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U.S. Olympic Committee Backs Gay Rights but Won't Lead Charge for Change

By The Moscow Times

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PARK CITY, Utah — U.S. Olympic officials said Tuesday that they supported amending the Olympic Charter to boost support for gay athletes but cautioned that its main role was as a sports body and not a human rights organization.

A Russian law that forbids the dissemination of information on homosexuality to minors has been the hot topic at this week's U.S. Olympic Committee, or USOC, media summit with nearly all the 113 athletes in attendance asked for their thoughts.

But Tuesday, about four months from the start of the Sochi Winter Games in Russia, it was USOC chief executive Scott Blackmun and chairman Larry Probst's turn in the hot seat.

"First and foremost, we are a sports organization, we are the only organization in the world whose job it is to make sure American athletes get a chance to compete in the Olympic Games," Blackmun said. "We are not an advocacy organization or a human rights

organization.

"We are a part of a worldwide Olympic movement and I think what we can do is advocate for change within our movement."

The USOC made it clear that it would not be taking the lead in any effort to force change in Russia or organize protests but would work quietly behind the scenes and would support an amendment to the Olympic Charter to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation.

"Anything we can do with the international Olympic movement, within the U.S. Olympic movement, we want to do to make sure that people understand that we want all of our athletes to feel comfortable being part of the U.S. team," said Blackmun.

"We want to lead by example and we also want to advocate internally, within the global Olympic movement, to make sure that we as a family are doing everything we can to send the message that we do not tolerate discrimination."

Most of the athletes pressed for their views on the Russian law danced around the thorny issue saying their focus was on the upcoming competition and winning medals.

The USOC said it will not attempt to muzzle athletes but would impress on them the serious consequences they could face from Russian authorities and the IOC.

Under rule 50 of the IOC charter athletes are banned from using the games as a platform to make political statements and could face expulsion for showing their support for Russia's gay community.

"I want to make it very clear that we have not asked our athletes not to speak up," said Blackmun. "What we are doing is trying to make sure our athletes are aware of the law and aware of the possible consequences because our job first and foremost is to make sure that they are safe while they are in Russia."

The IOC has said it has received written assurances from the Russian government that the issue would not affect Games participants, including accredited people as well as Olympic spectators.

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