Matej B. Silecky, University of California, Berkeley

The Post-Soviet Development of Elite Athletics in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

Elite athletics capture public attention throughout the world, especially during the Olympics. The Soviet Union and China—both recognized for their Olympic prowess—have developed extensive programs to train athletes. These programs typically overshadow the efforts of developing countries to achieve international success in sports. The five former Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (“KKTTU”) participated in the Soviet athletic development program and experienced its successes and setbacks. In 1992, shortly after the break-up of the Soviet Union, athletes from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan competed in the 1992 Olympics as part of the Unified team of a number of former Soviet republics and then competed for their respective countries in subsequent Olympics. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan began competing as independent countries in the 1996 Olympics. KKTTU’s post-Soviet participation in the Olympics, prior to the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, Russia, provides an opportunity to compare the developmental paths of KKTTU countries since independence.

The Modern Olympic Movement: Why Participate?

Pierre de Coubertin of France has been credited with establishing the current Olympic Movement in the first modern Olympic Games, which were held in Athens, Greece, in 1896. Coubertin’s goals for the Olympic Movement were included in the Olympic Charter. According to Rule One, “the goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and

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1 “Modern Olympic Games,” 2–3; see also, International Olympic Academy.
better world by educating youth through sport practiced in accordance with Olympism and its values.2 Olympians are encouraged to act as role models.3

In addition to these goals, developing countries participate in elite international athletics for nation building purposes through international recognition, development of national identity, and integration of a multiethnic country. Olympic programs can also support economic development and provide opportunities for sports diplomacy. Since many of these goals are intangible and overlapping, it is difficult to quantify outcomes. For example, sports teams increase the visibility of symbols that promote national identity, including flags, national anthems, bands, banners, and logos.4 These symbols, along with funding and facilities, can be used as a means of social control.5 Moreover, symbols of national identity were used for uniting the French and the English in Canada and “Russifying” the Soviet Union.6 In this way, the development of national identity can overlap with integration.7 While Russification is no longer desirable for the KKTTU, symbolism in international sport could be used to re-develop distinct national identities in the post-Soviet sphere.

Success in international sports, especially the Olympics, can contribute to an image that promotes state interests.8 In the case of the Soviet Union, this was the spreading of their ideology, while for China it was regional dominance.9 There is also perceived value in hosting major sporting events. Success leads to recognition in the international community.10

3 See, Gibson; Mpekatorou; Proceedings of International Olympic Academy.
4 Eitzen, 371; Houlihan, 216.
5 Eitzen 372, 373.
6 Houlihan, 216; Allison, 345.
7 See Allison, 350–351.
8 Houlihan, 216, 219.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 219.
One purpose for seeking international recognition from sporting events is to support economic development.\textsuperscript{11} This goal is taken so seriously that professional marketing agencies are often hired to assist in the effort. Rein’s article on place-branding sports takes this a step farther, providing sports-branding techniques to benefit “emerging, transitional, negatively-viewed and newly industrialized countries.” Possible platforms for branding are hosting an event, the team (promoting national identity) and wholly integrating sports into the design of the place such that the developed sports facilities become synonymous with the perception of the place.\textsuperscript{12}

One example of the branding possibility of a team is New Zealand’s All Blacks, which cultivated a rugged persona with an opening ritual based on Maori traditions and team logos. The team’s brand became part of the country’s national identity and promoted New Zealand abroad.\textsuperscript{13} This demonstrates the overlap of reasons for a country to engage in elite, international athletics.

Riordan argues that developing countries do not support sports for the sake of fun but to achieve serious goals which, for the Soviet Union, included military readiness, hygiene and health, and social agendas such as the emancipation of women.\textsuperscript{14} A country’s reasons to participate in the Olympics or other elite level international sports competitions range from the aspirational to the economic, encompassing ideology, social policy and diplomacy. Efforts made to increase success in these athletic events include hiring marketing experts to brand the countries, teams and athletes. As countries that moved from membership in the Soviet Olympic powerhouse to a developing or transitional status, each KKTTU country has much to consider in developing a national sports program.

**Measuring Success from Olympic Participation and National Sports**

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 217.
\textsuperscript{12} Rein and Shields, 77–78, 80.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{14} Riordan, “Developing Societies,” 287-288, 293.
Olympic medals are generally concentrated among relatively few countries. This suggests most countries choose to participate for reasons other than winning medals. The studies of factors that influence a country’s success in the Olympics conclude the size of its sports budget and the intensity of its effort to win more medals will positively impact a country’s performance. Oyeyinka points out that economic factors, political instability (especially ethnic wars and genocide) and religion, specifically a higher population of Muslims or Dharmists, detrimentally impact Olympic participation and success. Still, a country will likely choose a sport where there is a chance of success for Olympic participation and winning medals. Rein recommends considering the resources that a country can commit and the country’s historic association to the sport. In addition, countries should avoid sports where the medals are usually won by one country, e.g., China and table tennis. An exception to this rule is when there has previously been an athlete from that country with individual success in a particular sport. This provides an opportunity for branding and further development of the sport.

Riordan and Rein agree on the importance of selecting a sport based on national or cultural identity. Riordan brings up the related issue of whether sports in newly independent states should grow out of indigenous national traditions or align with popular sports already a part of international and Olympic competition. His examples are relevant to KKTTU: For example, there are many folk games in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (“USSR”), some of which were included in national competitions, including Uzbek Kyss-kuu.

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15 See Oyeyinka.
16 Ibid., 164.
17 Ibid., 174-177.
18 Re in and Shields, 81; Silver.
19 Ibid.
20 Riordan, “Developing Societies,” 296.
horseback chasing game.\textsuperscript{21} However, Riordan notes it is difficult for sports like this to cross ethnic boundaries to an international elite level.\textsuperscript{22} In addition, the USSR was already an Olympic powerhouse, so these events seem geared to encouraging broad participation rather than developing sports for Olympic competition. Countries like KKTTU might find more success in selecting Olympic sports with some connection to already-popular indigenous sports, but, as discussed below, economics is still a major factor.

During the 2012 Olympics in London, the New York Times ran a somewhat tongue-in-cheek article considering these questions for “the Kyrgyzstans of the world.” The author, Nate Silver, evaluated economic balance, competitive balance and “medal abundance,” concluding that such countries should look for a sport that is cheap to get in to, isn’t already dominated by one country and offers a lot of medals.\textsuperscript{23} While not a thorough statistical analysis, Silver’s conclusions are interesting and include a number of examples from KKTTU. For economic balance, he looks at Gross Domestic Product versus the cost of the sport, concluding that countries with a comparatively low GDP fare better in sports with lower associated costs; e.g., weightlifting versus equestrian sports. He notes that Kazakhstan has won Olympic medals in weightlifting while Kyrgyzstan, though it has many horses, is unlikely to fare well in equestrian events where nearly all medalists are from countries with the highest worldwide GDPs.\textsuperscript{24}

Silver quips that “competitive balance” equals “how good are the Chinese?”, meaning it is best not to pick a sport where one country has won most of the medals over multiple Olympics. “Medal abundance” translates into a conclusion that individual sports offering

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 297, 306.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Silver.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
multiple Olympic medals are better choices than team sports offering one medal. In Silver concludes that the easiest sports to medal in are wrestling, tae kwon do, weightlifting, boxing, gymnastics and judo. In several of these sports, KKTTU countries have not only participated but also some have won Olympic medals.

One online comment to Silver’s article suggests that developing and transitional countries focus on sports that are not popular among women, noting that China has begun to do this but has not yet dominated the field. This option highlights another measure of successful participation in elite international and Olympic sports: increased participation of women. This is relevant in KKTTU, where greater participation of women was encouraged in the Soviet period (discussed below), but it is not generally supported in Muslim countries. For example, national leaders can prohibit their athletes from participating in an international event, as did thirty-four Islamic nations at the 1996 Olympics, who would not allow their female athletes to compete because doing so would violate Muslim rules for appropriate women’s dress. However, women athletes from all KKTTU countries competed in the 1996 Olympics, and for three, this was their first Olympics since the break-up of the Soviet Union. This is an excellent example of women’s participation as a measure of a country’s increased involvement in Olympic sports.

**Elite Sport During the Soviet Era and Participation by KKTTU**

If a country were to develop a national sports program by considering: (1) their goals for participating in the Olympics and other elite international sporting events; (2) the factors

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Online comments to Silver’s article also suggest other factors to consider: time in the sport to achieve an elite level, athlete attrition, time commitment (does the athlete have another job?) and number of registered athletes in the sport in the winning country (depth of talent pool) (Ibid.). These are valid factors but the information is difficult to obtain.
28 Ibid.
29 See Akyildiz; Grabarenko; see also, Eitzen 373.
30 Eitzen, 375.
influencing which sports to focus on; and (3) a branding program and diplomatic relations, and if it had an adequate budget, it could end up with a sports program similar to the Soviet Union’s. This is not to suggest that the Soviet program did not have problems but it is an example of a cohesive plan that bore results. The USSR headed the medal table in almost every Olympics, summer and winter, from 1952, when it first participated in the Olympics, until 1992. This was not accidental success: knowing that Olympic success brings international prestige, the Soviet Union worked to develop prowess in Olympic sports.31

Riordan has written an extensive history of the development of sports at all levels in the Soviet Union.32 Sports were a requirement, like schooling, with a series of programs and schools at each level where talent was identified and advanced.33 This system was consistent with the Soviet philosophy of physical culture’s importance 34 and similar to the Latin maxim: “a sound mind in a sound body.” Moreover, there was also a military defense reason for encouraging physical training, especially in the years leading up to World War II. For example, shooting was included among the chosen sports until the late 1980s.35 While the Soviets believed that talent in sports deserved special attention and training, talent was secondary to a broader interest in physical culture.36

Soviet physical culture policies had a direct impact on KKTTU, including integration, sports diplomacy, and efforts to increase the number of women in sports, providing an example for broader integration of society. Soviet sports diplomacy was highly developed and was a part of Soviet efforts to build relations with bordering countries and those that shared the Communist

31 Peppard and Riordan, Soviet Sport Diplomacy, 71.
32 See Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society.
33 Peppard and Riordan, Soviet Sport Diplomacy, 71.
34 Riordan, Soviet Sport, 3; Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society, 43 et seq.
35 Houlihan, 215; Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society, 150–152.
36 Riordan, Soviet Sport, 17.
ideology. Soviet policies aimed at increasing the number of women in sports included investing similar funding and effort into women’s and men’s sports and the acceptance of sportswomen in Soviet society. Some examples of these policies applied to the Central Asian Republics follow.

Integration

“The Soviet Union attempted to use sport to submerge a broad range of ethnic communities within a Soviet identity.” In its most negative form, this “Russification” would destroy many unique aspects of the hundreds of cultures that were part of the Soviet Union, including those in Central Asia. However, to the Soviets, integration of “massively diverse ethnicities” was key. The physical culture and training programs were an important part of the Soviet socialization of its citizens.

The Soviet Union studied the level of sport participation in all of its republics, adjusted the facilities and coaching based on those results and held competitive events in each region. By 1970 most Central Asian republics had lower participation rates than most Slavic republics, generally reflecting their socio-economic ranking. In response to this data, the USSR Committee on Physical Culture and Sport (CPCS) added sporting facilities and professional coaching in Uzbekistan. Similarly, the Soviets held the first Central Asian Games in Tashkent in 1920, which coincided with other regional Soviet competitions. Riordan identifies these

37 See Peppard and Riordan, Soviet Sport Diplomacy; Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society, 347–387.
38 Riordan, “Developing Societies,” 293; Riordan, Soviet Sport, 130 et seq.
39 Houlihan, 215- 216, citing Riordan.
40 Riordan, Soviet Sport, 12–13.
41 Akyıldız, 2.
42 Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society, 307. Riordan data accuracy is uncertain because there are some reports of padding numbers (Ibid.). This demonstrates one of the difficulties of the Soviet system: corruption.
43 Akyıldız, 2.
44 Ibid., 5–6.
Games as the first time “Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Turkmenians, Kirgiz and other Muslim peoples, as well as Russians, Ukrainians and other Europeans,” competed in any sporting event together.\textsuperscript{45}

Central Asian participants focused on their national games, including games on horseback and the local form of wrestling, kurash. The final ceremony included a large gymnastics and folk dancing exhibition.\textsuperscript{46} Additional events were held in later years, including a Second Turkestan Olympics in 1921, an All-Turkestan Olympics in 1924, the first All-Uzbekistan Spartakiad in 1927 and local sports competitions for the selection of elite athletes.\textsuperscript{47} In subsequent decades, modern Western-style sports including weightlifting, basketball, gymnastics, boxing, pentathlon and decathlon would come to monopolize these events.\textsuperscript{48} The initial focus on traditional sports demonstrates the importance of this factor in choosing which sports a country might support, but the transition to current Olympic sports also shows the draw, be it by plan or unintentional, of broadly-popular global sports.

Riordan’s research concluded that about 26,000 people were sports club members in Uzbekistan by the end of 1926.\textsuperscript{49} By 1970, “the Soviet republic of Uzbekistan (which was previously part of the Turkestan khanate) is said to have had . . . over 4,000 qualified instructors, a State Institute of Physical Culture, physical culture faculties at the Tashkent, Andizhan and Bukhara colleges of education, thirty physical education departments in other institutes, and four sports boarding schools—more than any other republic.”\textsuperscript{50} This likely resulted from Soviet

\textsuperscript{45} Riordan, “Developing Societies,” 290.
\textsuperscript{46} Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society, 80.
\textsuperscript{47} See Akyildiz; Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society.
\textsuperscript{48} Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society, 113.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 308.
integration efforts. Muslim Uzbeks generally resisted integration into Soviet society, but successful Uzbek athletes in Olympic sports were touted examples of integration.\(^{51}\)

The three republics of Kirgizia, Turkmenia and Tadzhikistan tended to place last in Spartakiads. By 1972, these republics had more qualified coaching professionals than the top three finishers, Belorussia, Russia and Ukraine. Riordan surmised this might be part of a national policy to raise the level of sport in these locations.\(^{52}\) Notably, these three countries, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, continue to be less active in the Olympics and international competitions since the break-up of the Soviet Union than Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

**Sport Diplomacy**

The Soviet Union also utilized Islamic athletes from the Central Asian republics to develop stronger ties with Muslim countries, which was part of an effort to strengthen diplomatic ties. Beginning in 1969, the USSR held sports conferences in the Islamic territory of the Soviet Union between its Central Asian nationals and athletes from Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia and Algeria.\(^{53}\)

Famous Uzbek sportspeople were used for public relations at international meetings with Muslim countries in Asia and Africa.\(^{54}\) In addition, a sports cooperation treaty was signed in 1969 between the USSR and Egypt, providing for Soviet-Arab Sports Weeks.\(^{55}\) These alternated between Egypt and the USSR, with Uzbek, Kirghiz, and Kazakh athletes sent to Egypt in 1970

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\(^{51}\) Ibid., 2, 6. The Soviets also punished non-cooperation in sport and integration efforts: “At the 15th All-Uzbekistan Spartakiad that took place in May 1971, two Uzbek boxers suddenly vanished and another, a Candidate Master of Sport, refused to enter the ring when faced with superior opponents. As a result, the Candidate Master was stripped of his title, and disqualified from boxing for two years; the other two were disqualified for one year—all for 'demonstrating cowardice and indifference’” (Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 308).

\(^{52}\) Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 311.

\(^{53}\) Peppard and Riordan, *Soviet Sport Diplomacy*, 103.

\(^{54}\) Akyildiz, 14.

\(^{55}\) Peppard and Riordan, *Soviet Sport Diplomacy*, 103.
and Egyptian wrestlers, weightlifters and swimmers competing against Soviet Uzbek opponents in Tashkent, Samarkand and Andizhan the next year. The USSR signed similar agreements over the next decade with Iraq, Syria, and Algeria, Lebanon, Tunisia, Libya and Jordan.

These are just some examples of Soviet sport diplomacy engaging Islamic nationals from the Central Asian republics. A former Uzbek sports minister claimed “the attainments of Soviet Uzbekistan and its entry into world sport are of immense importance. They demonstrate graphically the triumph of Lenin’s national policy. Today, Uzbekistan has become a beacon of mature socialism in the East, attracting the attention of young developing states.” While Lenin’s policy is no longer an issue, it is clear that sports diplomacy developed international connections for at least parts of this region.

Women in Sports

As discussed above, the Soviet sports program adopted a policy to encourage greater participation by women. Though the Central Asian republics were traditional Islamic cultures up until the Soviet period, the Soviets were determined to equalize women in society, and sport was an important part of that effort. Riordan argues that this program provided Soviet women with development opportunities that were superior to those in other nations.

As of 1977, many women in Central Asian republics were still not allowed to participate in sports. The lowest participation rates for Soviet women were in Muslim areas: Riordan references a Kazakh author claiming that some parents forbade their daughters to participate in dance or sport because they could not bare their arms and legs. The Soviets established women-

56 Peppard and Riordan, Soviet Sport Diplomacy, 104.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 See Grabarenko, 424 et seq.; Riordan, Soviet Sport, 21.
60 Riordan, Soviet Sport, 136–138.
61 Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society, 319.
specific sporting events to address this issue, such as the First Spartakiad for Rural Women of Uzbekistan in 1969, where three-quarters of the finalists were Uzbek.\textsuperscript{62} Successful women athletes from this region were integrated, like their male counterparts, into the Soviet sport system. In 1952, Galina Shamray, a gymnast, was credited as being the first Uzbek to win an Olympic gold medal.\textsuperscript{63}

Riordan believes this integration is a benefit of the Soviet sports policy in its Islamic territories because it gave women greater freedoms. He explains, “It is a sobering thought that had the grandmothers of such Soviet Uzbek gymnasts as Nelli Kim or Elvira Saadi appeared in public clad only in a leotard, they would almost certainly have been stoned to death…”\textsuperscript{64} Instead, they are respected athletes.

This policy may be one that had the most lasting effect in KKTTU, as can be seen from the ongoing participation of women from these countries from 1996 on, even as other Muslim countries prohibited women from participating. In addition, in the London 2012 Olympics, some Muslim countries entered female athletes for the first time.\textsuperscript{65} In this context, sportswomen from KKTTU can be considered to be in the vanguard on this issue, an apparently positive outcome of this Soviet policy.

**Participation by KKTTU in the Olympics During the Post-Soviet Period: The Transitional Years: 1992–1996 Olympics**

According to Oyeyinka, between 1952 and 1988 Soviet Olympic athletes were identified only as Soviet rather than by republic, and from 1992 forward, they were identified by their post-

\textsuperscript{62} Riordan, *Soviet Sport*, 137.
\textsuperscript{63} Akyildiz, 7.
\textsuperscript{64} Riordan, “Developing Societies,” 293 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{65} Gohir.
Soviet country. Therefore, a full analysis of participants and medals by republic is not possible. However, on their National Olympic Committee (NOC) websites, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have claimed certain Soviet athletes as their own, although those athletes classified as Uzbek or Tajik could have been ethnic Russians or Tartars living and training in these republics.

The USSR had been training for the 1992 and 1994 Olympics long before the break-up of the Soviet Union. As previously explained, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan participated in the 1992 Winter and Summer Olympics as part of the Unified Team. That team finished second in the overall medal count in Albertville and first in Barcelona, again demonstrating the power of the Soviet training system. The women’s performance also demonstrated the success of Soviet efforts to provide sports opportunities for women: they won fifteen medals on their own and four more in paired events with men in Albertville. Uzbekistan is credited with three gold, two silver and one bronze medal in gymnastics, track, weightlifting, shooting and fencing.

However, after these Olympic Games, changes in these new countries were seen in their sports training programs. Training facilities, funding and professional trainers were lost and the strong youth programs critical to developing high-level sport were undermined. The structured and funded Soviet program was lost at the same time that the countries had pressing concerns arising from newfound nationhood. For example, Tajikistan, in addition to the break-up of the

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66 Oyeyinka, 168.
67 Akyildiz, 11-13; NOC Tajikistan, NOC Uzbekistan.
69 Ibid.
70 Akyildiz, 13.
71 Rein and Shields, 82; Peppard and Riordan, *Soviet Sport Diplomacy*, 135-136.
72 At first glance, the creation of so many new countries might seem to create more opportunities for individual athletes to become Olympians and/or high-level international competitors, and in fact some athletes sought to represent these new countries rather than Russia. However, this approach is complicated by the necessary organizational structures for each country (federations, Olympic committees, etc.) and the need to pay for training (see Section C, Winter Sports in KKTU: Figure Skating).
Soviet Union, suffered a civil war, “falling apart like a house of cards.” It did not participate in the 1992 or 1994 Olympics, entering in 1996 with small group of eight athletes in five sports.

At present, each country is deciding how to re-prioritize their efforts to develop athletic programs and considering what sports policies are important to them. Their participation and success rates, as measured primarily by medals, vary greatly among the countries. Nevertheless, aspects of the Soviet period training and traditions of each country are visible in the choices made regarding participation in the Olympics.

The Appendix provides charts for each KKTTU country, listing Olympics participation, the number of male and female athletes, medals (gold, silver and bronze) and sports entered. There has been much higher participation in the Summer Olympics, although each country except Turkmenistan has entered some athletes in Winter Olympics. For Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the two countries listing their claimed athletes during the Soviet period, a comparison of that data and the attached charts shows only a rough correlation between sports entered pre- and post-Soviet period. For example, none of the Uzbek athletes competing as part of the Unified Team in 1992 competed again in 1996 in Atlanta.

Only one athlete from Tajikistan was entered in both the 1992 and 1996 Olympics. The information available on this athlete is an excellent example of the problem described above: since there are no agreed upon parameters among these countries as to who “claims” an athlete, the data is often inconclusive or inconsistent. According to Tajikistan’s National Olympic Committee, Andrij Abduvaliev competed in the hammer throw in 1992 and in 1996. However, Sports Reference lists him as competing for the Unified Team in 1992, and because Tajikistan

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73 Grabarenko, 429.
74 See Charts; NOC Uzbekistan.
75 Sports-Reference.com.
did not participate in that team, he likely competed for Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan. In addition, *Sports Reference* does not list Abduvaliev as competing in 1996, but he is listed as competing for Uzbekistan in the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. Since *Sports-Reference* lists Abduvaliev’s birthplace as St. Petersburg, Russia, one can see why it is difficult to assign a country to some of these athletes.

**The London 2012 Olympics**

According to *Sports-Reference* and NOCs, the number of athletes participating in the London 2012 Summer Olympics for each KKTTU country was:

**Kazakhstan**: 115 athletes, of which thirty-eight were women. Kazakhstan earned thirteen medals (seven gold, one silver and five bronze) in five different sports. Of countries winning ten or more medals, Kazakhstan had the highest percentage of gold, three of seven in women’s weightlifting. This outcome supports criteria outlined in Silver’s “Medalball.”

**Kyrgyzstan**: Fourteen athletes, of which three were women. There were no medalists.

**Tajikistan**: Sixteen athletes, of which three were women. The only medalist was a female boxer, showing success in a low cost sport generally more popular among men.

**Turkmenistan**: Ten athletes, of which three were women. There were no medalists.

**Uzbekistan**: Fifty-three athletes, of which seventeen were women. The team received four medals, one gold and three bronze, all in wrestling, boxing and judo.

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77 Ibid.  
78 NOC Kazakhstan lists 115 and Sports-Reference lists 113 (compare NOC Kazakhstan with Sports-Reference). Additional discrepancies exist, such as in the number of women entered, but are not the focus of this paper so will not be otherwise noted. Details of the sports entered by each KKTTU country are included in the Appendix.  
79 Sports-Reference, Kazakhstan.  
80 Bloch, Carter and Fox.  
81 Sports-Reference, Kyrgyzstan.  
82 Sports-Reference, Tajikistan.  
83 Sports-Reference, Turkmenistan.
In the most recent Summer Olympics, three of five KKTTU countries earned Olympic medals, excluding Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Nearly all medals were in sports that Silver concluded were relatively easy to win medals for—boxing, wrestling, and weightlifting. Of these, seven were won by women and all but one were in a sport not typically popular with women, such as weightlifting or boxing. The outliers were two gold medalists from Kazakhstan: a woman in triple jump (track and field) and the well-publicized story of the 38-year old rider from Kazakhstan who was competing in his fourth Olympics and caused an upset in the men’s cycling road race. It is reasonable to conclude that Silver’s views on sports that attract medals, while simplistic, holds some truth for transitional countries seeking to win Olympic medals.

The importance of women in sports as part of that success is also clear from these results. London 2012 was the first Olympics in which at least one woman athlete was part of the delegation from each Muslim majority country. The KKTTU countries which have consistently sent women athletes to the Olympics, and who are obtaining medals, are in the vanguard.

**KKTTU Winter Sports: Figure Skating’s Example as an “Outlier” Sport**

As discussed, KKTTU countries have had limited participation in the Winter Olympics. First, the majority of Winter Olympics sports are not played in Central Asia. Although the Soviet Union was strong in these sports, its athletes and training facilities were typically in the Slavic regions. Second, many of these sports require facilities like ski areas and ice rinks that are uncommon in Central Asia. It is not surprising that KKTTU countries are not strong in winter

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84 Sports-Reference, Uzbekistan.
85 See Fotheringham.
86 Gohir.
sports. Still, one sport—figure skating—provides an example of developing countries getting athletes to an elite level in an outlier sport.  

A country that wants its athletes to participate in Olympic events must have a National Olympic Committee (NOC), which is under the International Olympic Committee. Figure skating is also governed on the international level by the International Skating Union (“ISU”), which determines Olympic qualifiers. To compete in ISU events, a skater must be entered by the governing ISU federation in his/her home country. Not all countries have an ISU member federation as they do not all meet the requirements, which include an ice rink in the country and a provisional period, among others. Skaters must meet other requirements, including citizenship/residency in the member country and ISU clearance to compete in qualifying events.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan do not have ISU member federations. In addition, figure skating requires year-round training for many years which means year-round, artificially-maintained ice (both expensive), and offers very few Olympic medal opportunities—only one event per person competing, only one set of medals per event. In addition, figure skating is dominated by certain countries (Japan, Russia, USA, Canada). However, this domination is a tendency, not a rule, and therefore Olympic participation could be appealing to Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan.

The Soviets were the strongest in the world in figure skating for years, and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have this tradition to draw from. Both countries have active ISU member federations and are in a better economic situation than the other three KKTTU countries. In

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87 Information about figure skating governing bodies and requirements is based on personal knowledge.
88 See ISU.org.
89 The Sochi 2014 Olympics will offer a figure skating team event for the first time. However, this is unlikely to add medal opportunities for countries without a strong skating history because the event is only open to the top ten qualifying countries and the country must have competitors for all disciplines (ladies, men, pairs and ice dance).
90 Sports Reference/Soviet Union Figure Skating.
addition, figure skating is typically popular among females although dress codes could be a concern in Muslim countries taking a stricter view of dress codes than these two countries currently do.

Currently, Kazakhstan lists three women skaters (one retired in 2001) and five men at the international level. Of these, two have Olympic experience and three are listed as current competitors. There are no pairs and there are two current ice dance teams.91 Dennis Ten, who trains in the United States, is the most well-known Kazakh skater and the first one to win a gold medal at an ISU competition.92 His second place finish at the 2013 World Championships is the highest result for a skater from Kazakhstan.93

Uzbekistan currently lists two women skaters at the Olympic level but both are retired. Four of its male skaters have reached the international level and currently compete. Three pairs are listed at the Olympic level, with one each competing in 2002, 2006 and 2010. Surprisingly, eight ice dance couples are listed, but only one is currently competing and none have made the Olympics.94 Of these skaters, Tatiana Malinina is perhaps the most well-known. She originally represented Russia, where she was born and trained, but moved to Uzbekistan as a teenager.95 Another Uzbekistan skater, Misha Ge, is still developing his reputation, and benefits from the opportunity to compete internationally for a smaller federation. Ge grew up in China, where his parents were coaches; they are now part of his coaching team.96 He trains in the United States.

For both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the existence of ISU member federations derives from the strength of that sport in the former Soviet Union. However, there is no indication that

91 ISU.org.
92 ISU.org/Athlete Biography.
93 Ibid.
94 ISU.org.
95 ISU.org/Athlete Biography.
96 ISU.org/Athlete Biography.
either of these countries has worked to improve its success in skating, given the high costs and lengthy training times involved. Instead, their figure skaters have a connection to the country and are able to switch, typically through maintaining dual citizenship, from a country that currently has a strong program to develop figure skaters. In this way, both the country and individual athlete benefit. Any KKTTU country could take this approach with athletes from other sports.

**Future Development Based on KKTTU’s 1992–2014 Olympics**

Some general observations can be made about KKTTU’s participation in the Olympics from the end of the Soviet period to the present. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan participate the most broadly in terms of numbers, gender mix and sports entered. Only those two countries have entered athletes in “outlier” sports, e.g., those with little history of competition in the country and/or are more expensive to participate in, such as cycling and figure skating. Each KKTTU country except Turkmenistan has entered at least one athlete in Winter Olympic events. Of course, the numbers are significantly higher for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the only countries that have won medals in the Winter Olympics (a total of seven: one by an Uzbek woman, two by Kazakh women and three by one Kazakh man). This distribution shows the significance of women in elite sports.

In considering the reasons initially outlined for participating in Olympic and elite international sports competitions, gender equity continues to emerge as one of the most significant and one where results are most readily noticeable. Grabarenko noted a post-Soviet resurgence of traditional Islamic values, including women wearing *hejab* and women withdrawing from public view as men impose their views of Islamic norms on them. However, Tajikistan’s pride in its athletes included Muslim women who competed during the Soviet

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97 Grabarenko, 426–427.
period, such as Zebuniso Rustamova (Archery, World Champion, Olympic silver medalist, 1976) and Erica Shiller (World Champion, gymnastics).\textsuperscript{98} Suggesting that these athletes could encourage women to participate in sports, Grabarenko concludes, these women prove that Tajikistan previously supported women in sports, and should continue that support.\textsuperscript{99} Rustamova, taking to heart the IOA edict that Olympic athletes should serve as role models, was still speaking out as of 2004 to encourage the participation of Muslim women in the Olympics.\textsuperscript{100}

As of 1998, Tajikistan adopted a program to attract attention and interest in women’s sports and then hosted the 2003 Central Asian games.\textsuperscript{101} However, this event still showed inequity between men and women. While all KKTTU countries participated, men competed in ten events, but women only competed in three: tennis, tae kwon do and track and field. Grabarenko attributes this to financing limitations, equipment shortages and conditions of sport venues.\textsuperscript{102} From the standpoint of a sports development plan, this inconsistency suggests that it is not well-thought out. For example, Tajikistan has yet to enter an athlete in tennis at the Olympics. No females have entered tae kwon do and only a few have entered track and field events.\textsuperscript{103} Quite a few have entered archery in the last three Summer Olympics and Tajikistan’s one medal in the London Olympics was earned by a female boxer.\textsuperscript{104} Thus, Tajikistan’s sports plan and event hosting do not correlate with development of elite athletes, gender equity in sports, or positive “branding” as described by Rein. However, Grabarenko points out that Tajikistan’s post-civil war efforts include rebuilding training facilities and programs in the female sports of field hockey and archery. The latter is especially significant due to Rustmova’s

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 429.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{100} Moore.
\textsuperscript{101} Grabarenko, 430 et seq.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 431.
\textsuperscript{103} Sports Reference.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
influence. The civil war has made improving the sports programs difficult, but Tajikistan is a telling example of the transition from being part of an Olympic powerhouse to the role of a transitional or developing country.

Uzbekistan intentionally built on the years of Soviet coaching and sports science, developing a leisure culture and sports for “international prestige.” Olympic participation continues, and the country is trying to develop funding through private sponsors and sports commercialization. Despite this, Uzbekistan has earned approximately the same number of medals in each Summer Olympics (ranging from four to six in each Olympics from 2000 to 2012). Per Akyildiz, this is approximately the same number of medals that Uzbek athletes won during the Soviet period, though some data may be questionable as previously explained. Popular sports are archery, wrestling, fencing, soccer, martial arts, boxing, ice hockey, figure skating, gymnastics and soccer.

Unlike Tajikistan, Uzbekistan’s popular sports are more closely aligned with their Olympic sports, although this could be partly because Uzbekistan has been able to field an Olympic team in a broader group of sports. Regardless, Uzbek athletes have competed in all of the popular sports, except for archery, ice hockey and soccer. Lower recreational and competition levels in these popular sports can provide a greater pool from which to select elite athletes, which is consistent with the Soviet approach. However, Uzbekistan, like Kazakhstan, also has had entries in “outlier” sports, like figure skating, that are expensive and offer few

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105 Grabarenko, 431–432.
106 Akyildiz, 9.
107 Ibid., 9–10.
108 Sports Reference.
109 Akyildiz, 10.
110 Ibid.
111 See Chart, Uzbekistan.
112 Ibid.
medal opportunities. Participation by women athletes has remained relatively stable, both in sports historically typical for women (e.g., gymnastics) and those less popular (weightlifting). Although Akyildiz references an Uzbek plan to improve Olympic results, the details of that plan are not available; however, Uzbekistan is much better situated in this regard than, for example, Kyrgyzstan, and could therefore act on Rein’s advice, e.g., branding its Olympic participation to develop international recognition.

Of the remaining KKTTU countries, Kazakhstan’s situation is most like Uzbekistan’s. Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan are more analogous to Tajikistan, but each has concerns that are likely more pressing than an elite sport program. However, a focused program that makes the most of a limited budget and takes traditional sports into account could lead to interesting outcomes. For example, despite Silver’s jokes about Kyrgyzstan, its horses and pressing budget needs, and the high cost of competing in equestrian events, horseback sports are strong in this area. A focused effort might yield results—even the Jamaican bobsled team made the Olympics and received positive press for years afterward.

**Conclusion**

It may seem that athletes simply work hard, have talent and luck, and end up representing their home countries in the Olympic Games. However, the image of an athlete who simply chose a sport for fun at a young age, and eventually won an Olympic medal while representing his/her country is an over-simplified and usually inaccurate model. In reality, that athlete is a part of a national system that encourages Olympic participation for reasons including nation-building, integration, international recognition, sports diplomacy, and gender equality. In becoming independent from the Soviet Union, each KKTTU country has remained part of the Olympic

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113 Ibid.
movement. Most of these countries have had some success, particularly in the areas of international recognition and gender equity. Each also has unique strengths—particular sports, known athletes, etc.—to build on. However, the most direct and measurable impact to date of KKTTU countries’ participation in the Olympics and elite international sport is the ongoing involvement of successful female athletes from these Muslim countries, a legacy of Soviet programs that sets up KKTTU countries as positive examples for other Islamic nations.

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### Appendix: Participation in Post-Soviet Olympic Games by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

#### Kazakhstan - 10 Games

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<td>Vladimir Smirnov (3 medals)</td>
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http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/countries/KAZ/  

#### 2012 London

- Archery
- Athletics
- Boxing
- Canoeing
- Cycling
- Fencing
- Gymnastics
- Judo
- Modern Pentathlon
- Rhythmic Gymnastics
- Rowing
- Shooting

http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/countries/KAZ/summer/2012/  

#### 2010 Vancouver

- Alpine Skiing
- Biathlon
- Cross Country Skiing
- Figure Skating
- Freestyle Skiing
- Short Track Speed Skating
- Ski Jumping
- Speed Skating


#### 2008 Beijing

- Archery
- Athletics
- Boxing
- Canoeing
- Cycling
- Handball
- Judo
- Modern Pentathlon
- Rhythmic Gymnastics
- Rowing
- Shooting
- Swimming
- Synchronized Swimming
- Table Tennis
- Taekwondo
- Triathlon
- Volleyball
- Weightlifting
- Wrestling

### Kazakhstan (continued)

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### Kyrgyzstan -- 10 Games

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#### 2012 London
- Athletics
- Swimming
- Shooting


#### 2010 Vancouver
- Alpine Skiing
- Cross Country Skiing


#### 2008 Beijing
- Athletics
- Shooting
- Wrestling


#### 2006 Torino
- Alpine Skiing


#### 2004 Athens
- Athletics
- Modern Pentathlon
- Wrestling

Kyrgyzstan (continued)

2002 Salt Lake City
Biathlon Ski Jumping

2000 Sydney
Athletics Boxing Cycling Fencing
Judo Shooting Weightlifting Wrestling

1998 Nagano
Biathlon

1996 Atlanta
Athletics Boxing Canoeing Cycling
Judo Modern Pentathlon Shooting Weightlifting
Wrestling

1994 Lillehammer
Biathlon

Tajikistan – 8 Games

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http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/countries/TJK/

2012 London
Athletics Boxing Judo Shooting
Swimming Taekwondo Wrestling
http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/countries/TJK/summer/2012/SWI/
Tajikistan (continued)
2010 Vancouver
Alpine Skiing

2008 Beijing
Archery Athletics Boxing Judo
Shooting Swimming Weightlifting Wrestling

2006 Torino
Alpine Skiing

2004 Athens
Archery Athletics Boxing Shooting
Wrestling

2002 Salt Lake City
Alpine Skiing

2000 Sydney
Athletics Swimming Diving Judo
Alpine Skiing
Freestyle Skiing

1996 Atlanta
Athletics Boxing Diving Judo
Wrestling

Turkmenistan -- 5 Games

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http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/countries/TKM/
### Uzbekistan -- 10 Games

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Games</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Gold</th>
<th>Silver</th>
<th>Bronze</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Top Medalist(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012 Summer</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 athletes with 1 medal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Winter</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 Summer</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 athletes with 1 medal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 Winter</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 Summer</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5 athletes with 1 medal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002 Winter</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 Summer</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 athletes with 1 medal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998 Winter</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996 Summer</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Karim Tulyaganov and Armen Bagdasarov (1 medal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994 Winter</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lina Cheryazova (1 medal)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Winter Sports</th>
<th>Summer Sports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008 Beijing</td>
<td>Athletics, Boxing, Canoeing, Cycling</td>
<td>Canoeing, Cycling, Judo, Taekwondo, Tennis, Trampoline, Wrestling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 Athens</td>
<td>Athletics, Boxing, Canoeing, Cycling</td>
<td>Judo, Rowing, Shooting, Table Tennis, Taekwondo, Trampoline, Trampoline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000 Sydney</td>
<td>Athletics, Boxing, Canoeing, Fencing</td>
<td>Judo, Shooting, Swimming, Taekwondo, Trampoline, Trampoline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998 Nagano</td>
<td>Alpine Skiing, Figure Skating</td>
<td>Freestyle Skiing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1996 Atlanta
Athletics Boxing Canoeing Cycling
Fencing Gymnastics Judo Shooting
Swimming Tennis Weightlifting Wrestling

1994 Lillehammer
Figure Skating Freestyle Skiing