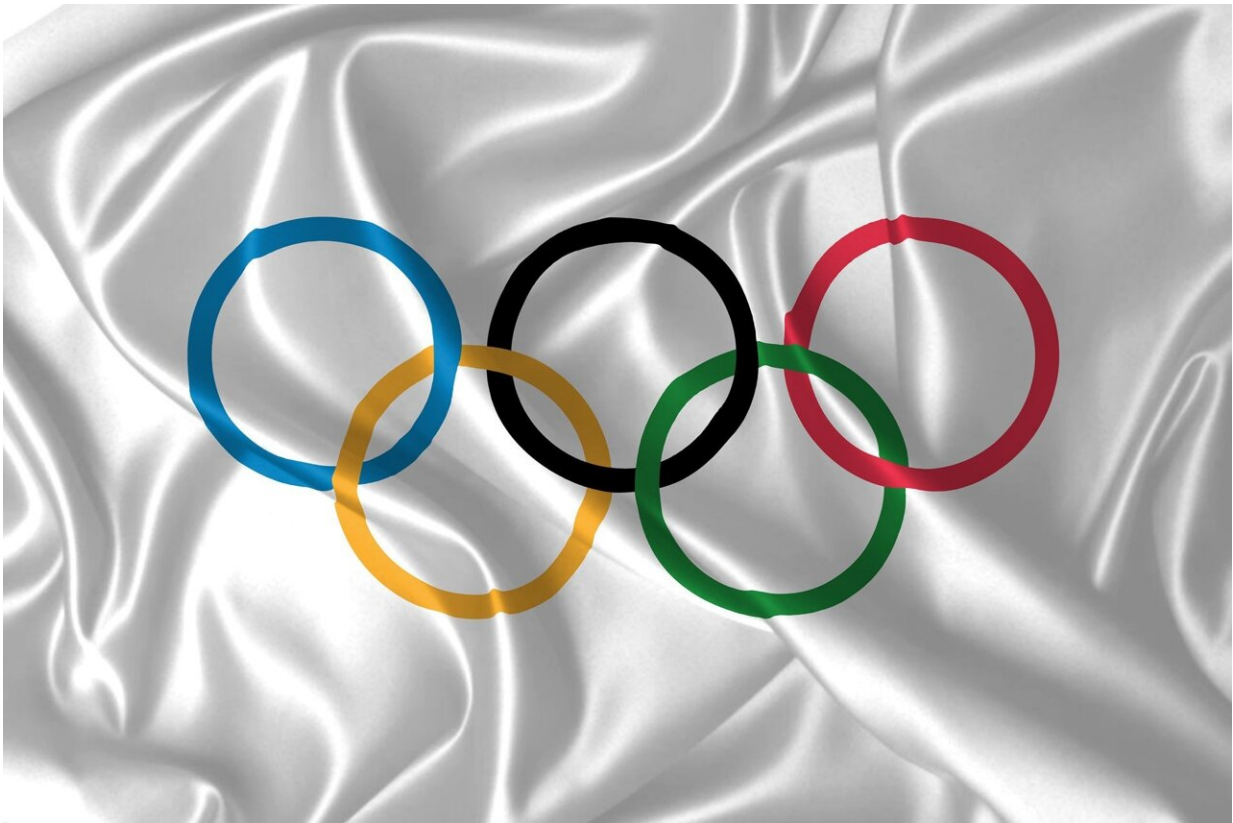


# Athlete mental health was sacrificed during Beijing 2022 Olympics

February 18 2022, by MacIntosh Ross, Eva Pila

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In a [recent letter](#), Richard Pound, the longest-serving member of the International Olympic Committee, claimed that "the IOC is athlete-centered," insisting the Olympics "can—and do—make the world a

better place."

He provided no evidence to support these assertions. Certainly, the 2022 Beijing Olympic Games seem to be anything but "athlete-centered."

This year's event has exposed how very little the IOC cares about the health and well-being of competitors, and its active role in the promotion of a psychologically damaging sociopolitical context for competition.

Unlike Pound's claims, there are piles of evidence to suggest that [the well-being of Olympians is of secondary importance](#) to pomp and profit.

## **Shut up and make us money**

Even before the Beijing Olympics were underway, athletes were struggling to have their voices heard. In fact, silencing athletes is a feature of the Olympic Charter, rigorously upheld by the IOC and enshrined in [Rule 50](#) that prohibits any demonstrations, political or otherwise, at the Olympics.

Before the Olympics got underway, Yang Shu, a member of the Beijing Organizing Committee, [announced that](#) any behavior or speech against the "Olympic spirit" or Chinese laws and regulations would be "subject to certain punishment."

In response, athlete's rights groups are speaking out. In a recent news release, [Global Athlete](#) argued that the IOC was suppressing free speech by limiting athlete's abilities to speak out about human rights issues in China. In doing this, they argue that athletes are being used to legitimize the Chinese government, while at the same time silencing any dissenting voices.

Athlete mental health is contingent upon [fundamental human rights such](#)

[as freedom of expression](#). An ideologically motivated and COVID-restricted competitive environment can violate an [athlete's](#) rights and [potentiate psychological distress](#). An unsupportive [competitive environment](#) is a critical risk factor associated with [elite athletes' mental health vulnerabilities](#).

## COVID-19 protocols and athlete well-being

COVID-19 has only exacerbated the usual pressure athletes face during the Olympics. [Like the recent Summer Olympics held in Tokyo](#), athletes are socially isolated in Beijing, with no family, friends or fans to support them. But athletes at the Winter Olympics are also *literally* isolated in China's Olympic "bubble."

The so-called "bubble" is China's way of keeping risk of infection as low as possible—a "[closed loop](#)" of hotels, conference centers and sporting venues with its own dedicated transport service that ferries athletes, coaches and media personnel back and forth. While a seemingly [effective way](#) to keep COVID-19 transmissions low, it is taking a toll on athletes' mental health.

There is a lack of transparency in how athletes can access mental health services and supports, which is directly at odds with [multi-societal consensus statements](#) and the [IOC's own consensus statement](#) that advocates for accessible and barrier-free [mental health](#) supports for athletes.

There has been no effort to mitigate this lack of support for athletes in Beijing.

And athletes in isolation [have it worse. They've complained](#) of issues with food, internet connections and access to training equipment. Officials say they are doing their best, but athletes on social media have

been sharing experiences that say otherwise.

Belgian skeleton competitor [Kim Meyleman](#) was shocked and terrified when she was taken to a non-Olympic facility for isolation, with no explanation. The uncertainty—in an authoritarian state no less—[clearly traumatized Meyleman](#), who fought back tears as she explained the situation on Instagram.

Other athletes are also complaining about their quarantine conditions. Russian biathlon competitor [Valeria Vasnetsova](#) tested positive for COVID-19 and, like Meyleman, was quarantined off site.

"My stomach hurts," she told followers on Instagram. "I'm very pale and I have huge black circles around my eyes. I want all this to end. I cry every day. I'm very tired," She was given the same meal three times a day, for five days straight. The only vegetable provided was a small amount of potatoes.

## Long lasting impact

[Rob Koehler](#), the director of Global Athlete, is very concerned about what he's seeing in Beijing. He told *The Associated Press*: "We're worried about the entire COVID-19 protocol. We're worried about the quarantine facilities and we're worried about everything that's not published, which is the details, and the devil is always in the details. They haven't been well-informed and it hasn't been transparent."

Athletes at the Beijing Olympics experienced a different Games. They were not only expected to perform under strict rules, but be at their best in a country where anything they say could have serious consequences.

The full extent of the impact this will have on athletes' psychological well-being remains to be seen—and the Beijing Games have certainly

thrown a shadow over the Olympics for years to come.

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