

## ONE PERSONS'S POINT OF VIEW: A RESPONSE TO HERB WEINBERG

by Robert K. Barney

Like many ISOH members, I received the passionately-expressed plea from Herb WEINBERG. In essence, Herb's remarks, directed "to one-hundred American and Canadian Olympic scholars and to those who have an interest in Olympic affairs" is a plea aimed at demanding that the IOC provide a forum for scholars from which concern might be enunciated on what is perceived to be an erosion of "Olympism" principles underpinning the Movement, an erosion promoted by several issues, among them: drug cheating, moral corruption, degeneration of the Games to "show-business" spectacle, and enveloping commodification. Herb's rationale, most understandable, is that "the Olympic Movement belongs as much to us [scholars], to anyone [the public], as it does to any IOC member" [parenthesis mine]. Few would argue with Herb's statement cited above. And, for most scholarly disciplines, residence within the Olympic Movement and its "Olympic Family" might be desirable, but not, in my opinion, for historians. I illustrate by citing the results of a fairly recent encounter.

In Beijing in October 2003 I was to give an address associated with an Olympic Symposium celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Chinese National Sports University. The program featured remarks by Zhenliang HE, China's senior IOC member. My own address focused on Juan Antonio SAMARANCH'S some twenty years stewardship of the Modern Olympic Movement. My thesis ended in some "good news" (commendable), "bad news" (condemnation) assessments. The venerable Chinese "Olympic mentor" listened intently, and afterwards, at a private dinner, offered me, in an

extremely polite manner I might add, quite different conclusions, albeit, as he noted, from the perspective of being "inside the Olympic family" rather than "as you, professor, from outside." "Both perspectives," he noted, "are important."

I agree on the importance of "both perspectives," but the work of the historian, fundamentally and beyond argument, should be approached from an outside, removed perspective. For example, in essence that is what the external review system of research evaluation is all about - "arms-length" evaluation of historical inquiry. The lack of such application of evaluation leads me, for instance, to be moderately anxious, sometimes even skeptical, of much autobio-graphical material (indeed, who wishes to leave an inglorious legacy???). This also applied to hagio-graphical works. Philosophers, whose world is "argument prompting action," are the folks for which I think Herb's plea is most appropriate. They will not have to think too carefully in embracing his messages. But, the historian is different. We should not be crusaders, at least not crusaders in crusades attached to our investigations.

Historians must tread carefully in allying themselves to "causes," the historicity of which form a principle investigation focus. By joining a cause we move away from historical objectivity in our research and argument, letting emotions cloud our quest to get as close to the truth as possible. If we are not careful, selectivity of sources to support one's thesis, and, in the same vein, exclusion of the evidence that weakens one's point of view, can become "the order of the

day." A willing historian/worker for "Olympism," irrespective of the nobility of the cause, makes one akin to being a missionary, and that, in my opinion, is dangerous. Indeed, one might ask, what damage occurs to our credibility if we are identified as "one of the family." I have the sense that there are many who question the credibility and objectivity of the work of both individuals and institutions because of their close link to IOC advocacy and sponsorship. As a way of example, what might be thought of the point of view of professors in a university political science department that collectively advocates a political and emotional attachment to a particular political party? I'd argue that historians seek the truth based on the best evidence possible, and forge conclusions therein, which may be accepted or rebutted (granted, sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists may have different "takes" – I don't speak for them).

Herb asks the question: "*Where do we fit in?*" My answer: as historians, we don't. In my opinion, first, our discipline is not one that should share a critical place within the Olympic movement as an active agency of argument for change; and second, enough has been and continues to be written and argued from "*within*" – let us look at the Olympic Movement from the outside, away from the compromises arising by dint of being looked upon as an "*Olympic family member*" "*Is it time we as scholars started asking questions that IOC officials may have difficulty answering relative to Olympic principle?*" Well, certainly, Herb, but what does that have to do with receiving Olympic accreditation? "*Do we have a right to be heard?*" Surely, but it isn't up to the

IOC to provide that right. We have ample forums in which our work "*can be witnessed*," and if it is judged to be serious, then public opinion will ultimately rule the day. My sense is that the IOC does not mind criticism, as long as it is constructive criticism. Let us, as historians, provide the body of knowledge from which criticism germinates, but let the philosophers and others carry the public argument for change.

Finally, Herb also brings up the subject of "Olympic education" and the scholar's role as teacher. If he means "*Olympic education*" in the context of indoctrinating the young in the espoused values of the Modern Olympic Movement, then I have severe reservations. For societies the world-over, virtually for millennia, family, church and school have traditionally taken care of the things that "*Olympic educators*" argue their quest is all about. Let the traditional avenues of value education persist. If, on the other hand, "*Olympic education*" is a process which seeks to capitalize on the great interest in "*matters Olympic*" worldwide to stimulate reading, writing, and verbal growth and development gained in similar fashion from studies of nature, current events, history, and art, for example, then so be it. How could one not argue in favor?

I commend Herb WEINBERG for taking the initiative and having the guts to pose a thorny problem and circumstance. But, though my new Chinese friend eloquently stated that "*both perspectives are important*" I would not retreat in arguing that "*our perspective*" (the historical) is more creditable and believable to a wider audience when it is rendered as free from political or ideological agendas as possible.

**The *Journal of Olympic History* is a liberal magazine in which controversial opinions on Olympic issues could be published. It is always welcomed to respond to articles by submitting letters to the editor.**