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Athens: the beauty of playfulness

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Athens: the beauty of playfulness
AUGUST 30, 2004

Amidst the controversies, the crass commercialism, and the artificiality of the staged teledrama of the Olympics, the main point can too easily get lost. This is a sporting event involving athletes seeking to perform at the highest level, individually or as a team, as they compete against one another, themselves, and the challenges of the sport. What this offers is a drama of its own, showcasing the sporting spirit and offering each of us a window on the possibilities of human achievement.

As such each Olympics delivers moments of great achievement, considerable human agony, and high drama. It offers what is most attractive in sport and what keeps us coming back for more despite the warts. It offers joy, agony, and the beauty of playfulness.

All those who watch the games will have their own favorites depending on their own interests, the views they bring to the event, and the particular events they see. Those who see the games through television will have a very different experience than those who were in Athens or those who compete.

For me these games had many moments and events that exemplify what I love about human athletic performance and how it reflects upon the human spirit.

Among the individual performances that will stick with me were those of Kelly Holmes, Hicham El Guerrouj, Fani Halkia, Carolina Kluft, and Vanderlei de Lima. Holmes and El Guerrouj both achieved doubles in athletics with both achieving breakthroughs late in their careers. Holmes' double came in the women's 800m and 1500m. In a career plagued by injuries Holmes had never before won a world title and in Athens at age 34 she reached the pinnacle, surprising herself perhaps more than anyone. For El Guerrouj the agony at both Athens and Sydney was put to rest with his victory in the 1500m. This is a race he has dominated internationally for a decade. His joy, along with those of his competitors for him, was a memorable moment. When he came back to win the 5000m equaling a double not achieved since 1924 by Paavo Nurmi, a double considered by many to be the most difficult in all of athletics, it couldn't have been better.

Fani Halkia's surprise win in the women's 400m hurdles sent the Greek fans into ecstasy and helped them overcome the doping charges surrounding the Greek heroes of the Sydney Games. Halkia's joy in victory was punctuated by that of the Greek fans and then replicated when she anchored a second place finish for Greece in the semi-finals of the 4X400 relay as the crowd literally propelled her to the finish line.

In the men's marathon the finishing lap by Vanderlei de Lima, after his being assaulted on the course and losing a silver medal, and perhaps even a gold medal, was a marvelous example of the sporting spirit. He came around the final stadium lap waving to the appreciative crowd and simulating the flight of an airplane as he neared the finish line. For this last lap alone he deserved a gold medal.

At every Olympics there is that superstar/glamour athlete feigning indifference amidst self-assured greatness, and at this one it was Carolina Kluft of Sweden. She went through the seven events of the Heptathlon with ease lounging on the infield between events occasionally emerging from her earphones to acknowledge the camera or her fans. She ended by taking a victory lap with all her competitors as ABBA's "Dancing Queen" enveloped the stadium in sound.

The Heptathlon! Who knew?

Personal attachment to Ethiopia made all those distance-running events featuring Ethiopian competitors quite special. The medal count of seven for the Ethiopian's was considerable but for me the final appearance of Haile Gebre Selaisse in the 10,000m was the highlight. He finished fifth while his younger countrymen took gold and silver, but it was a fond farewell to one of the great distance runners of our time.

In team sports the dominance of the American women in softball, soccer, and basketball was a continuing tribute to the impact of Title IX on American sport. The team play of the women's basketball team was a sharp contrast to the NBA style of the men, while the farewell appearance of five women who won the first women's soccer world championship in 1991 had an appropriate ending. As for the softball team the dominance of their pitching was extraordinary and if that dominance leads to the elimination of women's softball from the Olympics it would be a shame. In men's basketball the play of Lithuania, Puerto Rico, Argentina, Italy, Brazil, and even the Americans was interesting to watch. It offers another reason why women's

softball should survive as an Olympic sport in this period of American dominance. Rising to the competition, whatever the level, is what propels athletes and teams to improve. It is a constant in sport and one of things that makes it worth watching.

Finally I must say that I was quite taken by the further development of the Chinese. This appears to be the second coming of the Big Red Machine to international competition, as it is clear that the Chinese are determined to be the dominant force when they host the next Olympic games. In all venues Chinese athletes and teams appeared on the podiums to collect the medals. It was interesting to see how little was known about many of them, at least within the context of the American media. One can be sure that won't happen again in Beijing. It was also striking to watch their quiet quest for perfection.

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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