

SOCIALYMPICS: HOW SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS AND ATHLETES USED SOCIAL MEDIA AT LONDON 2012



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- 100 billion posts on Facebook: timeline status updates, likes, comments, shares, photos and videos.¹
- 5 billion tweets on Twitter.¹
- 650,000 photos shared on Instagram.¹ Athletes were using the mobile app to provide an intimate look behind the scenes, fans posted from events and even photojournalists used Instagram to post less formal pictures.
- More than 79 million video views on the International Olympic Committee YouTube channel.

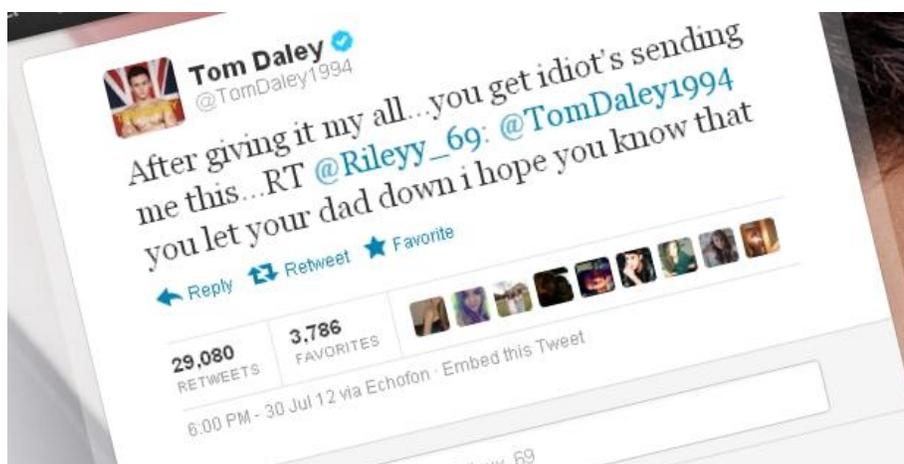
Sports have a built-in pool of passion and when it comes to social media, fans want to share their excitement, their knowledge and sometimes their criticism. And they want to do it NOW. Chances are they won't post later. Social media makes us all spectators, experiencing the Games in real-time without having to be there. We don't wait to see events in prime time as NBC learned when the hashtag #nbcfail trended on Twitter because it wasn't showing the opening ceremonies live.

- **Fact:** 41% of fans get sports results from Twitter and Facebook. Another 40% rely on news/sports websites compared to 4% who get results from radio and 13% from TV.²
- **Fact:** 83% are active on social media while watching a game on TV and a whopping 63% while at the game.²
- **Fact:** There were 80,000 tweets per minute when Usain Bolt won the 200m sprint.³ President Obama only garnered 52,000 tweets per minute during his speech to the 2012 Democratic convention.⁴
- **Fact:** Samuel L. Jackson tweeted a shout-out to Rosie MacLennan after she won her gold in trampoline to his nearly 1.5 million followers.



The free flow of information results in a lot of positive support but also provides an open forum for the public, fans and athletes, to vent their opinions on Facebook, Twitter and on blogs.

Fans of Tom Daley flooded Twitter to defend the British diver after he was criticized in a tweet for letting down his father, who died last year, by not medaling. Daley could



have ignored the tweet and let the issue go but decided to re-tweet with a comment to his more than 900,000 fans, keeping the issue alive to allow him to shine a light on bullying he suffered after the Beijing games when he was 14.

The Purpose of this Report

This report looks at how Canadian and international athletes and sports organizations used social media to communicate with the public during the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympic Games. It also provides recommendations for developing and executing sound and effective social media strategies and policies.

This report looks at three National Sports Organizations (NSOs): Athletics Canada, Equine Canada and Canoe Kayak Canada. Thirteen Canadian and five international athletes were chosen because they were active on at least two social channels going into the Games (*see chart page 12*).

We analyzed the social media efforts of NSOs and athletes using four criteria:

1. Organization-generated content
2. Engagement with fans and sharing of fan and athlete-generated content
3. Use of photos and videos
4. Integration of social media feeds into the NSO's website

The Analysis

Social Media Policies

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) underestimated how prevalent a role social media would play at the Games and its ability to control the open forums where people were tweeting, posting and sharing photos.

"...tweets must be in a first-person, diary-type format and should not be in the role of a journalist — i.e. they must not report on competition or comment on the activities of other participants or accredited persons, or disclose any information which is confidential or private in relation to any other person or organization." ⁵

Team Great Britain (Team GB), developed its own policy with a clear list of Do's and Don'ts for its athletes, but neither the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) nor Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC) had a formalized social media policy, with both opting to use the IOC rules. The COC also suggested that athletes who were new to Twitter should not start using it at the Games, advice that was largely ignored.

Dai Greene of Team GB, the reigning world 400m hurdles champion and British Olympic Athletics team captain, used the word "gayest" in a twitter exchange with 400m runner Martyn Rooney. The tweet was deleted. Greene was kept on the team and the British Olympic Association (BOA) launched an investigation and felt that the issue had been addressed. The BOA had a very clear and succinct social media policy that athletes were given before the Games. It asked UK Athletics to remind its athletes about the importance of using social media carefully.

The BOA stated, "We have contacted the leadership of our athletics delegation and asked them to remind their athletes about the importance of using social media carefully and responsibly. As far as we are concerned, this issue has been addressed and is behind us." ⁶

Michel Morganella, a Swiss soccer player, was expelled from the Games because of a tweet that said South Koreans "can go burn" and calling them a "bunch of mongoloids".

Gian Gilli, chef de mission for the Swiss Olympic delegation, said: "Michel Morganella gravely insulted and discriminated against the South Korean people and their football team with his highly offensive



comments on Twitter. We condemn his comments, which are in fundamental violation of the IOC's Olympic charter and Swiss Olympic's own ethics charter."

However, Morganella was sent home because he violated the IOC's code of conduct that requires athletes to show mutual respect.

Morganella later apologized for the tweet saying, 'I am sincerely sorry for the people of South Korea, for the players, but equally for the Swiss delegation and Swiss football in general. It's clear that I'm accepting the consequences.'⁷

The Swiss recognized the power of social media going into the Games and opted to use the IOC's policy. The head of social media, Philipp Furrer, said the "Swiss Olympic Association talked with every [Swiss] federation and most of the athletes", "We tried to tell them in a simple way what they can and can't do."⁸

Greece Olympic officials eliminated triple jumper **Voula Papachristou** from the team after she posted a comment mocking African immigrants and supporting a far-right political party.

Two Australian swimmers were sanctioned before the games for posting a picture on Facebook of them holding guns. They were allowed to compete, banned from using social media during the games and were sent home immediately after their events.

Canadian Triathlete Simon Whitfield took to the twitterverse to support team-mate Paula Findlay after her last place finish, calling for others to be held accountable. Triathlon Canada should have addressed the criticism, especially on Twitter where the original comment was made, missing an opportunity to reach the more than 20,000 people following Whitfield.

Findlay said her e-mail and Twitter accounts exploded with people telling her she had no reason to be sorry.



Social Media Management and Content Strategy

Sports organizations at all levels need to have a dedicated staff person, at least part-time, to manage their social media channels and online community. In the world of social media it is crucial that comments are responded to in some fashion and in a timely way.

One post, share, tweet or re-tweet can reach thousands. For example, according to TweetReach.com a person with 76 followers on Twitter can have a TwitterReach of almost 1000 people.⁹

Athletics Canada

Athletics Canada had the huge task of providing information for more than 20 sports in French and English for both the Olympics and the Paralympics. Excellent content was posted, including sharing athletes' posts, newspaper stories, photos and video. However, there were frequent updates on Facebook during events that were cross-posted from Twitter. The language used in tweets, restricted to 140 characters and full of #hashtags, do not translate well to Facebook. As well, Facebook users generally don't like to have their feeds clogged with too many posts.

Athletics Canada kept fans updated minute by minute on the disqualification of the Men's 4x100m relay, the appeal and the result. The posts and tweets were happening in real time. Including comments from the coach and the team provided fans with exclusive content and the ability to show their support for the team. Athletics Canada continued to follow the Men's 4x100m relay story sharing the letter of Elijah Porter – the Newfoundland boy who donated his Timbits soccer medal to the team. A link was posted on the Athletics Canada Facebook page to a CBC radio interview when Justyn Warner surprised Elijah. Athletics Canada also arranged for the boy to meet Jared Connaughton and Seyi Smitt in person.

Athletics Canada posted a photo album for each day of the Olympics and Paralympics on Facebook.

Athletics Canada's coverage of the Paralympic Games was just as comprehensive. There was little television coverage of the Games and social media was the only way for fans to



get information. The real-time coverage resulted in a lot of fan support that otherwise may not have been possible without social media.

Athletics Canada continued post-Olympic updates, focussing on human interest stories.

The creation of microsites for both the Olympics and Paralympics that integrated the athletes' twitter

account feeds along with the Athletics Canada twitter feed provided fans a one-stop-shop for getting updates. Unfortunately, the links were not prominently displayed on the Athletics Canada website and the sites were difficult to find. The links were part of the featured slider but if you missed the slides you could only access them by clicking on the International Events link.



Equine Canada

Equine Canada appeared to have no social media strategy for the Games, choosing to issue a traditional news release via an email service with a daily news roundup. The news releases were an excellent way for fans to get a snapshot of the day's events, but didn't replace the interaction of social media. Equine Canada's social presence consisted of tweeting and posting a link directing people to the news release. The overall tone was distant and formal. There were no updates on Facebook and Twitter during the events. For example, Eventing fans would not have heard or received real-time updates about Hawley Bennett-Awad falling off her horse and being taken to hospital



when it happened unless they were connected to others on Twitter and Facebook.

No photos were posted on Facebook or tweeted.

Issues can escalate if people's posts and tweets are ignored which is what happened after Tiffany Foster and her horse Victor were disqualified during the Jumping competition. The disqualification left the Canadian team down a rider and most likely out of medal contention.

Hundreds of equestrian fans took to social channels to voice their anger and disappointment about Equine Canada's response to the disqualification, sharing the news on their own channels as well as commenting on the Equine Canada Facebook page and Twitter account. Equine Canada released a revised statement in a news release but again did not talk to fans on Facebook where most of the criticism had been levelled.



Anne London Weinstein

Equine Canada I am appalled at your response to the disqualification of Tiffany Foster. As an equestrian and a lawyer, I cannot believe that you issued such a weak statement, basically endorsing the use of junk science to eliminate one of our athletes. In the criminal justice system we have become increasingly aware that the reliance on "expert" evidence can frequently lead to wrongful convictions. Allowing Ms. Foster to be eliminated on the basis of the current regime for hypersensitivity evaluation without review is grotesquely unfair. As an EC member, I expect our governing body to fight for our athletes and to protest against unfair and, or, arbitrary methods of soundness assessment. We all know that this system is flawed, why on Earth would you not do what you could to call for the implementation of a review of the findings? I am appalled. When Sapphire was similarly eliminated in a prior finding, at least the American governing body did not ally itself with the FEI. I am so very disappointed in you.

Like · Comment · 8 August at 12:55

👍 178 people like this.

💬 View all 16 comments



Beverly Van Guilder Amen to that! Hope EC actually stands up and at least apologizes to Tiffany and the equine community
9 August at 12:53 via mobile · Like



Christine Boucher Amen sister!
16 August at 20:46 via mobile · Like

Equine Canada has connected its social media accounts to its website but does not include a feed.

The Paralympic coverage was also communicated through news releases. It was difficult for fans to find information. Some of the best coverage came from the Ontario Equestrian Federation's Twitter feed.

Despite the overall lack of engagement there was a steady increase in "likes" and follows during the Olympics, which is to be expected from any high profile event. The challenge now is to maintain and increase fans post-Olympics.

Canoe Kayak Canada

Canoe Kayak Canada did an excellent job on Twitter keeping fans up-to-date, finding and sharing user generated-content and sharing pictures. However, its overall performance fell

because of poor content and lack of photos on Facebook. Many of the posts originated on Twitter and included twitter handles and #hashtags that did not translate to

Facebook. People expect content to be written and communicated in different ways on different channels. Cross-posting does save time but Facebook posts should be more detailed and descriptive than can be accomplished in a 140 character tweet. It's obvious to fans that the organization is not taking the time to engage differently on each channel.



-  **CanoeKayak Canada** @CanoeKayakCAN 12 Aug
#FR Merci à nos commanditaires pour leur soutien généreux @mazdacanada @nelokayaks @B2ten @level_six
Expand
-  **CanoeKayak Canada** @CanoeKayakCAN 12 Aug
#FR Merci @London2012 & @Olympics. Merci @CDNOlympicTeam, @ownthepodium, entraîneurs, famille, et tout le monde qui soutiennent nos athlètes
Expand
-  **CanoeKayak Canada** @CanoeKayakCAN 12 Aug
#EN Thanks to our sponsors for all of their support @mazdacanada @level_six @B2ten @nelokayaks
Expand
-  **CanoeKayak Canada** @CanoeKayakCAN 12 Aug
#EN Thanks to @London2012 for a experience great. Thanks @CDNOlympicTeam, @ownthepodium, coaches, family and all who supported our athletes
Expand

As with Athletics Canada, people who have "liked" a Facebook page generally do not want to their feed clogged up with three or four posts in an hour. They go to twitter for real-time updates.

Photos were shared on Twitter but no photos from the Olympics were posted in albums on Facebook, except of the team's arrival in London. There are photo albums from the Nationals and the trials but not the Olympics.

Canoe Kayak Canada has links to its Facebook page and to Twitter and has integrated the Twitter feed into its website.

Athlete Social Media Training

Sports organizations and athletes have a lot of social momentum coming out of the Games. Going forward, training for athletes on how to use specific social tools and best practices is needed. Connecting with athletes is how fans get the real experience and an exclusive behind-the-scenes look. This puts a lot of pressure on athletes to understand social media.

Before the games in an interview with the CBC Simon Whitfield said, "This will be very different because of social media....It puts more pressure actually because you connect with more people. So you see a lot more of those messages of support and you see a lot more of those messages of 'Go bring home the gold'".¹⁰

Australia's basketball team member Liz Cambage said in an interview after returning home that athletes need social media education, which she said will be an issue unless they learned to use it to their advantage. "I know a lot of athletes who only just signed up to social media for the Olympics. I've had Twitter for a few years now and I know when to put it away, when to get on it and how to block people out and how to listen to people. I love to get in touch with my fans."¹¹

Canadian athletes embraced social media in London as a place to interact with fans, get encouragement and show support for other athletes. Four time diving medalist Émilie Heymans said, "It's awesome, all the response that we got. The people from home, on Twitter, it's really crazy. It makes us really feel good."¹² Rowing silver medalist Ashley Brzozowicz felt that social channels helped her deal with feelings of isolation, "We try to stay out of the hoopla. But to be able to feel the support of your friends and family at home and see what was going on without having to do a long phone call or whatever, you can just quickly check, people can send you a short message and you really felt like you were still a part of it."¹³

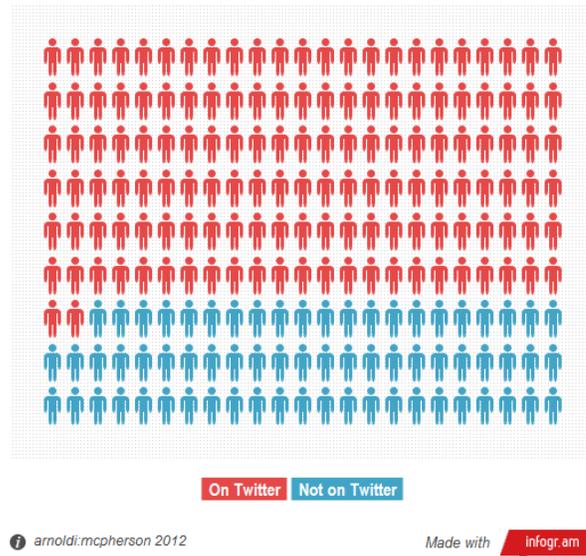
Coaches and NSOs tended to be a little more hesitant, worrying that the real-time connection could be a distraction. Chef de mission Mark Tewksbury, who joined Twitter in May 2012, saw the benefits but also warned that, "We just have to be careful obviously and there are some parameters. We're all learning."¹⁴

The Most Popular Social Channel?

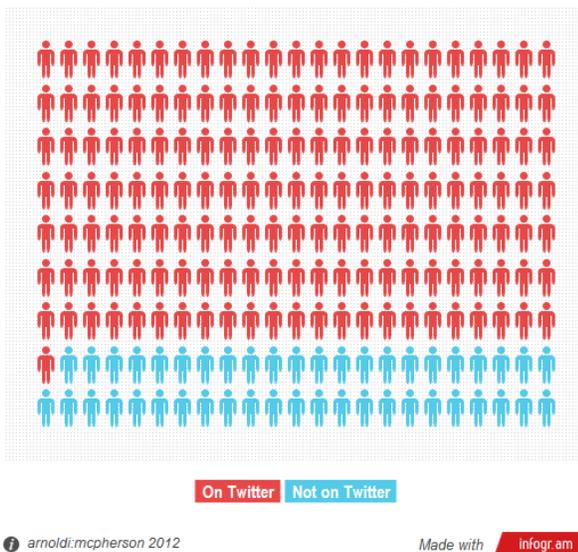
Twitter was the most popular tool among the athletes with 68% of our Olympic athletes and a whopping 78% of our Parathletes on Twitter.

Twitter lends itself very well to events because of real-time conversations. It also allows athletes and organizations the ability to search topics using #hashtags and create lists to follow other athletes. All the athletes that we followed gained Twitter followers during the Games. Their posts included shout-outs to fans, photos sharing their Olympic experiences, thanking sponsors pre-Games, congratulations and encouragement

Canadian Olympic Athletes & Twitter - London 2012



CDN Parathletes & Twitter - London 2012



to other athletes.

Facebook and websites/blogs tied for second place.

Fans had the opportunity to feel part of the Games with a direct connection to the athletes. Athletes who had both Twitter accounts and Facebook pages put more emphasis on Twitter, which most updated daily, often several times a day with Facebook posts every couple of days.

Tom Daley finished the Games with the most number of followers with over 1.3 million.

The biggest follower gain for Canadian athletes was Rosie MacLennan, who started the Games with 1,307 followers and ended them with 14,805, a gain of over 1000%.

The chart below shows the social media channels used by the athletes and NSOs followed for this report.

Athlete							
Hawley Bennett–Awad							
Donna Vakalis							
Richard Clarke/ Tyler Bjorn							
Rosie MacLennan							
Justyn Warner							
Michael Tayler							
Alexandre Despatie							
Ashley Gowanlock							
Meghan Montgomery							
Josh Cassidy							
Benoît Huot							
Summer Mortimer							
Rachel Burrows							
Matthew Mitcham							
Stephanie Rice							
Jessica Ennis							
Tom Daley							
Ryan Lochte							
Equine Canada							
Canoe Kayak Canada							
Athletics Canada							

Recommendations

If London 2012 was dubbed the "socialympics" then "personalization" will be the name of the game in Sochi and Rio. Fans will be able to customize their experience by bundling social feeds of the events they are interested in into a single package and delivered to them. The influence of social media will continue to increase rapidly and by the winter Olympics in less than two years new tools will emerge and fans, athletes and organizations will have even more outlets to enhance the experience.

It is impossible to control the use of social media. NSOs should embrace social media by developing a plan, having trained staff to implement it and helping the athletes, who are the ambassadors of their sport, to learn to use it to their advantage.

As the result of our analysis we make the following recommendations:

1. NSOs need to develop social media strategies and policies that are clearly defined and meet the core values of the organization. They must also be flexible and fluid to keep up with the development of social media tools and trends. Social media policies should be written into athlete agreements, or else linked directly by specific reference in their agreements.
2. There should be a person dedicated to social media full-time at large NSOs and at least part-time for those with limited staff. NSOs must stay active on social channels, follow what is being said about the organization and to keep on top of what's happening in social media. All staff should be familiar with the plan, the policy and understand how they are being implemented.
3. Keep up the momentum gained on social media during the Olympics and Paralympics and continue to engage fans who are still plugged into your sport. Understanding the goals of athletes and fans is critical. You will lose fans quickly if you do not continue to engage them with interesting and relevant information.

4. Your strategy should be communicated to provincial sport organizations and a plan put in place to share information with them. This enables the NSOs to significantly widen their social media reach.

5. Athletes should to be trained in using social media tools. Many of today's high performance athletes use social channels to connect with their fans and supporters, to raise sponsorship dollars and to increase their profile, especially for those athletes whose sports are not "mainstream". Understanding and determining which social media channels fit best would ensure that athletes use social media effectively.

6. Social media should be a focus in improving the profile of Paralympians. The London 2012 Paralympics gained increased fan attention, in part through engagement on Facebook and Twitter.

End Notes

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