

# Star Spangled Blunders

*Playing the national anthem during a live event should not be this difficult*



**O**rganizers of international sporting events have a tough job. In addition to the usual issues—the logistics and needs of traveling teams, ticket sales, concessions, security, the playing surface, just to name a few—there is the overwhelming desire to avoid an international

incident. It appears, however, based on recent events, that the people responsible for playing the national anthem for medal winners have not gotten the memo. This responsibility, which they should be able to discharge in fairly straightforward fashion, has presented some potentially disastrous scenarios.

**In March, at the Arab shooting championships** in Kuwait, Maria Dmitrienko from Kazakhstan won the gold medal. So what did the organizers play as the national anthem? The fake anthem from the 2006 movie “Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.” The anthem spinner for these shooting championships belongs in the Wrong Anthem Hall of Fame, if there ever is such a thing. At another point in the competition, the wrong anthem was played for a Serbian athlete.

**In a rowing competition for para-athletes** in Italy in May, Israeli Moran Samuel won a gold medal. However, since she had not been expected to win, there was no recording of the Israeli national anthem available at the venue. So, to avoid the sound of silence, Samuel asked for a microphone and sang it herself.

**In June, the South African women’s field hockey team** played in the London Cup against Great Britain. To honor the visitors, the organizers played a version of “Die Stem” that was used as the national anthem of South Africa during the apartheid era.

**This is not good.** As any athlete who has represented his or her country will surely tell you, hearing your national anthem played in a foreign country is a source of tremendous pride and inspiration, and to mess it up on such a level is universally regarded as a massive insult. These national anthem gaffes are becoming so frequent that someday soon we may see a scene reminiscent of Rick’s Café Américain in “Casablanca” played out on

a medal stand. The anthem DJ will put on an offensive national anthem and the winning relay team, for instance, will try to drown it out by singing a more appropriate one—à la Victor Laszlo instructing Rick’s house band, “Play ‘La Marseillaise.’”

**This insensitivity to musical selections** is not limited to national anthems. For instance, I have been to international sporting events where Bob Marley’s “Buffalo Soldier” was played for a Kenyan team. The anthem DJ was apparently completely oblivious to the fact that the song protests the use of “buffalo soldiers,” many of whom were former slaves from West (not East) Africa, being conscripted to conquer Native American land in the United States (“stolen from Africa, brought to America”)—not exactly the stuff of Kenyan dreams.

**The biggest burr under my saddle** in this regard over the years has been the countless times I have been at an event outside the United States and Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” was played when a U.S. team entered a stadium or arena. Have these sports DJs never listened to the lyrics of songs? “Born in the USA” is hardly a patriotic song, and its use as one has irritated not only me but also (and arguably more importantly) Springsteen himself. “Had a brother at Khe Sanh, fighting off the Viet Cong, they’re still there, he’s all gone” are not exactly the lyrics that athletes wearing the red, white and blue crave to hear moments before they walk onto the playing field.

## HEARING YOUR NATIONAL ANTHEM PLAYED IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY IS A SOURCE OF TREMENDOUS PRIDE AND INSPIRATION.

**This process just should not** have to be that complicated. So let’s establish a few simple procedures. First, take the time to listen to the lyrics of any song you intend to play that is not a national anthem before you actually use it to identify a particular national team. And when you are playing a national anthem, confirm that you’ve got the right one. If it is something written by Sacha Baron Cohen, chances are you’ve probably gone down the wrong road. ■

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