WHY THE OLYMPIC GAMES MUST, AND WILL, SURVIVE

The need for self-fulfilment, whether privately or publicly, whether almost unnoticed or in the glare of international attention, is a basic human characteristic. It is loosely referred to as having a purpose in life. We all need it in some form, however small, or we become despairing about ourselves and then, often, resentful of others. It may be as simple as singing in the church choir, or fishing, or growing roses, or being a dab hand at poker. It may lie in showing we are quick or strong, enduring or dependable. The most visible, and coveted, platform for achieving fulfilment, no more than a dream for most of us but for that reason infinitely desirable, is that of the Olympic Games.

For more than a hundred years, the modern Olympic Games have been unique as a sporting and social forum: to become an Olympic champion has carried a cachet, in public perception, without equal. Although the status is way beyond the potential of the majority, the humblest person can comprehend the distinction that graces an Olympic winner.

From the inaugural event in Athens, the Games have constantly been under threat: from lack of funds, administrative incompetence, chauvinism, nationalism, racism, political boycotts, professionalism, drugs, gigantism, corruption, and not forgetting envy. Yet it is no coincidence, surely, that through all these hazards, the Games have survived, a driving force for the ambitions of the honest competitor infinitely more far reaching than for the dishonest, however much the latter may in recent times have been seen to prosper. While malevolence stalks the Games at every turn, while some commentators and critics seek to damn the festival of youth for every blemish, the essential beauty of the ideal continues to burn brightly: the gathering of the youth of the world in competitive harmony. For every cheat, and there sadly are not a few, there are hundreds for whom it is a life-long honour to have taken part.

The Games were perhaps never closer to burial than in Moscow in 1980, near bankrupt and civilly shunned, yet since then there has been a series of hugely spectacular events in Los Angeles and, memorable for its warmth, Sarajevo, in Seoul, Barcelona, Lillehammer and now Sydney. ‘Give the Games back to the athletes’ cried the most strident critics of the International Olympic Committee, an imperfect organization in an imperfect world. The truth is that they were never really taken away.

Do you remember Terry and Charlie Malloy in Budd Schulberg’s ‘On the Waterfront’? Marlon Brando (Terry) complains to Rod Steiger (Charlie, his manager), that he should never have fixed for him to throw a fight for the convenience of big-time gamblers. “Charlie, I could have been somebody,” Brando says, the expression in his eyes a sad, long-lost yearning for dignity if not fame. We see that same ambition, that longing, from the perspective of a different age, in the new, moving British film ‘Billy Elliott’, directed by Stephen Daldry and leaving hardly a dry eye in the house. Billy, played by Jamie Bell, is a 12-year-old in the mining community of north-east England, his mother dead and his father, a miner on strike, struggling to find the modest fees for boxing lessons so that the boy may follow in the footsteps of grandfather, whose gloves he inherited. Billy discovers, to the myopic horror of his father and elder brother, that his real talent is as a dancer, with all the cultural prejudice that surrounds such an occupation in a closed, male-orientated small town. The film poignantly traces Billy’s agonized passage towards a student scholarship with the Royal Ballet, under blind paternal opposition. It is a touching portrayal of a boy’s resilient conviction in the pursuit of an ambition. The history of the Olympic Games has a thousand such stories, told and untold.

“Sport is a metaphor for life”, Alexandru Siperco, the late IOC member, said to me during his last months. “That was a legacy which England gave to the world. Nowadays, chivalry has almost gone. Chivalry and profit do not mix”. The venerable Siperco was a genuine philosopher of the Olympic Movement, a man who for...
Britain’s Matthew Pinsent, Tim Foster, Steven Redgrave and James Cracknell, Olympic champions in the coxless fours.

half a century had to juggle with the conflicting ideals of Olympism and communism, which the socialist world liked to believe were in some ways synonymous. Indeed they were, but for the repression of the latter. It was an irony that Romania’s evil and subsequently assassinated dictator should have broken with the Soviet Union in sending a team to Los Angeles in 1984.

I think that Siperco was unduly pessimistic in believing chivalry to be dead. It could be observed repeatedly in Sydney, even if not in the deflection of the defending women’s 400 metres track champion from France. The crowning instance, leaving aside the politically correct manipulation of the Organizing Committee’s nomination of an aboriginal woman, was Cathy Freeman’s lighting of the flame. It was an act of exceptional subordination of athletic ambition for Freeman to accept the role, when she already carried the burden of being the sporting soul of the nation. Disarmingly, Freeman denied that the responsibility placed additional stress upon her. “It made me feel good about myself,” she said, although John Coates, president of the Australian Olympic Committee, admitted that he had been seriously worried that the burden could harm her challenge for the 400m title. It was subsequently learned that she did indeed catch cold during the 5.00 a.m. rehearsal of the Opening Ceremony. Freeman has an unusual simultaneous appearance of child-like naivety and the maturity of many years. Seemingly she understood her double appointment with history.

Another appointment, though little regarded by the domestically pre-occupied Australian media, was that of Steven Redgrave. To have won a gold medal in four consecutive Games was exceptional. To win a fifth was...well, truly Olympian, an act of the Gods. Rowing is one of those Olympic sports in which sportsmanship and old-fashioned manners still rise above so-called modern pressures. The first action of the winners in each event is graciously to acknowledge the efforts of the vanquished, before dwelling euphorically on the acclaim for their own achievement. There were few contests in a fortnight more tingling than that in which Redgrave and his colleagues held off the furious and sustained challenge of the Italians in the coxless fours, for the veteran Brit to become a unique figure in the history of endurance events. Chivalry is commonplace in this sport. Before the final a man unknown to Redgrave had approached him at the course, an Australian. “I so much want you to win,” he said, “but I have a problem. My son is in the Australian boat”.

Five times Redgrave has been motivated by the advice given to him as a youngster by a former British gold medallist in the eights: “When you are world champion, it’s for a year, when you are Olympic champion it’s for life”. Redgrave recalls that he dreamed of standing on the podium even before he had encountered the sport which became his life, night and day, for 20 years. “I was watching the Games at Munich,” he says, “and didn’t even know what rowing was. I started at 14, and at 15 somebody said that I was capable of becoming a world champion, but I thought to myself that I wanted to be an Olympic champion. I’ve been flag bearer at the Opening Ceremony twice, that’s something special, it’s only the Olympic Games that has it, bringing all sports together, it’s fantastic, the Dream Team and the tennis players wanting to be there to join the amateurs. They are doing it because of what the Olympics are”. Yet how many can sustain Redgrave’s phenomenal workload and near-manic dedication without, on the one hand, a huge compensatory financial reward – his wife at one stage had to mortgage the house which she, a doctor, owned
– or on the other losing a sense of rational proportion? “The drive to perfection has an equivalent cost, and that should not be on the public budget,” Marc Hodler, elder statesman of the IOC and for many years president of international skiing, reflects. “So the alternative is commercialization. But sport must be careful to embrace both the peak and the base, which must broad, so that the numbers are pyramid – shaped and not a tower”.

Jean-Claude Killy, memorably a skiing triple gold medal winner in 1968, believes that the emotions generated by the Games are central to its success “If we retain the tears on the podium, we will survive,” he says, “Millions dream about being there, and only a few thousand make it. The Games can change the life of someone from the ghetto, but greed must not take over. If every winner wants a private jet, the Games will disappear. To retain the prestige, you have to be higher, morally, than everything. The guardians of the philosophy, the IOC, must fight to remain autonomous. It cannot turn into some super-international federation. The professionals will eventually make a choice, between the Games and other alternatives, unless we remain the ultimate and continue to offer something unique. We need a truce with the athletes”.

Whatever the attractions of the Games to the professionals, the event will always be an Everest to the underdog, to the unknowns, whose presence is as much a part of the magnetism for the audience as the superstars. Not since Abebe Bikila came barefoot from Ethiopia to win the marathon in 1960 has there been such a celebrated new arrival as there was in the Atlanta Centenary marathon: Josia Thugwane from the rainbow nation, South Africa’s first gold by a black man. The security officer from a mining township, who only a few months previously had been shot in the jaw when his car was hijacked, won by a mere three seconds “Winning the Olympics eliminated the poverty I have known all my life,” he said. “More important, it has given me the opportunity to learn to read and write, an education I was denied by my circumstances. I will be able to ensure that my children have the education they deserve. When I received the (special) President’s medal from Nelson Mandela, I knew that while someone might steal it on
A distinctive characteristic of the marathon is that competition is everything, and the time relatively insignificant. Ottavio Cinquanta, President of the International Skating Union, reflects on the dangers of financial rewards related to records. “We are approaching the limits of performance,” he says, “and rewards for records” – outside the Games – “raise problems. Once you educate the public, there is no going back. The message can be risky, a perception that if there is no money it is a lesser event. ICI, or whoever, can create another championship, but not what the Olympics have been doing for a century”. Prize money was not something that preoccupied Alberto Tomba, though the Italian skier had the advantage of a secure background. He competed for the hell of it, and it showed. “I never felt so happy as when winning the Olympics,” he said. “World championships are just for sponsors, television, and the ski station. The Olympics, like love, are good for children. They are an inspiration”. There speaks an Italian.

Tomba was one of the best salesman the Games ever had, yet the IOC is poor at proclaiming its virtues in the face of mountainous denunciation of its faults.

Katarina Witt dwells on the deeper realities of the Games, competing with one another, not against one another. “Cordiality and competition are totally compatible,” says the 1984 and 1988 figure skating champion. “There are pictures from sport which inspire the hope of a new era for humanity. Pictures spread a powerful message. The power of losers is found in pictures just as much as the eternal winners. The image of a single child in Sarajevo, one leg amputated, often says more than carefully compiled United Nations statistics on children in civil wars. Athletes with different skin colours in a brotherly or sisterly embrace are more inspiring than many frantic appeals against racism... The Olympics contain within them dangers, but also powerful messages for humanity”.

The Olympic Games remain the most exhilarating and the most unforgiving public examination in sport, and therein lies its appeal and its charm, the challenge and the fear, Yet what every competitor should know is that there is no failure if they have done their best. They can do no more. Even to be there is a triumph which the rest of us should respect.

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