Athletes without borders

From the Editors in the August 3, 2016 issue

Yusra Mardini, a Syrian swimmer now living in Germany, who reached Greece with others in an inflatable boat—and pushed the boat for four hours after its motor stopped—is competing as part of the team of Refugee Olympic Athletes at Rio de Janeiro. United Nations photo.

The International Olympic Committee has announced that a team made up of refugees from around the globe will participate in the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. The ten refugees will compete under the Olympic banner and their participation is being funded by the IOC. The athletes—who would otherwise have been excluded because they lack a national team to play for—include a Somalian runner who was raised in a refugee camp in Kenya, a Syrian swimmer who has been training in Belgium, and a Congolese judoka who trains in Brazil.

This is the first time that the Olympics have included such a team, and it’s appropriate in a year when the number of displaced people in the world reached a record 65 million. The president of the IOC, Thomas Bach, has said that the purpose of the team is to give hope to refugees everywhere. That is a noble sentiment, and

the IOC deserves praise for its creative response to a global crisis.

Watching the refugees compete under an international flag that belongs to the whole world might also inspire new reflection on the meaning and purpose of a nation in a world of citizens and noncitizens. When the modern Olympic Games were founded in 1896, they were built on the idea that the people of the world could come together in peace for the sake of healthy competition—the fighting would be on the sports field, not the battlefield.

At their best the games have fostered mutual respect and understanding between people of different cultures and nations. But organized as they have been by nationality, the games have often been surrounded by—and sometimes encouraged—unhealthy forms of nationalism. In 1936 the Nazis used the Berlin games to promote a racist and nationalist ideology. Coordinated use of performance-enhancing drugs—for which the Russian track team has been banned this year—is another sign of nationalism gone awry. The American media's focus on counting the number of medals won by the U.S. team is another worrisome form of nationalism.

Political scientist Benedict Anderson says that a modern nation is always an "imagined political community." The meaning of nation is something created by peoples and cultures over time. The Olympics captivate us in part because they conjure up and connect us, in an intense form of imagined belonging, to a nation. We cheer on strangers whom we regard as "our own" through an imaginative act of what Anderson calls "deep, horizontal comradeship."

Perhaps at this Olympics, by cheering on the refugee team, people of every nation can find a deep, horizontal comradeship with 65 million displaced people—people like Rami Anis, a swimmer who fled his home in Syria at the age of 15 and who says that "the swimming pool is my home." Maybe Anis and his teammates can inspire us to make our own nation more open to those who have been forced to find new ways of belonging.