

Why the £10bn surfing industry deserves its introduction as an Olympic sport in 2020

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Source: Getty

Once the epitome of sporting counter culture and the natural home to the mavericks and outsiders of the sports world, surfing has finally been accepted as an Olympic sport.

With Brazilian pro surfers like Gabriel Medina and Filipe Toledo now superstars in a sport which is rivalling football in its appeal to younger generations, the surfing boom in Brazil has come just too late to help get the sport onto the Olympic programme in time for Rio. However, the global growth of surfing, with athletes from Brazil, Portugal and South Africa now challenging the long established 'duopoly' of the US/Hawaii and Australia has undoubtedly been the impetus behind the IOC's decision last week to add surfing to the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2020, alongside other action sports, climbing and skateboarding, together with baseball and karate.

The IOC knows it has to refresh its offering and change with the times. What is going to capture and inspire the next generation of Olympic audiences? Shot put and weightlifting? Or lean, athletic heroes pulling airs and getting barreled in 6ft waves?

I have been privileged to work with and for many of the world's top pro surfers for many years now, representing their global athlete association, World Pro Surfers. The sport has had to come through some challenging times, with major commercial sponsors like Quiksilver going into and emerging from bankruptcy, Billabong racking up major losses, and prize money for the athletes paling in comparison to their counterparts on the world tours in tennis and golf. A US ownership group took over the reins of the world pro surf tours in 2012 and the professionalism and strategic vision that has been injected since has brought both structure and commercial credibility to a sport which always had a reputation for being as uncontrollable and unreliable as the waves themselves. There has been a surge in media reach, with the 'World Surf League's world championship tour events being streamed live on tablets and mobile phones globally. The result has been a return of commercial sponsorship to the world pro tours, with the like of [Samsung](#) Galaxy, Jeep and Go Pro joining the 'endemic' surf brands such as Rip Curl, Vans, O'Neill, Billabong and Quiksilver, who have long been investing in and exploiting the surfing lifestyle. Simultaneously, there has been a significant increase in prize money for the surfers and the women's pro tour has grown out of all recognition; another boost in surfing's quest for Olympic recognition.

Fortune magazine estimates the global surf industry will generate \$13bn (£10bn) worldwide by 2017 and participation is growing by 30 per cent annually. Meanwhile, technology is about to disrupt the sport, with eleven-time world surf champion Kelly Slater's wave pool technology set to transform the experience of surfing for many landlocked participants not fortunate enough to have waves like Hawaii, Sydney or Malibu - bringing the potential for perfect, clean, surfable waves to the masses.

Surfing is a truly global niche, and in many ways a perfect addition to the Olympic family. The future belongs to the lifestyle sports – surfing, cycling, mountain biking – which the millennial generation practice and follow online. They are perceived as healthy and active, but also cool, fun and desirable. Not so much sports, but a way of life.

Perhaps one of the closest parallels to surfing is snowboarding. The impact that snowboarding has had on the Winter Olympics since joining in 1998 has been remarkable. Shaun White's win in the half pipe at Vancouver was the Winter Games second most watched event and snowboarding is now arguably one of the top three Winter Olympic sports.

The global Olympic media audience could propel surfing and the world's top surfers into a different orbit altogether. The social media reach of lifestyle sports is equally attractive to event organisers and the brands who want to connect directly with these highly targeted and attractive demographics.

Whilst the industry response has been largely positive, with Surfing Australia describing the news as 'a dream come true', the inclusion of surfing, skateboarding and other youth orientated lifestyle sports in the Olympics will probably always be regarded by some as a 'sell out'. "It's too cool for the Olympics," said one veteran pro.

At a time when the values and conduct of the sports establishment in the Olympics, Fifa and international athletics have come under intense scrutiny, the Olympic 'brand' could do well to borrow from the simple but authentic values of surfing. Having worked in sports for over two decades, I can vouch not just for the athleticism, talent and courage of the elite surfers, but their integrity, decency and commitment; traits that have inspired millions and will inspire many millions more from Tokyo 2020 onwards.