

**ORGANISATIONAL EVOLUTION AND THE OLYMPIC  
GAMES: THE CASE OF SPORT CLIMBING**

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# ORGANISATIONAL EVOLUTION AND THE OLYMPIC GAMES: THE CASE OF SPORT CLIMBING

This paper discusses the processes underpinning the evolutionary development of sport climbing in recent decades, with a particular focus on the impact of its inclusion in the Olympic Games. New institutionalism and resource-dependence theory provide an analytical and explanatory framework for this study. The research adopted a qualitative method strategy comprising a series of interviews and the analysis of documents, reports, press and social media. Sport climbers effectively “own” their sport, having strong representation in the international organisation governing the sport to which all actors relate. The recent inclusion of the sport in the Olympic programme has created challenges, primarily because of strong values inherent within the sport. The research, however, shows that the values of a sport can expand and develop in order to fit the regulatory legitimacy required by inclusion in the Olympic Games. Nonetheless, the research also shows that involvement with the IOC raises questions about who ‘owns’ the sport.

## **Keywords:**

Sport climbing, organisation, evolution, Olympic Games, institutional, legitimacy, resource dependence

## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on the organisational evolution of sport climbing, which will join the Olympic programme in 2020 as a consequence of a vote at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) session in August 2016. Sport climbing requires participants to conquer climbing routes, either on natural rocks or artificial walls, in real-time contests. Currently, there are three key disciplines in sport climbing: Speed, Lead, and Bouldering, with the latter two often referred to as Difficulty disciplines. Sport climbing is a relatively universal term, used in relation to both indoor and outdoor environments. Whilst the focus of this paper is indoor sport climbing, it also considers traditional outdoor climbing– the origin of indoor sport climbing.

Until the 1970s, the evolution of modern sport was very much about rationalization, quantification and the growth of the competitive aspects of sport (Guttman, 1978). However,

in recent decades the commercialisation and professionalization of sport has driven the development of sports in line with the growth of consumer capitalism and the adoption of a business approach. Sport climbing is an action sport that has recently experienced growing commercialisation and professionalization and thus the aim of this paper is to investigate the processes underpinning the evolutionary development of sport climbing in recent times. In doing so, this study contributes to the body of literature focused on the professionalization of action sports by investigating the pressures that have impacted on the development of the sport. In particular, few studies, such as Thorpe and Wheaton (2016), consider the organisation of international action sports and their inclusion in the Olympic Games. The growth and incorporation of sport climbing presents an interesting case, as it might have been expected to have evolved in a more institutionalized way, similar to most mainstream sports, to suit professional athletes, media and sponsors. However, due to the distinctive traditional culture of climbing, which is central to an initial understanding of its organisation, the nature and patterns of organizational evolution of this sport were not clear and required investigation. First, the paper provides the theoretical context used to investigate the sport. The following sections set out the methodology and then discuss the evolutionary changes and structural features of sport climbing.

### **Theoretical background**

In considering the evolutionary changes that have affected sport climbing, the notion of new institutional theory, also referred to as institutionalism, provides a valuable framework for analysis. This is because.....A popular approach underpinning the studies of organisational evolution and change in sport (O'Brien and Slack 2003, 2004; Skirstad and Chelladurai 2011), new institutionalists (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Powell 1991; Scott 1995) suggest that organisations change in order to conform to expectations in an associated

organisational field. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) an organisational field is represented by organisations and individuals that are involved in institutional life: suppliers, consumers, governing bodies, competitors and other participants with a common meaning system. Organisations follow a dominant institutional logic, which is a manifestation of the culture of the organisational field and ‘constitutes its organising principles and which is available to organisations and individuals to elaborate’ (Friedland and Alford 1991, 248). As previous studies (Choi and Scott 2008; Smith and Shilbury 2004, Southall and Nagel 2008; Peachey and Bruening 2011; Skirstad and Chelladurai 2011) have demonstrated, in terms of new institutional theory, international sport climbing can be seen as organisational field and its culture can be discussed as the field’s institutional logic. The notion of institutional logics was an important aspect within this research as it was believed to be particularly applicable to the context of climbing – an activity with traditionally rich and distinctive culture.

Within this study, the values of climbing will serve as the measurement of culture, although this is an approximation to a certain extent. While it is understood that culture involves more than values, assessment of culture through the examination of values has been commonly used in cultural studies. Indeed, many of the early academic contributions (Schein 1985; Enz 1986; O’Reilly, Chatman and Caldwell 1991; Peters and Waterman 1982; Wiener 1988) suggested that values constitute the core elements of culture. In addition, other studies have used value-based dimensions to measure culture: for example; Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983), Hofstede (2001), Hampden-Turner and Trompenaar (1997) and Goffee and Jones (1996).

Previous work on climbing (Kiewa, 2002; Aubel and Ohl, 2004; Potgieter, 2006; Rickly-Boyd, 2012) highlighted the change in values and practices that occurred as sport climbing started to evolve from traditional rock climbing in the late 1980s. According to Potgieter (2006), the pre-

prepared nature of the climbing routes, its "fixed" protection, and more competitive element became the main features of sport climbing which differentiated it from traditional climbing.

*Traditional climbers insist that cliffs should be climbed from the ground up. Climbs should not have been inspected beforehand (by abseiling down the climb); nor should parts of the climb be practised whilst on top rope (a rope tied to an anchor-point at the top of a cliff that stops a climber from falling any distance). Although traditional climbers use a rope as a safety back-up, it is not intended as an aid for climbing—climbers should not 'rest' by hanging on the rope at any time. The 'sports' climbers, on the other hand, engage in all these practices. Characteristics of sports climbing include an acceptance of cliff modification and 'working climbs' in the name of safety; an emphasis on image, with high levels of publicity and media coverage; rapid development and adoption of technologically advanced equipment; and the promotion of formal competition. Because of these practices, traditional climbers believe that sports climbers have embraced consumerist society.*

*Kiewa (2002,148)*

Thus clear differences in the practices and values sport climbing, in comparison to traditional rock climbing, are underpinned by the use of safety measures, a focus on the competitive element of activity and promotion through media and sponsorships. In line with those findings, more recent work of Dumont (2014, 2016) on the professionalization of climbing highlighted that in order to gain sponsorship professional climbers need to be much more than just climbers, but also to be good at "... producing media, being able to act and speak in public, developing relationships with fans, participating in product design, and teaching clinics and seminars, along with many other activities" (Dumont, 2016, 455-456).

A second theoretical lens of value to this study is resource-dependence theory, which, as suggested by Aldrich and Pfeffer (1976) and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), sets out that organisations depend on their environment for resources, specifically on resource allocation by other organisations. Resource-dependence thinking underpins the notion of organisational fields as organisations depend on funding from other institutions and change according to environmental pressures. Davis and Cobb (2010) have highlighted that one of the major

contributions of resource dependence theory is to bring issues of power to the forefront of organisational studies. The notions of power and dependence are linked within resource dependence theory in that an organisation can be legally independent of another organisation, but still depend on its resources, so the organisation that controls resources holds power over those dependent on them.

Both resource-dependence and new institutionalism converge around the importance of organisations obtaining stability and legitimacy (DiMaggio 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1983; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Zucker 1983). However, they emphasize differences underpinning the need to obtain legitimacy. For example, resource dependence theory highlights the role of regulatory legitimacy (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Greenwood and Hinings 1988), which derives from ‘rulemaking and enforcement activities within the agencies of the State’ (Deephouse and Suchman 2008, 56), as facilitating access to resources acquisition. Alternatively, the new institutional perspective extends the notion of legitimacy by highlighting cultural aspects (Zucker 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer and Scott 1983). Conformity to values and norms is inevitable for organisational actors in order to ‘receive and maintain legitimacy, and survive and prosper’ (Danisman, Hinings and Slack 2006, 303). Thus, cultural legitimacy is the degree of cultural support for an organisation within an institutional field (Meyer and Scott 1983). As such, new institutionalism and resource-dependence theories complement each other in evaluating regulatory and cultural legitimacy in this study.

Of specific interest to this study is the impact of the IOC upon sport climbing, in particular, its influence on cultural legitimacy. Heino (2000) has described how the IOC requires sports to conform to certain organisational standards, which may not reflect the culture of the individual sport. Nonetheless, over the last two decades the athletes of the new Olympic sports of

snowboarding and BMX have accepted what can be called “the positive aspects of mainstreaming and legitimization” (Heino 2000, 188), such as international acceptance of the sport, added media exposure and opportunities for the development of the sport and the creation of athlete-owned businesses (Honea 2013). However, as highlighted by Heino (2000) and Honea (2013), there have been ongoing tensions between these participant-focused, action sports and the organisational model of mainstream sports, as participants of action sports felt the Olympic Movement ignored their role in the organisation of the sport. However, Honea (2013), Batuev and Robinson (2017), Thorpe and Wheaton (2016) and more recent evidence of the inclusion of BMX freestyle and skateboarding into the Games suggest that the process is “...not necessarily one directional and leaves open the possibility that action sport participants could retain some control over the organisation and presentation of their activities” (Honea 2013, 1272). This suggests that cultural and regulatory legitimacy can co-exist within action sports that often eschew many aspects of regulatory legitimacy.

## **Method**

This paper sets out research that aimed to explore the organisational evolution of international sport climbing. It was part of broader doctoral research that adopted a phenomenology and processual research strategy and included two additional case studies: snowboarding and skateboarding. A major advantage of the case study methodology adopted is that it allows the incorporation of multiple research instruments within the case, rather than over a sample (Bryman 1989; Yin 2012).

Open-ended interviews with key informants in the sport were the primary source of evidence, as the flexible approach of non-structured interviews provided insights into the case and revealed “how case study participants construct reality and think about situations” (Yin 2012,

12). Interviews with athletes were the key source of data, as participants of sport climbing have traditionally been individual athletes rather than teams or organisations. With due respect to other actors involved in the sport (officials, spectators, coaches, media and sponsors), this research assumed athlete centrality. As sport climbing derived from outdoor rock climbing, it was also necessary to interview several well recognised protagonists of outdoor rock climbing in order to understand the broader values of the activity and obtain a perspective on the early years of sport.

In terms of other interviewees, officials from both the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) and the IOC who held or had held strategic positions in these organisations were selected. Interviewees were chosen in advance based on their role in international sport climbing, their awareness of main issues and willingness to discuss them. What makes each of them “key informant” can be debated, so identification of and access to them were subject indeed to the researchers’ bias and should be treated accordingly.

Ethics approval was obtained from the authors’ institution and interviewees were emailed to ask if they were willing to be involved in the research. Interviews were held from November 2012 to October 2013, but were primarily carried out at the RockMaster, the international elite climbing event held in Arco, Italy, September 7-8 2013. In total, twelve interviews were conducted (see the full list in Appendix). Most interviews were one-on-one and face-to-face with two interviews that were carried out via electronic means. The average duration of the interviews was 55 minutes. All interviewees were informed about the research project objectives and consented to the audio recording of the interviews and the use of non-anonymous data in the doctoral dissertation and consequent academic papers.

To supplement the interviews, an analysis of relevant materials concerning the organisation of international sport climbing was conducted. These materials included:

- published statements of international sport organisations, such as the IOC, the UIAA (the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation), IFSC and Sportaccord;
- reports, articles and news in the business press, such as the New York Times and Sport Business International;
- blogs and websites covering international sport climbing, such climbing.com, ukclimbing.com and isportconnect.com;
- posts and comments of international climbing athletes and officials on social media: Facebook and Twitter.

Documentary analysis was used to validate or corroborate interview findings (Robson (2002). The process was not separated from interviewing, so the researcher was fully engaged in examining emerging issues (Patton, 2002). Documentary analysis supplemented the data obtained from the interviews in two ways. First, a preliminary study of the documents facilitated the choice of interviewees and identification of themes and questions. Secondly, information from documents was beneficial in the post-interview period of data analysis because it was developed without the research in mind which means possible bias from the interviews was reduced (Bryman 1989, Jones 1991, Burgess 1991).

The doctoral researcher took primary responsibility for the data analysis, aided by the supervisory panel, when developing and checking the coding process. Codes were created inductively through the first reading of each transcript. The initial codes were then checked with the supervisory team for appropriateness and consistency. Throughout the analysis, where appropriate, the information provided by the interviews was crosschecked against the

document sources to ensure trustworthiness. The transcripts were re-read multiple times. This resulted in some data being recoded and new codes emerging. This approach assisted in maintaining the trustworthiness of data analysis and in developing, understanding and limiting the extent of the researchers' subjectivities (Strauss and Corbin 2015). The second-order analysis stage moved to a more theoretical level, re-examining the data and first-order findings to produce an explanatory framework. Examples of the themes that emerged were "Olympic Games", "Athlete involvement", "Culture of sport" and "Resources of sport" identified by using a "multistage process of independent, comparative, and collaborative analyses" (Faems *et al.* 2008, 1059). The thematic content analysis was facilitated by the application of NVivo software, which was used to manage and group data from various sources and in different formats. This allowed the synthesis of all of the various data into themes and patterns in order to create a narrative.

### **The history of organisation of international climbing**

The interviews with Stefan Glowacz, Eneko and Iker Pou, Rustam Gelmanov, Helmut Knabl, and literature (Kiewa 2002; Aubel and Ohl 2004; Rickly-Boyd 2012) helped to summarise the four common values that are considered historically important for those who consider themselves climbers: passion for adventure, travel, and challenge; desire to be close to nature (life outdoors); camaraderie of fellow climbers; being an anti-establishment community to a certain degree. The research indicates that the actual role of competitions in international climbing community has been just one of the aspects of the activity, but has not been seen as a prevailing aspect. For example, challenging outdoor activities and video making have been as important as competition.

*... climbing is not only the competition sport. There are other aspects of climbing, and I know a lot of guys who are not doing competitions, but they enjoy climbing, the same like freeriding in snowboarding.*

*Jerome Meyer ( interviewee)*

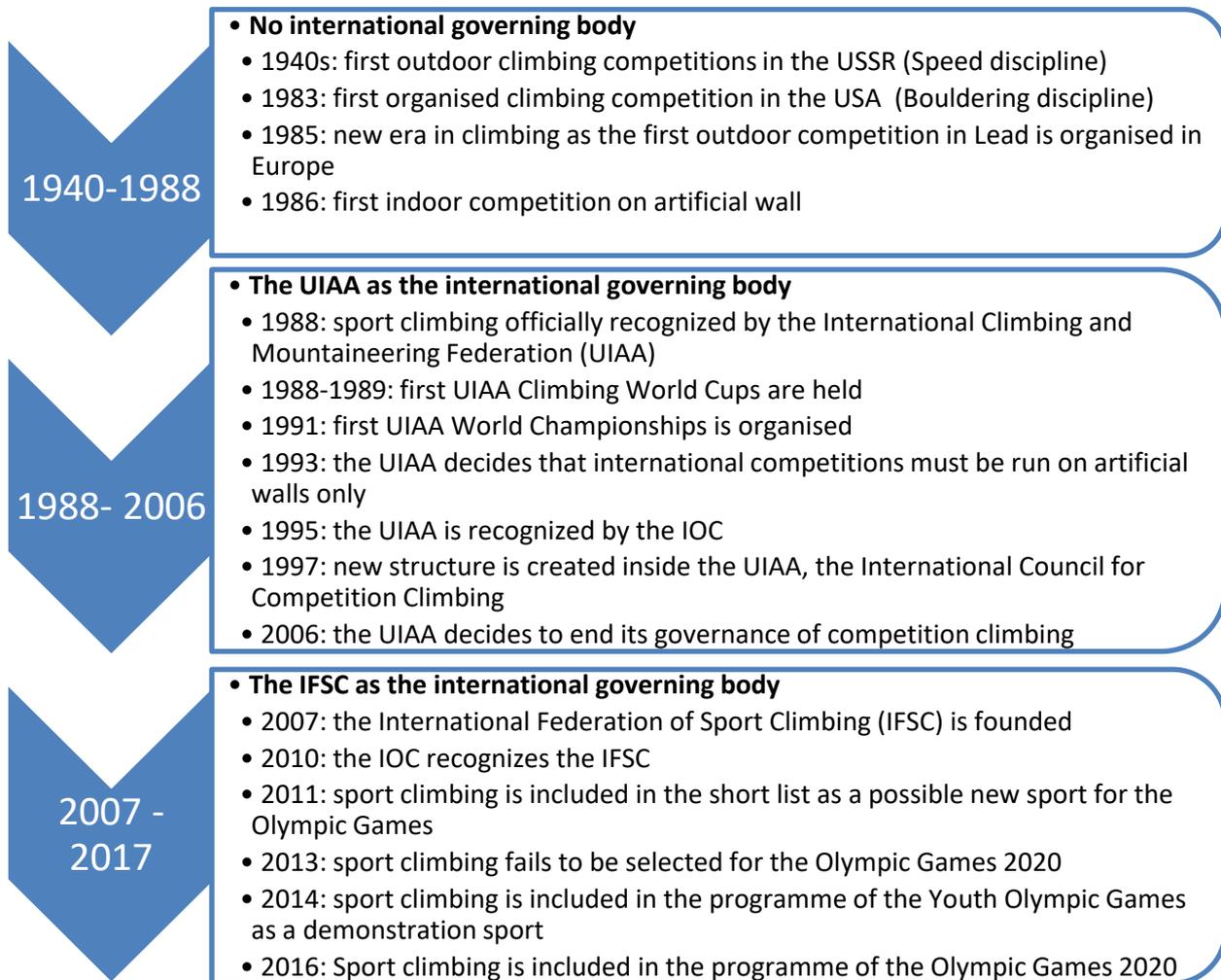
Indeed, climbing can be exercised and presented in a variety ways, but traditional outdoor climbers are pre-dominantly concerned about the growth of sport aspect of climbing, which has been manifested in the recent Olympic inclusion:

*... on one hand, it [the Olympics] is a good thing, especially for people who dedicate themselves to indoor climbing. But on the other hand, it is another step off the mountain/outdoor philosophy... We are not sure that this is good for our sport. We think our sport is an outdoor sport and adventurous. Everything else is interesting, but is not a main activity of our sport.*

*Iker and Eneko Pou ( interviewees)*

Compared to most Olympic sports, sport climbing is a relatively young phenomenon. Indoor sport climbing started to separate from outdoor rock climbing in the late 1980, as described by Potgieter (2006) and Kiewa (2002) and shown in Figure 1. An indoor competition circuit quickly gained popularity in the 1980s and, following a proposal by the French Mountain and Climbing Federation, sport climbing was recognized by UIAA in the late 1980s (Stirling 2009). Consequently, the UIAA became the first international governing body of sport climbing and oversaw the sport from the late 1980s to 2006. This period can be described as the final “sportisation” of climbing, marked “with the structuring of a competition system organised into a hierarchy, from the departmental to the international level” (Aubel and Ohl 2004, 127). Consequently, under the UIAA, contemporary sport climbing was shaped and institutionalised. This was thought to be the result of the rationalisation of climbing activity in the context of social reality, which is done through the “incorporation of the values of rationalised society” (Kiewa 2002, 150) and is “very much suited to today's achievement-oriented world” (Potgieter 2006, 16).

**Figure 1: Timeline of the history of organisation of international sport climbing**



Sources: Tyson (1991), UIAA (2017), IFSC (2017a), Batuev (2016)

The evolution of sport climbing, initiated by and emphasising competition was, for many traditional climbers, an anathema. This was described by Rustam Gelmanov:

*If you want to do official competitions, there are some rules of course... Therefore, there are many good athletes who don't do the competitions because they are just reluctant to meet those criteria. So you have to "put up" with federation and other organisational stuff, if you really want to be a good athlete. This "federation" stuff is a problem for many athletes. For example, one of the best climbers in the world Chris Sharma does not do any competitions, because he simply does not like this official stuff. He doesn't bother about rankings, places. He thinks freedom is lost in there. But everybody knows Chris because he is very strong climber, a legend.*

This concern reflects the radical structural change of the organisation of international sport climbing as in 2004 the UIAA “recognised that it was no longer possible to keep all the sections of the UIAA together as a single federation” (UIAA 2017). In 2006, the UIAA allowed sport climbing to leave the organisation, as:

*. . . Competition Sport Climbing developed very different ethics and style. Competition Sport Climbing is generally practised indoors and has a very urban character. These differences produced a rift within the UIAA between supporters of traditional mountaineering and those driving the development of modern Sport Climbing competitions. When it was recognised that the conflict could no longer be resolved and was blocking the development of both organisations, the General Assembly in Banff, Canada in 2006 decided to cease governing international sport climbing competitions on artificial surfaces.*

*UIAA (2009, 11)*

This UIAA statement suggests that sport climbing was allowed to leave because the culture of sport climbing was considered to be too different from the rest of the mountaineering activities managed by the UIAA. The key words in the above quote are “indoors,” “urban in character,” and “artificial surfaces.” To put it simply, by 2006, competitions had led sport climbing became too “artificial” for the UIAA.

Consequently, in 2007 the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) was created, which became the sole international authority for all matters concerning sport climbing and that provides “the direction, regulation, promotion, development and furtherance of the sport of competition climbing on a world-wide basis” (IFSC 2017b). To summarise, sport climbing evolved from being governed by an international organisation of the broader activity of mountaineering, to becoming independent in terms of organisation with the IFSC emerging as the dedicated international governing body for sport climbing. It can be argued that, by 2006, the values of sport climbing had become too distant from the values of outdoor climbing, set out earlier, creating conflict within the UIAA.

When considered through the lens of institutional theory, the “handover“ of sport climbing from the UIAA to the IFSC illustrates the challenges of cultural legitimacy associated with the governance of new and emerging sports by the international federations of more established sports. The topic of who owns the sport, around which many conflicts in modern sports revolve (Washington and Patterson 2011, 10), has caused debate within other action sports, such as skateboarding and snowboarding and has also been played out in sport climbing. Integrating several sports under the umbrella of one governing body has benefits, in a reduction of administrative costs and synergy of resources however, as with previous work on skateboarding (Thorpe and Wheaton 2011) this research has revealed concerns about the appropriateness of umbrella organisations due to cultural disconnectedness amongst the sports that make up these overarching federations. In this instance, there is an apparent disconnect between the values of the UIAA and sport climbing, suggesting that as new sports develop strong and embedded cultures, their alliances with established sports are unlikely to be of benefit or considered legitimate due to cultural differences.

### **The current organisation of international sport climbing**

Since 2007, international sport climbing has been organised independently of mountaineering and has developed a simple hierarchical structure. The IFSC became the international federation responsible for the sport globally, so that this organisation is the exclusive agent representing competitive sport climbing and is recognised by the IOC. The IFSC unites 87 national federations that are represented on the Executive Board of the IFSC via four continental councils, so arguably, no nation or continent is more influential than another. The IFSC has memberships in several sport associations, such as the International Paralympic Committee, Association of IOC Recognised International Sport Federations, Sport Accord, Association of Summer Olympic International Federations, and adopted the WADA anti-

doping code (IFSC 2017a), which was mandatory for the Olympic bid. In organisational terms, the IFSC's position of being the sole international authority of sport climbing is similar to the organisation of most mainstream sports, such as football, athletics, and cycling.

The IFSC was created by professional climbers and employs people who climb, which is an organisational feature typical of the early history of most so called lifestyle sports. For example, Marco Sclaris (interviewee) was “a pioneer of bouldering in Italy in his younger days” in the 1980s (iSportconnect 2013), whereas Jerome Meyer (interviewee) is a three times consecutive winner of the World Cup, winner of the European Championship, and four-times Champion of France. Both the IFSC officials and the current athletes, such as Rustam Gelmanov (interviewee) consider the fact that the IFSC Board and employees are all either people who regularly climb, or have done so, to be a benefit for the organisation of the sport. Jerome Meyer describes one of the benefits of being a former climber from the organisational perspective:

*Obviously, I am really careful of what the athletes say. For me it is important to listen to them. Being a former athlete, I know perfectly what they want. And I am always supportive to them. So the President is really supportive to them [and] ... is still climbing.*

This also ensures that, as discussed later, although the sport practices may be different, aspects of the values traditionally associated with climbing outlined above can be found within the new sport federation.

In reflection of the importance of camaraderie and anti-establishment, athletes' interests are considered to have a key part to play in the organisational philosophy of this international sport governing body. The IFSC President Marco Sclaris explains this in his interview:

*We have tried over the years to create a (different) way to manage the sport. Athletes are the centre of our activity, therefore we want to be “athletes” at all levels of the organisation. That is to say to recreate in the management the same atmosphere that usually one meets in the climbing community, where mutual*

*respect and the joy of the effort reign. Not easy, but possible. Even when the sport grows and interests increase . . . it is a challenge for the future . . .*

The IFSC approach to organising the sport is focused on the athletes and transcends the actual structure of the organisation, so the athletes have strong power and their interests play a key role in organisation of the sport. For example, the President of the Athletes Commission sits on the IFSC Executive Board, with full voting rights. In his interview, Sean McColl, the current President of the Athletes Commission, suggests that in comparison with most global sport governing bodies, where the athletes are thought to be “little represented” (Forster and Pope 2004, 101), the will of climbing athletes has played a much bigger role in the organisational evolution of international sport climbing.

Whilst the interviews indicated that athletes believed that they have enough opportunities to be involved in the organisation of sport climbing via the IFSC, they also acknowledged they could have been more active in exercising this power:

*I am the member of athletes union. But I'm too lazy to be involved in the work of athletes' commission...*

*Rustam Gelmanov, (interviewee)*

From the IFSC point of view, it may have affected the development of sport climbing in a negative way, as many leading athletes have been reluctant to become involved in organisational issues and participation in decision-making:

*So technically they [athletes] are represented everywhere and they can block anything. So on the paper it is really perfect for the athletes—they are really inside the IFSC. In reality athletes have to have a motivation to participate in these procedures . . .*

*Jerome Meyer, the IFSC Sport Director, (interviewee)*

Athlete Jacob Schubert (interviewee) confirms that athlete motivation has been an issue:

*I am on the athletes' commission . . . [However,] there were not so many things that we have already done in the past . . . There are some motivated guys in it, but also some not so motivated who should work a little more.*

It is possible to argue that this lack of athlete contribution relates to the culture of traditional climbing, which has transferred into sport climbing and, specifically, the influence of the values of climbing of being free and anti-establishment.

Even though the IFSC has grown in function since its establishment, it has not grown in size and has remained a small organisation with recent expansion (as a consequence of Olympic inclusion) to six full time employees (Sportcal 2017). The size of the organisational structure of the IFSC allows decision-making to be fast and flexible. The IFSC President Marco Scolari (iSportconnect 2013) perceives this approach to be of value for international sport governing bodies:

*We are bringing some fresh air and something that is completely new... Since we are a small sport we are also flexible. When something goes wrong it is relatively easy to go to our members and international federations and say "look, we need to change something here because this doesn't work." Then it can be done in a couple of months, whilst other organisations that have been around for a century can take longer.*

Whilst such efficient and quick decision making can be highlighted as an advantage of the IFSC, on the operational side of the organisation the IFSC has struggled. According to Sportcal (2017), the IFSC budget for 2017 is just €1.15 million (\$1.23 million), whilst for example, USA Climbing, has an annual budget of just over \$2.3 million. The lack of resources has recently become an issue, as summarised by Marco Scolari (CBJ 2017):

*The sport is growing too fast and we do not have the resources to manage the sport. If it goes on in this way and our income does not increase and therefore we are not able to hire additional human resources. We will become victims of our success.*

IFSC climbing competitions have not generated substantial sponsorship income and the IFSC has not been able to sell TV rights. Without doubt, the new Olympic status clearly provides the IFSC with the opportunity to explore these avenues further.

However, controversy occurred in April 2017, when the IFSC announced a new deal with streaming service provider FloSports. This deal would have required a paid subscription to watch the IFSC World Cup live stream, which had been free for many years. This announcement was followed by hundreds of negative comments deriding the “greedy” nature of the partnership and “accusing those responsible of being sell outs to the spirit of climbing” (CBJ 2017). An online petition opposing the streaming deal received over 15,000 signatures. Not only were the climbing community and fans unanimous in this protest, elite sport climbing athletes threatened to boycott the competitions and staged a mass protest during one of the World Cup events. Eventually, the IFSC pulled out of the deal and issued an apology stating that “... any possible future variation of this [free live stream] policy will be discussed inside the IFSC and subject to the approval of our key stakeholders” (IFSC 2017c). As admitted by Marco Sclaris (CBJ 2017), neither the Athlete Commission, neither the member federations were consulted about the deal. Nonetheless, the impact of the resistance by sport climbing athletes that led to the eventual cancellation of the deal, demonstrates that athletes have substantial power in sport climbing. It was also proof that the traditional values of climbing were not lost and had not been replaced entirely by more commercial values.

Whereas previous studies of international sports, such as O’Brien and Slack (2003, 2004) predominantly suggest that the logics of their organisational fields shifted under increasing pressures of professionalisation, commercialisation, and formalisation of structures, this research suggests that the range of values existing in some international sports can be extended, rather than replaced. To illustrate, competitive values, which were not an inherent part of traditional climbing culture, have been accepted and embraced by sport climbing. However, they have not replaced traditional values but co-exist with them, as sport climbing has remained

a relatively “laid-back sport, more like surfing or snowboarding... where everyone is really close and really friendly” (Alex Puccio, interviewee). Most of sport climbers are “absolutely free wanderers who just like climbing and travelling around the world” (Rustam Gelmanov, interviewee). The prominence of a flexible athlete-centred governance structure in sport climbing emphasizes this finding because it is also a manifestation of values. Therefore, the research shows that the process of the institutionalisation of the sport did not necessarily lead to a replacement of values in a macro perspective. What it facilitated was a separation between two different “versions” of the same activity: sport climbing and traditional climbing. The co-existence of and a divide between a “natural” and “competitive” set of values suggests a significantly different response to environmental pressures than has been found by previous studies.

### **Sport climbing and the Olympic movement**

Over the last two decades, the Olympic Movement has been the major phenomenon affecting the organisation of action sports, as the IOC, looking for ways to attract younger audience to the Olympic Games, has turned attention to non-traditional sports on the back of the positive introduction of snowboarding and BMX (Heiberg, interviewee). Therefore, for an understanding of the patterns and mechanisms of the organisational evolution of sport climbing, it is necessary to understand the organisational relationships between the IOC and the international organisations representing sport climbing. Resource dependency theory is particularly helpful in this instance as a framework for analysis.

Though the UIAA was recognised by the IOC in 1995 it did not formally propose sport climbing for inclusion in the program of the Olympic Games, despite claiming that “the IOC recognition was originally closely linked to the development of sport climbing competitions on

artificial surfaces, a popular form of climbing” (UIAA 2009, 9). However, this research suggests that it did not propose sport climbing for the Olympics because of the rift between sport climbing and mountaineering, which eventually led to the structural change of 2006 (UIAA 2009). The first activity of the newly established IFSC was to apply for IOC recognition to represent sport climbing within the Olympic Movement (iSportconnect 2013), gaining provisional recognition in 2007 and final recognition in 2010.

Crucially, this established an initial power/dependency relationship between these two organisations, as the IFSC had to fulfil the IOC organisational criteria, adopt the Olympic values, and follow specific regulations to bid for inclusion in the Olympic Games, a reflection of the regulatory legitimacy that is inherent in resource dependent relationships. In addition, inclusion in the Olympic Games can be seen as an indication of the legitimacy of a sport (Honea 2013) and thus, the drive for the inclusion of sport climbing in the Olympic Games can be attributed to a desire to “legitimize” the sport. This was noted by Marco Sclaris, in his interview: saying that “We believe that being in the [Olympic] Games is the natural aspiration of all sports ...”

As discussed in the previous section, the IFSC has struggled to generate enough revenue to grow sport climbing. It is evident that, along with the benefits to promoting the sport in general, the IFSC’s Olympic ambitions have been driven by the possibility of securing Olympic funding for the sport. In the interviews the IFSC officials referred to the resources needed for the development of the sport across nations and explained the tangible benefits of being an Olympic sport for the national federations. Helmut Knabl, the IFSC Vice-President, points out that:

*... a lot of countries only fund the Olympic sports... [With this funding] many young climbers can go competitions without paying themselves. Expenses are*

*paid by government money. That is why I want to have climbing inside the Olympic Games. The moment it happens, a lot of countries will have a look if they have climbing in their countries and if they want to have it inside their national Olympic committees... It would be a big advantage.*

Apart from national funding opportunities, in 2017 the IFSC is reported to have benefited from an increased direct IOC contribution and from a 10-15% increase in sponsorship and advertising revenues due to its new-found Olympic status (Sportcal 2017).

Overall, in terms of resource-dependence theory, this IFSC's behaviour over the past decade can be characterised as a co-optation of constraint (Selznick, 1949), as in order for sport climbing to be officially considered by the IOC, the IFSC allowed the IOC to obtain a degree of power over the sport and traded its autonomy to some extent. As access to Olympic resources was proactively sought, the IFSC vision and focus on the Olympic bid was a reasonable and professional approach to development of sport climbing. However, it does not necessarily reflect the traditional values of the sport, which have tended to consider the Olympic Movement as a form of corporate bureaucracy.

There is clear evidence of the power that the IOC has bought to bear on the sport. An ongoing controversy around the "combination" Olympic event is an example of the IOC influence on sport climbing traditions and regulations. Initially, the IFSC announced that Lead climbing would be the sole event in its Olympic proposal (MacDonald 2012). However, shortly after that, the IFSC reversed this decision and proposed the combination of three climbing disciplines (Speed, Bouldering, and Lead) as the only medal event of sport climbing in the 2020 Olympic Games (MacDonald 2013). According to Degun (2013) the IFSC decision was influenced by a recommendation of the IOC Technical Commission that evaluated the 2012 World Climbing Championships. However, in modern sport climbing no athlete combines all

three disciplines. Although some athletes combine Bouldering and Lead, Speed climbing requires completely different skills and training. Thus, the communities of Speed climbing and Bouldering/Lead climbing are quite distinct from each other. Consequently, this proposal has been questioned by sport climbers, such as Jacob Schubert stating in his interview that

*. . . they [the IOC] really tried to change our sport a lot. Many changes were not that good I think. Also, I did not like the idea of having the combination of Lead, Bouldering and Speed as an Olympic sport at all, because we don't have it right now. I think if we make it to the Olympics, we should have a medal for each discipline.*

Limiting the number of athletes and disciplines rather than the number of sports had been one of the key messages of the IOC Agenda 2020, so there was a suspicion that the IOC was guided by this consideration in choosing a combined event:

*It's all about the IOC wanting to have minimum athlete numbers at the Olympic Games. Perhaps not the most preferred possible start . . .*  
*A comment from user Mac Stirling in reply to MacDonald (2013)*

It has been confirmed by the recent study of Thorpe and Wheaton (2016) that the quota given to sport climbing by the IOC for Tokyo 2020 Games was one medal; so the choice needed to be either just one discipline or the combination of all three. As a result of the suggestion to combine all three disciplines in a one-medal event, the credibility of both the IOC and the IFSC has been questioned.

A bigger issue from this debate is, again, who owns the sport and who has the power to decide sport climbing's representation in the Olympic Games. In terms of resource-dependence theory, the feedback on the proposal to have one combined climbing discipline for the Olympics suggests that the IOC exercised its power over the IFSC, undermining the IFSC ownership of the sport. Evidence to support this can be seen by the fact that the IFSC followed the recommendation of the IOC technical commission to propose combined Olympics

disciplines, and had a willingness to meet IOC demands, offering no resistance despite concerns among the athletes and the community that the traditions of sport could have been compromised. By doing this, the IFSC effectively co-opted with the IOC constraint in order to strengthen the relationships with the source of dependence, the IOC, and establish a favourable “negotiated environment” (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, 263).

The inclusion of sport climbing into the Olympics must be viewed in the broader context of the recent shift of the IOC towards action sports. This research supports the findings of Honea (2013) and Thorpe and Wheaton (2016) in that the alliance of action sports with the IOC cannot necessarily be inclusion under existing mainstream frameworks as happened with snowboarding, the first Olympic action sport. This threatens participant control of the sport, although they may appreciate many aspects of the “mainstreaming” of their sport. The history of the organisational evolution of sport climbing provides further evidence that placing action sports under an umbrella of an existing international organisations is unlikely to work well due to cultural differences. Therefore, this study supports the recommendations of Thorpe and Wheaton (2016) that the IOC should provide more opportunities for the self-governance of action sports and work more closely with smaller, but culturally legitimate federations. As indicated by Batuev and Robinson (2017) to a certain degree this is already starting to happen as the IOC allowed more flexibility with the inclusion of skateboarding into the Olympic programme by facilitating a collaboration between the skateboarding and rollerskating governing bodies in order to ensure the role of participants and sport-specific organisations was not ignored.

## **Conclusion**

This study attempted to provide structure and explanation to a complex story of the organisational evolution of international sport climbing. One of the major findings is that, contrary to most studies on structural changes in sport organisations (Kikulis, Slack and Hinings 1992, 1995; Amis, Slack and Hinings 2004; Skille 2011), the institutionalisation of international sport climbing within the IFSC and its subsequent inclusion on the Olympic programme did not lead to the substantial bureaucratisation of the sport within the governing body. The findings of this study largely support the concepts of institutional pluralism (Danisman et al 2006; Kraatz and Block 2008), as it was evident that the organisations and actors in the organisational field of sport climbing embody multiple logics despite institutional pressures from the traditional logics of climbing activity, competitive “sport” logics and commercial logics of modern sport. Many of the values of outdoor rock climbing remain prominent within sport climbing, but new values that emphasise the competitive aspects of sport, often reflecting the Olympic values, have also been adopted. This study also established is that the approach to organisation of international sport climbing has always been centred around the athletes, so they possess substantial decision-making power with the international organisation. However, there are some motivational and cultural issues that several participants referred to and that might affect the actual role of athletes in organisation of their sport.

In terms of contribution to the understanding of institutional theory, this research shows how regulatory legitimacy can overcome, but not remove cultural legitimacy in an action sport. This challenges new institutional theory, which predominantly advocates that sport organisations respond to regulatory pressures by the bureaucratisation of their sport, and suggests a variation in organisational responses to change. The history of sport climbing highlighted the role of cultural legitimacy in the governance of sport – the topical issue for many action sports. In terms of resource-dependence theory, the findings of this research support the view of Heino

(2000) who considers the IOC as one of the major bureaucracies of sport that tends to control sport, primarily through resource dependent relationships. The desire to become part of the Olympic Movement was identified as an important mechanism in the organisational evolution of sport climbing, as the IFSC sought resources to develop the sport and effectively strengthened relationships with the IOC. Some of the IFSC actions, such as introduction of paid stream service or a combination medal event for the Olympics, had a mixed reception from the climbing community and could potentially compromise the cultural legitimacy of this governing body.

This paper adds knowledge previous studies on climbing, such as Kiewa, 2002; Aabel and Ohl, 2004; Rickly-Boyd, 2012; Dumont 2014 and 2016. In line with these works, this study discusses changes in climbing under the influences of professionalization and commercialisation. However, the major contribution of this paper is that it focuses on the institutionalisation of sport and organisational implications of its evolution. In particular, it is believed that an examination of actions and approaches of international governing bodies, the IFSC and the IOC, from theoretical perspectives contributes to understanding of an increasingly complex process of evolution of modern sport. In terms of wider implications for action sports in general, many issues arise from the question of who 'owns' the sport. As highlighted by Thorpe and Wheaton (2011) this research also shows that the incorporation of action sports into the Olympics, with an over-concern for regulatory legitimacy and little concern for cultural values leads to a range of power struggles. Therefore, the research set out in this paper suggests that the legitimisation of action sports based only on their technical characteristics and existing conventional regulatory frameworks within the Olympic Movement is a questionable practice. The major limitation of this project was a limited volume of data collected on sport climbing and some finding need further corroboration. . As mentioned earlier, the advantage of the case

study approach was the use of data from various sources, but a disadvantage is that case studies are generally considered a weak basis for generalisation in the statistical sense (Edwards and Skinner 2009). Although, analytical generalisation and explanatory theories are viewed as valid outcomes of this type of research, a limitation of this method is that any conclusions of this study refer to a particular sport and their applicability to other sports lies within analytical generalisation and will be limited to similar environments.

Future research could take a more focused approach to the impact of Olympic inclusion on the sport and there are further opportunities for research to focus on relationships between other action sports and the Olympic Games. For example, one interesting research direction is concerned with the notion of political economy as the word “political” frequently appeared within this study. The findings of Thorpe and Wheaton (2016, 4) also predicted “politics for the flow of resources” within the new Olympic sports. Specifically, issues of autonomy, dependence and control, which emerged from this research, can be discussed within the terms of political economy. Another interesting angle might be an examination of athlete centrality and power in sport climbing, as findings that emerged from this paper require further investigation and elaboration.

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### **List of interviews (face-to face interviews unless stated otherwise)**

1. Stefan Glowacz, Germany, professional climbing athlete: sport climbing until the late 1990s; since then he's focused on adventure outdoor climbing
2. Sean McColl, Canada, professional sport climbing athlete, the IFSC Athletes President
3. Roman Krajnik, Slovenia, professional sport climbing coach
4. Marco Maria Sclaris, Italy, the IFSC President (interviewed by e-mail)
5. Rustam Gelmanov, Russia, professional sport climbing athlete
6. Jerome Meyer, France, former professional sport climbing athlete, the IFSC Sport Manager (interviewed by Skype)
7. Alex Puccio, USA, professional sport climbing athlete
8. Helmut Knabl, Austria, the IFSC Vice-President
9. Jacob Schubert, Austria, professional sport climbing athlete
10. Paola Gigliotti, Italy, the IFSC Honorary Member (in charge of human and social programs)
11. Iker and Eneko Pou (brothers), Spain, professional adventure outdoor climbing athletes
12. Gerhard Heiberg, Norway, the IOC Member; the Head of the IOC Marketing Committee