

Olympics

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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So it has ended. A bit over two weeks, a fortnight of intense athletic competition with spectacular performances, highs and lows, and way too much national naval gazing by the host nation and by NBC on behalf of the USA. That said, it was at the sporting level a wonderful two weeks of competition.

Just a year ago I arrived in London where all the talk was about "London, 2012." Would it come off well or would the Brits embarrass themselves? How could so much money be spent on games, when the country was under a regime of economic austerity? Would the city be able to cope with the massive numbers of people, especially considering the already fragile character of its transportation infrastructure? Would the new facilities be ready?

A few weeks in this atmosphere and it was easy to conclude that London was hurtling toward a disaster of significant proportions. Already inclined to side with the pessimists by virtue of my experience in England, I was convinced that the Olympics and London would collapse within a few days of the opening ceremonies.

It didn't.

I should have followed the advice of Simon Kuper of *The Financial Times* who told me not to take the doomsday views of the media too seriously. The problem for any reporter before the games, he noted, is that there is only one story to write, namely what could go wrong. Once the games actually begin this pessimism would quickly vanish. And so it did.

After the brief hiccup over lost bus drivers and the breakdown of outsourced security, things went very well. In central London there were less people than usual, and traffic and public transport moved along with minimal inconvenience. The feeling is that conventional tourists were kept away by the gloomy predictions, and a large number of Londoners responded to the pleas of London authorities and left town for the duration to watch the games from the British countryside or the civilized precincts across the Channel in that alien place known as Europe.

The opening ceremonies were for many people across the globe a strange and funky presentation of British history. And so it was by design. Danny Boyle's creative genius was about as mind-bending as you can get from someone who has not been institutionalized. It was, to use the British term of choice, brilliant!

Marina Hyde of *The Guardian* put it as well as anyone could: "Tonight was Britain's opportunity to speak directly to the world, and - as befits a nation that declines to learn other languages - it did so in English. . . . Danny Boyle's banquet felt as deliciously indigestible to global tastes as Marmite or jellied eels. I loved it. We can't be worrying about how it went down in Moscow or Madagascar. I'm still reeling that a country that can put on a show that hilariously bonkers is allowed nuclear weapons."

As for the closing ceremonies it reminded me of a Super Bowl halftime show on steroids with a splash of LSD. Excessively long and replete with musical acts from a late lamented past, cherished by some members of the audience while unrecognizable to others. It didn't come close to the genius of the opening ceremonies. The only positive quality was that it seemed to baffle the NBC commentators.

Between these two events were the games. NBC offered an American version in which gold medal performances by athletes from the USA dominated coverage, while on the BBC main channels it was mostly about Team GB and its record breaking performance. The BBC did offer all events live on accessible television channels, while NBC offered most events live except the ones it wanted to feature in prime time. You could find these on some "platform" that you could access if you had all the latest electronic devices and a clairvoyant ability to determine event scheduling.

The beauty of the Olympics is that there is something for almost everyone, and there are always magnificent moments and performances by the planet's best athletes. For me it was Usain Bolt and his compatriots in the 4 x 100 relay, along with the American challengers, who provided the electric moment of the games. The Americans tied the world record and lost to the Jamaicans with Bolt running the anchor as they set a new world record. The American women in the same event were nearly as exciting while setting a new world record.

Also riveting was the American/Canadian football match with its sudden outpouring of goals and unbelievable finish. Back on the track Mo Farah and Temerat Dibaba offered great performances in the men's and women's 5,000 and 10,000 meter races with Mo doubling and Dibaba falling short in the 5,000 after taking gold in the 10,000 meters.

As for Team GB you knew it was their games when Andy Murray blasted Roger Federer off center court at Wimbledon just a few weeks after Federer had beaten Murray in the Wimbledon final. This marked the start of Team GB's big medal weekend.

As to the Olympic spirit the one moment that captured at least some aspect of it occurred after the semi-finals of the 400 meters when Kirani James exchanged race bibs with Oscar Pistorius. James said he had great admiration for the South African runner. James went on to win the first gold medal for Grenada in the 400m final which was another great moment in its own right.

After the final television commercial is run, and after NBC completes its exploitation of American athletes for ratings purposes, it is great athletic performances that will be remembered, not Ryan Seacrest's Twitter reports.

The one lingering question is if staging these games was worth upwards of 15 Billion dollars, which was more than three times the original projected budget. If you answer "yes" to that question, you may need to reexamine your priorities.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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