

## Teaching geopolitics through sport

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**Abstract.** This paper reflects on teaching sport in political geography undergraduate courses in the United States, through which I simultaneously aim to de-essentialize geopolitics and de-essentialize sport. I integrate sport examples in diverse courses on political geography and teach a dedicated “Geopolitics of Sport” course. By framing my approach to the political geographies of sport around the specific term “geopolitics,” I deliberately tap into a sense among Americans that it is a “more serious” topic than “geography.” Since students in my courses rarely come from Geography, but are primarily majors in Political Science and International Relations, “geopolitics” invites them to approach sports geography as a serious subject and to be more open to the field of geography. Since geography remains a neglected subject in US schools and universities, teaching sports geography through geopolitics, and geopolitics through sports geography, can be a powerful way to encourage critical geographic reasoning, especially among non-geography majors.

**Keywords:** geopolitics; geopolitics of sport; political geography; sports geography

### Introduction

I have taught political geography at Syracuse University (SU) for over 10 years, in a department that has a long and important history in the development of political geography in the United States. But as the Geography department’s recent name change suggests – it is now called the Department of Geography *and the Environment* – it also has a long history of focusing on nature-society and environment themes. Indeed, I found that most of our department’s undergraduate Geography majors were more interested in environmental themes than political geography. I rarely have geography majors in my classes, which are instead mostly enrolled with students majoring in International Relations (IR) and Political Science.

When US students arrive at college, they are unlikely to know what geography as a field encompasses. Geography remains a neglected subject in American schools: it is rarely taught in high school and students typically only encounter it through courses in “Social Studies” or world history. For most US students – myself included – “geography” was only ever a small unit in fourth grade about how to read maps. Those of us teaching in universities that actually have a geography program (and many do not) are therefore tasked with introducing students to the tremendous breadth of our field, as well as what it means to think geographically. Often this comes late in their academic careers, whenever they happen upon one of our courses.

Because of this widespread association of geography with elementary school map-reading lessons in the United States, there is a persistent sense among students – and faculty members in other departments – that geography is not a “serious” field. Indeed, I was told exactly this by a disdainful Political Science professor when I decided to leave his Master’s program at Harvard to transfer to a Master’s program in Geography at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Because of the hierarchy of prestige that political scientists sit atop and actively promote within the US academy, many students interested in political geography are implicitly or explicitly taught to steer clear of courses with “geography” in the title (Kaplan, 2021; Murphy, 2007; Stoler et al., 2021).

To counter these prevailing stigmas, I frequently use the term “geopolitics” instead of “geography” in my course titles – including my course on sports geography. After much wavering, I chose to call it “Geopolitics of Sport.” The class was focused on a broader set of sports geography questions than I would usually teach through units on geopolitics, but I knew the title would sound more “serious” to non-majors and their advisors. This did indeed help in recruiting students, and I have seen a similar dynamic with my

publication titles – geopolitics simply does a better job of piquing the interest of anyone interested in politics who does not necessarily know that geography is a serious academic enterprise. In both my writing and in the classroom, I have thus come to see teaching about the geopolitics of sport as a welcome opportunity to teach others that geography *is* a serious subject and to open them up to the complexity and breadth of both political geography and sports geography.

### **De-essentializing geopolitics**

By emphasizing geopolitics in my course titles and content, I have been able to recruit many students interested in political geography, but who did not previously have the language to describe it as such. In their various iterations, my course units typically introduce key concepts of the state, territory and borders, nationalism and citizenship, authoritarianism, and more. I enjoy introducing newcomers to the power of geographic reasoning, but de-essentializing geopolitics among IR and Political Science majors is not without its frustrations – especially when these students arrive later in their academic careers. Professors in those fields still tend to teach politics through an essentialist understanding of space that treats the state as a “container” – what John Agnew (1994) famously critiques as the “territorial trap” – and through a realist approach to geopolitics that centers on conflict and Great Power rivalries.

Such essentialist ideas are far from the critical approach that now prevails in political geography, which asserts that “geography is not a natural given but a power-knowledge relationship” (Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 10). To meet the students where they were, this basic idea – that geography is not just a physical backdrop for world affairs but a power-knowledge relationship – is where I have to start all my classes. This means that I typically begin with explaining the constructed nature of the territorial state system and the idea of the “state” itself. Given the long history of global sporting competitions being organized around territorial states, sport is a natural example to use to illustrate the *state effect* (Mitchell, 1999). That is, states are an effect of practices, including material and rhetorical elements, which must continue for the state to continue. For instance, there is no Soviet hockey team competing in the Olympics anymore. The Soviet Union no longer exists, so the practices that give meaning to the state have also stopped. One cannot compete for a country that does not exist. But it is more than just a question of who is participating in the Olympics that is at stake here – other performances that have ended include the structures that defined the country’s once-powerful sporting institutions, as well as the political meaning that people and organizations once gave to Soviet flags and jerseys, which now only exist as souvenirs or nostalgia items.

The Soviet Union is an easy example in the United States because, even though most college-age American students today were born after the USSR disintegrated, they are likely to have encountered references to it in popular culture, if not their high school classes. Many have seen some of the popular Cold War films related to sport, such as *Rocky IV* (1985), *Miracle on Ice* (1981), or *Miracle* (2004). In addition, a great deal of excellent sports studies scholarship makes it easy to find texts that introduce students to the role of sport and media in the cultural geopolitics that defined the Cold War (e.g. Dichter and Johns, 2014; Sarantakes, 2011; Shaw and Youngblood, 2017; Wagg, 2017). In other cases, when I want to offer a more contemporary ethnographic set of examples, I will assign some of my own publications for reading and pair this with a rich set of visuals and stories from my fieldwork in the lecture (e.g. Koch 2013, 2015, 2017a, 2018), such as the slide in **Fig. 1** from one of my ethnographic projects in Qatar.

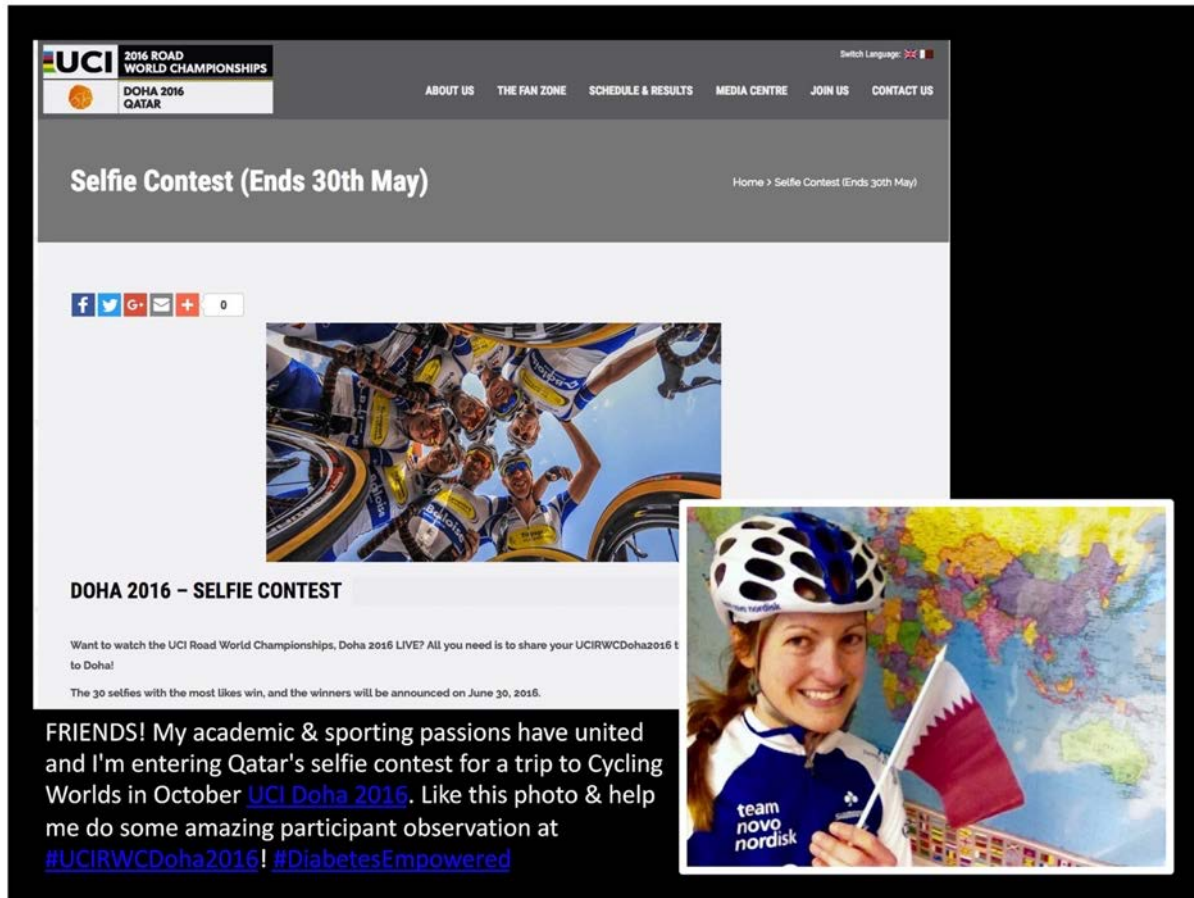


Fig. 1. Slide from my lecture on “Sporting cities in the Arabian Peninsula.” Source: Author, 2017.

Overall, I find that students can more easily conceptualize the constructed nature of the state when they have a concrete example that they already know, or when they have a vivid illustration from empirical research. This helps them see that they already know the phenomenon that we are describing when we call it the “state effect” or the “territorial state system.” And this in turn, helps them to approach political geography not as an elite intellectual terrain, but rather as a toolkit to describe familiar political phenomena with precise vocabulary. By presenting my own work and ethnographic research, I offer students examples of how they too might take their personal observations and life experiences seriously. For me, tapping into latent student knowledge is key to instilling them with the confidence to engage with sophisticated theories as knowledgeable people deserving of respect in the classroom.

### De-essentializing sport

Demonstrating respect for students’ knowledge about sports is important not just for establishing trust in the classroom. It also helps them learn to articulate the problems with popular misconceptions about sport, which they often encounter in their daily lives and especially at university – namely the stigmatizing of sport as an unintellectual diversion or an “opiate for the masses.” Scholars in sports studies fields know this essentializing stigma well. But we also know that it is simply not true – that sport is a tremendously significant cultural phenomenon with financial, political, environmental, and physical impacts that must be taken seriously to understand the world we live in (Koch, 2017b).

In my Geopolitics of Sport class at Syracuse University, I aim to de-essentialize sport by encouraging students to put their own interests into conversation with the political geography themes via a group presentation and individual research papers. For the group presentation, students choose their own case study that relates to the concepts we were discussing that week. These include Cold War geopolitics, local/urban politics, authoritarianism, citizenship, and nationalism. During my last offering of this course, student presentations covered a diverse set of case studies, which I would have never considered myself, and skillfully drew on their own life experiences.

For example, Syracuse is in upstate New York, which is located on land of the Haudenosaunee confederation of Native American tribes. The Haudenosaunee are known to have a deep cultural connection to the game of lacrosse, and SU's lacrosse team is one of the best in the United States. In the class, I had both Haudenosaunee and non-Haudenosaunee members of the lacrosse team who had a deep knowledge of Indigenous identity politics because they experienced firsthand the impact of Haudenosaunee passport debates on who could and could not participate in global competitions. Other students in that course had personal working experience or family members employed by professional sports teams, like the New York Giants American football team, which gave them the unique opportunity to conduct primary interviews about stadium development plans and more – even when the project did not require such extensive research. And given the strength of Syracuse's Newhouse School for Public Communications, various students have come to my classes after doing internships at large sports media companies, or covering the Olympic Games for major broadcasting companies.

In all these cases, when the students are given the opportunity to present their passion and experience as a form of expertise, a new energy seems to drive their interest in linking it to the new language of political geography. In many cases, this latent knowledge just needs to be matched with the vocabulary offered by geography and spatial analysis. And for the students who struggled with the abstract geography concepts, classmates could much more easily explain things through different examples. In fact, they could often do this more skillfully than I could because the breadth of my sports knowledge is quite limited to my own idiosyncratic interests. Having students teach one another was one of the motivations for having the group presentations, but it was also something I encouraged in other exchanges in the classroom. By de-essentializing sport and giving them the opportunity to shine as experts in their own right, I have learned a tremendous amount from my students.

## **Conclusion**

Framing my approach to the diverse political geographies of sport through the idea of “geopolitics” has allowed me to tap into a sense among Americans that it is a “more serious” topic than “geography.” For some, this rhetorical trick might feel disingenuous. Yet I cannot personally remedy the larger problem that geography remains a neglected subject in American schools. There are structural changes that those of us in higher education must work on to address this issue, but to have a more immediate impact, I have sought to bring as many students into my classes as I can. Sport is an effective topic for recruiting a wider student population into a geography class, especially those who might never consider a geography major. And for those who are concerned about “geography” or “sport” not being considered serious enough – whether because of their own internalized biases, those of their parents or academic advisors, or even potential employers who might see the course title on their transcript – I have found the “geopolitics” term is helpful at destigmatizing the topic. Once I get students into the classroom, I then have a unique opportunity to introduce them to the power of critical geographic reasoning as well as critical sports studies. This strategy might also prove effective in classrooms beyond the United States, including in places where geography is

a more established university subject. Wherever our classrooms are located, the opportunity to simultaneously teach students to de-essentialize geopolitics *and* sport is a privilege. And in 10 years of teaching these students, I have found that it is a privilege for me to learn from *them* and their wide-ranging expertise related to sports and geography.

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