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(Tara Jacoby for The Washington Post)

Two types of people are watching the final week of the 2024 Summer Olympics.

In one camp are those who believe that adding breaking — what we Gen Xers used to call “breakdancing” — as an Olympic sport insults legitimate athletes and portends social collapse.

In the other camp are the rest of us.

The Olympics, like all collective rituals, are built on tradition. But they maintain their relevance, and renew their energy, through novelty and experimentation. This year's Games have earned solid TV ratings in part because of innovations that would have seemed outlandish a few decades ago, such as surfing in Tahiti and skateboarding at Place de la Concorde.

But as the International Olympic Committee, the 200-plus participating nations and all of us sports fans ponder the 2028 Games in Los Angeles, we have a chance to think bigger — to bring this quadrennial spectacle more fully into the 21st century.

The modern Olympic Games have matured from battles of brute strength in 1896, when the economies of the 14 participating countries relied on the equivalent of pinning dudes to a mat or hoisting a massive barbell. Over the next 120 years, the Games evolved: Women joined in 1900, officials approved popular team sports in the mid-20th century such as basketball and volleyball, and events that require finesse and beauty became mainstays, from artistic swimming to rhythmic gymnastics.

Yet today's Games don't fully reflect how much the world has changed.

Why not introduce more contemporary competitions, assemble more varied teams and involve more of the world as participants?

1. New sports

Hundreds of millions of people across the globe now earn their living less with their backs and more with their brains, relying on sharp reasoning and creative thinking. So how about seeing who's best at that?

One idea: a competition such as the solar car challenges popular in many high school and college engineering programs. Mixed-gender squads of techies could receive a design brief months in advance and then arrive at the Games to pit their team's creation against those of other nations on an official Olympic racetrack. It would be a competition that relies on teammates with smarts, skills and creativity — and some would need to be traditional athletes, too. Have you seen a pit crew at the Indy 500? I'd cheer on Team USA against Team China in a battle to create and race zero-emission automobiles. Besides, who wouldn't want to see the Katie Ledecky of mechanical engineering smiling on a box of Wheaties? Or how about Olympic chess? Don't laugh: The International Chess Federation has been pushing the idea for decades. In 1999, the IOC, whose byzantine rules and procedures determine which competitions are worthy of medals, relented and finally recognized chess as an official sport.

But the IOC is unwilling to include chess in the Games themselves, even though it is surprisingly physically demanding. Top competitors such as Magnus Carlsen enlist nutritionists and personal trainers to maintain their stamina.

However, my gold-medal choice for a new, more modern Olympic event would test endurance, agility, strategy and ingenuity as well as the ability to withstand pressure and heat: cooking. After all, food unifies people even more than sports. And the rise of cooking shows — “Chopped,” “Hell's Kitchen,” “The Great British Baking Show” and so on — over the past 20 years demonstrates that watching someone whip up jollof rice or sear Wagyu beef is as compelling as watching someone dive from a 10-meter platform or cross the finish line of a 100-meter race. The culinary world already offers its own elite competitions, such as the Bocuse d'Or. But Olympic cooking would be higher-profile and for the masses, with more varied challenges and a wider representation of nations.

Imagine a tournament in which countries sent their three best chefs to compete against the three best from other nations. Tough challenges. A ticking clock. Imperious judges. Single elimination. It would be television gold: Eurovision meets “Top Chef” meets March Madness. (NBC executives, please send royalty checks to whynot@danielpink.com.) And those added viewers might even stick around for the modern pentathlon.

2. New teams

Think again about those first modern Olympics in 1896. Life expectancy in the United States, for both men and women, was under 50.

Since then, despite a few disturbing recent trends, average life spans have soared. People are remaining physically and mentally active longer than at any time in history. Olympic teams could better reflect these spectacular improvements in longevity and health. For example, some of the most exciting Olympic events are track and swimming relays, so much so that in 2021 at the Tokyo Games, officials introduced mixed-gender relays. What if the Olympics fielded *intergenerational* relay teams?

The IOC could select a few events — say, the 4x200-meter freestyle swim relay and the 4x400-meter track relay — and give fans a chance to see athletes of all ages. The four participants in these relays would each come from a distinct age bracket: one competitor no older than 20, another between ages 20 and 39, a third who's between 40 and 59, and a fourth who's 60 or older.

The literal passing of the baton would become the metaphorical passing of the torch, dismantling age-based stereotypes, bonding athletes across generations and inspiring spectators young and old.

3. New participants

At the turn of the 20th century, when the modern Olympics began, only 8 percent of American households had electricity. Today, more than 7 billion people across the globe own a smartphone — a battery-powered supercomputer capable of communicating with anyone on the planet that fits in a pocket. The Olympics still haven't realized the potential of that massive transformation.

Imagine if the next Olympics invited all those smartphone-toting people to compete in the Games and represent their countries.

The IOC could create a “Citizen Participation” app and make it available to everyone in the world. Individuals could register — entering their name, age and country, for example — and agree to share their location for the duration of the Olympics. Then from the torch lighting to the Closing Ceremonies, the app would count their steps. Those steps would count toward their country's *total* steps. And the nations whose citizens accumulated the most steps would win gold, silver and bronze medals in a worldwide competition. (Steps have become a key measure of movement for many of us. But that's not to say there isn't a better way to do it, particularly to include people with disabilities.)

Of course, to be fair, we'd have to adjust this event for population. Otherwise, the countries with the most people would pile up the most steps. One possibility is to calculate steps per capita. Another would be to group countries into divisions — large, medium and small — so that Liechtenstein (population: about 40,000) wouldn't have to compete with India (population: about 1.4 billion).

Whatever the arrangement, the potential is extraordinary. During the Olympic Games, billions of people around the world could be motivated to start exercising, a habit they might then maintain, thereby having a lasting impact on global public health. In neighborhoods and villages, people might form walking groups to help the national team, building community and enlisting fellow citizens in a common cause. Allowing anyone to become an Olympian would turn the Games into a truly global event — unprecedented in sports history and unimaginable when the Olympics began.

And if your country won the Olympic step competition and you became a gold medalist, you might even start breakdancing.

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