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## The Olympics Look Back Part II

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE OLYMPICS LOOK BACK PART TWO  
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As the 2008 Games approached, there was fear that air pollution in Beijing would cast a pall over the games. Essentially what happened was the rulers of the People's Republic ordered the pollution to go away.

As expected this would be another NBC United States show facilitated by Michael Phelps' record-breaking performance in the pool. Also, gymnastics dominated prime time broadcasts. The U.S. and China provided a fierce competition and created a new rivalry. The occasional Russian or Rumanian appeared briefly, but basically it was a preview of the new Olympic Cold War.

U.S. television commentators were in top form, complaining about the judges and accusing the Chinese of cheating by using a thirteen-year-old in violation of the sixteen-year-old minimum age. This fit the patterns of the past when doping was the accusation against Chinese swimmers in the 1990s. Leading the accusers for NBC was Bela Karolyi, whose tainted reputation apparently did not bother NBC.

In fairness to NBC they did bring more of the games to the U.S. audience than ever before by using its cutting-edge technology and multiple broadcast platforms. There was also some very good commentary, particularly in the coverage of basketball and track and field events. Also, a nod to Al Trautwig's excellent color commentary on the otherwise overblown gymnastics coverage.

Four years later, it was on to London. Having spent several months teaching Olympic History in London in 2011, I was not optimistic about the ability of the city to handle the 2012 Olympic Games. Already overcrowded and dealing with a crumbling infrastructure, it was easy to conclude that London was heading to disaster. I was convinced that the entire enterprise would collapse in a matter of days of the opening ceremonies. It did not.

I should have followed the advice of Simon Kuper of *The Financial Times* who told me not to take the doomsday views of the media too seriously. The problem for any reporter before the games, he noted, is that there is only one story to write, namely what could go wrong. Once the games actually begin this pessimism would quickly vanish. And so it did.

Two things helped. The usual tourists stayed away to avoid the Olympic crush and Londoners escaped to France or other European venues. The result was less traffic and fewer people in London proper.

The opening ceremonies were amazing and best described by Marina Hyde of *The Guardian*: “Tonight was Britain's opportunity to speak directly to the world, and - as befits a nation that declines to learn other languages - it did so in English. . . . Danny Boyle's banquet felt as deliciously indigestible to global tastes as Marmite or jellied eels. I loved it. We can't be worrying about how it went down in Moscow or Madagascar. I'm still reeling that a country that can put on a show that hilariously bonkers is allowed nuclear weapons.” In addition, the closing ceremonies resembled the Super Bowl Halftime Show on steroids with a touch of LSD.

As to the games themselves, it was first and foremost about Usain Bolt. He won gold medals on his own and anchored the Jamaican 4X100 relay in which the American's bested the world record but were bested by the Jamaicans. The American women set a world record in the 4X100 and claimed the gold. Also, on the track Mo Farah doubled in the 5000m and 10000m, while Temerat Dibaba won the 10000m, but fell just short in the 5000m.

The host nation had a record-breaking performance, as host nations often do. The locally beloved Andy Murray won Gold with a win over Roger Federer, who had beaten Murray a few weeks earlier at Wimbledon.

Despite the many excellent athletic performances, was it worth the 15 Billion dollars, which was three times over the original projected cost? This question is asked before and after every Olympics, and so far, no one seems willing to say, “NO.”

"A large number of athletes have chosen to withdraw from the games because of the health threat posed by the virus that has spread rapidly through the host country." I wrote this, not two weeks ago, but on the eve of the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio. The virus in question was Zika, not Covid-19. I must say I had forgotten about this and that the current games are now the second in succession to take place during a public health crisis. As is the case in Japan, so it was in Rio: The Games must go on.

Added to the health crisis in Rio were high levels of pollution in the waters of Brazil, including the Bay in Rio. Cleanup of the Bay netted a massive amount and array of waste, including dead fish, dead animals, and one human corpse. Problems with electricity, gas, and water plagued the dirty rooms that were the quarters for the athletes from Australia. There was political turmoil as the President of Brazil was being impeached. But, the Games must go on, and they did.

Once the Games were underway, the focus turned to the athletes. Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt were back doing what they did before, yet again. 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, even better, his coach was a 74-year-old great-grandmother. Gymnastics, as usual, were a centerpiece of the NBC Rio Games, with Simone Biles as superstar.

I started one of my Sport and Society pieces on the Rio Olympics this way: "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."

In many ways, my feelings about the current games are similar to the views expressed four years ago. Also, my views on the distortions produced by television have deepened with each passing Olympics, and it is not simply an NBC driven issue. The overhype has increased, and the prism of television has deeply skewed our perception of whatever is left of reality. Now social media has emerged fully to add to the cacophony and distortion.

For me, it has been interesting to look back at my comments on the Summer Games from 1992 on, and to wonder how distorted that vision was and to know how incomplete a picture I have painted.

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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