

A myth of Olympic proportions

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Ilya Shapiro is currently on the ground in Vancouver and will be sending dispatches throughout the Olympic Games, posted here at The Daily Caller.

VANCOUVER—The 2010 Olympics, held in the largest city ever to host a Winter Games, have not gone completely according to plan.

Before the games even began, organizers lamented how Washington, D.C., was getting a surfeit of snow that would have helped certain venues. Then, a luger lost his life to a track that was apparently both the fastest in the world and the one with the least padding. Then the fourth arm that was to hold the Olympic cauldron failed during the opening ceremonies. Finally, as I personally observed, ice conditions detracted from several promising speed skating events.

Apart from these real concerns, however, political activists and their media enablers remind us of how drugs, commercialism and the threat of terrorism have spoiled the world's preeminent athletic event. Columnists lament the passing of a purer age, when doctors trained to run four-minute miles in their spare time, when competition was its own reward and a medal brought national glory rather than celebrity endorsement contracts. These Cassandras habitually predict the demise of the Olympics as modern society wreaks havoc on the sacrosanct traditions of the ancients.

But this prediction is based on bad information; politicians' beliefs that the games should promote a kinder, gentler, unified world reflect romanticized history. Since the end of the Cold War, the Olympics have thrown off the corrosive chains of ideological battle to revert to the values of the original Games, among which were the dominance of the personal over the national, the economic over the political, and the athletic over larger concerns of the state.

The standard view of the Greek Olympics as a halcyon festival bringing amateur sportsmen together in the name of peace and brotherhood is a remnant of 19th-century Romanticism, which was institutionalized by aristocrats like modern games founder Pierre de Coubertin. Adolf Hitler, who staged the 1936 Berlin Games as a testament to the German people—and invented the torch relay in the first place—was taken in by a similar Olympic vision of nationalism via physical perfection.

The ancient reality could not have been further from these modern misconceptions, however, as Greek armies routinely violated the Olympic truce, and battle sometimes took place *in the Olympic sanctuary itself*. Individualism and athletic prowess were valued much more than mere participation, and wealth superceded ideology.

Pindar, the lyric poet whose victory odes tell us much of what we know about the early Olympians, wrote at the behest and patronage of wealthy athletes, who sought personal glory rather than the vindication of their city-state and its political system. And the great champion Alcibiades used his prestige to gain fame and riches, often at the expense of his "national interest."

Further, the ancient heroes were Panhellenic—Athenian kids cheered for a Spartan Lindsay Vonn—and the victors' olive wreaths were intrinsically worth about as much as the medals doled out in Vancouver.

The modern games, as they developed during the Cold War to allow politics to overshadow sports, broke with their predecessors. Mexico City hosted the 1968 Olympics amid the tumult of student uprising around the globe. Black Power made its presence felt on the victory podium with a barefoot gloved-fist protest. Subsequent Olympiads reflected the expansion and retrenchment of communism, along with guerilla warfare and counter-revolution in Latin America.

The Games of 1972 succumbed to the most dastardly terrorism ever visited upon the Olympics, with Palestinian jihadists' murder of 11 Israeli athletes and coaches in Munich. The 1976 Montreal event, which left a trail of debt that Quebec taxpayers only recently paid off—and for which British Columbia taxpayers now brace themselves—saw the first of a series of boycotts, this time by 30 African countries protesting apartheid.

As the Soviet Union and its vassal states succeeded in using the games as a showcase for ideological superiority, and the Western world lay mired in stagflation and cynicism, the Olympics lost their ancient bearings.

Though nobody knew it at the time, the 1988 Seoul Olympics were a watershed. These games followed the tit-for-tat superpower boycotts in Moscow and Los Angeles and were the first to be free from major political turmoil since Tokyo in 1964. More importantly, they represented the last Olympiad of the Cold War, with the Berlin Wall falling the next year, followed by the dissolution of the Evil Empire, German reunification, and the New World Order of globalization.

The 20th century took us through almost continual political upheaval—not least within the Olympics—with most of it defined by the bipolar Cold War mentality and the specter of nuclear Armageddon. With that edifice of pretension eroded, the games were free to become athletic spectacles again.

Under today's conditions of globalization—cultural homogenization, economic interdependence, decline of the nation-state even with respect to our enemies in war—international athletic competition assumes an ever-more parallel course to that of world society at large. As with all sporting events, the Olympics of the past two decades have become exponentially more entertainment-oriented. Even the proliferation of crass commercialism is a positive step because it returns the Olympics to the role they fulfill best: providing a forum for the finest athletes in the world to compete for fame and riches, while showing the rest of us a good time.

The Olympics now bring us the absolute best, without regard to color, creed, contract, or the Iron Curtain. The nature of the Olympic "movement," meanwhile, has returned to the entertainment, ritual, and indeed athletic value of the original games. Gone is the sham of amateurism, as athletes are once more individuals, not tools of the state.

Tradition meet meritocracy; Coubertin meet Milton Friedman. Counter the conventional punditry, the symbiotic relationship between sports and society has thankfully returned to its original, proper status under the ancient Greeks.

Returning to 2010, International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge was correct to quip ironically that his leadership group should have urged something other than the "greenest Games" (perhaps by avoiding temperate climates like Vancouver—or 2014's Sochi, Russia?). It is of course tempting for these unaccountable IOC grandees to hitch their star to the ~~global warming~~ climate change fad, but that doesn't mean they should be immune from criticism for using a glorious athletic competition for peddling utopian myths.

Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow in constitutional studies at the Cato Institute, wrote his master's thesis at the London School of Economics on the transformation of the Olympics in the post-Cold War era. He will be filing periodic dispatches for the Daily Caller from and about the 2010 Winter Games.

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