

Episode 143: Previewing the "Covid Olympics"

Bill Walton (00:01):

Welcome to The Bill Walton Show. I'm Bill Walton. The Olympics. This year seems to be particularly fraught with pros and cons as we think about what's going to be happening in Tokyo the next couple of weeks. [inaudible 00:00:18] the Olympics since 1960, and I've loved them over the years, and of course there's always been political and other things swirling around them. The boycott, Jimmy Carter, the terrible thing that happened in Munich in 1972, but we got to kicking around this thing during a recent conference call with the Bill Walton team, and so I've asked a few of us to come on to talk about what's at stake here. Brian McNicoll, Greg Corombus, and Frank Wazeter. Welcome guys.

Brian McNicoll (00:50):

Thank you.

Greg Corombus (00:50):

Thank you.

Bill Walton (00:52):

Brian, what do you think?

Brian McNicoll (00:55):

Well, I think it's going to be interesting. I'm wondering what they're going to do about COVID protocols. I think that's going to be the big story out of it, as you've already got a US gymnast, she was an alternate, she wasn't one of the six actual members of the team, who's contracted COVID. And they think another alternate may also have it, so that leaves you with just your six, so nobody better get hurt or anything or we're we're in trouble in gymnastics. It actually starts today, softball and women's soccer and some other stuff, but look for political displays, look for American athletes to kneel and turn away from the flag and all this kinds of stuff, and I don't think it's going to be real popular. I think that the nation has kind of voted on this and we don't like it. It's like, "You're over there representing us. If you can't do that in good conscience, then you should give your slot to someone else. But if you're over there with USA on, you need to act like you're a proud American."

Bill Walton (01:58):

So as I understand it, the only fans there will be Japanese.

Brian McNicoll (02:02):

Correct. Very few fans. Most things are not even allowed. In fact, there was a story in the Washington Post this morning, there's a Paralympic ... they always have the Paralympics in the same place they had the Olympics as soon as they're over. And this girl is deaf and becoming blind. She has a condition that you're deaf at birth, and then your sight goes away, and she needs a personal assistant to compete. She's a swimmer. And they told her the personal assistant cannot come, so she's like, "Well, I can't go. I've got to have her." And these are young, healthy people who are in no real meaningful danger of being seriously sick from COVID.

Bill Walton ([02:46](#)):

Well, you know what I think about this whole COVID thing? I think we need to treat the vulnerable and leave the ones that are not likely to have any problems alone. And if you think about a poster child for a healthy person that's likely to be unaffected by the COVID virus, it's an Olympic athlete.

Brian McNicoll ([03:04](#)):

Right. That's right. Young adult who's in good health and knows what they're doing.

Bill Walton ([03:10](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Greg?

Greg Corombus ([03:11](#)):

Yeah, I think Brian's right, that that is going to be the headline because we're going to see famous people withdrawing. We already are. We saw Coco Gauff, the tennis player, say that she's contracted COVID, she's not going. And the thing that is perhaps going to be bigger than the Olympics on this is people still being pulled away, quarantined, even though they've been vaccinated, even though their symptoms are very mild. And so, are we essentially going to get to the point where we never really get past this because the slightest sniffle, you might test positive, but if you're vaccinated or if you're young and healthy, like you just said, the effects are likely to be pretty mild.

Greg Corombus ([03:49](#)):

And so, are we going to just go in this continuous cycle where people who are mildly sick end up throwing a lot of things into chaos, in this case, the Olympic games. What if it's Simone Biles? What if it's a leading member of the basketball team, or a star track athlete or swimmer? It's going to be very interesting to watch the reaction if somebody who's very likely to be in a position to win a gold medal or medal at all to get kicked out because they barely feel sick. And I think that the blow back to that could be huge.

Greg Corombus ([04:22](#)):

The one thing I do give the IOC credit for is actually making sure that this is going to happen. A lot of people over there don't even want it to happen at all. It's going to be different with no crowds. And I think they said no hugging, even if you win. So it's going to be a silent Olympics in a lot of ways, but the COVID thing and elite athletes getting robbed of their chance to achieve their dream at the last moment could be a very big story here.

Bill Walton ([04:46](#)):

Well, we're all doing it for the Olympians, or at least I think we all feel that they've put their life into this and they deserve their shot, but my guess is this is going to be an Olympics with an asterisk attached to it, because there are going to be so many people who are competing in an event where maybe the world champion is out with COVID, or maybe a whole team is taken out. What happens if the US basketball team decides it's got to quarantine? And that's all in the possible realm.

Brian McNicoll ([05:15](#)):

Then somebody else would win the bronze medal.

Frank Wazeter ([05:17](#)):

Yeah.

Greg Corombus ([05:20](#)):

Yeah, they've had a rough preseason, but they've also had a couple of players step away from the team for COVID.

Frank Wazeter ([05:25](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Walton ([05:25](#)):

Oh, have they?

Greg Corombus ([05:25](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Walton ([05:26](#)):

I think they've already lost three times, haven't they?

Greg Corombus ([05:29](#)):

At least twice.

Brian McNicoll ([05:30](#)):

They've lost twice, and they've lost Bradley Beal, who was one of their top scorers and was a Washington Wizards player. And one more, I believe.

Greg Corombus ([05:39](#)):

Kevin Love is not going to be there either.

Brian McNicoll ([05:41](#)):

Yeah, Kevin Love.

Greg Corombus ([05:41](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Walton ([05:41](#)):

Hey, Frank?

Frank Wazeter ([05:42](#)):

Yeah. I think what you've got there is just a powder keg of a situation. The Japanese populace, they are not happy with anything going on with the Olympics. In fact, it's so bad over there that the major companies like Toyota and everything like that, it pulled all of their advertising away from local Japanese TV because they don't want to be associated with it, because this is a situation where there's no

playbook. It's not like the reference man would say, "Okay, well, what do I do in this situation amidst national pandemic and everything like that, with views and policies as extreme as they can possibly get?"

Frank Wazeter ([06:27](#)):

So on the one hand, you've got ... there's no good out for this. The local Japanese business owners are disappointed because they were kind of expecting a lift from the tourism that the Olympics usually brings. That's not going to happen. They're kind of resentful for the people that are in attendance, is what I was reading across reports from over there because fundamentally, Japan's in its fourth quarantine lockdown stage. And because of that, there's a lot of restrictions on their citizens' freedoms because they've got a real no-nonsense form of government when it comes to these things. They take the extreme action.

Bill Walton ([07:14](#)):

Okay, so Japan has draconian lockdown measures. They're an island country. They think they're going to be like Australia and New Zealand, and they've got an ocean around them, they can lock themselves down, but that hasn't proven to be effective.

Frank Wazeter ([07:27](#)):

Right. No.

Bill Walton ([07:27](#)):

And so, this Olympic argument is layered over this whole argument about what's the appropriate way to deal with the virus? And I think the jury is in. A year and a half ago, we didn't know, but right now you can look at the statistics for say, a state like California versus a state like Florida, where they didn't have any of this. And actually, Florida got better results with old people.

Frank Wazeter ([07:54](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Walton ([07:54](#)):

And Japan's filled with old people.

Frank Wazeter ([07:56](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Walton ([07:56](#)):

So on a scale of one to 10, is Japan like a nine in terms of lockdown severity?

Greg Corombus ([08:02](#)):

Yep. Yeah, they're-

Frank Wazeter ([08:03](#)):

I would say that, yeah. They say, "Hey, these are the things that you can and can't do." So there's resentment between that, and the people that are allowed to travel and attend have significantly more freedoms in what they're able to do than the local populace.

Bill Walton ([08:19](#)):

Oh. So if you can get into the country, you're part of the privileged few, you can move about freely, but everybody else is locked down?

Frank Wazeter ([08:26](#)):

Move about freely within basically the zones that they set up that you can do that, yes, but-

Bill Walton ([08:32](#)):

I think Japanese companies have about \$3 billion in sponsorship money they've already put into this thing, and I think they're pretty cranky.

Greg Corombus ([08:40](#)):

Yep.

Frank Wazeter ([08:40](#)):

Yeah. They're pulling. Toyota pulled all their stuff. They said they're not associated. They don't want to associate with it whatsoever because basically, they're looking at it and saying, "No matter what happens here, this is probably going to be the most unpopular Olympics ever, and there's just no way that everybody comes out saying, 'This was great.'"

Brian McNicoll ([08:59](#)):

It's very little of the pleasure and all of the pain and more that goes into putting on the Olympics.

Bill Walton ([09:09](#)):

Well, this could be a short show. And you also have the fact of the Olympic Village, we've already seen some positive tests come out of the village, and you've got these people in fairly close quarters.

Brian McNicoll ([09:21](#)):

Oh, yeah.

Bill Walton ([09:21](#)):

And for those who don't follow the Olympics, in addition to going to your event, well, let's just say there are other events that go on in the Olympic Village throughout the rest of the two weeks where people are in fairly close contact with one another, with these elite athletes, and-

Greg Corombus ([09:35](#)):

A lot of athleticism on display there.

Bill Walton ([09:39](#)):

They are discouraging that type of activity. I think the beds are made of cardboard this year, if I read that correctly. Cardboard. The Olympic Village just sounds like the best party place on the planet during the games. Obviously I've never been there, but isn't that just one of the real ... aside from competing in your event, being part of the whole Olympic Village and that whole experience and hanging out with other athletes, isn't that a big part of the experience?

Brian McNicoll ([10:08](#)):

Mingling? Yes. Yeah. And there's the-

Bill Walton ([10:10](#)):

We've got all these euphemisms. Okay. We'll go with mingling.

Brian McNicoll ([10:15](#)):

Yeah. But the US basketball team, I remember the Dream Team back in '92, you guys might not have been old enough to watch TV.

Bill Walton ([10:24](#)):

I remember that. I remember the Dream Team, absolutely.

Brian McNicoll ([10:28](#)):

But they were huge celebrities as they moved around the Olympic Village. They were heavily guarded and they had their own hotel off out of the village because they would have gotten crushed in the village, but they made themselves available, and it was a huge cultural exchange. And I always thought they were ambassadors for America in a good way, and you're not going to have any of that this year. Part of what the Olympics is designed to do is sort of bring us together, everybody loves a trophy, but you're not going to get that this year. It's going to be very sterile, and the award ceremony is very quick and dry and unemotional, and a lot of what we watch the Olympics to see has been peeled away in the name of preventing a disease that almost everyone recovers from.

Bill Walton ([11:21](#)):

Well, at the risk of stating the obvious, spectator sports need spectators.

Brian McNicoll ([11:25](#)):

Right. Exactly. And in a lot of these sports-

Bill Walton ([11:29](#)):

I think the athletes feed off of the crowd.

Greg Corombus ([11:32](#)):

Oh, definitely.

Frank Wazeter ([11:33](#)):

Oh, absolutely.

Brian McNicoll ([11:34](#)):

Yeah. But the thing about it is a lot of these sports, this is the only way you will ever get spectators. We don't really watch diving. The big tournament you may watch, but diving on TV, I'm shifting right through that. Most people are.

Greg Corombus ([11:53](#)):

Well, I watch it. Isn't it funny, every four years I watch Olympic diving and I have-

Brian McNicoll ([11:58](#)):

No idea what they're talking about?

Greg Corombus ([12:00](#)):

I have no idea.

Brian McNicoll ([12:01](#)):

But you want to learn by the end of it. It's like, "Yeah, I know what a triple tuck is."

Frank Wazeter ([12:05](#)):

You relearn it every four years.

Brian McNicoll ([12:08](#)):

That's right.

Greg Corombus ([12:08](#)):

After an hour or two, you get mad at the judges because you think you know better than they do about the vault or a dive. Yeah.

Bill Walton ([12:17](#)):

Well, curling. I guess that's winter, but yeah, there are lots of arcane-

Greg Corombus ([12:21](#)):

Same thing. Figure skating judges. Yeah. No matter what.

Bill Walton ([12:23](#)):

So have any of the events been canceled? Is everybody, all the-

Greg Corombus ([12:29](#)):

I don't think any events have been canceled.

Brian McNicoll ([12:30](#)):

I don't think any of the events have been canceled. Some have been moved, like they're doing funky things with the marathon because Tokyo is like New Orleans in the summer, and so it's kind of hard to run a marathon in that kind of weather.

Bill Walton ([12:44](#)):

So they're going to [crosstalk 00:12:45].

Brian McNicoll ([12:45](#)):

I think they went up somewhere in the mountains and they're doing it separate from the rest of the games.

Bill Walton ([12:51](#)):

Frank?

Frank Wazeter ([12:52](#)):

Gotcha. Well, I think I was going to build on Brian's point, if you look at the original purpose of the Olympics, I'm talking not even when we brought it back, but the Greek originals, they said, "We're going to compete athletically amongst the city-states," Athens Sparta, and everything like that as a replacement to war. So rather than settling disputes and things like that through sending people out to go to fight battles, we're just going to hold these games and it's going to do two things. One, it's going to allow us to kind of settle disputes. And number two, as people, the less that you're able to interact with other people from different tribes, cities, countries, et cetera like that, it's very easy to go and say, "Well, they're messed up," or, "They're evil. They're not on the same level." But when you can meet, that makes relationships better. It just opens up to that.

Bill Walton ([13:59](#)):

I'm not quite sure that's correct. I think there are two different Olympic spirits going on here. There's the Olympic spirit in 1896, when they restarted the game or 1892, whatever the date was they did it, the Brit that put that together said a lot of those same things you're saying, but when the Greeks did it, it was part of a religious ceremony and they didn't have any prizes for second. You came in first and that was it. And they had no women, they competed naked. They didn't even allow women as spectators. And one of the interesting things, there's a story where one of the runners that was the favorite somehow fell, and his trainer leapt over a barrier of some sort to find out what's going on.

Bill Walton ([14:52](#)):

And maybe this was before they ended up with no clothes, and the trainer's gown flew up and they discovered it was not a man. It was his mother. And at that point, they banned the whole thing. So the Greeks had a different view, but I think you're right about the 1896 spirit. And that is sort of the spirit today. We're supposed to be these countries coming together to celebrate our common humanity and to celebrate excellence in sports and comradery and all that, but if you believe that's the agenda, I think you guys have made the case that isn't what's going to happen this year.

Frank Wazeter ([15:29](#)):

Nope.

Greg Corombus ([15:30](#)):

Well, think about it for those of us who are old enough to remember, Bill, the Cold War. Part of it was cheering for Americans the whole time, and the other thing was cheering for the people from the communist countries to wipe out and fall on their butts skating, and find a way [crosstalk 00:15:44].

Bill Walton ([15:43](#)):

Don't you remember hating the Russian hockey team?

Greg Corombus ([15:45](#)):

Of course.

Frank Wazeter ([15:45](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Walton ([15:45](#)):

It was East German-

Brian McNicoll ([15:45](#)):

Wasn't that Alexei-

Bill Walton ([15:49](#)):

It was East German women sprinters.

Brian McNicoll ([15:53](#)):

The power lifter who always beat us. What was his name? Alexei.

Bill Walton ([15:57](#)):

Yeah.

Greg Corombus ([15:58](#)):

Yes. I remember who you're talking about, I just can't say his name.

Brian McNicoll ([16:01](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Walton ([16:01](#)):

Hey, I [crosstalk 00:16:02].

Frank Wazeter ([16:02](#)):

The Miracle on Ice is why these are important. They mean something.

Greg Corombus ([16:05](#)):

Exactly.

Frank Wazeter ([16:05](#)):

They're important traditions.

Greg Corombus ([16:06](#)):

That was a major, major geopolitical victory.

Bill Walton ([16:09](#)):

But I'm going to change my view. I sort of thought maybe they shouldn't happen, but now I'm hearing us talk about, and I'm exhibit A, getting absorbed in all these sports and rooting for these outcomes when you didn't even know what the rules were an hour ago, and arguing with the ref. I think we're going to have fun watching it. I think it'll be problematic and there's lots of dire stuff, but I think let the games begin.

Brian McNicoll ([16:35](#)):

I think our friends on the other side of the aisle are going to make asses of themselves over this.

Bill Walton ([16:42](#)):

What do you mean? Who on the other side of the aisle? What do you mean?

Brian McNicoll ([16:46](#)):

The left, the wokes, right?

Bill Walton ([16:48](#)):

Oh. Oh, that aisle.

Brian McNicoll ([16:49](#)):

It's one big demonstration of patriotism, and the reason we're for these people is because they're from our country, right?

Bill Walton ([16:59](#)):

Yeah.

Brian McNicoll ([16:59](#)):

We don't know them from Adam. In most of these sports, we don't know who the people are until the start. But hey, if you've got that USA on, you're ours, okay? Now that's an attitude we've all had our entire lives.

Bill Walton ([17:12](#)):

Right.

Brian McNicoll ([17:12](#)):

I remember I was in Canada one time and the US was playing Canada in women's basketball, and all the Canadians are cheering for Canada, and that feeling of being the outsider, it was incredible. It was something I've never forgotten. And so it's about your country, so they're not for glorifying our country, the left, they're for running it down. Critical theory, it's not just critical race theory, it's criticism of all of the institutions. It's mocking all the institutions. And so this is an institution and how can they resist mocking it?

Bill Walton ([17:54](#)):

Well, I know there's one female hammer thrower I'm not going to be rooting for. Well, she finished third in the US trials, and speaking of sports that we don't watch until we get to the Olympics, hammer throwing would definitely be one of them. What does the hammer even look like? It's not a hammer with a nail remover.

Brian McNicoll ([18:14](#)):

It's like a little piece of iron, basically.

Bill Walton ([18:17](#)):

Okay. Anyway, Greg, what were you saying?

Greg Corombus ([18:19](#)):

Yeah, I was going to say there will undoubtedly be political issues. I'm guessing someone, if it's not her, it will be someone else, will do something on the podium or with the flag, and that'll be a major discussion just like it was at the Olympic trials for someone very few people had heard of in a sport nobody follows. And so, we're going to have a controversy probably if the transgender New Zealand weightlifter wins a medal, is that fair? The left will obviously celebrate that if that happens, so there will be political elements of this, for sure.

Bill Walton ([18:52](#)):

Well, sports has been ESPN for the last decade and everything is political and everything is race and everything is ... There was a funny, I thought it was pretty funny, there was an article in The Economist criticizing the Italian soccer team because they didn't have enough people of color on the Italian soccer team. And it turns out the Italian soccer team has, I think one Black guy from North Africa, one of the countries, maybe ... I don't know which one, but that's not the point. The point is if you look at the racial makeup of the demographics of Italy, it's about 96% Italian. It doesn't have a large ethnic community at all.

Bill Walton ([19:39](#)):

So if you just take a cross-section of Italy, you'd end up with a soccer team that looks exactly like the soccer team they have without kind of finding an affirmative action way to re-engineer it. And so even with something like that, the Italian soccer team, they're somehow racist because they don't have enough Black people on it. If I'm Black, I'm beginning to get deeply offended that you've got to give me extra points to get me into the game. I think as athletes, they would certainly prove themselves. I don't know. Thoughts?

Brian McNicoll ([20:16](#)):

And if you think Italy is choosing that team on any criteria other than merit, you are nuts. That is not being chosen on [crosstalk 00:20:25].

Bill Walton ([20:25](#)):

They want the best soccer players.

Frank Wazeter ([20:28](#)):

Yeah.

Brian McNicoll ([20:28](#)):

They want to win. They're the best in the world. They're in the best two or three in the world and World Cup, all these big soccer competitions. They're not there to pick all the white guys, they're there to win the tournament.

Frank Wazeter ([20:42](#)):

Yeah. The only thing that matters, especially when you're putting a highly competitive team together, is who is the best in the country that I can put on this team to give us the highest probability of success? And no other factor matters.

Brian McNicoll ([20:56](#)):

Yeah.

Frank Wazeter ([20:56](#)):

It just doesn't.

Brian McNicoll ([20:57](#)):

They don't care about anything else, I promise you that.

Bill Walton ([20:59](#)):

That's the beauty of sports.

Brian McNicoll ([21:01](#)):

If they put green people in there, green people would help them win.

Bill Walton ([21:03](#)):

Sports is the ultimate meritocracy. You can either get the job done, you're better than the guy you're playing against, or you're not. There's very few ways you can try to fix the playing field with that. Talent rises to the top, determination, the character traits that go into champions, and that's why people love sports. It's when you start to politicize it just like we've seen with the NBA and Major League Baseball with the All-Star Game this year, and the NFL is doing a lot of it too. I think the NBA is probably the worst, but it's happening more and more, and people who just want to appreciate the competitiveness, the drive for excellence, and just get away from the politics of it, they're having a hard time doing it now.

Brian McNicoll ([21:44](#)):

WNBA is the worst.

Bill Walton ([21:46](#)):

Okay.

Brian McNicoll ([21:46](#)):

That is the worst politicized sport-

Bill Walton ([21:48](#)):

WNBA is women's basketball?

Brian McNicoll ([21:51](#)):

Yeah.

Frank Wazeter ([21:51](#)):

Yeah. I keep trying to watch it, and I don't know, it's-

Brian McNicoll ([21:55](#)):

I want to watch it, but I can't be a fan. I can't be a fan because you're all this other messaging first. I tune in for basketball. I'm a basketball coach. I'll watch basketball all day long, but I don't care about all that other stuff. I don't want that in my face.

Bill Walton ([22:14](#)):

Okay. Predictions. As this thing gets covered by NBC, what percentage of this is going to be about sports, and what percent of it's going to be about social agendas and everything else?

Frank Wazeter ([22:28](#)):

Well, I think they're going to have the reel going of course, of the events, but nothing sells like good controversy. So if there is any opportunity to spin up controversy, it's going to get the majority of the exposure. It's just the bottom line because that gets advertising dollars, that keeps NBC going.

Greg Corombus ([22:47](#)):

Yeah, that's part of it. And also, if you watched the Olympics any time in the last few decades, they love the human interest story. Anybody with a chance to medal, they will put together a story that will tell some challenge or obstacle they've overcome, and people love to identify with those people and root. And so hopefully, most of it will be about outstanding performances. Simone Biles being far and away the greatest that we've ever seen, and excellence in the pool and on the track, just speed and strength and whatever else the event is. It's inevitable that we're going to see the other stuff, but hopefully, I'm still slightly optimistic that athletic excellence will still end up being the headline of the day, assuming the athletes don't test positive for COVID.

Frank Wazeter ([23:31](#)):

Well, you remember what happened with Ryan Lochte last time, and then that was the majority of the coverage. He got exonerated, by the way, but nobody heard about that.

Bill Walton ([23:39](#)):

I forget, Ryan Lochte. What did he do? What was his sin against humanity?

Frank Wazeter ([23:43](#)):

They were mingling.

Greg Corombus ([23:44](#)):

He lied about being mugged.

Bill Walton ([23:47](#)):

Oh.

Greg Corombus ([23:47](#)):

Or allegedly, I don't even know what the hell that-

Frank Wazeter ([23:48](#)):

Yeah.

Brian McNicoll ([23:50](#)):

He engaged in some behavior under the influence of alcohol that he tried to-

Frank Wazeter ([23:54](#)):

Yeah.

Brian McNicoll ([23:54](#)):

... explain away in some curious [crosstalk 00:23:56].

Bill Walton ([23:56](#)):

Okay. Oh, I remember that. The swimmer. Yeah.

Greg Corombus ([23:58](#)):

Yeah.

Bill Walton ([23:59](#)):

And we could always bring back Tonya Harding with her boyfriend and the ball-peen hammer. Anyway, there's going to be some drama. This is going to be fun. I guess, why don't we check back in after this is all happening for maybe a little post-mortem to see what comes true? I hope it's about the sports, it sounds like you guys do too.

Greg Corombus ([24:20](#)):

I hope so. You never know.

Bill Walton ([24:23](#)):

Okay. Frank, Greg, Brian, thanks, and fun to talk about. And we'll talk again soon. You've been watching The Bill Walton Show, and we've been on talking with the Bill Walton team about the Olympics and various predictions about what might happen. We're all looking forward to it, hope you do too, and hope you all join us again for our next show, which you can find at TheBillWaltonShow.com. Thanks. Bye.