The U.S. Department of State Takes the Field with Sports Diplomacy

Nearly one billion people tuned in to watch matches during the 2014 World Cup. This number in itself brings to light the power of sports. While the international community’s enthusiasm for sports peaks during mega-events such as the World Cup, Olympics and Paralympics, the motivation to play and engage in sports is constant.

Every day of every year, SportsUnited—the U.S. Department of State’s Sports Diplomacy Division—taps into this universal power and shared passion of sports. The State Department uses the hands-on experiences that define sports to transcend cultural hurdles between people with different backgrounds.

From the ancient Olympic Games to the era of ping pong diplomacy, sports have opened channels of communication in difficult climates. Recognizing this, the State Department established SportsUnited to advance U.S. public diplomacy efforts. Since 2002, sports diplomacy exchange programs have expanded to reach socioeconomically disadvantaged youth and marginalized groups, including women and individuals with disabilities. Through people-to-people sports exchange programs, the State Department reaches out at the grassroots level to connect with populations in every region of the world.

While the global spotlight focuses on triumphs at the World Cup and Olympics, the State Department has its own diplomatic victories by “leveling the playing field” and promoting respect for diversity. SportsUnited’s coordination partnerships with sports leagues, federations, and non-profit organizations are vital in ensuring that sports diplomacy programs impact communities in meaningful ways. The State Department has developed core sports diplomacy programs: Sports Envoys, Sports Visitors, Sports Grants, and the Empowering Women and Girls through Sports Initiative.

Sports Envoys: In cooperation with U.S. Missions and American leagues and federations, the Department identifies and dispatches prominent athletes to serve as athlete role models on envoy programs overseas. These star envoys include Michelle Kwan, Ken Griffey, Jr., and Jackie-Joyner Kersee, amongst an all-star roster of American sports ambassadors. Through sports clinics, school and community organization engagement and host dialogues focused on teamwork, Sports Envoys are often able to connect with youth and key audiences in places where traditional diplomacy proves challenging.

Sports Visitors: Underserved youth athletes and coaches nominated by U.S. Embassies come to the United States to experience American society and sport culture during two-week exchanges. Programs include sessions on nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention, sport and disability, and team building, along with technical training. Special emphasis is placed on the visitors’ development of personal action plans to apply their experiences and new skills once they return home. The program builds connections between foreign visitors and U.S. participants, through a mutually enriching experience.

Sports Grants: The State Department coordinates with U.S.-based nonprofits on two-way exchanges designed to enhance the infrastructure of sports programs worldwide. The grants
emphasize environmentalism, disability rights, and social change through sports. As a result, the State Department supports activities ranging from wheelchair basketball in China to training soccer coaches in Uganda, always promoting the diversified capabilities of its partners to reach larger target audiences.

Empowering Women and Girls through Sports: Building on the State Department’s longstanding commitment to gender equality, the Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports Initiative inspires women and girls’ increased involvement in sports so that they can experience benefits including improved health, enhanced self-esteem, and greater academic success. Title IX – the U.S. landmark legislation that afforded equal opportunity for women in education and sports – serves as a key theme. For the flagship Global Sports Mentoring Program, each participant develops a strategic plan for using sports as a means to create new opportunities for women back home. By placing these action plans into motion upon their returns home, these women have created a ripple effect – with an ever-expanding footprint of positive social change globally.

The State Department also focuses on the enthusiasm of sporting mega events, including the World Cup and Olympics and Paralympics to spread messages of diplomacy through sports-related channels to audiences who may otherwise not have tuned in. The versatility, practicality, and inclusivity of SportsUnited’s programs contribute uniquely to the State Department’s efforts to increase understanding of different cultures and viewpoints, build language and leadership skills, and enhance economic prosperity and security.

Links for Photos, Videos, and Additional Information:

Video links: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2401359CA6BC5212
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