

## Olympic myths

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**The Salt Lake City Olympic Winter Games draws to a close this weekend with very little controversy surrounding it. For this newly famed US Western city, its challenges were found somewhat earlier in the last millennium.**

In 1999, the guardians of the Olympics, or as journalist Andrew Jennings calls them, *The Lords of the Rings*, were revealed for accepting back-handed deals from bidding cities, the Olympic equivalent to 'cash for questions'. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was not, it would seem, acting as impartially as the international sporting community might have hoped. It was in relation to the Salt Lake City bid when these allegations surfaced and the discoveries stood to ruin the image of Salt Lake considerably.

### Olympic Reform

Today, the IOC claims to engage with reform and there are visible signs of this. For instance, IOC members are no longer allowed to visit bid cities, at least for the

time being. As well, the Salt Lake Organising Committee (SLOC) has brushed off the bad press, identifying itself as being the norm, rather than the exception. The Salt Lake bid was quite probably only one of many other cases where bid cities would try to win the vote of the influential IOC members by offering gifts and financial incentives. At the time, the IOC would claim that such offerings were part of the tradition and that, for many countries, it is impolite to refuse gifts. Many others did not see that such tradition extended quite as far as it did.

Since the exposure of these IOC scandals, the Olympics has been criticised for being vastly disassociated with the Olympic Movement's alleged values, which include international peace, fair play, and humanitarianism. In the past, these values have allowed the Olympics to achieve a somewhat apolitical status in international dealings, though today even this can be questioned. Its aspirations for UN acknowledgement as a non-governmental organisation is still less prominent than the IOC would like.



UN Declaration on Olympic Truce

Inevitably, as an increasing number of countries tune in to watch the Olympics, the Games have become one of the more effective means to communicate international statements. As well, its inherent nationalist structure of competition – country versus country – would seem to reinforce separatism rather than the IOC's preferred value of humanity. Previous Games have seen terrorist attacks, such as that of Munich 1972 and the bombing in Atlanta 1996. Now, in Salt Lake, all eyes have been watching to see whether the Games will be used to challenge the United States overwhelming political influence.

### **Olympics post 9/11**

Following September 11, the security plans for Salt Lake heightened significantly. Reports have been made of FBI red alerts leading up to the Games, air space over the Olympic Opening Ceremony stadium was closed during the proceedings, and athletes are said to be

outnumbered by military 4 to 1. For many US citizens, the Salt Lake Games is hoped to be a threshold to overcome fears about travelling to and within the US. If all goes well, then it is anticipated that flight sales will pick up. However, if anything should go wrong, then very little may change.

With the use of the World Trade Centre US flag in the Opening Ceremony, one could be forgiven for feeling that America has been insensitive to how its nationalism is perceived by some countries. At a time when it might be best to stress togetherness rather than overcoming, the example raises further questions about the Olympics' supposed apolitical status. This reveals one more inner contradiction of the Olympic Movement. That is the limited powers of the IOC, which in this case manifested an explicit opposition to September 11 statements, to prevent the promotion of nationalistic values by the Games host organiser.

### **Pricing values**

Olympic values seem also left by the wayside by the overtly commercialised nature of these special moments. The TOP sponsors of the International Olympic Committee include many big hitters such as Coca Cola, Samsung, McDonalds, Panasonic, Visa and Xerox. It must be noted that for Sydney,

sponsorship consisted of 33% of the Organising Committee's revenue and that a further 50% was derived from broadcasting rights. The importance of sponsorship and broadcasting demonstrates that the Olympics is, necessarily, a commercially driven enterprise.

Of the broadcasters, US based NBC is a dominant player. Watching the NBC coverage, one is overwhelmed with this impression, as the commercial breaks occur every 5 minutes or so, even interrupting the coverage of many sports. As well, when one realises that sports are often scheduled by the broadcasting company's preference, rather than the needs of the athletes, the importance of Olympic values seems to be rather overshadowed.



Olympic branding and commercialism: the Sydney 2000 countdown auction

The Olympic venues, despite claims by the IOC of being "clear of branding", are no less commercial. While corporate logos are banned in the sports

field, they are overwhelmingly present in every item of consumption surrounding the field, from the food stands to the staff uniforms and even as far as the Olympic pins, which have become collector items and significant source of income for the Olympic organisers.

## The Olympic Hero

So, what is left of the philosophy of Olympism if the Games are predominantly a site for political statements and commercial gain? Some would say that it is the athletes that remain, the silver-linings of some very dark clouds of sport gone wrong. However, even here, one can be critical. Nobody really believes in the moral virtue of athletes any more. Their heroic status seems lost among the branding and product promotion that holds their careers together. Their mediatisation has de-celebrited them interest little more than extravagant 'big brother' characters.

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## athletes are persecuted when any character flaw is discovered

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The continual coverage of athletes' lives has revealed them for what they are - normal human beings with very fit and skilful bodies. They make

mistakes and are not guardians of morality, as some might have it. Nor should they be considered as such. Indeed, people still find awe and wonder in the elite athlete and praise the extraordinary the achievements of any gold medal. Yet still, athletes are persecuted when any character flaw is discovered. The most common way of de-popularising an athlete has been to brand them cheat and moral fiend in respect of some doping offence. It is an odd situation when the use of a cold remedy can render a human being as a national villain, as Alain Baxter (GB) found out.

Despite these criticisms of Olympic values and Olympic

myths, it must still be said that people seem to care about the Games. Spectators get excited about being close to elite athletes and witnessing extraordinary moments. While it cannot be denied that a price is most definitely paid for such privileged experiences, it does not make them any less exciting.

It seems unlikely that elite sport can thrive in a de-commercialised world, and even less likely that it could ever take place. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the institution of the Olympics, not only the IOC but also respective host organisers, ought not to be criticised and made publicly accountable.