

Olympic Contradictions

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE - OLYMPIC CONTRADICTIONS
August 17, 2016

There are times when I think that the Olympics should be wiped off the sports calendar once and for all. Then when the games begin I flip into reverse and find myself watching the performances and admiring the high level of skill on display.

The athletes come in all shapes and sizes and represent a wide swath of humanity from across the globe. Some are highly paid professionals while others come from humble circumstances and perform in sports that have a very limited cohort of fans. All of them share a dedication to their sport, have worked long and hard to reach these games, and have achieved a level of skill that approaches the highest levels possible in terms of personal best or world record levels.

Olympic athletes demonstrate what it is in sport that attracts us, and that we both admire and envy. The pursuit of perfection is something that is never achieved, occasionally approached, and deeply desired. To see someone performing on a world stage and reaching for this goal always draws us in. This is the heart of the matter. Standards are set and the athletes are measured against those standards. Doing sport is a daunting exercise and one that produces exhilaration in both athlete and spectator.

One of the major problems with the Olympics in our time and for the past several decades is that the games, which most of us receive via television, have lost much of their sporting character to the demands of that medium.

What is it that Olympic television viewers watch when they watch these games? Are they watching the sport? The individual athlete

or teams of athletes? Or are they watching NBC's construction of the games?

NBC, and other networks before them, present the Olympic Games in terms of constructed scenarios, not necessarily false, but embellished to add drama, as if the outcome of an event or a performance alone doesn't offer enough drama. These constructions also get repeated throughout the event or events ostensibly to increase interest.

Rivalries between various athletes are the most common of these constructs. Rivalries between nations are another. In the old cold war days the U.S. and Soviet competition was beaten into the ground by the television presenters. Now that has been morphed into a drumbeat of negative comment on Russian doping violations with the theme, we are clean and they are not. It is as if no other nation, no American, nor any other athlete had ever before doped their way to the podium. Each Russian victory brings a reminder from commentators of the doping issue.

Within each of the events other rivalries are brought forward, often in terms of individuals. The notion that someone like Michael Phelps is motivated by a swimmer from South Africa rather than by his personal quest for gold may contain a small grain of truth, but it is hardly what drives this great athlete.

Many Olympic years ago Roone Arledge and ABC Sports brought the "up close and personal" segment to sports reporting. Arledge believed that narrative enhanced the reporting of the event and that human interest stories had a special appeal. This is no doubt true, but over the years the need to "overcome great odds" has been repeated so often and with such increasingly steep odds

that this device has come to overshadow the event itself and slipped into self-parody.

NBC and its prime time coverage offers another opportunity to increase the stakes in an event and to hype and repeat the false narratives. In promoting the primetime schedule the drama is teased and event presentation is delayed into the final 90 minutes of the evening telecast. The delayed broadcast format does allow television producers to change the order of competition building to the final confrontational presentation. I do not know if NBC has done this, although it has been done in the past.

So what is it we watch when we watch the Olympics? Does it matter if it is something other than sport? Perhaps not. Certainly not for the television networks and advertisers.

And despite all the corruption of the IOC, the massive spending of public money in a country with massive problems involving basic necessities for its people, the Games Do Go On.

In the end, the awareness of all this doesn't overshadow the great performances by well-knowns and unknowns. The achievements of Michael Phelps approach greatness. Almaz Alyana, a 24-year-old Ethiopian woman in only her second time in the event, crushed the world record in the 10,000 meters by fifteen seconds. It was a record that had not been challenged since 1993. In the men's 400 meters, Wayde van Niekerk of South Africa broke Michael Johnson's 17-year-old world record that many felt would never fall. Niekerk's gold was enhanced by the fact that no one had ever won this Olympic event while running in Lane 8, and by the fact that he is coached by a 74-year-old great-

grandmother. And of course there is the wonderful Usain Bolt about whom nothing else need be said.

Always appealing are the many firsts that come in each Olympics, as athletes from countries that had never before won a medal take home the gold. At least two runners fell during their races and got up to win gold. The dominance of American swimmers and gymnasts were of course wonderful to watch and a gift send to NBC by the sporting gods.

Equally intriguing are those sports that most of us never, or seldom watch, but now take a few minutes for a look. Sometimes those minutes turn into hours. The list of these sports seems endless and many are endlessly entertaining. Some are quite mysterious to the uninformed observer. It is a smorgasbord of sporting delights and we get to sample all on the plate once every four years. We all have our favorites even if we pay attention to them only once every four years.

Finally, I must give a special salute to Hope Solo for her validation of my closing tagline for this column.

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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