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The Olympics - A Look Back Part One

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE OLYMPICS
A LOOK BACK, PART ONE
AUGUST 7, 2021

This is a look back at how in these Sport and Society essays I have characterized the Summer Olympic Games beginning in 1992. It is not meant to be a history of each Olympics but simply a look at how I reacted to them. It is in two parts with this being Part One

Each edition of the Olympic Games has its own unique characteristics that distinguish it from those of the past. The XXXII Olympiad has a number of such markers. The two most obvious and related are the fact that these games are one year late and that they are occurring in the midst of a pandemic. After a postponement and calls for cancellation, this Olympics is now coming to a close without any major health related disasters.

For the American television audience, and indeed for much of the known universe, the biggest story of the games is the saga of Simone Biles. This great gymnast has been the center of Olympic attention since her record setting performance in Rio in 2016. The drama generated by her withdrawal from competition could not have been greater, at least on NBC.

The sports competitions across the vast stage of the Olympics were not, however, obliterated by the Biles factor. There were many great competitions, many compelling stories, and many superb individual and team performances from athletes from nations great and small. Certainly, in the long run, these will be prominent in the annals of the Pandemic Olympics. Not as well remembered will be those athletes who at various stages were eliminated by positive Covid-19 tests.

"Sport and Society" began in 1991 as a radio commentary and evolved into its current written form. I thought it might be interesting, at least to me, to go back and look at the subjects covered in the Summer Olympics columns.

The first Olympics that I wrote about in this column was the 1992 Games in Barcelona. Basketball fans will remember it for

the first appearance of the Dream Team. In August of that year, I wrote about the *Sports Illustrated* Olympic Preview Issue that offered a full examination of the corporate sponsorships available: World Wide Sponsor, Official Sponsor, and Proud Sponsor. The biggest cash cow was "The Dream Team" that attracted forty corporate sponsors producing \$40 million dollars in revenue. Many of these sponsors had yachts to entertain clients and Olympic Officials.

Four years later the sponsorship scene was much the same only more so. The year 1996 was the Centennial year of the Modern Games and given the escalation of sponsorship money, some suggested they should be called the "Peter Ueberroth Memorial Games" named for the man who first showed how the Olympics could turn a profit.

Worldwide Sponsors paid \$40M, as did the Centennial Olympic Games Partners. The Partners got exclusive rights in their product line to advertise their connections to both the Games and the United States Olympic Team. The U.S. Sponsors paid anywhere from \$10M to \$20M, while licensing fees brought in another bundle of cash as the holders of the licenses paid a percentage of their product sales. NBC contributed \$456M in rights fees. The total of all these revenues came in somewhere north of \$2B.

The biggest player in Atlanta was clearly Coca-Cola, who essentially paid the International Olympic Committee to bring the Centennial Games to Atlanta rather than Athens where the Modern Games were born. Some preferred the title The Coca-Cola Games rather than The Centennial Games for the 1996 Games.

When women, especially U.S. women, started to accumulate medals, some began to talk of this as the Year of the Woman and much was made of Title IX as a contributor to U.S. success. In point of fact, NBC coverage ignored many of the achievements of female athletes, and NBC producers believed that female team sports were of no interest to the television audience. Overflow crowds at the venues for women's competitions indicted otherwise. Also telling was that no women were featured on Olympic Wheaties boxes.

There were three "Sport and Society" pieces written on these games with one focused on the bombing in Olympic Park. That will certainly be remembered, as will the fact that it barely impacted the games. That third piece also focused on Michelle Akers and the Women's Soccer team and ended with a tip of the

hat to the Ethiopian runners who carried on the legacy of Abeba Bakila the barefoot Marathon winner in Rome.

Four years later, the games moved to Sydney, Australia. As the games approached, there was concern that the venues might not be ready, but in the end they were. There were fears that the Australian rail system might not be able to handle the crowds. There were concerns about performance enhancing drugs. Some worried about the absence of the major NBA stars and the decision of Major League Baseball to decline participation. In the end, most of the fears proved unwarranted or simply irrelevant.

For Sydney undoubtedly the defining moment occurred when Cathy Freeman took the gold medal in the 400-meter race. A nation stopped and gave its undivided attention as one of its citizens of Aboriginal origin ran away from the field. The 110,000 fans in Olympic Stadium cheered wildly; thousands just outside the stadium watching on a large screen television did the same; and, in downtown Sydney, yet another large vocal crowd screamed in joy at the sight of Freeman's exquisite run. As if to underline the point, it was the 100th Gold Medal for Australia in Olympic competition.

Cathy Freeman's run did not change anything in the history of Australia; it did not improve the condition of the Aboriginal people who live at the poverty level in Australia. However, it was a symbolic moment when a nation embraced its history in a way that it had not done before. In the long run, it could prove to be more than symbolic, while in the short run, it was already a moment of considerable significance.

In these games, the Australians dominated in the pool, while the Chinese divers displayed their extraordinary skills. Perhaps the most amazing moment for Americans was the victory by Rulan Gardner in Greco-Roman wrestling over the Siberian Bear, Alexandre Karelin, who had not lost in thirteen years of competition.

So, despite the corruption at the highest levels and the fact that a bribe may have put the games in Sydney; despite the legion of failed drug tests and successful masking of drugs beating the tests; despite the crass commercialism of the games; despite the bogus nationalism on display; this was still a wonderful celebration of the best qualities of human competition.

In 2004, the Olympic Games returned to Athens eight years after the Centennial of the Olympics games which began in Athens in 1896. So, after a pause of a Coke and a trip down under the Games were back to their birthplace.

For the most part, what stuck with me about this Olympics were the many excellent individual and team performances. Kelly Holmes' double in the women's 800m and 1500m events was stunning coming at age 34 and after a career of injuries. Fanny Halkia of Greece sent the Athens crowd into a frenzy as she won the 400m hurdles. Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj achieved the double, winning the 1500m and 5000m events, equaling the achievement of Paavo Nurmi in 1924, one of those records that experts felt would never be equaled.

One other notable development was the growing success of China as an Olympic force. It appeared that Chinese athletes would be ready to be major players in Beijing in 2008. American television did not anticipate this development as commentators did not know much about these athletes and had little "up close and personal" material on them. That would certainly not be the case in 2008 when China was poised to make a run for gold. This may have been a preview of the coming of the next Big Red Machine.

End of Part One

Part II will follow early next week.

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