



Athens, Greece



In Sports, Red Is the Winning Color

When **opponents** of a game are equally matched, the team dressed in red is more likely to win, according to a new study.

British **anthropologists** Russell Hill and Robert Barton of the University of Durham reached that conclusion by studying the **outcomes** of boxing, tae kwon do, Greco-Roman wrestling, and freestyle wrestling matches at the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, Greece.

In each event, Olympic staff randomly assigned red or blue clothing or body protection to competitors. When competitors were equally matched with their opponent in fitness and skill, the athletes wearing red were more likely to win.



“Where there was a large point difference—presumably because one athlete was far **superior** to the other—color had no effect on the outcome,” Barton said. “Where there was a small point difference, the effect of color was sufficient to tip the balance.”

Joanna Setchell, a primate researcher at the University of Cambridge in England, has found similar results in nature. Her work with the large African monkeys known as mandrills shows that red coloration gives males an advantage when it comes to mating. The finding that red also has an advantage in human sporting events does not surprise her, and she adds that “the idea of the study is very clever.”

Hill and Barton got the idea for their study from a mutual interest in **primates**—“red seems to be the color, across species, that signals male dominance,” Barton said. For example, studies by Setchell, the Cambridge primate researcher, show that **dominant** male mandrills have increased red coloration in their faces and rumps. In another study, scientists put red plastic rings on the legs of male zebra finches, which increased the birds’ success in finding a **mate**.

Barton said he and Hill speculated that “there might be a similar effect in humans.” Hill and Barton found their answer by viewing Olympic competitors in the ring, on the mat, and in the field. “Across a range of sports, we find that wearing red is consistently associated with a higher probability of winning,” the researchers write.

Barton adds that this discovery of red’s advantage might lead to new **regulations** on sports uniforms. In the Olympic matches he studied, for example, it is possible that some medal winners may have had an unintended advantage—their clothing!

