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To cite this article: Joost Jansen, Gijsbert Oonk & Godfried Engbersen (2018) Nationality swapping in the Olympic field: towards the marketization of citizenship?, *Citizenship Studies*, 22:5, 523-539, DOI: [10.1080/13621025.2018.1477921](https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2018.1477921)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2018.1477921>



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Published online: 29 May 2018.



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## Nationality swapping in the Olympic field: towards the marketization of citizenship?

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### ABSTRACT

Nationality swapping in sports is commonly assumed to be a rapidly expanding practice that is indicative of the marketization of citizenship. Sports are said to have become wholesale markets in which talent is being traded for citizenship. In this article, we seek to empirically explore such claims by analysing 167 athletes who have competed for two different countries in the Summer Olympic Games. It seems that most switches occurred after the 1990s. Then, following a citizenship as a claims-making approach, we introduce the work of Bourdieu so as to connect citizenship as both legal status and practice with normative claims. The analysis reveals that the practice of nationality switching is shaped by structural conditions of the Olympic field. First, a complex realm of citizenship laws and regulations produces conditions under which athletes make legitimate claims to citizenship. Second, through a mechanism of reverberative causation, prior migrations are often echoed in contemporary nationality swapping. Only a limited number of athletes acquired citizenship via the explicit market principle we call *jus talenti*. Claiming that instrumental nationality swapping is indicative of the marketization of citizenship obscures the complex interplay between structures of and practices within the Olympic field.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 November 2017

Accepted 26 March 2018

### KEYWORDS

*Jus talenti*; marketization of citizenship; nationality swapping; Olympic Games; reverberative causation

## Introduction

On 6 February 2017, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) issued a press release in which they stated that, as of that moment, all so-called ‘transfers of allegiance’ would be suspended, meaning that it is now no longer possible for athletes to apply for nationality switches. The decision followed a long period of deliberation on how to deal with the allegedly growing number of athletes who switch allegiance to other countries. The athletes in question are sometimes portrayed as ‘mercenaries’ who are selling their talents to the highest bidding country. The IAAF itself claims that its current rules are no longer fit to secure ‘a championship sport based upon national teams’, because ‘what we have is a wholesale market for African talent open to the highest bidder’.<sup>1</sup>

Not just within athletics, but also in the wider context of sports, the idea that nationality switching is a rather novel and rapidly expanding practice is widely spread. Naturalizations of prominent athletes are extensively discussed in media broadcasts, often with a focus on non-Western athletes (e.g. Chinese table tennis players or long-distance runners from Kenya). In anticipation of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, for instance, controversy arose over some athletes swapping passports to the Gulf States Qatar and Bahrain.<sup>2</sup> However, also Western cases frequently provoke public debate, as for instance the 61 ‘plastic Brits’ who competed for Team Britain at the London 2012 Olympics were subject to a lot of controversy.<sup>3</sup>

It seems that various agents in the Olympic field are increasingly inclined to adopt an instrumentalist stance towards migration and citizenship. Especially, states are said to utilize migration by lightly offering citizenship to talented immigrants so as to increase their global economic competitiveness or, in sports, their positions on medal tables and FIFA world rankings (Shachar and Hirschl 2014). This talent migration challenges the notion of citizenship (Adjaye 2010; Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan 2011; Shachar 2011; Spiro 2014; Shachar 2017). Do naturalized athletes who conveniently exchange their talents for passports genuinely belong to a nation? Are they eligible to wear its vest and waive its flag at a global sporting event? Are we witnessing a marketization of citizenship (Shachar 2017)?

The claim that sports are confronted with a rather novel and rapidly expanding practice has hitherto not been verified empirically, nor has the idea that nationality swapping is indicative of the marketization of citizenship. In discussions about nationality switching, media broadcasts and academics merely tend to invoke ‘anecdotal evidence about the crème de la crème’ (Shachar and Hirschl 2014, 237) and highlight recent and prominent cases of naturalized athletes (see also Adjaye 2010). Apart from anecdotal evidence and normative claims, a more systematic, historical and theoretical perspective is lacking.

In this article, we empirically explore the novelty and extent of nationality swapping. We specifically analyse Olympic athletes who represented two different countries in the Summer Olympic Games. They form ‘strategic cases’ in a Mertonian sense (Merton 1987). These cases represent the ultimate form of nationality swapping and have the advantage of being relatively well documented. By examining the biographies of Olympic athletes who swapped their flags, we track down the stories behind their naturalizations. Ultimately, we aim at verifying claims that these naturalizations are the result of a marketization of citizenship.

This article is organized as follows. First, we present an overview of the citizenship literature that pointed out the intricacies of the study of citizenship. Then, building on Bloemraad’s (2018) citizenship as a claims-making approach, we bring Bourdieu into the field, whose relational framework can help us understand the complex dynamic between normative ideas about citizenship on the one hand and citizenship as both legal status and as practice on the other. In what follows, we categorize Olympic athletes who switched nationality according to generic principles of attributing citizenship in order to juxtapose legal statuses, practices and normative claims about nationality swapping. Ultimately, we aim at answering two questions:

- (1) How have patterns of switching Olympic nationality evolved over time?
- (2) To what extent do cases of Olympic athletes who switched nationality indicate a movement towards the marketization of citizenship?

## Theorizing citizenship as status, practice and claims-making

Since IOC regulations state that an athlete's Olympic nationality is dependent on his/her citizenship status (which allows athletes to get selected by their national committees),<sup>4</sup> an understanding of the conceptual intricacies of citizenship is crucial in trying to comprehend how practices of nationality swapping and their normative evaluations are dynamically related. Citizenship is a multifaceted concept, and its study entails both formal aspects (legal status, rights) and informal aspects (participation, identity and belonging) (Bosniak 2006; Joppke 2007; Bloemraad 2018). In the case of Olympians who switch nationality, it is important to study citizenship as both formal status and as practice.

### *Citizenship as formal status and as practice*

Citizenship as status is foremost related to the nationality laws that determine who is legally entitled to membership of a country. Historically, two ideal types of policies of attributing membership are discerned (see Brubaker 1990; Vink and De Groot 2010; Bauböck 2017):

- (1) *Jus sanguinis*: citizenship acquired through descent. Germany is best known for basing its citizenship regime on this principle. Children born outside of German territory to German parents are eligible to German citizenship.
- (2) *Jus soli*: citizenship acquired by birth in the territory. The United States is the prime example of employing this citizenship principle, as membership is automatically attributed to people born within the US and subject to US jurisdiction.

However, citizenship can also be acquired after birth via naturalization (see Vink and De Groot 2010; Bauböck 2017). The main principles through which naturalization is regulated are *jus domicilii* and *jus matrimonii* (cf. Vink and De Groot 2010; Bauböck 2017). Via the latter principle, immigrants can acquire citizenship by marrying a native citizen. Through the principle of *jus domicilii*, citizenship can be granted to individuals 'independently of the place and community of birth [...] after they entered a territory and established residence in this territory' (Bauder 2014, 93). This residence-based approach to membership applies to immigrants who have resided in their new countries for a minimum number of years. Residency criteria vary across countries and are generally combined with other conditions, such as language proficiency and income criteria.<sup>5</sup>

Some scholars argue that, in the global 'war' for skilled labourers, countries increasingly and selectively ease their immigration policies by, among other things, introducing fast-track admission procedures for highly skilled migrants, such as scientists, doctors, engineers and athletes (Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan 2011; Shachar 2006; Shachar 2011). Simultaneously, in the quest for attracting 'the world's rich and affluent', more than a quarter of the world's countries even go as far as developing cash-for-citizenship programmes, which make it possible to purchase passports (Shachar 2017, 790). In this vein, Shachar and Hirschl (2014, 253) have coined 'Olympic citizenship' as a metaphorical and generic term for describing the 'fast-paced race to recruit the world's most creative and brightest' through which countries aim to increase their competitiveness and promote their national projects (Shachar 2006; Shachar 2011; Spiro 2014). The

proliferation of these policies points towards the ‘marketization of citizenship’ – i.e. the reconception of citizenship from ‘sacred’ bond to marketable ‘commodity’ (Shachar 2017, 792), which, as Shachar rightfully argues, threatens the ‘political ideal of a common enterprise committed to promoting equality, rights, and collective decision-making’ (p. 811).

We propose to call these transactions in which citizenship is conveniently being traded for talent or money *jus talenti*: the right of talent. Following a Bourdieusian and Biblical<sup>6</sup> line of reasoning, we argue that the concept of *jus talenti* captures the two etymological meanings of the word talent: (a) a significant sum of money – concretized in so-called ‘cash-for-passport programs’ (Shachar 2017), and (b) ‘skills’ or ‘human capital’, which also functions as a currency in today’s global market for highly skilled foreigners (Shachar and Hirschl 2014).<sup>7</sup> Through *jus talenti*, citizenship is granted either to immigrants who are willing to pay a significant amount of money or to those who hold particular skills that states conceive of as valuable. Although apparently some athletes bought their way into the Olympics,<sup>8</sup> the immaterial meaning of the word talent is of particular relevance for this study.

Besides referring to the formal organization of membership regimes, the concept of citizenship also comprises the practices of those who are affected by legal status categories (Bosniak 2006; Bloemraad 2018). When defined as practice instead of state policies, the agency of citizens and noncitizens takes centre stage (Bloemraad 2018). The study of nationality swapping in relation to normative claims about citizenship partially requires directing attention to the practices and experiences of immigrants themselves, in this case Olympic athletes. A focus on practices rather than on the formal statuses of athletes implies a shift towards analysing their biographies in terms of motives (what motivated them to claim citizenship?), sense of belonging (do they feel that they belong to their new countries?) and experiences (how do they deal with public claims that are dismissive of their actions?).

### *A relational approach*

Bloemraad (2018) makes a plea for studying citizenship as claims-making. Such an approach incorporates the agency of immigrants (those who make claims to citizenship), while also recognizing the fact that their agency is heavily structured by legal and institutional constraints (are their claims legitimate?). Besides citizenship laws and regulations, these structures comprise shared normative ideas or ‘cognitive maps, cultural meanings and emotive understandings’ of citizenship (p. 17). Immigrants who legitimately acquired citizenship, for instance, can still be conceived of as ‘further from embodying the essence of a citizenship characteristic’ (p. 18). In a similar vein, some scholars (e.g. Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010) observe an increased *moralization* of citizenship, which centres on notions of civic engagement and nationhood. When these discourses evolve into more or less universal claims, they could have the power to influence citizenship policies and reshape the boundaries of the (imagined) community (Bloemraad 2018).

The relational approach Bloemraad proposes resonates well with Bourdieu’s theory of social fields, which dialectically connects structure with agency and meanings attached to practices. Bourdieu conceives of a field as a relatively autonomous network (but not a self-contained universe) of agents struggling over the distribution of various forms of

capital. The configurations of capital that agents have at their disposal (e.g. economic, social, cultural) are used to access specific profits at stake in the field and, ultimately, to preserve or change the status quo of the configuration of forces in a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Tomlinson 2004). Fields have particular sets of shared beliefs and rules that either normalize or reject certain practices. Following Bourdieu's (1988) elaboration of the field of sports, we define the Olympic field as an arena in which multiple agents (e.g. athletes, coaches, the public and sports federations), or 'claimants' in Bloemraad's terms (Bloemraad 2018), struggle over the dominant meanings attached to practicing Olympic sports.

In the Olympic field, various actors make different claims, both legal and normative, to citizenship. The state, as a kind of meta-field, has the power to shape configurations of power relations and capital in other fields. Sports federations, such as the IOC and IAAF, hold the power to draw up rules on which athletes are eligible for competition. Athletes strategically mobilize their capital, in this case by making claims to citizenship, so as to improve their position in the field. Importantly, for Bourdieu, social fields are not static. The structures of the Olympic field (e.g. citizenship laws and regulations of international sports federations) are at the same time enacted and acted upon by various agents in the field. Thus, on the one hand, Olympic nationality switching is the product of 'a space of possible practices' as objectified in citizenship regulations, which offer the 'possibilities and especially the impossibilities' for practice (p. 157). On the other hand, the 'dispositions to practice' and the species of power or capital actors possess provide the very realization of the structures through practice. In other words, these structures, which involve material conditions (laws and regulations) for practice as well as normative ideals (e.g. the IAAF stating that we must prevent athletics from becoming a wholesale market), are both generative of and produced by the practices of the various actors involved.

In this article, the central question is whether normative accounts of instrumental nationality swapping as being indicative of the marketization of citizenship are grounded in empirical reality. Answering this question fundamentally requires 'scrutinising relational processes' (Bloemraad 2018, 14), i.e. juxtaposing the multifaceted nature of citizenship (both as status and as practice) and normative ideas about citizenship. The practices of athletes who switch nationality need to be situated in the realm of citizenship laws to which they and others make claims. Those claims can be either recognized or dismissed as legitimate and morally just. Laws and regulations are the structural conditions that provide individual athletes with 'opportunity structures' or 'life chances', which give them a differential access to certain rewards (Merton and Sztompka 1996). The ultimate question is, therefore, not whether athletes strategically mobilize citizenship (they most likely do). Our aim is to explore 'socially patterned choice' (Merton and Sztompka 1996, 157) or 'structured mobilization' (Bloemraad 2018, 14) so as to uncover how structures provide the (im)possibilities for practice (Bourdieu 1988, 157) and impact the resonance of normative claims (Bloemraad 2018, 14).

## Methodology

Given the multifaceted nature of citizenship, historically and cross-nationally assessing nationality swapping is far from a straightforward exercise. Owing to a lack of data, most mainstream migration studies are limited to counting persons considered foreign-

born. However, cross-national variations in citizenship regimes would ideally require additional information on the nationalities of both immigrants and their parents. The OECD also addressed this issue and started mapping international migration by distinguishing between persons who are foreign-born and persons with foreign nationality (Dumont and Lemaitre 2005). These conceptual and methodological complexities also apply to our aim of understanding the dynamic relation between nationality swapping and normative claims about citizenship.

Unfortunately, there are no organizations that keep public records of nationality switches and underlying motives, let alone information on citizenship statuses of individual athletes.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to FIFA regulations, IOC regulations do not distinguish between various pathways to naturalization and switching allegiance (e.g. between athletes living in their new countries for more than five years and those with parents native to the new country). Impediments to the study of nationality changes have led prior studies (Horowitz and McDaniel 2015; Jansen and Engbersen 2017) to conclude that the only feasible alternative is to rely on secondary sources. Both studies draw on information provided by Sports Reference LLC, being the only source that offers an overview of athletes (including their countries of birth) who have participated in the Summer Olympic Games.

To analyse how patterns of nationality swapping have evolved over time, we created a database consisting of approximately 45,000 athletes from 11 countries who participated in the Summer Olympics between 1948 and 2016. The 11 countries we selected are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United States. In total, the selection covers 33% of the total number of athletes who participated in these editions. The motivation for the selection is fourfold.

- (1) The selected countries have different histories of migration. The selection comprises 'nations of immigrants', 'countries of immigration', 'latecomers to immigration' and 'former countries of immigration' (cf. Hollifield, Martin, and Pia Orrenius 2014; Jansen and Engbersen 2017).
- (2) The selected countries employ different citizenship laws, in particular with regard to the principles of *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis*.
- (3) The selected countries participated in nearly all editions of the Summer Olympic Games after the Second World War, which allows us to systematically map historical variations.
- (4) Information on the birth countries of athletes in our database is relatively complete.

Our database also contains a small number (167) of athletes who have represented at least two different nations during different editions of the Olympic Games (see Jansen 2018). In this article, we analyse the biographies of these 167 athletes to capture variations in Olympic nationality swapping over time. Given the preselection of both countries and editions, it is, unfortunately, impossible to draw definitive conclusions about the full extent of nationality swapping. Moreover, we do not have information on the wider group of athletes who swapped passports before or after representing only one country at the Olympics.<sup>10</sup> Yet, despite these limitations, we argue that a systematic analysis of the selected cases enables us to provide a historical understanding of the practice of switching Olympic citizenship, as well as an indication of its presence nowadays. They are, in a



Merton (1987) sense, strategic cases. First, they represent the ultimate or ideal form of nationality swapping, i.e. competing for two different countries at arguably one of the most prestigious global sporting events. Second, these cases have the advantage of being documented relatively well in media reports. Our strategic selection thus ‘exhibits the phenomena to be explained or interpreted to such advantage and in such accessible form that they enable the fruitful investigation of previously stubborn problems’ (Merton 1987, 10). Olympic nationality swapping can serve as a prism through which the stubborn problem of changing notions of citizenship in relation to (Olympic) talent migration can be systematically studied.

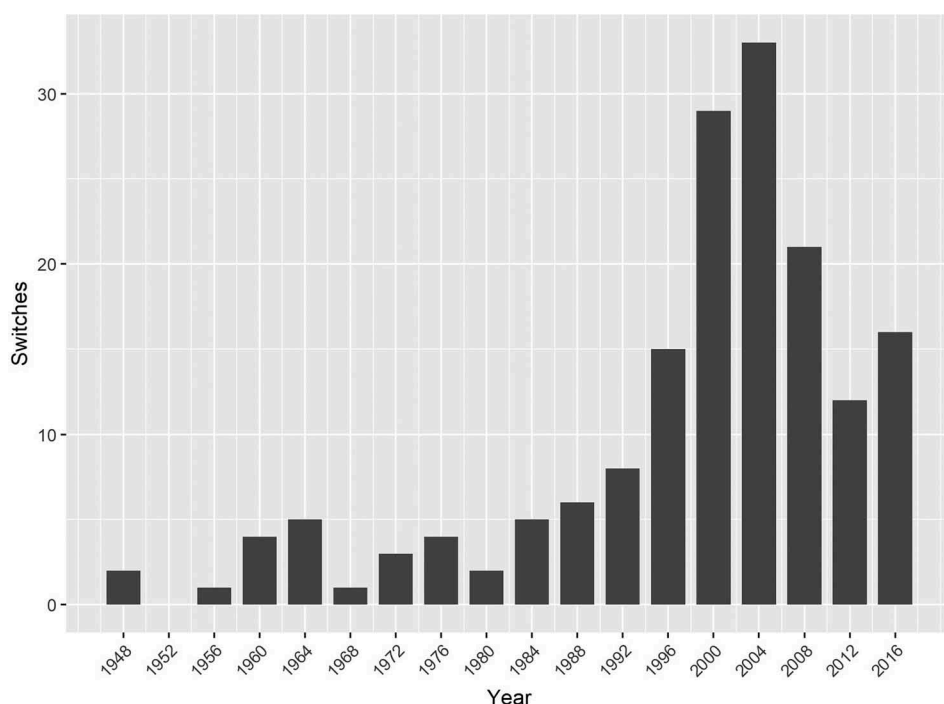
Insofar as possible, we gathered biographical information about each athlete who has switched Olympic nationality by relying on secondary sources such as Wikipedia or newspaper articles, which we found via Google or LexisNexis Academic. These biographies enabled us to assign each athlete to one of the three citizenship categories. In doing so, we followed a hierarchical procedure. First, we checked whether athletes obtained citizenship via the principles of either *jus soli* or *jus sanguinis*. If this was not the case, we checked whether they were naturalized through marriage or residence in their new countries (thereby accounting for country-specific residency requirements). The remaining cases were assigned to the *jus talenti* category if their naturalizations were clearly instrumentally motivated and the athletes had (as far as we know) no prior connection to their new countries. In 19 instances we did not manage to find sufficient information to categorize the athlete in question, leaving us with a final selection of 148 cases.

## A history of swapping Olympic nationality

Although hitherto never verified empirically, it is commonly assumed nowadays that an increasing number of naturalized Olympic athletes competes for countries to which they do not ‘belong’. The first question to answer is thus how patterns of Olympic nationality switching have evolved over time. As for the 167 athletes in our selection, we find that most Olympic nationality swaps indeed occurred after the 1990s (see Figure 1). Before the 1990s, the highest total number of switched athletes had been 6. From the 1990s onwards, there is an upward trend (in absolute terms) in swapping Olympic nationality, which is in accordance with the gradual liberalization of citizenship regimes since the 1980s (Kivisto and Faist 2007; Koopmans, Michalowski, and Waibel 2012).

In our selection, the Athens 2004 Olympic Games saw the highest absolute number of athletes who had represented or would later represent another country, namely 33. Note that the total number of athletes participating for the 11 countries in that year’s edition was 3239, of whom (only) 8% were foreign-born athletes. Most of them did not switch nationality but were natives of the countries they represented (also see Jansen and Engbersen 2017). Although we do not have information about athletes who switched allegiance without representing another country at the Olympics, it seems that Olympic nationality switching is a recent yet rather exceptional practice. Moreover, judging from the data (Jansen 2018), facilitating transfers of allegiance is not a practice in which only specific countries tend to engage, as practically all countries have selected athletes who had already represented or would later represent another country.





**Figure 1.** Olympic nationality switches 1948 – 2016 ( $N = 167$ ).

Somewhat counterintuitively, we found that the number of athletes who switched Olympic nationality decreased after 2004. This might indicate that countries in our selection have become more hesitant in recruiting athletes from other countries, perhaps as a consequence of nationalist backlashes. In line with this, Koopmans, Michalowski, and Waibel (2012) argue that citizenship rights in some of the countries in our selection have become less inclusive after 2002 due to a growing right wing electorate.

The trajectories followed by Olympians who switched nationality show a stark resemblance to global migration patterns, which points towards path dependency. This is in line with what Sassen (1999, xxi) argued, namely that ‘international migrations are conditioned, patterned and bounded processes’. Our data indicate that European and colonial migrations that have taken place during the first half of the 20th century still resonate in recent transfers of Olympic nationality. This indicates the occurrence of a mechanism we call ‘reverberative causation’, referring to a process that causes contemporary migration patterns to be the echo or reversal of migration flows by which they were preceded.

Jansen and Engbersen (2017) studied foreign-born Olympic athletes from a cross-national and historical perspective and concluded that the Olympic Games have not become astonishingly more migratory. Olympic migration is mainly a reflection of international migration patterns and histories.<sup>11</sup> Foreign-born Olympians in the first decades of the 20th century often had a European background or colonial linkages with the country they represented. Nowadays, Olympic migration has become much less European, less colonial and more diverse, as foreign Olympic athletes are now born in a wide array of countries. Yet it still seems that immigrant Olympic athletes are inclined

to follow the beaten paths. Athletes born in, say, Senegal are more likely to move to France, whereas immigrant athletes from Cuba are more likely to represent the United States or Spain.

As for Olympic athletes who switched their nationalities, a similar pattern emerges. Although these athletes have agency in determining which country they pledge allegiance to, it seems that their aspirations are path-dependently shaped by prior migrations. In particular, colonial histories are important in understanding nationality swapping at present. Of the 21 athletes who would later in their careers switch allegiance to France, 12 athletes were born in one of its former colonies (Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Madagascar or Senegal). And of the 15 athletes who at some point competed for Great Britain, 10 athletes were born in the Bahamas, Ireland, South Africa, Guyana or Jamaica. Two athletes who first competed for Argentina later represented Spain and Italy. The Brazilian equestrian Luciana Diniz-Knippling switched allegiance to Portugal after already having participated under the Brazilian flag. Such reversed migration trajectories are closely tied up with citizenship principles. The principle of *jus sanguinis* paves the way for the descendants of, e.g. Italian immigrants in Argentina to return to Italy three generations later. Contemporary practices of changing citizenship thus cannot be understood without looking at historical patterns of international migration.

### **Towards the marketization of citizenship?**

To provide an empirical answer to the second question, i.e. whether the increase in nationality swapping is associated with a marketization of citizenship, we assigned each case to one of the legal principles through which citizenship is generally attributed. A marketization of citizenship, then, would imply that increasing numbers of Olympic athletes who switched nationality obtained citizenship via the principle of *jus talenti*. Although the legal attribution of citizenship to athletes through one of the other principles can be considered as strategically motivated practice, we argue that this is the inevitable consequence of the way states organize their membership regimes, resulting in issues of multiple citizenship. Viewed from this perspective, citizenship is not a tradable commodity per se (as would be the case with *jus talenti*).

Figure 2 shows, like Figure 1, the absolute number of athletes who represented two different countries in the Summer Olympics between 1948 and 2016. As we already observed, the general trend for switching national allegiance is upwards. However, we now assigned each case to one of the five different citizenship principles. Interestingly, we find that by far most athletes who switched Olympic nationality had some sort of prior connections with their new countries.

### ***Jus soli and sanguinis***

First, we note that a substantial number of athletes in our selection switched allegiance to a country in which they were either considered native or born. Even athletes with dual citizenship whose nationality switches are purely cash-driven are legitimate claimants of citizenship of their new countries. Dismissing the instrumental rationality behind the athletes' decisions obscures the structural conditions under which these practices occurred. An interesting example is that of the long-distance runner Kathy Butler, who switched to

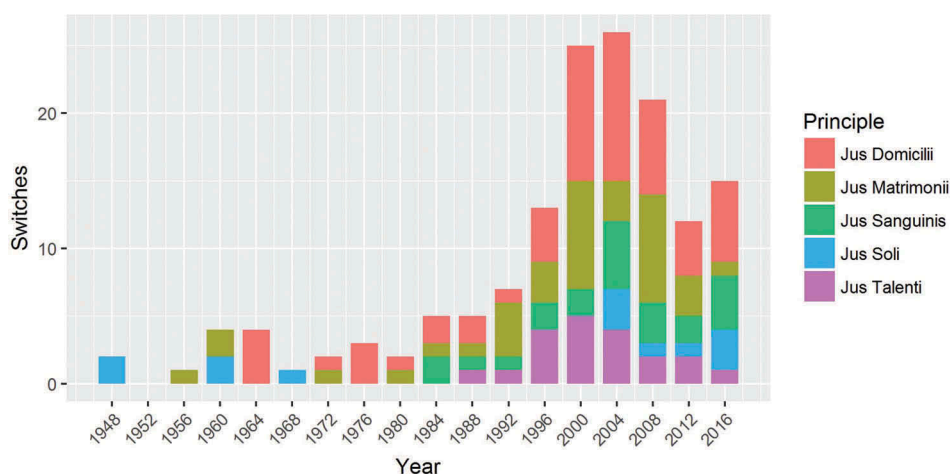


Figure 2. Olympic nationality switches 1948 – 2016 by citizenship principle ( $N = 148$ ).

competing internationally for Great Britain in 2000 after already having competed for Canada. Butler held dual citizenship (she was born to English parents and moved to Canada at the age of 10) and was eligible to represent both Canada and Great Britain. Butler decided ‘she had enough of how she was being treated by Canada and switched to run for Britain’.<sup>12</sup> She felt she did not get the (financial) support she needed from Canada, whereas Britain was willing to provide her with full support. In Butler’s case, prior migrations between Great Britain and Canada and Olympic nationality regulations provided the structural basis for her decision to claim British Olympic nationality.

Another exemplary case we want to highlight is that of Pietro Figlioli, one of the world’s most talented water polo players. Figlioli was born in Brazil and grew up in Australia because he and his parents had moved there when Figlioli was three years old. Figlioli first competed for Australia at the 2004 and 2008 Summer Olympics. Since professional water polo is predominantly played in Europe, professional European water polo competitions attract many non-European players who aspire to take their careers to a higher level and monetize their talents. He went to Europe in 2003 and played for the Italian team Pro Recco from 2009 to 2017. His transfer to Pro Recco was controversial. Not only was the deal closed between Figlioli and Pro Recco very lucrative in financial terms, but it also involved Figlioli switching to the Italian national team, which he would later represent in the 2012 and 2016 Olympics, during which Italy and Figlioli were very successful (winning bronze in London and silver in Rio).

At first sight, it seems that Figlioli’s controversial case exemplifies the marketization of citizenship. Figlioli was not born in Italy, nor had he lived there before playing for Pro Recco, yet he still adopted the Italian nationality, a decision from which both he and Italy would greatly benefit. However, a closer look beneath the surface of Figlioli’s naturalization shows us the conditions that ultimately shaped his decision to switch nationality. Historic migrations from Italy to Brazil and Brazil to Australia, as well as institutional conditions (citizenship laws and sports federations’ rules) are, in Bourdieusian terms, important

‘socially pertinent properties’ that, to a certain extent, shaped his inclination to switch allegiance to the Italian team.

Figlioli is the embodiment of a set of structural properties of the Olympic field. Although born in Brazil and raised in Australia, he is of Italian descent. Figlioli’s grandparents were among the many Italian immigrants who arrived in Brazil between 1880 and 1920, and his parents were among the many Brazilians who, after the 1970s, migrated to Australia (Castles, De Haas, and Miller 2014). Since all three countries allow their citizens to have multiple citizenship, Figlioli holds three passports. He is thus legitimately entitled to claim citizenship of and represent three different countries. Given the fact that the Italian water polo federation only allows each professional team to have one non-European player, Pro Secco wanted Figlioli to adopt Italian nationality as a water polo player, thereby forcing Figlioli to leave the Australian national team. Paradoxically, measures meant to protect the Italian-ness of the Italian water polo competition produced the practices some people are dismissive of.

### **Jus domicilii and matrimonii**

Most athletes who swapped nationality obtained citizenship via the principles of *jus domicilii* or *matrimonii*. Although they did not acquire citizenship at birth, they managed to claim citizenship of their new countries because they were married to a native citizen and/or met the basic residency requirements for naturalization. Apart from marriage, the main reasons for becoming a citizen of their new countries were work (not necessarily related to sport), pursuing a study and having grown up there.

France has often been represented by talented athletes who had also competed for its former colonies (e.g. Senegal and Cameroon). Initially, the athletes went to France for better training facilities and financial support. Some had received scholarships (funded by a joint initiative of the IAAF, the Olympic solidarity commission<sup>13</sup> and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs), which enabled them to move to France at a young age. These cases too are an expression of the mechanism of reverberative causation, which reverses prior migration flows, making athletes from France’s former colonies more inclined to reversely follow the beaten paths. Acquiring citizenship of country via the principles of *jus domicilii* or *jus matrimonii* does not exclude the strategic mobilization of citizenship in the Olympic field. However, it shows that merely emphasizing instrumentality only offers a partial understanding of the origins of practice. Most Olympic nationality swaps were not the outcome of a talent-for-citizenship exchange *per se*.

A famous example we wish to highlight is that of Bernard Lagat, a talented middle- and long-distance runner born in Kapsabet, Kenya. Before representing the United States in 2005, Lagat had won multiple international competitions representing Kenya. Though *prima facie* Lagat’s nationality transfer may seem like an archetype of, in the words of the IAAF, athletics ‘becoming a wholesale market for African talent open to the highest bidder’, Lagat’s life story nuances this image. In 1996, Lagat was given the rare opportunity to attend Washington State University to pursue a career in athletics and follow a study in Management Information Systems. In 1998, Lagat received his green card and in 2004 he officially became an American citizen, ‘not for running, but for life after running’, he said.<sup>14</sup>

Technically, since at that time Kenya did not allow dual citizenship by law, Lagat was not eligible to represent Kenya anymore. Luckily for Lagat, this was only discovered a few months after he had won a silver medal. Later, in the 2008, 2012 and 2016 Olympics, Lagat represented the United States. Although he did not have any connection with the United States prior to moving there, Lagat claims that he gradually came to identify himself as a ‘real’ American:

He closely follows the presidential campaigns, intently watching Barack Obama, the son of an American mother and a Kenyan father. Lagat lives in a gated community, plays golf and barbecues four times a week. ‘If I drank a lot of beer, I would have everything’, Lagat said with a laugh.<sup>15</sup>

Lagat’s life story illustrates how many athletes swapped allegiance to a country in which they had developed a permanent interest during their lives. Often, their actions are not just the product of sheer instrumentalism. Their (legitimate) claims to citizenship are shaped within the wider context of international migrations and citizenship regimes. In fact, since Kenya did not allow dual citizenship (at that time), Lagat was given no other option but to switch allegiance to the United States.

### Jus talenti

As we have already discussed, some countries have implemented fast-track admission programmes to attract highly skilled immigrants in the global race for talented migrants. Part of these programmes are what Shachar (2011; 2017) calls talent-for-citizenship exchanges. Based on the media reports we managed to obtain, our database only comprises a few athletes who *explicitly* received citizenship via such policies. For example, the Serbian handball player Arpad Šterbik became a Spanish citizen thanks to his exceptional qualities. And in 2000, during the Sydney Olympics, the number of athletes belonging to this category was the largest. Most of them were former Soviet weightlifters or wrestlers who competed for Australia that, perhaps not coincidentally, also hosted the Olympics that summer. They managed to claim Australian citizenship via a distinguished talent programme, which grants visas to talented academics, artists, researchers or athletes. The applicants are eligible to apply for Australian citizenship after two years.

The Australian weightlifting coach, Paul Coffa, openly admitted he sought to strengthen the Australian team by actively recruiting talented weightlifters from former Soviet countries. Although these nationality switches are the result of instrumental rationality (and thus often invoked as anecdotal evidence in discussions about Olympic nationality), we must not forget the major geopolitical transformations that provided the athletes, Coffa and Australia with a window of opportunity. Before switching allegiance to Australia, these athletes had represented the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which led to a period of socio-economic and political instability, emigration from countries such as Armenia rapidly accelerated. To escape the hardships in Armenia, a number of skilled Armenian migrants migrated to Australia where an, albeit relatively young, well-organized Armenian-Australian community was already established.<sup>16</sup>

Our point is not to downplay the instrumental logic behind naturalizations of Armenian weightlifters and other talented migrants, but, what these cases exemplify is that the various agents involved acted under structural conditions that had created a space that offered the (im)possibilities for practice, three of them being: (1) the breakup of the Soviet Union and hardships in Armenia; (2) prior migrations from Armenia to Australia and (3) the IOC regulations that define Olympic nationality in terms of citizenship.

## Conclusion

Assumptions about the novelty and extent of nationality swapping in the context of various sports have hitherto remained relatively understudied, as have claims that these practices are indicative of the marketization of citizenship. In this article, we have tried to shed a systematic, historical and theoretical light on switching Olympic nationality. In answer to the first research question, the results suggest an increase in the number of athletes who switched Olympic nationality, especially after the 1990s. However, in answer to the second question, this practice is not necessarily bound up with the marketization of citizenship. Following a relational approach, which was inspired by the works of Bloemraad (2018) and Bourdieu (1988), we examined how the practice of Olympic nationality swapping is structured in two ways. In turn, these practices become regenerative of the (imagined) boundaries of the field and thus of ideas about citizenship.

First, through a mechanism we call reverberative causation, prior migration patterns are frequently echoed in current Olympic migration. Rather than randomly picking the highest bidding country, most Olympic athletes who switch nationality are inclined to follow the beaten paths. Second, the instrumental logic behind nationality switches of Olympic athletes takes place within the complex realm of citizenship laws and nationality regulations. Whether granted at or after birth via the principles of *jus soli*, *jus sanguinis*, *jus domicilii* and *jus matrimonii*, ‘issues’ of multiple citizenship will inevitably arise from (increasing) population mobility (see also Spiro 2014). Some athletes are thus technically allowed to represent different countries during consecutive editions of the Olympics. Practices that are *prima facie* merely strategically motivated are in fact shaped under specific structural conditions. Therefore, instead of being an indication of a marketization of citizenship *per se*, we argue that the study of Olympic nationality swapping uncovers the dynamic interactions between structures, practices and ideas.

Acquiring citizenship via the explicit market principle of *jus talenti* is conceived of as more prevalent than ever. Our strategic selection, however, indicates that in reality only a few nationality switches in the 11 countries we studied were the outcome of a purely instrumental talent-for-citizenship exchange between athletes and states between whom no prior connection existed. The ‘whole set of “models” of practices (rules, equipment, specialized institutions, etc.)’ (Bourdieu 1988, 157) in the Olympic field are the historical and (socio)logical outcome of struggle between various agents in the field who each mobilize their specific configuration of capital.

## Discussion

Part of this struggle involves either making legitimate claims to citizenship or claiming that citizenship is becoming a sheer commodity, which challenges dominant meanings attached to practicing Olympic sports (e.g. athletes ought to represent their 'own' countries). Perhaps, and we believe this is something future studies should address, we can better explain the controversy over athletes who swapped their flags in terms of the *moralization* of citizenship, which entails a strong focus on notions of culture, ethnicity and nationhood. For instance, rather than being an indication of the marketization of citizenship, the fact that 61 athletes who represented Great Britain were pejoratively referred to as 'plastic Brits' could point towards the reassertion of established discourses of nationhood and the intensification of nationalist sentiments (also see Poulton and Maguire 2012).

Acknowledging the limitations of our data, we do not intend to make claims about the full extent of nationality swapping in sports. Given the unavailability of adequate data, we were constrained to select a specific group of athletes and countries. For example, this study does not cover countries such as Qatar and Bahrain. Our selection, however, has the advantage that the biographical information needed to categorize athletes was relatively accessible. This enabled us to scrutinize the complex interrelation between the practice of nationality swapping and changing notions of citizenship. We strongly believe that our approach could also be extended to a wider group of athletes who switched nationality *if* the various organizations involved – i.e. the IOC, NOCs and other sports federations – started (retroactively) registering transfers of allegiance, including information about the timing of and motives behind nationality switches, as well as information on the citizenship status(es) of athletes. For example, prior to the London 2012 Olympics, the Daily Mail published an infographic<sup>17</sup> that portrays five British athletes who swapped their flags. Except for Yamile Aldama (who married a Scottish man whereupon she moved to the United Kingdom), all athletes were either born within UK territory or to British parents. Hence, their claims to British citizenship were legitimate, although, as the image shows, their decisions to switch their nationalities were clearly instrumentally motivated.

To conclude, we hope that the outcomes of this study could help future studies that aim at understanding changing notions of citizenship in relation to nationality swapping in sports – and perhaps even in a wider societal context. In this vein, future research should explore to what extent the aspirations and decisions of other groups of highly skilled migrants (academics, technicians, engineers, artists, etc.) to migrate are subject to similar structural conditions (i.e. citizenship regimes and prior migrations) that we have discussed in this article.

## Notes

1. <https://www.iaaf.org/news/press-release/transfer-allegiance-council-meeting-russia>.
2. <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/08/why-some-olympians-compete-against-their-home-country/494648/>.
3. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/olympics/article-2171923/London-2012-Games-Team-GB-61-plastic-Brits.html>. Ironically, in 1984, the Daily Mail campaigned for bringing Zola Budd from South Africa to represent Great Britain in the Los Angeles Olympics: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/olympics/article-2114102/London-2012-questions-answered-Martin-Samuel.html>.



4. Naturalized athletes, or those with multiple citizenship who make a request for a transfer of allegiance after already having represented country A at an international competition, generally have to wait three years before being eligible for competing for B. This period can be waived or reduced if the IOC, the international sports federation and the NOCs concerned come to such an agreement. See: [https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/olympic\\_charter\\_en.pdf](https://stillmed.olympic.org/Documents/olympic_charter_en.pdf).
5. Most of the countries we selected (see methodology paragraph) employ residency requirements of 5 years. Australia and Brazil require a residence period of 4 years, and Argentina requires a waiting period of only 2 years. In Italy and Spain, applicants for naturalization have to meet a residency requirement of at least 10 years. However, in the case of Spain, nationals from Spanish-American countries only have to wait 2 years. For more information, also see: <http://globalcit.eu/acquisition-citizenship/>.
6. In 'the parable of the talents' in Matthew 25, the literal meaning of word of talent is a significant amount of money. However, ultimately, the lesson to be learnt from the parable is that we must use our talents, i.e. our abilities and skills, in the best way we can.
7. Others have coined the term *jus pecuniae* to describe this specific type of investor citizenship (cf. Dzankic 2012).
8. See: <http://www.insideedition.com/headlines/7863-did-a-rich-couple-buy-their-way-into-the-olympics>.
9. The IAAF started registering transfers of allegiance in 1998. Yet it remains unknown why an athlete changed nationality and if s/he for instance held dual citizenship, allowing the athlete to represent two countries.
10. Beyond what we know about some controversial individual cases of naturalizations that gained a lot of media attention. A famous example is that of Becky Hammon, an American basketball player who, after not being selected for the US national team to participate in the Beijing 2008 Olympics, decided to apply for Russian citizenship whereupon she represented Team Russia at the 2008 and 2012 Olympics.
11. This also applies to other sports, such as football. For instance, Dubois (2010) argues how the diversity of the French national football team serves to remind us of the fact that the history of France is marked by immigration.
12. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2001/jul/31/athletics.duncanmackay>.
13. <https://www.olympic.org/olympic-solidarity-commission>.
14. <https://nyti.ms/2ssfrH1> .
15. <https://nyti.ms/2ssfrH1> .
16. <http://www.anc.org.au/community> .
17. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/olympics/article-2114102/London-2012-Olympics-Plastic-Brits-questions-answered-Martin-Samuel.html>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This study is part of the research project 'Sport and Nation' ([www.sportandnation.com](http://www.sportandnation.com)), which is funded by Erasmus University Rotterdam via a Research Excellence Initiative (REI) grant.

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