

Olympians Say They Want To Correct 'Injustice'

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London (written by Jon Saraceno/USA Today) -- The 30th Olympiad is guaranteed to generate billions of dollars in revenue for the London Games' ruling body, the International Olympic Committee.

Despite the grandiosity of the Games, and the fame and fortune it brings to some, simmering resentment among U.S. Track and Field athletes has boiled over. They have launched a public campaign against what they think is a restrictive, income-eliminating IOC policy regarding "ambush marketers" that bans mention of individual, non-official Olympic sponsors during what amounts to a one-month blackout period - but also when worldwide exposure is at its maximum peak.

"We're professional athletes, and we don't like being treated like we're amateur athletes," high jumper Jamie Nieto told USA TODAY Sports on Monday. "I feel honored to compete. But honor and pride and all that stuff can't pay my mortgage."

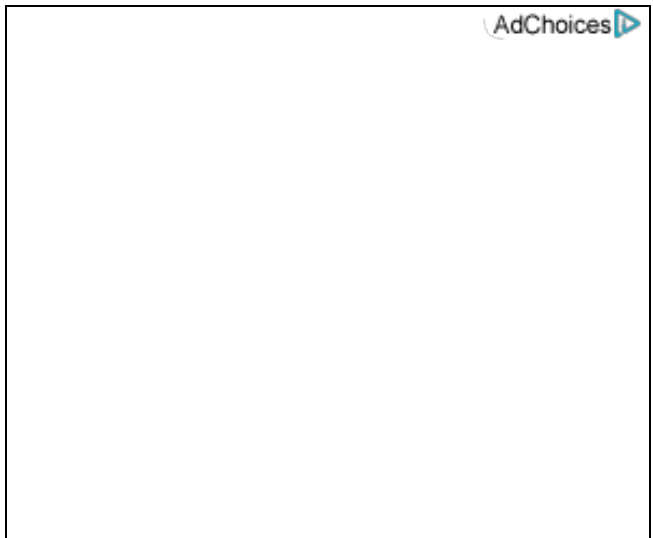
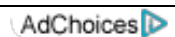
In the IOC's demands to protect corporations who provide the bulk of advertising dollars during the Games, athletes are not permitted to publicly acknowledge or endorse their personal sponsors. That includes the posting of photographs thanking sponsors, most notably, but not excluding, on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

Athletes also are prohibited from wearing the names of individual equipment sponsors and the like on the medals stand because of the substantial bankrolling the IOC and national Olympic committees receive from apparel companies. Other large corporations, such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Visa, invest hundreds of millions of dollars for global rights to officially sponsor the Olympics.

It's all about the business of the Olympics, U.S. track and field athletes say.

"I believe the Olympic ideal and the Olympic reality are now different - \$6 billion is being traded hands around these

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Games," said sprinter Sanya Richards-Ross at a Monday news conference.

Over the weekend, U.S. long distance runner Leo Manzano was directed by the IOC to remove a photograph of his running shoes from Facebook. That prompted more dissatisfaction from within the ranks of his teammates - and the decision to go public after they convened.

Finally, Sunday evening, the dust-up became public with a simple tweet by aggrieved teammates: "I am honored to be an Olympian, but #WeDemandChange2012."

A coordinated campaign of tweets followed by numerous U.S. track and field athletes, including Richards-Ross, middle-distance runner Nick Symmonds and decathlete Trey Hardee. Monday morning, U.S. hurdler Jason Richardson followed up the tweet barrage with another shot across the IOC's bow.

"I don't have multiple sponsors and all BUT .. if I wanted to be a human NASCAR tatted w/willing sponsor I kinda think I should be able to," he tweeted.

Athletes from other sports voiced their support of the movement on Twitter.

With the start of track and field competition Friday, U.S. athletes are using their worldwide platform in an attempt to correct what they say is an injustice.

"People see the two weeks when athletes are at their best; it's the most glorious time

of our lives," Richards-Ross said. "But they don't see the three to four years leading up to the Olympic Games when a lot of my peers are struggling to stay in the sport ... A lot of my peers have second and third jobs. That's just unfortunate."

Noble cause or not, those athletes are in no position to unilaterally insist on any changes to Rule 4 of the Olympic Charter. The current rule banning such sponsorship is clear: "No competitor, coach, trainer or official who participates in the Olympic Games may allow his person, name, picture or sports performances to be used for advertising purposes except as permitted by the IOC Executive Board."

Penalties for violation of the policies include removal of accreditation and financial sanctions.

"The IOC takes (these) things very seriously," said Rob Prazmark, founder and CEO of 21 Marketing. "It's not just about the Rule 40. It's about how it relates to all of the other rules in that handbook

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regarding athlete participation."

Prior to the Games, London Olympic organizers sent athletes a 20-page briefing that spelled out Rule 40. "Ambush marketers have used their association with athletes to suggest or imply that they have an association with the Olympic Games," said the note. It also said ambush marketers undermine the exclusivity offered to official sponsors.

Any potential policy revision, which is highly unlikely, would start with the IOC's Athletes' Commission, which would have to formally voice its concerns. It is unclear how much worldwide support the U.S. Track and Field team has with its mission.

Richards-Ross insisted that, "This is not just a USA issue - it's a global issue." She later backed off a bit when she said, "We definitely don't want to start a war or start too much trouble. We just want to come out here and run well. I'm definitely not forecasting more Twitter rants or a big coming together and uprising of the athletes."

The IOC appears resolute in its stance, but a spokesman said it would listen to the athletes.

"But for this one month, I think it's important we try to protect the revenues of the Olympic movement (because) that money goes in huge amounts back to the poorer countries and lower-profile athletes who also deserve their moment in the sun, too," said the IOC's Mark Adams, who said 93%-94% of the revenues are re-routed

back to the individual sports.

Nieto's background suggests he is one of those lower-profile performers. The 35-year-old high jumper from Chula Vista, Calif., has two coaching jobs and is an actor on the side. He has no sponsors except the New York Athletic Club, which pays him precious little - "not enough to live on," he said.

"You wouldn't expect Tiger Woods to go play the Masters for free. Why should we be competing for free at the Olympics?"

Contributing: David Leon Moore, Michael Florek

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