

# Playing the game: The soft power of sport



*Better at inventing sports than winning at them.* England hosts the 2015 Rugby World Cup.  
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Following the summer's Ashes triumph and with the UK hosting the Rugby World Cup, we look at how sport can help further the UK's international influence

This autumn's Rugby World Cup continues a great era of international sporting events in the UK, including the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics and the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games.

THE REAL STRENGTH OF UK SPORT

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The UK is also home to some of the world's most iconic sporting stars and venues, from David Beckham to Jessica Ennis-Hill and from Lords to Wimbledon. UK sporting competitions also generate huge global audiences. The Premier League alone is watched by 4.7 billion people and is one of the UK's most successful exports. Research has suggested that as many as **10% of the world's population support Manchester United, including 100 million people in China – more than are members of the Communist Party.** In Burma Premier League rights were among the earliest cultural engagement **when sanctions were lifted.**

As well as the familiar benefits of sport at home, this global following presents important opportunities for the UK and chimes with a growing interest in 'sports diplomacy'.

## WHY SPORT MATTERS

Research by [Kings College London](#) into major sporting events has found that their popularity provides a powerful means of showcasing a nation's achievements and values and its ability to manage major projects. The London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics – which was watched by more than 50% of the world's population — generated a substantial boost in international interest in the UK through the impressive medal haul and Danny Boyle's dazzling opening ceremony. Results from research in eleven strategically important countries for UK foreign policy and trade showed that on average 36% of people stated that the Games had made the UK more attractive as a place to study or do business, and [35% were more likely to visit the UK](#). The events also facilitated broader cultural programmes, such as the Cultural Olympiad and the 'UK Now' programme in China (the biggest ever celebration of UK arts and culture in that country). As the British Ambassador to China said following the Games: 'The Olympic opening ceremony and the UK Pavilion at the Shanghai Expo, together with a big UK arts festival last year and some GREAT Britain campaign events, have helped move the dial on perceptions of the UK brand. Many Chinese people now associate us strongly with creativity as well as tradition and ['English gentlemen'](#). The success of the Paralympic Games also helped change attitudes towards disabled people around the world.

In the digital and globalised age, one of the increasingly effective ways of developing influence for a country is via direct contact between people of the sort that sport encourages. **Sport can build camaraderie between people who might otherwise never meet**, be they competitors in sports tournaments, international visitors to the Rugby World Cup or young people from different countries discussing the latest Wayne Rooney goal online. It brings people from diverse countries and backgrounds together – witness the make-up of any UK Premier League football team, or the fact that many young people idolise overseas sports stars as much as those from their own country.



*Football or Cheju? Vice Premier Madame Liu Yandong and Michael Owen at a British Council China-UK youth football match. Photo ©*

Han Lifeng.

## HOW SPORT CAN HELP

Community sporting programmes can also be immensely powerful in supporting development and promoting the UK's influence. From the favelas of Brazil to the cities of China, international sporting programmes from the UK – including British Council rugby and football projects – have given hope, inspiration and life skills to young people across the world.

**Try Rugby** is a programme developed by the British Council with Premiership Rugby. It uses rugby coaching to engage with young people, helping tackle health, education and social issues in a growing range of countries. It also generates good will and influence for the UK. In Brazil the programme is capitalising on the interest in the game generated by the 2016 Olympics, which will for the first time feature Rugby Sevens.

Premier Skills is a partnership between the English Premier League and the British Council to train football coaches. In eight years it has reached some 500,000 people across 25 countries. It has become a tool for international development, promoting inclusion, rights, role models and people-to-people engagement, as well as **tackling specific issues like violence against girls**. Programmes of this type also help the UK be seen as a dynamic country and to build future long term economic opportunities, e.g. via training provision, promotion and the marketing of UK sports industry services. Last month it was announced Premier Skills would be expanded further in China. This will help to position the UK as partner of choice as China undertakes a massive campaign to promote football and sport as part of its drive towards consumer-led growth.

Recent research for the British Council by the Youth Sports Trust also showed evidence that sport promoted inclusion, diversity, community cohesion and women's rights. For example, the London 2012 Olympic legacy programme 'International Inspiration', run by the British Council with UNICEF, UK Sport and the Youth Sport Trust, trained girls around the world as peer leaders to help change attitudes towards gender equality through sports events. The programme reached **over 15 million young people in 21 countries** and inspired 55 significant national policy changes, including increasing sport on school curricula in 19 countries.

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**Sport programmes can create positive pathways for young people, giving skills, confidence, and self-respect.** Sport generates role models, meaning, identification and status. It **reduces violence and promotes community cohesion, as well as having direct economic benefits**. It can therefore play an influential role in places affected by instability or extremism.

Of course sport is not always a force for good. It has been blighted by drugs, cheating, and hooliganism. In 1969 Honduras and El Salvador even fought the so-called 'Football War', after some violent World Cup football matches. Yet as a safe outlet for passions, aggression and tribalism, it is more often a positive force. In that sense sport is perhaps better seen as a continuation of foreign policy by other means – as Orwell said: 'War minus the shooting'.

## WAR MINUS THE SHOOTING

Sport, then, can deliver international development, education and influence. Yet these benefits are not yet sufficiently recognised or supported in mainstream public policy. The Sport White Paper that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is currently preparing offers one opportunity for these positives to receive deserved attention. Further study of the growing evidence for what UK sport is contributing to people's lives around the world and how it supports the UK's global standing can only help it achieve more in the future.

As Bill Shankly famously [said](#) of football, but perhaps could equally be applied to the international role of all sports: 'Some people believe [it] is a matter of life and death... I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.'

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