

# Sports equity: a new BJSM e-Edition brings the fundamentals back into focus

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Change your leaves, keep intact your roots  
–Victor Hugo

Throughout history and across cultures, nearly all human societies have constructed systems of privilege and power that oppress, exploit and disadvantage some, while empowering others.<sup>1</sup> Across sectors, the powerful have engineered these systems to achieve step-change economic gains at the expense of the oppressed. In addition to wealth, systems of oppression also generate non-material benefits for those on the weighty side of the power imbalance. Consciously or not, as micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions from the advantaged are dealt down the power gradient to the disadvantaged, social advancement opportunities and recognition disproportionately benefit the dominant group.<sup>1</sup> The key here is that *people actively thought this through*. These intentionally designed systems divide society into a dystopian hierarchy based on race/ethnicity, gender, perceived ability, wealth, age and more, despite the fundamental human rights all people are equally due. As clinicians and academics, we have the opportunity to consciously and deliberately expose and dismantle societal biases

in our field of Sport and Exercise Medicine (SEM).

## SPORT AS A SAFE HAVEN FOR INCLUSION

While many see sport as a microcosm of society,<sup>2</sup> and while sport continues to be influenced by this context,<sup>3–10</sup> it is much more expansive than that. At its best, sport is society's *opposite*, providing an idyllic counterpoint to this dystopia. Consider spontaneous sport—unfettered and unadulterated—played by children barefoot on beaches at dawn, in backyards and parking lots at lunchtime, in living rooms and verandas (often to caretakers' dismay!) at dusk and on cracked courts encircled by old fences at sunset. Sport of this nature offers people a place to connect with self and others, to play with joy, courage and abandon.<sup>2</sup> Rather than mirror society, sport in this form provides a safe haven of inclusion and well-being, not as a matter of calculated thought, but as a matter of the heart. Within this context of its pure essence, sport provides a literal and figurative level playing field of existence.

While society remains far from dismantling existing systems of bias, there are promising indications beyond the boundaries of sport, that we are placing increased value on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles. Examples include the #MeToo, #TimesUp and #BlackLivesMatter movements, and how societies are better engaging with people with disabilities. Such influences set the backdrop against which sport can frame, interpret and respond to its own charged EDI debates. The SEM community has a crucial role, not only by respecting EDI principles in its dialogue and practice, but by taking this historic moment(um) to intentionally and boldly champion EDI. Through active leadership, the SEM community can reduce the extent to which sport is a mere echo chamber of society's oppressive narratives, and instead, help ensure that sport fulfils its place in illuminating society's path to higher moral ground.

## BJSM E-EDITION ON SPORTS EQUITY

In contrast to equality (giving everyone the same), equity recognises that not everyone began in the same place in society. While the full gamut of inequities present in wider society can surface in sport—harassment, neglect, psychological, physical and sexual abuse, as well as systemic discrimination against marginalised and historically disadvantaged groups—we have developed a special BJSM e-Edition focused on five topical areas, which we believe are of utmost importance:

1. Interpersonal violence<sup>3,7</sup>
2. Racism<sup>4–6</sup>
3. Ableism<sup>8</sup>
4. Sexism<sup>10</sup>
5. Heterosexism and Transphobia<sup>9</sup>

The aforementioned areas of prejudice affect a huge proportion of the world's population—girls and women, black, indigenous and people of colour, those who identify as LGBTQ+ (including those who are gender non-binary, genderqueer and those with non-heterosexual identities) and those with physical, sensory, intellectual or behavioural disabilities.

## SPORT AS A CHAMPION FOR JUSTICE

In their purest forms and at their roots, sport and play draw everyone in. Regardless of lived experience, those on society's margins can participate wholeheartedly and find their strength. Sport also challenges us to engage each other with full dignity, honesty and respect, and inspires us to reach for our highest standards of performance. These features position sport as a powerful change agent and an instrument in the fight against inequity. This past year, through the pandemic and during the simultaneous global racial reckoning, sports teams and leagues around the world, from USA Basketball to European Futbol to Women's Tennis, used their platforms to speak out for inclusion, equity and well-being. There may be no clearer example of how sport participants, regardless of background and identity, can model social justice advocacy. The accompanying BJSM e-Edition blends past BJSM resources with modern commentary to feature and advance fundamental areas in sports equity. By intentionally, meaningfully and consistently seeking solutions to sport's inequities, this and similar work can ultimately liberate sport not only to entertain, inspire and promote health, but also to achieve its highest work: spark joy and champion justice.

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