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Officials to review gag on Olympic athletes

- Clause in contract banned any demonstrations
- Measure may have gone beyond Games charter

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The Guardian, Monday February 11 2008

The British Olympic Association is to review its athletes' contract for the Beijing Games after criticism of a clause which had prevented competitors from making political statements in China.

The clause, which appeared to go beyond the requirements of the Olympic charter, will be softened although athletes who engage in overt political demonstrations or statements could still risk being sent home.

Simon Clegg, the BOA's chief executive, said: "I accept that the interpretation of one part of the draft BOA team members' agreement appears to have gone beyond the provision of the Olympic charter; this is not our intention, nor is it our desire to restrict athletes' freedom of speech, and the final agreement will reflect this."

The contract for Beijing contains a new clause preventing athletes from commenting "on any politically sensitive issues" as a condition of their membership of the British team. The clause appears to go further than the

requirements of the Olympic charter to which athletes are subject, which requires competitors to refrain from "any kind of demonstration or engaging in any political, religious or racial propaganda at Olympic sites".

The association said the clause had been included for the first time because of the political sensitivities about China's hosting of the games, but said it was not intended to inhibit free speech. Athletes who make overt political statements will risk ejection from the team.

The BOA will offer athletes media training and is likely to agree on a stock line for them to take if questioned about China's human rights record.

"This clause is intended to stop overt statements such as wearing a Free Tibet shirt," said a BOA spokesman.

"In the most extreme cases an athlete could be sent home ... this is not aimed at an athlete who speaks a little naively in a press conference."

Pete Gardner, chief executive of the British Athletes' Commission, said the organisation had no objections to the gagging clause in the Beijing contract and that no athletes had approached him with concerns. "Any athlete going to China with the overt intention of making a political statement would not in our view be fully focused on the job in hand ... and would not be going for the right reasons."

The games have long provided a political stage, from the Nazis' appropriation of the 1936 games to Tommie Smith's Black Power salute in Mexico in 1968. The choice of China as the 2008 host has been controversial because of the regime's appalling human rights record.

The shadow culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt, said Britain's athletes should be allowed to "say what they want". The Lib Dem leader, Nick Clegg, said: "[It is] our moral responsibility to push for human rights wherever they are being abused."

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