

SOULAN POWNCEBY – OLYMPIC ATHLETE: A CASE OF MORAL OUTRAGE

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ABSTRACT

This case provides opportunity to examine the moral dimensions of selection and appointment processes, stakeholder reactions to the outcome of those processes, and consequent management of public and stakeholder relations. The case describes the behaviour of various actors preceding the announcement of Olympic athlete selection, the subsequent display of public outrage, and the consequent media demands for explanation and justification of decisions taken by National Sporting Organisations. It also allows for an examination of how moral emotions may impact on moral conduct and behaviour, and how such emotions may be distinguished from moral values in contributing to moral reasoning.

THE BACKGROUND

Soulán Rikihana was brought up in a one-parent Christchurch household with his mother, sister and younger brother. His father, who was unknown to him, had been an US navy serviceman that his mother had met in the early-seventies. From an early age, Soulán had regularly spent time in the care of various family members because of his mother's ongoing mental illness. In 1989, when fifteen, his older sister bled to death after being thrown through a window by the father of her three children, all of whom were under five years old. The following year, an anonymous benefactor funded his attendance at St Bede's College, a catholic boarding school, where he excelled at sport. In 1993, his mother died of cancer. During his teenage years, he was also known to have associated with gang members.

In his late teens, he formed a relationship with Losalia Mulipola, and in May 1994, baby Jeanette Rikihana, was born in Rotorua, her family home in NZ's North Island. Five months later, on October 19 1994, Jeanette was rushed to Christchurch hospital suffering from head and body injuries. Medical staff found she was bleeding behind one eye, and had cracked ribs and abdominal bruising. She died days later from irreversible brain damage. The evidence of pathologist, Martin Sage, suggested that baby Jeanette's rib fractures and head injuries were of a nature usually associated with non-accidental injury. Rikihana's partner, Losalia, told hospital staff at the time (and later told the court) that Rikihana had been playing around with Jeanette, holding her under her arms. Losalia said that on the day that Jeanette had been injured, he flipped her once, catching her legs. Coincidentally, and only hours before she was rushed to hospital, Jeanette had been seen by a local doctor – a General Practitioner (GP) - and treated for scabies, a condition shared by Rikihana and his partner. The GP later advised that he had concerns about the baby girl's low weight, but was otherwise undisturbed about her condition.



The immediate outcome of the baby's death was that Rikihana was charged with manslaughter and put on trial. In August 1995, he pleaded guilty and was convicted of manslaughter and assault. At age nineteen, he was jailed for four years. On leaving prison in 1998, released on parole, he adopted his mother's maiden name of Pownceby and took up boxing with almost immediate success.

Faded remains of a short life NZHerald, 23.06.2004

He rejoined the Salvation Army boxing club, whose academy coach, Paul Fitzsimons had not only vouched for him at the Parole Board hearing that led to his early release, but also agreed to take Pownceby into his home as a condition of his parole. Before the end of 1998, Pownceby was selected to represent NZ at the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Cup, where he progressed to the quarter-finals before losing. However, by 2000, he was charged with a further four assault charges – one against his new partner – before converting to Christianity. Subsequently, in 2001, Pownceby won the first of three gold medals at the Oceania Games taking the middleweight title.

Pownceby's Record		
1998	KL Commonwealth Cup	Quarter-finalist
2001	Oceania games	Gold medal
2002	Oceania games	Silver
	NZ championship	Gold
	Sparc Award	Prime Minister's Sports Scholarship
2003	World Amateur Champs	Lost to Gold medal winner in R1 round
2003	Oceania games	Gold medal
2004	Oceania games	Gold medal

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

On Monday June 21 2004, following his success as a light-heavyweight boxer at the May 2004 Oceania Games, the New Zealand Olympic Committee (NZOC) confirmed Boxing New Zealand's nomination of Soulan Pownceby as New Zealand's only boxing representative at the 2004 Athens Olympiad. *Officials back killer boxer* NZHerald 23.06.2004



THE AFTERMATH

Almost coincident with the NZOC announcement, a New Zealand TV One Olympic Special, "*The Road to Athens*" that ran for several weeks in the lead-up to the Games, profiled Pownceby alongside other athletes. During an interview that had been recorded before the announcement of the Olympic team, Pownceby had freely talked about his past and his convictions.

On the day following the announcement, during another interview recorded for late night TV One News, Pownceby said he accepted "total responsibility" for what happened to his daughter and for his previous behaviour. He broke down, sobbing, as TV News personality, Kate Hawkesby, demanded on-air apologies and an answer to "why he deserved to wear the Silver Fern!"

MEDIA COVERAGE

Over the next few days, considerable media attention focused on Pownceby and his selection for the NZ Olympic boxing team. Whilst the media became an outlet for emotional response and public outrage expressed through newspaper editorials, articles and letters to the press, and through talkback radio, TV and Radio News, current affairs coverage etc, it also provided opportunity for reasoned comment and debate. The Auckland-based *New Zealand Herald* offered a lead Editorial suggesting that Pownceby be given the benefit of the doubt, stating that "there has to be recognition of rehabilitation in any system of justice." It backed its judgement by drawing on the view of Steve Caldwell, the head of NZ's Victim

Support organisation, who was prepared to say "the world is full of stories of criminals turning their lives around through sport. I don't think we can afford to be a country that says there's no salvation"

However, *The Dominion Post* of Capital City Wellington expressed a view that if he **had** been capable of turning his life around as many had suggested, he could be expected to survive the disappointment of missing out on the trip to Athens. Other viewpoints suggested that Pownceby had "done the crime and done the time." Yet others considered that dealing appropriately with Pownceby would give NZ opportunity to decry "its shockingly high rate of violence toward children." The nature of the polarised views was no better exemplified than in Bluck's reference to a "Media blitz of righteous indignation".

Letters to the Editor similarly represented polarised positions. One expressed shame at a "sick society ... happy to promote ... killers ... as Olympic medal candidates". Others suggested that preventing him from competing "squashes hope ... of any chance of redemption" and would be an "indictment of NZ society" in as much as it is implied that those "who offend, pay the price but are never allowed to forget - because we never forgive". Others insisted that regardless of Pownceby, the sport of boxing "as a controlled outlet for ... lust to inflict violence ... must not be glorified on the Olympic stage."

These diverse views were redolent of those of various Prisoners' Support Groups, the Howard League for Penal Reform, the Prisoners Aid and Rehabilitation Society, as well as those of Victim Support groups, the Sensible Sentencing Trust, the Commissioner for Children, and the Women's Refuge Movement. Indeed, soon after the announcement, women's rights advocates sought media exposure in their attempts to lobby for the decision to be reversed, in opposition to the Howard League stance.

THE SPORTING BODIES

As soon as the story broke in the media, and pressure started to build, Boxing New Zealand (BNZ) decided to go through the process of re-examining their decision. BNZ reaffirmed Pownceby's nomination after an emergency conference call between members of the executive and stated that the nomination was made "in accordance with the selection criteria and nothing has arisen to change that. We are confident that he has turned his life around". "We made the right decision. We stand by the decision." Ken Walker, the BNZ chairman, stated that they had "unanimously agreed to stick to their original decision. It became apparent that BNZ had been aware of Pownceby's prior manslaughter conviction when they finalised their nomination. The matter was also subject to discussion at a NZOC board meeting on the Thursday of that week of intensive debate.

Barry Maister, NZOC Secretary-General, stated in a press release that "Soulan has shown great dedication to the sport of boxing and has been rewarded with his selection." It became apparent that the NZOC had interviewed Pownceby, had sought reports about his past from the police, his coaches and others in the boxing fraternity who had travelled with him to overseas tournaments – and that they were aware of his past. Indeed, Maister was quoted as saying that "The police indicated there was no reason why we should not select him", and that how he had overcome his "difficult past" could be an inspiration to those who had "fallen on the other side of the tracks. Maister was also able to point to The Olympic Charter which states that selection "shall be based not only on the sports performance of an athlete but also on his ability to serve as an example to the sporting youth of his country."

ROLE MODELS, SPORT AND THE BROADER COMMUNITY

Peter Williams QC, President of the Howard League for Penal Reform, claimed that "prison usually drags people down ... Recidivism is around 50-60%. His view was that if people are going to break free, "it's got to come from within." He went on that here was a case where "this young man seems to have got his "house in order." Ken McMaster, a social worker specialising in family violence offered a view that despite Pownceby having had a "pretty tragic upbringing," there was still a need to take responsibility and be accountable for what he'd done, and if so, he could still be a role model for youth-at-risk. Keith Walker, BNZ Chairman, stated that "he's served his time – everything he's done in the five years with boxing has been perfect and impeccable".

Similar sentiments were expressed by former All Black, Member of Parliament, Race Relations Conciliator and diplomat, Chris Laidlaw, who pondered whether Pownceby could be a role model for others caught in the domestic violence syndrome. "As he has confessed publicly, without his sport he has nowhere to go except further down." His NZ coach Phil Shatford said much the same - "You would be taking everything away from him". Pownceby's first coach at the Salvation Army boxing academy in Christchurch, Paul Fitzsimons, had continued to support him from the time of his imprisonment. Fitzsimons had vouched for Pownceby at a Parole Board hearing and agreed to house him as a condition of release. Fitzsimons was still able to say "I found him a good bloke. He's turned his life around and he deserves his chance." Bob Lyall, the BNZ convenor of Olympic selectors said that he had always found him to be "a good person to have around. He is a great role model." His NZ coach, Phil Shatford, warned that taking away his Olympic selection "would be taking everything away from him".

THE POLITICIANS AND THE GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

The media sought and published opinion from anyone prepared to comment. Even the NZ Prime Minister, Helen Clark, was drawn into debate on the matter, saying that "it would be difficult for the public to take pleasure in any success (at the Olympic Games) if Pownceby did not make a complete and utter apology for the violent past." In responding to a question about whether we should only select people who are fit represent the country, Justice Minister, Phil Goff was quite firm in his view that Pownceby "most certainly should not be seen as a role model."

The New Zealand sports agency, Sparc, who were responsible for administering the Prime Minister's Sports Scholarship awards, had supported Pownceby with such an award in 2002. When asked to explain why Sparc had supported a known criminal, CEO Nic Hill replied in a similar vein to others - "he had done his time and it was not for Sparc to punish him further" (MacDonald, June 23 2004, pA1).

APPENDIX 1 -BOXING AND SOCIETY

"Throughout the world, the gatekeepers of the boxing subculture project an image of their sport as an antidote to crime, delinquency, drug abuse and moral decline. This view is so deeply structured that everybody, especially the fighters themselves, believe it to be true. Boxing has the appearance of being a self-constructed coping strategy through which young men from disadvantaged backgrounds can 'make something of themselves.' Boxing is a hard regime which contrasts sharply with the 'quick fix' environment of the ghetto. It demands time, physical effort and mental discipline and it requires dedication, isolation and sacrifice. ... Every second in the limelight has to be earned through countless hours of physical and mental preparation. Continued membership of the boxing subculture necessitates the acceptance of a value system which emphasises respect for oneself and for others: not just physical

respect, but equally respect for one's own and an opponent's character. It also requires acceptance of a work ethic along with the principles of self-sacrifice and deferred gratification. Boxing requires a deference to authority and appreciation of fairness and, despite what goes on in the ring, it demands controlled aggression and a renunciation of vicious violence which is so familiar in neighbourhoods beyond boxing-club doors. In short, boxing inculcates in its adherents the value system and behavioural trappings of a 'civilised' society. The irony here should not be lost. Those who regularly call for boxing to be banned are often the same people who abhor the rough working-class culture which boxing, at least on an individual basis, seems best placed to counteract. In this sense, it could be argued that boxing is one of the few harbingers of bourgeois civilisation to penetrate into the heart of the ghetto experience."

Sugden, J. (1996). 'Boxing and Society', London: Manchester University Press, Ch 6: 182/3.

STUDENT ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS

Why has the case attracted such attention?		Introductory or Summary Question
Part 1 Outline the major “players” in the affair and describe their roles and responsibilities.		
1	Identify at least six main actors in the case. Describe their roles.	
2	Identify at least six stakeholders likely to be affected by the selection of Pownceby as an Olympic representative. Outline their roles in society and sport.	
3	Use Badaracco’s framework to discuss and clarify to whom the main actors are responsible, whom they are responsible for, and with whom they share responsibilities. Identify those stakeholders who appear to be taking responsibility for upholding principles of natural justice, but who do so in different ways.	
4	What moral emotions may be at play with the different actors and stakeholders?	
Part 2 Should Pownceby go to the Games?		
Outline the nature of moral reasoning, moral behaviour and moral emotions involved		
Should Pownceby go to the Games?		
	Consider	(i) whether BNZ and the NZOC should select athletes who have been convicted for criminal offences. (ii) whether selection criteria should consider only sporting matters.
1	Indicate the values underpinning recognition and identification of responsibilities of decision-making actors. At what level of reasoning do these values tend to be manifested in behaviour?	
2	What moral emotions may be at play with the different actors?	
3	How may those moral emotions impact on moral judgements, and how may they be confounded with moral reasoning?	
Part 3 Risk Management.		
1	Identify the broad constituency of stakeholders likely to be affected by the verdict. Identify the broad range of stakeholders, especially those that appear to be taking responsibility for the safety of participants in sporting events that involves an element of risk.	
2	Outline the economic, political and personal risks associated with event management of this nature.	
3	Discuss the factors and risks likely to impact on volunteer-based clubs whose activities are event-driven.	
4	Identify the role of those stakeholders in society and in sport.	
Part 4 Other Issues		
1	Outline what you feel to be the future trends and implications that may arise from this case.	

An Instructor's Guide and full set of references and is available on request from the author.