

Athens 2004, Ahead of the Games?

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Visitors to Sydney for the Olympic Games may have not discovered the small but impressive representation of people from the organising committee for the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. Despite some pressing concerns about the progress of Athens in its preparation for the Olympic Games, it appeared to be on top form in Sydney.

The expectations of any host city appear to grow exponentially each time they are held. However, it is often unclear whether a host city has been successful in its holding of the Olympic Games.

The 4-year run-up towards Sydney was marred with concerns about the IOC and the scandals that came to light in 1998/9. At the same time, the Australian approach to integrating indigenous people with the festival of the Olympic Games has been patchy at best, and quite disastrous at worst. Yet, the Sydney 2000 Olympic

Games appears to be getting good reviews.

It seems to have been heralded as a media success (unless you live in the United States and were watching NBC).

However, upon seeing this appearance within the media, one might wonder what the criteria are for evaluating the successes and failures of the Games. Furthermore, it might also be asked as to whether host cities ought to be held responsible if they fall short of providing the level of organisation that the competition requires. Finally, it must be asked whether the expectation of the host city is becoming too great, whether the Games is becoming too big a competition to manage.

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This final question is provoked by the emerging interest to ensure that Athens is on schedule and how it will compare to the

very different organisational management of the Sydney Organising Committee.

The enormity of the Games has been on the minds of Olympic researchers for some years. It is without question that the Games becomes increasingly inclusive, though this ambition might simply be unworkable if the Games remains in its current state. Are there good reasons for arguing the removal of, for example, team sports to ensure that the Olympic Games is manageable?



Photograph from a Sydney Subway poster advertising Nike. Cathy Freeman and Michael Johnson symbolise what some would describe as the core business of the Olympic Games: athletics. Captions read: 'Change the World, 400m at a time' (left) and 'Outrun History' (right).

Alternatively, it might be considered that the Summer Games might need to be split into two further divisions in a comparable way to having the summer and winter games. Thus, one might envisage two summer games. Perhaps there could be an

Olympics each year or at different times of the year and in different cities. This would certainly lessen the burden on any host city, minimise potential risk of loss and even allow for a more inclusive experience, as more cities would be able to form alliances with the staging of this international event.

Other solutions and criticisms can be posed. It seems reasonable to argue that the Olympic Games continue to perpetuate a particularly Western ideal in the kinds of sports that are included.

Furthermore, the very notion of competition that is embraced within the Olympic ceremony, the winning of medals, and, the form of idolising the victors is notably Western and not entirely shared by many cultures. Thus, it might be argued that, in order to strive for the ideals of Olympism, there needs to be a greater emphasis on other aspects of the festival that do not involve pathological notions of competition.

One way in which this can be achieved is through the promotion of the cultural and arts festivals that are an integral part of the Olympic Ideal and aspirations, though which are terribly under-promoted within the four years preceding the games and even during the games themselves. In recognition of this broader notion of the Olympics as a cultural

festival, it could be argued that there is a need for a return to values and refocus in the way in which the Olympics are held.

This is certainly not to dismiss the sporting competition or even to neglect it. Rather, it is to advocate and even demand that attention be given by the media to the cultural aspects of the Games, to shift the emphasis from winning and competition to inclusion and the embracing of cultures, of which sport is a part; a shift from the celebration of victory, to the celebration of cultural integration.

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Of course, cultural integration can and has been demonstrated in quite profound ways through the participation of sport. Indeed, it is often thought that

sporting competition is one arena whereby it is possible to leave behind the conflicts of the world to engage in an activity that is loved by all communities, regardless of their political disagreements.

This has been shown time and time again, particularly and, I think, exceptionally through the Olympic competitions. Yet, it is because of this very powerful symbolism of the Games that I would argue that more can be done. As the Olympic Games, becomes increasingly immersed in the globalised guise of elite and professional competition, which is performance based, any broader notions of excellence are being lost.

The Olympic Games is unique in its underpinning philosophy and its ability to convey this through such powerful symbols as the flame and the rings. These symbols may have the capacity to broaden and challenge performance-based sport. However, it requires explicit prerequisites for host cities to strive for and even prioritise these aspects of the festival.