

Beyond Olympic Gold

—toward a Global Human Rights Assessment

by Leland Beaumont

Alan always wanted to make a difference in the world. As a teenager he was fascinated by the book *The Boys in the Boat*. He was captivated by the true story of nine University of Washington students who struggled to become the world's best eight-oar rowing team. Hitler watched as a remarkable act of American courage defeated the Germans during the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

Inspired by the story Alan was determined to enter the University of Washington, join their crew team, work toward national and international rowing success, and relive for himself the glory of the original boys in the boat. He studied hard and trained hard throughout high school and was eventually rewarded with acceptance to the University of Washington. Crew tryouts were an ordeal, but Alan was well prepared, worked hard, and eventually made the team. Securing a position on the varsity boat took all his strength and determination, but he eventually earned a position in the varsity heavyweight shell. Practice was every day, year round, and competitions were frequent. The University of Washington crew team record is remarkable. They often won the Intercollegiate Rowing Association championship. In his senior year Alan was part of the crew that won the championship. He was ecstatic; he had lived his life-long dream. He became one of the boys in the boat.

As sweet as his rowing victories were, they ended when he graduated. Alan needed a new goal that could focus his energy on something that mattered. He needed something that would be more significant and enduring than a national or even international sports victory. What could he do with his newly earned degree in Law, Societies, and Justice? Did he dare to think he could advance world peace? Speaking with one of his professors he learned about a crazy project that just might make a difference. The Global Human Rights Assessment project was just getting started and they needed people to join the effort.

Eleanor Roosevelt was also a determined and courageous American who wanted to make a difference. After the death of her husband, she dedicated herself to the United Nations effort to create and adopt the [Universal Declaration of Human rights](#). On December 10, 1948 her efforts paid off as the United Nations General Assembly adopted the declaration by a vote of 48 in favor, none against, and eight abstentions. The Declaration consists of thirty articles, each establishing a particular human right.



The concept of the Global Human Rights Assessment is simple: Use the [thirty articles](#) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the basis to assess the achievement of each participating country in protecting those human rights. The Assessment would proceed like an Olympic sports competition. Representatives from every country of the world would be invited to participate. Country representatives would describe how their country

protects and promotes each of the human rights described the thirty articles of the Declaration. International teams of judges would assess the level of human rights protection by each country, for each article.

Alan was intrigued by the idea. On the one hand, it seemed unlikely that countries would choose to participate, and that progress could be judged fairly. But countries do participate enthusiastically in the sports Olympics competitions, and international panels of judges are able to score events as subjective as Ice Dancing competitions. It seemed worth a try.

Getting started was very difficult, but crew experience had prepared Alan to endure the difficulties and overcome the obstacles. The project languished until an internationally respected statesman was engaged to spearhead the effort. Eventually scoring guidelines were prepared, and the logistics of when and where to hold the event were decided. The United Nations helped secure interpreters and translation services. The organizing team grew slowly but was able to engage sponsors, invite representatives from each country, and begin to assemble judges.

Although most of the invitations went unanswered and many others were declined, representatives from a few countries showed interest. Eventually Austria, Bhutan, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United States agreed to participate. The first ever Global Human Rights Assessment was held in Toronto Canada and lasted one week. Judging panels listened carefully as each country presented their case addressing each of the thirty articles of the Declaration. A carefully prepared scoring rubric was used to help the judges objectively and consistently assign a score from one to ten as each of the thirty articles was addressed. Judge's notes accompanied each scoring decision. All of this was recorded in an overall [master score sheet](#) and in detailed reports for each country.

Although progress was being made throughout the week, controversies erupted. The judges had never done this before and they disagreed on interpretations of the Declaration and the scoring criteria. Sometimes they doubted the accuracy and relevance of the information being presented. National pride surfaced often in the form of heated debates. Participants persisted, dialogued, learned, and eventually completed their work. Alan worked as an organizer, delegate, and judge throughout the event. By the end of the week the results of the first Global Human Rights assessment were available.

Many countries were surprised and disappointed by the scores the judges assigned. Citing an elusive doctrine of American Exceptionalism, the United States delegation expected to be granted a perfect score in all areas. Fortunately the assessment team skillfully used objective evidence and prevailed in demonstrating the need for improvement in several areas.

After seeing their scores privately, each team was given the option of having their scores reported publicly, or keeping the scores and assessment notes private. Teams struggled with this choice. Olympic sports results are reported publicly. The teams that chose to participate expected to receive validation and recognition for the Human Rights protections their countries provide. But many scores were lower than what the teams had expected. They were learning that full protection of a broad range of human rights is difficult and rarely achieved.

Awards for the highest overall score and for the highest score in each of the thirty articles were presented to the winning teams that chose to publicly report their scores. All of the teams learned as a result of this assessment. They had, perhaps for the first time, an objective assessment of the status of Human Rights protections in their country. They met representatives of other peace-loving countries. They learned many ideas for better advancing human rights in their own countries. Exemplary approaches to protecting and promoting human rights were described and used as learning resources. Alan worked as hard judging the event as he had rowing with the crew, and he certainly gained as much satisfaction.

Planning soon began for the next Assessment event to be held in two years. Results from the first event were publicized, scoring guidelines were refined, more sponsors and participants were recruited, and all countries were again invited to participate. The importance of the work was being recognized around the world, even as many countries dismissed it as unfair, and unimportant.

Each year more countries participate, judges become more skilled, learning increases, fact finding becomes more reliable, more results are reported, and the prestige of participation, results, improvement, and awards increased. Best of all, human rights increased throughout the world.

Although this story is fictional, the possibilities it describes are very real. Please pass this story along to others who aspire to peace. Begin assessing Human Rights in your own country using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and [this spreadsheet](#).