

## **Winning Olympic Gold: Do preferences rather than performance decide on who becomes an Olympic Champion?**

When we think of the athletes who appear in the next Olympic Games, we like to believe that talent and effort are the only factors that are going to determine their sports performance. But is it?

In ski-jumping competitions, athletes compete on their distance and their jumping style, where the latter is assessed by a jury consisting of five judges.

It was recently established that judges favor athletes from the same nation. This bias is amplified by the other judges, because even judges with a different nationality give an athlete exceptionally high style points when the athlete's compatriot is a jury member. This nationality bias is even higher in the absence of spectators, as is common during the pandemic. In other words, spectators act as a deterrent to the nationality bias. While regulation discards the highest and lowest points awarded by the judges, it is still found that the nationality bias affects the outcome of the contests. Roughly half of the athletes in a ski-jumping competition have an advantage due to the nationality bias. And in 6 out of 10 cases, the compatriot in the jury gives the highest style points. These findings beg the question whether ski-jumping competitions can be considered fair.

It appears that athletes do not have an equal chance of winning a ski-jumping competition says Professor Christian Hofmann, who has looked into the ski-jumping competitions together with PhD student Christopher Lechner and Professor Jan Bouwens. "Our analyses suggest that the nationality bias is at least 0.3 style points in favor of the athlete who has a compatriot in the jury. With this magnitude, the bias can change almost 20% of all final rankings." It appears that judges are unable to suppress their nationality bias and that this bias does affect the chances of athletes winning or losing a contest. The study provides clear evidence of a substantial bias in assessing an athlete's style. Thus, fairness is not really present.

One solution to this problem would be to prohibit a judge from giving points to athletes from their own country, for the nationality bias cannot be prevented in their presence. An alternative solution would be to have a jury of more than five judges, an extension similar to the one made for figure skating competitions.

An extended elaboration on these findings (including the main conclusions, tables, and graphs) is documented in:

Jan Bouwens, Christian Hofmann, and Christopher Lechner (2022), "Transparency and biases in subjective performance evaluation," working paper. The study can be downloaded from the following link, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4012905](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4012905) . This study is part of the TRR266, "Accounting for transparency," funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (Project ID 403041268).