olympic movement.

Coates describes the personal impact of the Opening and Closing ceremonies of his first Olympic experience at Montreal in 1976. It was, he says, 'such a wonderful thing to be involved in' and as if struck by an Olympic ember, it left him knowing that he wanted to remain a part of the movement.

To this day, his affinity with the Olympics remains undiminished. In 2016, he stood alongside the then UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and IOC President, Thomas Bach, in Geneva as the Olympic Torch stopped at the United Nations en route to the Rio de Janeiro Games. It was a symbolic moment and a reminder of the core values shared by the United Nations and the International Olympic Committee.

Coates says, 'You certainly know that you are part of something very significant on those occasions'. He explains that 'We have a very close association and in our

case, with the support of the United Nations, we're using sport to promote peace'. It is with both pride and joy that he notes the many projects that improve the lives of so many around the world, which the IOC has supported and continues to support.

The fundamental Principles of Olympism – defined within the Olympic Charter – are inspiring and benevolent. The goal of Olympism 'is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity'. It is through the spirit of Olympism that the Olympic movement affects millions of individuals on a daily basis.

It would be easy to assume that the Olympics was just about the Games and that its relevance was limited to every two years (Summer and Winter Games). The reality is, however, that the IOC is committed to a broad spectrum of ongoing international initiatives intended 'to promote the values of solidarity, peace and human dignity which sport can channel'. This includes an emphasis on providing food and recreation to disadvantaged children, on fighting poverty and violence, upon restoring hope within war affected populations and in HIV prevention. This is where the real value of the IOC lies, in the determination to harness the power of sport and to realise its full potential. When asked what the power of sport is, Coates says meaningfully, 'To make lives better'.

Coates has witnessed this impact of sport at the individual, communal and international level. He understands the heartfelt response of the athletes who



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In a very real sense, the quality of the IOC administration and its subsidiaries is intrinsically linked to the ability to successfully employ the power of sport. Coates believes that it is vital for the IOC to employ the 'highest corporate governance standards'.

Significantly, Coates leads by example. He has shown strength and initiative by taking a pro-active stance regarding the issue of child abuse and child protection within sport. This includes pursuing all means to create an environment that not only seeks to prevent abuse of young athletes but that also establishes the trust necessary for victims to confidently disclose abuse. Furthermore, he has been similarly tough on issues of anti-doping and illegal betting.

Coates believes in the power of sport. Importantly, he has the character and drive to direct this energy toward great, even life-changing, ends. And this is one of the primary reasons why Coates is ideally suited to the role of AOC President and IOC Vice-President. Additionally, he has the intellect, communicative skills and the business acumen to navigate the international world of sports administration.

What is inescapable is that Coates truly understands sport. The IOC operates centrifugally, promoting and proliferating the power of sport. Its impact is far and wide. In fact, Olympism is an all-inclusive philosophy. Wherever individuals are involved in sport there is an obvious opportunity for physical, psychological and emotional benefits.

The power of sport is as significant in the schoolyard, the gym, the local pool or track, as it is to the gold medallist standing on the podium. The power of sport is that it can, and does, awaken hope. And when sport sparks the spirit, anything is possible!

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were allowed to compete under the Olympic Flag in Rio as the first Refugee Olympic Team. He finds fulfilment in the faces of the children who smile, because they have found a reason to dream again through sport. In fact, research published in *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* indicates that child victims of political conflict and/or trauma, 'who participated in structured sporting activities reported feeling more hopeful about their futures'.

Most recently, Coates has been involved in the preparation for Tokyo 2020. One of the great purposes he says, 'is to provide some hope to the children who survived the Fukushima tragedy in 2011'.

It is arguably in tragedy when the value of sport is most obvious. One of the greatest realities to emerge through the decision to award the next Olympic Games to Japan is the veritable joy and spirit of hope it has imbued throughout the country. Japan has embraced this opportunity with a sense of great honour.

Olympic gold medallist and Tokyo 2020 Executive Director of Sports, Koji Murofushi believes that sport 'has the power to create new dreams and bring people together – even in the most difficult of times'. Like many Japanese Olympians, Murofushi has been working directly with the victims of Fukushima, encouraging them to find strength through sport.

Photo courtesy of the International Olympic Committee