

ONE SLOGAN, MANY MEANINGS: BRING TIBET TO THE 2008 GAMES

By Tendon Dahortsang

A Tibet activist introduces the concept of Team Tibet, as well as International Tibet Support Network's campaign to highlight Tibetan concerns about human rights and self-governance before August 2008. This is one innovative example of how human rights groups are linking important issues to the upcoming Olympics.

This campaign started with a dream to bring Tibet to the Beijing Olympics. In May 2007, the Fifth International Tibet Support Groups (TSG) Conference, attended by 315 representatives of Tibet groups from 56 countries and six continents, resolved to launch a major

global campaign coordinated by the International Tibet Support Network (ITSN),¹ targeted at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. This was the beginning of Team Tibet.²

The idea is simple but powerful. The Tibetans want to be part of the Games like every other nation and represent their country. Team Tibet is comprised of approximately 30 Tibetan athletes, scattered around the world. Almost all of them are young Tibetans who grew up in exile as refugees. Some of them have never seen Tibet, and yet each is waiting for his or her chance to walk into the stadium, alongside other athletes, waving the Tibetan national flag, to show the world that we are still here.

On July 30, 2007, a National Olympic Committee Tibet³ was set up, which began the task of applying for participation in the Olympic Games, accompanied by a worldwide campaign. Since then, the campaign has gained international support from many renowned athletes, like Markus Ryffel, a former Olympic silver medalist (5,000 meter, 1984) who supports Team Tibet and has given advice to 10,000 meter-runner Lhazom Puenkang.

On November 8, 2007, the Tibet Intergroup of the European Parliament and the participants of the European Parliamentarian Conference on Tibet gave a warm welcome to the members of Team Tibet and called on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to let the Tibetan athletes participate in the Olympic Games. Members of Team Tibet spoke at the European Parliamentarian Conference, convened by the Tibet Intergroup, and asked for the support of the conference participants to make their dream come true. More than 200 participants from 20 countries—members of the European and national parliaments, members of the EU

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Tsultrim Gope (shot put), a 25-year-old Tibetan woman, born and raised in Switzerland. While attending the Youth Olympics held in Denmark as a representative for Switzerland, she was dreaming of a Tibetan team: *"It was a fantastic feeling to enter the stadium along with the other athletes. I was proud. Nevertheless, I thought how wonderful it would be to enter the stadium under the Tibetan flag and with a Tibetan team."*

Rigzin Gyaltag (men's cycling), a 25-year-old journalism student, stated at the same event: *"I grew up in the Pestalozzidorf in Trogen AR, Switzerland, together with people from different countries and cultures. As a child, it was possible to play with children from so many different nations. Becoming an adult, I had to realize that in worldwide events such as the Olympic Games there are people who are excluded. We, the Tibetans, are one of them. I want to change this. This is my motivation to join Team Tibet. In a refreshing, positive, and sporty manner we draw the world's attention toward Tibet."*

Commission and Council, ambassadors, human rights and environmental activists, and Olympic gold medalists—attended the conference at the European Parliament in Brussels.

One attendee was Dieter Baumann, a German Olympic gold medalist from 1992 (1,500 meter and 5,000 meter distance), who encouraged the Tibetan athletes in their Olympic pursuit and invited them to participate in a footrace with him in Germany. Another supporter of Team Tibet is Peter Stastny, MEP and ice hockey legend in Slovakia. Stastny argued for Tibet, saying:

This IOC stance is just a set of rules. Rules can be changed and modified and they should be. They need to reflect evolution and progress and change. The Olympics should be a leader in this. The Olympics is supposed to be about inclusion and universality.⁴

He was referring to a rule change of the IOC in 1996 saying that only national committees from countries recognized by the international community can take part in the Olympics.⁵

On December 10, International Human Rights Day, the executive board of the IOC finally responded and rejected Team Tibet's attempt to join the Games.⁶ The IOC, as expected, explained that exceptions were granted only to those territories whose national committees were recognized before 1996, like Palestine, Hong Kong or Taiwan.

Of course we were frustrated and disappointed by this response. But the campaign is far from over.

As I mentioned at the beginning, there are different ways to Bring Tibet to the 2008 Games. The second phase of the campaign has already begun. This phase will include protests; solidarity actions for Tibet; and appeals to celebrities, professional athletes, and the general public to stand up and be counted as symbolic members of Team Tibet. Additionally, legal steps against the decision of the IOC will be considered. Last but not least, another attempt for the 2012 Games is not out of the question.

In the coming months the whole world will be scrutiniz-

Team Tibet member and hopeful 100 meters track and field runner Jigme Puenkang pins up a banner reading "Bring Tibet to the 2008 Games" during a demonstration in front of International Olympic Committee (IOC) headquarters on December 10, 2007. Photo credits: REUTERS/Denis Balibouse.



ing China. This offers a unique opportunity to put China under political pressure. The IOC has given the Chinese regime a huge opportunity to showcase itself as a global power and a respectable nation. But we will raise our voice and put pressure on the Chinese leadership to take positive actions on Tibet—not only during this coming summer, but also beyond the 2008 Olympic Games.

Notes

1. “Welcome to the International Tibet Support Network,” International Tibet Support Network, <http://www.tibetnetwork.org/>.
2. “Bring Tibet to the 2008 Games,” Team Tibet, <http://www.supportteamtibet.org>.
3. National Olympic Committee Tibet, <http://www.noc-tibet.org/>.
4. Brendan Connor, “The dream of Team Tibet,” Al Jazeera, November 30, 2007, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/E3B5E251-04C0-42E2-8BCA-B2DB99ED4227.htm>.
5. This is a reference to Rule 31 of the Olympic Charter, which states: “In the Olympic Charter, the expression ‘country’ means an independent State recognized by the international community.”
6. “Tibet denied team at Beijing Games,” CNN, December 10, 2007, <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/SPORT/12/10/olympics.beijing.ap/index.html>.