

## The Case For A Hawaiian Olympic Surfing Team

As the governing body of the Olympics, The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is made up of 147 members of multiple nations whose responsibilities include implementing and overseeing regulations and deciding host countries.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, the IOC voted to approve surfing in the Olympic Games during its 129th session, and this year, the 2021 Tokyo Games featured the sport for the first time.<sup>2</sup> In the final moments of the women's competition, millions witnessed native Hawaiian Carissa Moore wave the star-spangled banner as she took the gold for the American team, cementing the nation's dominance on the world stage. However, what many spectators unfamiliar with the sport may not have known was that raising this flag was an anomaly for Moore, as she usually showcases the union jack of Hawaii's state flag.<sup>3</sup> Going into the event, the IOC ignored a petition for the participation of the Hawaiian national surfing team, meaning that Hawaiian surfers were forced to compete under the American flag.<sup>4</sup> With the two-hundred-year legacy of American and European colonization of the island, members of the surfing community and native Hawaiians have questioned the role the United States should play in the sport's Olympic debut. The IOC's decision disrupts established norms in the surfing world and ignores the hopes of Hawaiians who wish to see their homeland represented in a sport their ancestors practiced for hundreds of years. Given the recent reckoning with the legacy of the United State's past treatment of indigenous peoples along with Hawaii's long-established ties to

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<sup>1</sup> "The Organisation," *Olympics*, <https://olympics.com/ioc/organisation>.

<sup>2</sup> "IOC approves five new sports for Olympic Games Tokyo 2020," *Olympics*, 3 Aug. 2016, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-approves-five-new-sports-for-olympic-games-tokyo-2020>.

<sup>3</sup> John Branch, "I'm Not Anti-Anything. I'm Pro-Hawaii," *The New York Times*, 17 May 2021, [www.nytimes.com/2021/05/17/sports/olympics/olympic-surfing-hawaii-flag.html?auth=login-google](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/17/sports/olympics/olympic-surfing-hawaii-flag.html?auth=login-google).

<sup>4</sup> Claire Wang, "Team Hawaiian Kingdom? Activists want some U.S. Olympians to surf for a different homeland," *NBC News*, 27 Jul. 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/team-hawaiian-kingdom-activists-want-us-olympians-surf-different-homel-rcna1503>.

the sport, Hawaiian surfers should be able to compete under their own flag in Olympic competitions.



Fig. 1. John Florence holding the Hawaiian state flag after winning the 2019 World Surf Title, Matt Dunbar/World Surf League, via *Getty Images*.

To be clear, Hawaiians are not pushing for a separate team for every Olympic sport, as they compete under the American team like any other state. Surfing, however, is different. Avid fans are used to seeing Hawaii compete against the U.S. and other countries, as Hawaiians have always competed under their state flag in world surfing events.<sup>5</sup> Fig.1. shows Hawaiian athlete John Florence triumphantly waving the state flag after winning the men’s World Surf League title in 2019. Although he did not make it to the Olympic finals this year, Florence’s comments are memorialized in the title of John Branch’s *New York Times* piece “I’m Not Anti-Anything. I’m Pro-Hawaii” which centers the perspectives of surfers and native Hawaiians as they discuss what the introduction of surfing at the Olympics means to them. An excerpt from Hawaiian historian and native John Clark examines his nation’s relationship to the sport:

<sup>5</sup> “History,” *World Surf League*, <https://www.worldsurfleague.com/pages/history>.

In surfing culture worldwide, everybody looks at Hawaiian surfing as different...even California surfers look at Hawaii different...But the Olympics see us as the same...Hawaiians took surfing far beyond anyone else in the world — technically, in board design, and in their skill level...surfing becomes so embedded that it becomes the national pastime. Everybody does it. Royalty does it. Commoners do it. Children do it. Seniors do it. Men do it. Women do it.<sup>6</sup>

As the birthplace of surfing, Clark notes how the deep bond that Hawaii's people have to the sport goes beyond the boundaries of the Olympic games and is rooted in their national identity. Given this linkage, Native Hawaiian surfer Brian Keaulana voices his thoughts on the dissolution of the Hawaiian surfing team a month before the Olympic Games via local Hawaii news station KITV:

How many challenges we gotta go through...We understand who we are, it's the outside world, do they even see us? It's like we're invisible. That's the whole thing. As a Hawaiian in Hawaii, we're invisible...when [John Florence and Carissa Moore] win, we're all gonna fly our Hawaiian flags...we are gonna be proud, we all gonna celebrate, and that's the only thing that we can do.<sup>7</sup>

Keaulana's impassioned words highlight the dismay of locals in forcing Hawaiian athletes such as Florence and Moore to surf for the United States and its subsequent erasure of the small bit of agency Hawaiians have in claiming the sport as their own. Yet, many view the idea of a Hawaiian national team as an example of cancel culture, with T.V. show host Bill Mahr voicing these concerns a week before the kickoff of the games:

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<sup>6</sup> John Branch, "I'm Not Anti-Anything. I'm Pro-Hawaii."

<sup>7</sup>"Mixed emotions in Native Hawaiian community ahead of surfing debut at Olympics," *KITV Island News*, 14 Jul. 2021, <https://www.kitv.com/story/44309681/mixed-emotions-in-native-hawaiian-community-ahead-of-surfing-debut-at-olympics>.

I must say of all the violations of the woke penal code, cultural appropriation just might be the dumbest of all. First of all, there are 25,000 islands in the Pacific. How do we know a Hawaiian was the first to stand on a board in the water? But let's say Hawaiians did invent surfing, should he or she have kept it to themselves? Most of human history is a horror story but the good parts are about different groups coming together and sharing is sort of the whole point of the Olympics.<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to Mahr's implication, the inclusion of a Hawaiian national surfing team is not an issue of the woke left running amuck on cultural appropriation. His characterization of the petition as seeking to restrict who can surf is unfair, unwanted in the surfing world, and irrelevant to Hawaiians' wish to see themselves represented in the games. Instead, the IOC's refusal to allow a Hawaiian Olympic surfing team negates the desire of Hawaiian athletes such as Carissa Moore and John Florence to be able to compete as they normally do in international competitions. Merging the Hawaiian and American surfing teams takes away an integral aspect of surfing where Hawaii's history is recognized as a source of interest for new observers intrigued to learn more about their separate designation. If anything, the IOC would be acting on a precedent as Hawaii has been surfing independently at the largest surfing competition for decades. The inclusion of the team in the Olympics would further what already exists and cement how much of a milestone its Olympic debut truly is.

However, the IOC has been complicit in many unethical practices in the past, such as ignoring allegations of physical and sexual abuse by the Soviet Union gymnastics coaches, and most recently of trainer Larry Nasser.<sup>9</sup> So what obligation do they have to do something now for

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<sup>8</sup> "New Rule: The Woke Olympics." *Real Time with Bill Maher (HBO)*, 31 Jul. 2021, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anUIV6umjqM>.

<sup>9</sup> Liubovb. "Everyone Knew" – More Ex-Gymnasts Came Forward With Accusations About Renald Knysh". *Gymnovosti*. 16 May 2018, <https://eng.gymnovosti.com/everyone-knew-more-ex-gymnasts-came-forward-with-accusations-about-renald-knysh/>.

an issue that is obviously less severe than the exploitation of child athletes? Just because the IOC did not take action to prevent these events then does not prevent them from doing so now.

Addressing the repercussions of an abuse scandal is far more complex than allowing Hawaii to continue surfing under their national team in a new Olympic sport. In doing so, the IOC has an opportunity to honor its commitment to “promot[ing] sport, culture, and education to build a better world” and even increase its viewership by provoking interest in Hawaii’s designated status.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, if the World Surf League has a Hawaiian team and an American team, why has the IOC not continued this practice? The likely answer is the United States. While not discussed in most American history classes, the colonization and eventual statehood of Hawaii was a violent process that still impacts how natives view the country to this day. When Captain James Cook reached the Polynesian islands in the mid 18th century, the Pew Research Center estimates that Hawaii’s population was around 683,000, effectively that of Alaska in 2000.<sup>11</sup> By 1920, this figure dropped to a measly 24,000 according to the U.S. Census data.<sup>12</sup> With Hawaiian society in ruin, nothing, not even surfing, was left unaffected. Nearly a decade after Cook landed, Christian missionaries attempted to ban the sport from the island after imposing “Western values” on what they deemed an “infant race”.<sup>13</sup> The 1893 overthrow of Hawaiian Queen Lili‘uokalani and the illegitimate annexation of Hawaii in 1898 by the McKinley administration capture the brutality of foreign presence on the island.<sup>14</sup> Their actions were followed by wealthy

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<sup>10</sup> “Olympic Values,” *Olympics*, <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-values>.

<sup>11</sup> S Goo, “After 200 years, Native Hawaiians make a comeback,” *Pew Research Center*, 6 Apr. 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/06/native-hawaiian-population/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Scott Laderman, *Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing*, 1st ed., University of California Press, 2014, pp. 15, [https://pitt.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma9998955215506236&context=L&vid=01PITT\\_INST:01PITT\\_INST&lang=en&search\\_scope=MyInst\\_and\\_CI&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=Everything&query=any.contains.surfing&offset=20](https://pitt.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma9998955215506236&context=L&vid=01PITT_INST:01PITT_INST&lang=en&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=Everything&query=any.contains.surfing&offset=20).

<sup>14</sup> Douglas Booth, “Surfing,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 19 Jan. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/sports/surfing>.

Americans such as Alexander Ford capitalizing on the tropical lands of Hawaii and hailing surfing as a selling point for tourists at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not these agents were intent on preserving or reshaping Hawaiian culture, all missionaries, nations, and corporations ultimately did what they believed to be important, subsequently restricting the agency of Hawaiians. Therefore, excluding the Hawaiian national surfing team from the Olympics mirrors the ongoing colonization experience that Americans and Europeans have forced on the island for centuries, reinvigorating the frustrations expressed by Hawaiians such as Keaulana.

Despite this history, some may retort that Hawaii was conquered decades ago, and therefore these concerns should be forgotten or at least treated as a resolved issue. While this narrative is tempting for mainland Americans to accept, it simply is not the case. The impacts of American interference continue to this day, namely through the practice of surf tourism. Described as the commercialization of surfing culture, the phenomenon of foreigners vacationing to Hawaii to experience tropical destinations has forced natives into low-paying jobs to cater to visitors, the influx of which has pushed native surfers out of sacred beach spots which have been used for centuries.<sup>16</sup> Today, beach space has been reduced by development that has displaced communities invested in Hawaiian traditions.<sup>17</sup> Merging the Hawaiian Olympic surfing team with the United States continues the assimilation process responsible for eroding Hawaiian culture and land. In turn, locals already distrustful of the United States are even more aggravated at being represented alongside the country that decimated their nation.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> T Mzezewa, "Hawaii Is a Paradise, but Whose?" *The New York Times*, 4 Feb, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/04/travel/hawaii-tourism-protests.html>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

With Indigenous People's Day being recognized with Columbus Day, the moment is ripe with the opportunity to reckon with the wrongs of the past. Obviously, staying at a hotel and going to the beach in Waikiki is not equivalent to the violence inflicted by early Americans towards Hawaiians, just like how no one alive today is responsible for the genocide of Native American tribes hundreds of years ago. Yet, we as a society are acknowledging the harm that has been done to indigenous groups, and our policies are reflecting this moment of change. Despite the brutal history of the American presence on the island, Native Hawaiians have been left out of this discussion. Surfing may seem like a trivial issue to many, but to those whose ancestors have been partaking in it for centuries, it is anything but that. Having this tradition banned by people who dismantled one's way of life, only to be readopted by those very authorities who continue to take land and shape the economy, is gut-wrenching. Allowing the Hawaiian national surfing team to compete in the games is a small step forward in the context of all the harm that has been perpetrated against its people, in addition to the much more drastic actions being undertaken to remedy the violence inflicted against Native Americans.

To those who say that a national Olympic team will stir up unnecessary tensions between the U.S. and Hawaii, such conflicts have been occurring long before today and will likely continue, with the controversy being a symptom of America's failure to remedy the destruction caused by their actions centuries ago. Allowing Hawaiians to surf under their flag serves as a moment of reconciliation for the U.S., seeing as many people are beginning to rethink how indigenous groups have been treated, and serve as a start to repairing the wounds stemming from colonization. Moreover, national attention can foster greater awareness of the harm that surf tourism causes and inspire solutions to reverse the economic and cultural damage that has

plagued the island, in turn rousing interest in Hawaii beyond the beauty of its beaches and more so with the resiliency of its people.



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