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The Beijing Olympics

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Beijing Olympics
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The Olympics in Beijing has been a great disappointment. No one has collapsed into a coughing fit from the air pollution. This seemed a certainty from all the reports leading up to the opening of what are so quaintly termed "the games." The American cyclists who arrived in the Beijing Airport wearing face masks seemed to have made it through the opening ceremonies without contracting "black lung" or suffering a terminal case of "ring around the collar." I feel I have been let down yet again by the press.

Not all has gone well however. In what no one seems to have noticed as a protest gesture that dwarfs Carlos and Smith's now legendary salute, the women's beach volleyball venue was the scene of a protest for the ages. The American, Misty May-Traenor, bent over with her back to President Bush. This certainly symbolically summed up what the American people have been doing for the past seven years of the Bush Administration. Oddly there was no comment from the press, no IOC or USOC officials rushed in to put Misty on a plane out of Beijing in disgrace. You can bet that Avery Brundage would have understood this gesture, and punishment would have been swift and harsh.

Indeed little Bobby Costas seemed to find the entire episode amusing. Context apparently is everything.

The nightly Michael Phelps show has been quite impressive and has been nearly devoid of any controversy. Phelps' display in the pool was great television, great sport, and just the sort of thing that brings people to their television sets in big numbers. It will also mean big money for Phelps. He should have been designated an NBC vice-president for programming, rather than being crowned with the understated title of "greatest athlete of all time."

While Phelps was dominating prime time, NBC also offered a seemingly endless parade of gymnastics events. The men's and women's competitions both provided high quality performances from the U.S. and Chinese participants, and perhaps also from many others nations not deemed worthy of prime time by NBC. In fairness to NBC they did manage to work in a stray Russian or Rumanian now and again.

The great drama of the gymnastics venue was the U.S. v. China. Here we had what we have come to expect from the American television version of the Olympics. The U.S. commentators were in good form whining about the scoring of the judges who somehow never scored the U.S. gymnasts high enough, and simultaneously managed to score the Chinese gymnasts higher than they deserved.

Then there was the great "age controversy" in the pixie division of the gymnastics competition. As the Chinese women began to collect their medals the American reporters and commentators went into action on the age issue. The charge was that at least one Chinese woman was thirteen years old, not the required sixteen. There were suggestions of fraud by the Chinese authorities issuing false documents for these young women. There was one report which seemed to offer some proof that one competitor was only thirteen. And if you looked at them, well certainly many did not look sixteen.

One of the things that puzzled me about the age issue was that when I was sixteen it was a humiliation to be beaten by some little kid in anything. Certainly to have your lunch handed to you by a thirteen year-old would not be something you would want to advertise to your peers. Yet here were the Americans complaining about being beaten by a child.

Adding to the objectivity of this reporting NBC trotted out that highly reliable man of measured and cool judgment, Bela Karolyi. The former Romanian gymnastics coach, who built his career on the back of Nadia Comaneci, hyperventilated on camera over the obvious cheating being done by the Chinese. That Karolyi, exposed as a serial child abuser in Joan Ryan's *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, should be anywhere near NBC's gymnastics reporting brings shame on this once distinguished television network.

In the 1990s it was the Chinese swimmers who were winning the medals that belonged to the United States. That led to the repeated cries of doping by the American competitors and television commentators. That the swimmers were passing drug tests at the Olympic Games didn't matter; everyone knew they were cheating. Indeed many were, although that does not negate the fact that American losses in most any sport too often provokes charges of cheating, rather than respecting the achievements of athletes from other nations.

Before that it was the Eastern Bloc using men in women's competitions, using professionals in an amateur competition, or juicing up their athletes in some way or another. But then when

American athletes fail, as Roseanne Roseannadanna once astutely observed, "It's always something."

Despite their over the top reporting and analysis, their nationalist bias, and the mind-bending and confusing time warps, NBC has still managed to bring more of the games to the American public if you are willing to look for them in their various obscure cable and satellite locations. The quality of the camera work combined with the spectacular high-definition format put the viewer in the stadium and often in the event in ways never before seen.

There has been some very good reporting of the events, even by those who are in New York watching the games on huge HD screens. Of those announcers I have seen and heard I especially like the work of Al Trautwig on gymnastics excluding the color commentators, Mike Breen, Doug Collins, and Ann Meyers on basketball, and most of those at the track and field venue both male and female. The camera work at this venue has also been spectacular.

So enjoy the remainder of the games despite the underage competitors and the unprofessional commentators, always remembering while you watch this international spectacle that it's the competition and the individual effort that matters most. Unless you're looking for endorsements.

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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