

A NOTE TO OLYMPIC HISTORIANS

BY HERB WEINBERG

Please allow me, through this Journal dedicated to those with a specific interest and affection for Olympic history, to offer several criticisms and suggestions as to the means by which that history is being recorded. . . or rather NOT being recorded.

Within this world there are three universals common to all social systems.

{1} religion, {2} sport, and {3} Coca Cola.

It is the function of the *Journal of Olympic History* and its parent body, The International Society of Olympic Historians, to record the processes and goings-on of the organization that is the most powerful within that second universal: sport. I refer to the International Olympic Committee and its concomitant national Olympic committees and related national and international sporting federations. There are also IOC commissions and committees and Olympic organizing committees, all of which serve to create and maintain the heart and soul of {1} Olympism, {2} the Olympic movement, and {3} the Olympic Games.

Together their rulings, decisions and philosophies affect most of the world's athletes. Therefore, the mechanics and processes of these bodies should be recorded for posterity, to allow the future to what the Olympic movement was and is relative to our generation and those of past generations.

Of course that is the task of Olympic historians, of which I am not one. However, I count many of them among my friends because of our common interest in things Olympic, and in my way I have been a keeper of the Olympic record if not the flame in that I have been an Olympic journalist for more than the past quarter-century, having covered almost all Olympic Games and IOC sessions during that time. I

have also covered the interstitial aspects of Olympism: covering issues, policies and controversies that arose during those years between each Games. Similarly, I have covered the affairs of my own NOC, the United States Olympic Committee. Therefore, in my way, I am sort of an historian, having lived through so much history. During my time as a journalist, Americans have learned of Olympic issues through my eyes, words and voice.

For example, I was there when the Israeli athletes were murdered in Munich and I was there when South Africa was readmitted into the movement. I have seen and reported about changes in the Olympic Charter and I have analyzed the politics of Red China's admission into Olympism. I have covered issues and policies that dealt with eligibility, banned drugs, aspects of commercialism, television contracts, boycotts and other controversies ranging from gender tests to scandals involving the subjectively judged sports such as gymnastics, diving, boxing and figure skating.

I've also seen the Olympic movement establish itself as the largest and most successful international organization in the world . . . having seen athletes of warring nations talking, at peace, at tables within the Olympic Village. And, unfortunately, I have also known the cheaters, the liars, and the schemers who believe that winning and/or making a profit is everything.

Those of who write about these events when they are contemporary are called reporters; but do we become historians when that which we wrote about become sources for historians, archivists?

And therein lies what I hope is constructive criticism.

Firstly, I have rarely seen scholars, historians, academics

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or researchers at regular IOC or NOC sessions.

Secondly the criticism above means, therefore, that we are allowing living contemporary Olympic history to slip through our fingers, to go unrecorded. And since they record nothing contemporary I assume they wait until issues have become aged enough to have become ‘history,’ from which time they can then deal with them second-hand, from newspapers clippings for example. I recently read a book dealing with Olympic history that described controversies which occurred at a Games or at an IOC session I covered...and I could feel the light years between the author and the emotion and strategies of the antagonists and protagonists. He seemed to be dealing with those controversies with little more than his fingertips, as though he did not realize that 90 percent of the iceberg lies below the waterline. He seemed to have relied almost entirely on secondhand sources. There were a few interviews but too few to have fully developed each issue, policy, decision or controversy.

How can we allow that to happen when most of decision-makers and participants are alive today? After all, modern Olympic history is for the most part a “living” history...it is alive today. There are even people alive who had conversations with Pierre de Coubertin, such as France’s Comte de Beaumont.

Taking as an example the issues of the ’76 Olympics at Montreal, almost all the participants are still alive: former IOC President Lord Killanin; Pierre Trudeau, Canada’s Premier at the time; Jean-Claude Ganga, now an IOC member, but at the time the Congolese leader of African NOCs who led more than 20 nations out of those Games over the issue of New Zealand’s national rugby team having played a rugby game against a South African team.

During those Games Red China, not yet a member of the Olympic family, forced out of Canada the “Nationalist” Chinese team from Taiwan. The officials from Canada, Taiwan, China and New Zealand whose arguments almost found the cancellation of an Olympics, I believe have never been interviewed in depth beyond contemporary sessions with reporters. I believe it is now the time of historians to fulfill that task, in depth, in light of the participants’ reflections. Or will wait until the events are “historic” at which time archivists, those who probably never attended an IOC session nor ever met an Olympic official, reconstruct these

incidents from secondary sources?

Thirdly, and in light of the above two criticisms, would it not be wise to ask journalists who covered those events to write their detailed recollections of those events?

Of course we must strive to be objective; however, we must not overlook subjective recollections. What about the interplay amongst the power brokers? What blocs were formed, continental or otherwise, and what pressures did each bring to bear? Which strategies succeeded, which failed, which strategies backfired? A description of the strokes of genius and the blunders that brought the ‘88 Olympic Games to Seoul is almost worthy of a book in itself. Unfortunately, however, current books deal primarily with results, scores, victors, losers, Olympic and world records. There is too little narrative accounting of the heart and soul of controversies and debates.

Am I being chauvinistic in expressing my belief that journalists can handle these kinds of tasks better than historians?

I recommend such American colleagues as Phil Hersh of the Dallas Morning News, Christine Brennan of The Washington Post, Mike Janofsky of The New York Times, Ken Reich and Randy Johnson of The Los Angeles Times, among others. Non-Americans include Morley Myers of United Press International, David Miller of The Times of London, the dean of us all is John Rodda now retired from The Manchester Guardian, and Steve Parry of Reuters. There’s also Larry Siddons, international sports editor for The Associated Press.

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These people have been there with no axe to grind although they know the people who did...and as writers they cast a wary and cynical eye on the decision-makers. . .as they should.

There is so much important Olympic history that has not been adequately written about. For example, is there a detailed account of the part played by the Olympic movement in bringing about the collapse of South Africa’s apartheid policies? How many historians are even aware there was a South African Olympic Committee “in exile”? Having great pride in their athletes white South Africans realized they could never rejoin the Olympic family so long as such racism existed. Therefore, they had to choose and they did. Not that their desire to rejoin the Olympic movement was the only factor, but it was a contributing factor.

This story, among so many other stories that have impact-

ed world history need full and accurate delineation.

Perhaps it is time for the ISOH to petition the IOC for automatic accreditation for its members to attend and to record any IOC and IOC-related session. Of course since some expense is involved grants can be requested from the IOC, or we can subsidize ourselves while gaining so much insight into what the IOC and Olympism are all about by becoming part of the Olympic family while covering such as an assignment. The activists within Olympism attend these sessions; let's not wait decades to recount their attitudes via newspaper clippings in light of the fact they are available "now" to be interviewed even while they're in the midst of the decision-making process. Let's do it right, and get it right.

There's probably no more interesting process within Olympism than its method of selecting sites for each Games. Continental blocs form; trade-offs are arranged relative to second, third, and fourth-ballot votes assuming the balloting goes that far. Blunders are made; strategies succeed or fail; a great deal of schmoozing and politicking takes place, all of which makes it seem like an American political convention. After all, hundreds of millions of dollars are at stake.

However, despite blocs, politics and tradeoffs and maybe a few intrigues, it is still an honest straight-forward process. I never uncovered cases of chicanery or corruption and validation of the process is found in the fact that the IOC just about always selects the best, most qualified site...the city with the best bid, the city that has the most to offer an Olympic Games.

But who's covering these stories, these pieces of Olympic history? Who in the future will learn from these accounts? Of course there are official accounts, but each election has its own story, its interesting people, its own strategies.

Let's get it all down...and how many other aspects of the Olympic movement go unrecorded?

For example, using only my experience at Olympic Summer Games, these are events that in my opinion have not been adequately written about by Olympic historians. Most of the officials and other individuals who affected and made the decisions involving these issues are still alive, willing and able to be interviewed.

1968 - African athletes raised black-gloved hands, ignoring their national anthem on the medal stand, to make a statement about racism. The removal of South Africa from the Olympic movement.

1972 - The removal of Rhodesia from the Olympic movement. The murder of Israeli athletes in Munich.

1976 - The boycott of the Montreal Games by 22 African and other nations over the issue of New Zealand not being banned after their national rugby team played a match against banned South Africa.

Red China's successful effort to have the Nationalist Chinese {Taiwan} team removed from those Games although mainland China was not an Olympic nation.

1980 - The USA-led boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games over the issue of the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan.

1984 - The retaliatory boycott of the Los Angeles Games by the Soviet bloc.

1988 - The Ben Johnson scandal at Seoul (banned drugs).

1992 - The apparent over-commercialization of the Games at Barcelona, the city taking on the semblance of a huge Coca Cola sign.

1996 - Again, over-commercialization, this time in Atlanta.

As stated, the issues above involve only the summer Games. Other issues such as eligibility, the size of the Games

and security are ongoing issues that need clarification on a regular basis in that they are issues that plague aspects of sport every day of every year.

Have Olympic historians adequately dealt with such policies and controversies?

In summary {1} as to the past, I believe we should ask those journalists who covered these as current events to provide us with their recollections; and {2} as to the future, I suggest accreditations and arrangements be made for those with an interest in Olympic history to attend such events as each Olympic Games and all IOC-related sessions and events.

Get it down now - before it becomes history - and for the sake of history

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