ROAD TO GLORY

BY HARRY GORDON

When the Olympic Games last visited Australia in 1956, Lygon Street was coming out gently as the Italian heart of Melbourne. It was virtually unlit at night, but a few small establishments - among them the University Cafe and the Cafe Sport - were serving spaghetti, minestrone and lots of coffee. They represented a kind of pasta beachhead, those cafes, a glimmer of potential for a cosmopolitan nightlife; and their clientele expanded vastly that November as word of their existence spread among members of the Italian Olympic team.

Melbourne wasn't much of a nightlife town then. The pubs shut a 6pm, a practice which intrigued visiting journalists: the columnist Red Smith advised readers across the United States bemusedly that the six o'clock swill was a charming folk custom. Footpath dining, let alone drinking, was forbidden by municipal edict. Wine was consumed in special saloons, often by people who had a problem. Collins Street had what was called a Paris End, but not even a striped umbrella to show for it.

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Now that the five-ring circus that is the Olympic Games is due to visit Sydney in the springtime of 2000 (Friday, September 15 to Sunday, October 1), the temptation to reflect on change is enticing. Twice in a history stretching across 104 years, the modern Olympic movement will have ventured to the Southern Hemisphere.

Both times, its choice of host city has been Australian. The 44-year gap offers a window of sorts on a nation that has in many respects become another country.

It is not, of course, just Australia that has changed. So too, essentially, have the Olympic Games. We're talking here about a span of years, eras really, from Menzies to Howard, from Truman to Clinton, from Brundage to Samaranch. When the Games last came to Australia, the world had never heard of the Beatles, JFK, or Rupert Murdoch. It had come to terms with the dry-drip shirt.

Melbourne in 1956 was an innocent city, even naive, and the Games that were celebrated then are remembered by many in the Olympic movement as the last of the innocent Olympics. The portents were not promising. The Cold War was at its harshest, causing the Soviet team to be housed, quarantined in effect, on a liner in Port Phillip Bay rather than in the Olympic Village. Apart from that, the Games were preceded by eruptions of international tension: the Russians were invading Hungary, the two Chinas were disagreeing vehemently, and there was much shooting around the Suez Canal.

After Russian tanks rumbled into Budapest, several nations registered disapproval by refusing to send teams to the Games. During a water-polo match, there was a notable, maybe inevitable, punch-up between players from Hungary and the Soviet Union. For all that, those Games were pervaded generally by a mood of simple goodwill, a purity of performance, spectacle and appreciation.

Some host cities, like Rome and Los Angeles, are so very large, so blase really, that they are unfazed by the Games. They take them in their stride, then set on with their own bustling business. Melbourne was not such a place: it had real doubts about its own abilities and it was bedazzled by the exoticism of the largest event in its history. It was bolstered by its passion for sport, its enthusiasm and its generosity of spirit. Those Olympics were utterly successful, Australia won more gold medals than it ever

has, the legends of people like Betty Cuthbert and Murray Rose were born, and Melbourne was never quite the same again. Television came to the Games after Melbourne, and with it came multi-million dollar deals that continue to escalate: the cost of TV rights alone for Sydney 2000 is $954.6 million. Maybe because of that medium, and the vastness of its audience, terrorism came to stain the Olympics in 1972. TV might claim some responsibility too for the era of extreme sponsorship, which reached a low-tide mark in Atlanta last year, when McDonald's and Coca-Cola seemed at times to be in charge.

Sometime early during the 44-year gap, opening ceremonies began to evolve from blazered processions to extravaganzas, some of them laced with spectacular elements of kitsch. A whole procession of mascots came along. Drugs invaded the festivals that had been founded as celebrations of idealistic endeavour. Urine samples, gender tests, became forensic symbols of the preparedness for cheats to accept a little aid in their efforts to be stronger, go faster, fly higher.

Olympic amateurism died in the years between our Australian Games, and this was no bad thing. It belonged to another age. Some moments of glory and a medal or two are no just reward for a young lifetime of dedication and discipline. Anyway, the amateurism inflicted by Avery Brundage, the Samaranch of 1956, was hypocritical. It tolerated devices (army service, college scholarships) from both sides of what was then the Iron Curtain, but made a villain of anyone who took the money openly.

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Unsurprisingly, politics sullied the Olympic Games. Hitler had used Berlin to give some gloss to his Nazi regime in 1936. But after Melbourne, a new phenomenon arrived: the boycott as political muscle. Moscow in 1980 represented one of the less edifying moments after Jimmy Carter persuaded 26 nations not to compete.

There is some irony in the knowledge that for Australia, those Games of 1980 have come to be seen as a defining, triumphant episode. In defiance of the unsubtle urging of its prime minister, Malcolm Fraser, Australia sent a team to Moscow. In doing so, it established a principle of independence from government - one due to be underpinned financially by a $99.54 million bounty which will flow from the Sydney Games.

One area of quite dramatic change has been in the attitude of the Olympic Games to women. The all-male, elderly and rather fusty membership of the International Olympic Committee in 1956 obviously considered the female to be a fragile creature. Heavy sweating, it felt, was strictly for chaps.

No women's track event longer than 200 metres was included in that program; since then, the distances have been extended steadily, until in 1984 they came to embrace the marathon. In Sydney, women will contest one of the most physically demanding test of all, the triathlon.

The IOC itself has undergone something of a conversion, too. It lowered its own gender barrier in 1981, letting in just two female members; from 1987 to 1995, it added 54 members, only five of whom were women. But last year it admitted three more, bringing its female tally to 11 - to reach its target of 10 percent of 110 members.

In this context of change, it is worth considering what might be termed the doubling of Australia. In 1956 the nation's population hovered around 9.5 million. Sydney's was 1.9 million, Melbourne's 1.6 million. By June last year the two major cities had multiplied neatly by two: to 3.8 million for Sydney, 3.2 million for Melbourne. And the national figure had moved to 18.2 million.

During the doubling process, the very texture of the nation's population has undergone emphatic change. A largely monocultural society has evolved into one which includes people from all but a few of the 197 nations which competed in the Atlanta Olympics last year (1996). In 1947, 90 per cent of Australians were from British stock. By the mid-fifties, after vigorous immigration, the count of Australians who had been born overseas was up to 14 per cent. Of those, more than half were from the United Kingdom. By 1993, Annita Keating was able to tell the IOC (during Sydney's 2000 bid) that she was one of 25 per cent of all Australians born overseas, and that "mine is now one of 140 cultures found in Sydney alone: we speak more than 80 languages in our city". She could have added that Sydney's quota of overseas-born Australians was up to 30 per cent, that its people worshipped in 78 religious categories.

Travel habits have changed too. In 1956 a few adventurous souls were staking out Earl's Court as a London outpost, but we were hardly a nation of worldly wanderers. People who had spent time overseas tended often to let the fact be known; to some it was a badge of sophistication. Last

year, more than 2.6 million Australians went abroad, 50 for every person who did so in 1956.

When the Olympics moved on from Melbourne, not much tangible evidence of their stay remained. The organisers had spent little, and made much use of the abundant sports facilities the city possessed. The most visible legacy was a swimming pool which represented a landmark in the architecture of sport; that and a Housing Commission complex that had served as the athletes' village.

The biggest legacy was. . .well, more spiritual. An identity had been defined. Something had happened to the soul of Melbourne, and maybe of Australia.

Sydney's Olympics, whose logo is based on an opera house undreamed of when the Games last visited Australia, will undoubtedly launch a new crop of heroes, and fresh legends to sit beside these created by the Cuthberts, Roses and Frasers. They will also leave a huge physical imprint. Most notably this will involve the transformation of Homebush Bay, once known for its abatoirs, brickworks, dumping grounds and sheer dormancy, into a magnificent complex of sports arenas, parklands, high-technology industry and urban living. The Games will cost $2.3 billion to stage, and leave behind $3.1 billion worth of infrastructure, including a rail loop to Olympic Park.

The success of the Sydney Games will not of course be measured in bricks and mortar, or balance sheets. Performances are what will count most, not just of the Australian team but of the whole community. A city's passion will be touched in September 2000, maybe as never before.

Like Melbourne in 1956, Sydney will be able to demonstrate its love of sport, its generosity, its tolerance. In doing so, it will have the opportunity to assert the character, goodwill and vision of an Australia which has changed so much. The timing could not be better, as a century turns and a huge global audience watches. It is a moment to be grasped boldly, and with grace.

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