

8-20-2004

The Athens Olympics open

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Athens Olympics open" (2004). *On Sport and Society*. 672.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/672>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Athens Olympics open
AUGUST 20, 2004

There is no doubt what I will remember most about the 2004 Olympic Games. It will not be the opening ceremonies, nor the historic setting of Athens, nor the amazing performance by Paul Hamm in the Men's Gymnastics all-around when he snatched victory from the jaws of defeat and left the arena with a gold medal. Unfortunately, it will be Hurricane Charley that left myself and many of my fellow Orlandoans without power and therefore unable to see the opening ceremonies. For some it is still not possible to see the games, as they remain without power in the sweltering heat of summer. Compared to those south of us, of course, we were fortunate.

I didn't see any events until Monday. Since then impressions have begun to accumulate. I will start with the positives.

Easily the pick of the events so far has been the miraculous recovery from his fall in the vault by Paul Hamm. Best of all was his complete and total shock by the result and the fact that the television cameras fully captured his incredulity. This is one of those moments that make sports so appealing.

The performances in the pool have been amazing. Despite the fact that Michael Phelps was over-hyped by the marketing forces surrounding the sport of swimming, and despite his ill-advised replacement of Gary Hall in the 4 X 100 relay event, Phelps has performed at an incredibly high level and so far has seven medals in his stash, with five of those being gold. This is no small achievement.

The Michael Phelps quest for eight gold medals cheapened his achievements, exposed the crass commercialism surrounding the games, was an insult to the greatness of Ian Thorpe, and obscured the achievements of other swimmers. On the day the headlines screamed that Phelps had been "Torpedoed" and would not win eight gold medals, the gold medals won by Aaron Peirsol and Natalie Coughlin in the men's and women's 100-meter backstroke were but a footnote. The excitement generated by the 4 X 200 U.S. men's freestyle relay was palpable, as was the record-setting performance by the U.S. women in the 4 X 200 relay.

The Olympics has an appeal too because there will always be some marvelously inspired performances resulting in gold medals or major upsets for unlikely performers. The Puerto Rican basketball team belongs in this category with their thrashing of the United States. In fact, in basketball the performances by most of the men's teams and most of women's teams have put a very appealing style of game on display. One can only hope that the emphasis on team play and shooting will have an impact on the dismal NBA style. Those who thought that NBA shooting was so abysmal because of the fierce defense and physical play can now see that the poor shooting in the NBA is the result of players who can't shoot.

The performances by the U.S. men's and women's gymnastics teams were a joy to watch as were that of their competitors. The great play being displayed in women's soccer and the flawless performance of the USA softball team has been a delight.

More on the edge of my radar screen have been water polo, fencing, kayak racing, sailing, and the equestrian events. All of these have produced their own special moments. The sheer variety of sports and the cornucopia of victories, both predictable and surprising, is a treat for anyone who loves competition.

Less attractive over this first week has been the saga of the Greek tragic heroes, Kostas Kenteris and Katerina Thanou, who missed a drug test, may have been in a motorcycle accident, and then withdrew from the games. Other drug stories, failed tests and disqualifications, and the BALCO issue lurking in the background have marred the games. In point of fact track and field will lose much of its luster because of the depletion of the roster of athletes by the drug issue.

The U.S. Men's basketball team has shown its less attractive side by performing poorly, whining, and isolating themselves from the other athletes at the games. Perhaps if they lived the Olympic experience they might both enjoy themselves more and perform better on the court. The NBA stars are also being haunted by the rumor circulating in Athens that they only agreed to come to the games after being guaranteed that they would not be tested for drugs.

The empty seats, so much in evidence, detracted from the excitement, and the refusal of an Iranian athlete to compete against an Israeli was a clear violation of the Olympic spirit.

NBC has provided some very good coverage for those who have cable access. All variety of events can be seen live if you wish to see them and do not need to worry about such nonessentials as sleep. Unfortunately, the necessity of videotaped events has become more problematic in the information age as it is nearly impossible to get through a day without inadvertently seeing the results of the major events of the day several times. Still NBC insists on playing up the drama despite known outcomes and drags them on ad nauseam through a forest of commercials and features.

It might also be asked of NBC who decided that the last fifteen minutes of each evening broadcast should be filled with the repetitious awards ceremonies as the National Anthem is played in its entirety over and over again. Perhaps someone at NBC is on a mission to make sure that all the NBC audience memorize the notes and words of this less than great piece of music.

And did anyone notice that there is no USA team playing in either of the two new baseball stadiums built for the Olympics?

Still and all, it is the Olympics, and if you pick and choose your events you can shape it in the way you prefer it to be, and make it your Olympics to remember.

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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