

THE IOC TRAUMAS AND THE SYDNEY GAMES..... A TIME OF RENAISSANCE

Sydney 2000 Olympic Games

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In recent times, in various cities, I have been asked whether the recent traumas inside the international Olympic movement have affected the will and the enthusiasm of those of us who have been charged with the responsibility of staging the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. Such questioning is understandable enough. The publicity concerning corruption and excess has, after all, been relentlessly bad.

The whole issue relates to values, and I welcome the opportunity to address it. It is precisely when values have been ignored or perverted that it is important for people to stand up and reassert them.

As Jacques Rogge, the International Olympic Committee member in charge of liaising with the Sydney Games, and a man of the highest integrity and decency, has pointed out, it is precisely because the Olympic movement casts itself as a movement of values and a movement founded on ideals that the disillusion has been so deep.

Movements that espouse higher standards are destined to be judged by those standards. Fair enough. And the good thing is that Rogge and people like him recognise and accept this.

And with this has come recognition of the need for change and reform. Recognition that the problems have been real and the crisis deep is always the first vital step on the road to finding a solution.

Thus it was so important that during his recent visit to Australia, Rogge acknowledged forthrightly that the IOC, or some members of it, had betrayed the athletes, betrayed the spectators, and betrayed the values.

And from this position of admirable realism the International Olympic Movement is now, in my judgement, on a path of irreversible reform.

I do not speak for the IOC but as someone who represents the hosts of the 2000 Games and that includes broadly all Australians - with strong and legitimate interests in demanding that the international movement stay on the course of reform.

I used to regret, when these issues first arose, that they had occurred on our watch with the Sydney Games coming up. I do not now regret that. My view is that by the end of this year we will have seen an international institution reform and transform; that

when historians look back, they will see this as a time of fundamental transition. They will see the Sydney Games as involving a renaissance of the real values of the Olympic Movement.

We therefore have not a problem but a historic opportunity.

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And what are those values? They are values I suggest above all about universality.

The real Olympic spirit was beautifully conveyed by one, Philip Miskin, who was commandant of the Olympic Village in Melbourne in 1956, when he welcomed his deputy to work with the following words:

“We are to be hosts to the young men and women of about 70 nations, without distinction of race, colour, politics or creed. We have to provide their accommodation and training facilities and their performance will depend on the quality of what we

provide. Their food, living conditions and leisure opportunities must be the best that we can offer. Moreover, we must make no distinctions between any of them. We want them to give the best performances they are capable of. We want to be agents of good will to everyone of them, and when they leave us, we want them all to be good ambassadors for Australia.”

And unfortunately we cannot say, as the 20th century comes to a close, that those words of goodwill and universality are irrelevant when we see the horror and inhumanity going on before our eyes today in Kosovo and elsewhere. We need all the reassertion of human values that we can get.

And these values of universality and inclusiveness and respect for diversity that are at the heart of the Olympic values properly understood, are also Australian values. And I do not doubt that they are the values of much of the world community and must be so in a world of always richer and closer global connections.

But in an Olympic context I want to reaffirm the importance of individual values not just collective ones. Because the Games we will see next year in Sydney are not just about welcoming the world, nor just about great sporting prowess and great athleticism. At a much deeper level they are in fact about the individual human spirit.

We have seen unforgettable and inspiring examples of the strength of the human spirit over the years in the Olympic Games.

When I was first taking an interest in these things, Abebe Bikila, the great Ethiopian athlete, amazed the world by winning the Rome marathon in 1960 in a world’s best time, running in bare feet.

The spirit lies not just with the winners. It can be with those who finish last. One of the most moving stories concerns the Tanzanian marathon runner, John Steven Akhwari, who completed the 1968 marathon in Mexico City. The race had been won. The medals awarded. Night had fallen. The great majority of the crowd was on its way home. And into the stadium came the lonely, struggling, suffering

figure of Akhwari, an hour after the field, in great pain and seriously injured after a bad fall. Despite this, he struggled for the line and finished. And when a journalist asked Akhwari why he had wanted to finish, despite his bleeding and pain, Akhwari replied: “My country did not send me 7000 miles away to start the race. They sent me 7000 miles to finish.”

The truth is, of course, that in doing what he did with such courage and grace, Akhwari was a winner too.

The Games are a treasure house of authentic stories of sportsmanship. I will illustrate with a story from the javelin competition at our first Olympic Games in Melbourne 1956. Most of the competitors at that time were using wooden javelins while some had brought with them the new steel ones. History records that after three rounds of the final, the Soviet athlete, Viktor Tsybuleoko, was lying in third place. At his fourth throw, he abandoned the wooden javelin he

had brought and borrowed one of the steel ones from another athlete, immediately improving his standing by an extraordinary five metres. The favourite for the event, Egil Danielsen of Norway, meanwhile was lying only in sixth place. He had one more throw left and, for it, Danielsen asked Tsybulenko if

he too could borrow the steel javelin. With it, he then unleashed an enormous throw which broke the world record by over two metres, and in fact, almost landed on the runway of the pole vault. Tsybulenko was left to laugh, shake his head, pick up his bronze medal, and marvel at the result of his good sportsmanship. Not bad for the cold war.

And of course there are inspiring stories of our own athletes from Australia, in fact one of a tiny handful of countries to have competed at every Olympic Games since 1896.

The great feats extend all the way from Edwin Flack, a hundred years ago, to an out-of-form Kieren Perkins, swimming courageously and on the basis of catch-me-if-you-can in the 1500 metres to win in 1996, to Cathy Freeman’s brave attempt to beat one of the all time Olympic greats in Marie-José Percé, and her beautiful sportsmanship in congratulating and embracing that champion, right up to the

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paralympic performance of a lad from Bulli, Troy Sachs, in scoring an extraordinary forty-two points from a wheelchair to win gold for Australia at Atlanta.

These personal values of dedication, tough but friendly competition, courage, good sportsmanship, grace under pressure, celebrating the achievement of the other person, are the same values which Australians and many other people respect and honour.

So Sydney will do the 2000 Games for more reasons than just the fun of it, or the enjoyment, or the chance to marvel at tremendous athletic performance. We do it for the reassertion of these values.

We do it also, however, for its significance for Australia, because logistically and organisationally our country has taken on the world's biggest peace time event. Nine million tickets, a six billion dollar addition to gross domestic product, 62,000 meals a day at the athletes village alone, 50,000 volunteers, a work force of 120,000, the challenge to accredit 175,000 people - the list goes on and on. It's very big.

Another way of putting it, is that Melbourne, though a wonderful Games, now looks like a country carnival. Did you know, for example, that in Melbourne 1956 the Games were covered by 5 television cameras and there were 5,000 television sets in Australia that could take the Games live. In Sydney in the year 2000, there will be 700 cameras, 50 mobile broadcast units, and a cumulative television audience of 25 billion.

In fact the Paralympic Games, which we must also do excellently, will be bigger than the Melbourne Games were in '56. They will, in fact, be bigger than the Commonwealth Games held in Kuala Lumpur.

It is no wonder that my colleague in Paralympics, Lois Appleby, likes to say that the Olympic Games will be a fantastic test event for the Paralympics.

One of only two IOC members ever to have organised an Olympic Games as opposed to requiring people like me to try and do so is the great French

skier, Jean-Claude Killy, who organised the Winter Games in France some years ago. Having been in this job now a couple of years I am rather inclined to agree with Killy who said 'to organise one Olympic Games is a privilege, to organise two would be suicide'.

We have immense time pressure, we have less than 500 days to go, or as I like to put it to staff there are 64 Mondays left.

This is a task not for the faint hearted. It sometimes reminds me of what Margaret Thatcher said to George Bush, at a particularly difficult point in the lead up to the Gulf War 'George, this is no time to get wobbly'. Nor is it a time for those of us charged with organising the Games to adopt the "cross your fingers and hope for the best" style of management or the "it will be right on the night" school of management.

I rather liked the movie Shakespeare in Love where the producer is trying to put on the play and everything is going wrong and he is asked the question how can he be confident it will be OK on the night. And he just says: "Well, it always happens but it is a mystery." I can't plan on this assumption that it will all come good.

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It will take skill and tenacity and determination and confidence but not complacency. Values again.

And that's the point. That's why in the end, this project matters profoundly for Australia because we are never, never going to have a better opportunity to show the world, nor to hold up a mirror to ourselves, the quality that really is Australia - an Australia organisationally capable, technologically sophisticated, proud and protective of its environment, culturally vibrant, relishing its diversity and welcoming to people from around the world.

Speaking of Melbourne 1956, Harry Gordon in his wonderful history called "Australia and the Olympic Games" said this:

“Nothing before or since, no Football Final or Test Cricket Match or Melbourne Cup, neither the departure of Burke and Wills nor the

arrival of the Beatles, has ever evoked such sheer emotional involvement from the whole community. For a city and a nation which considered themselves worldly, but were, in truth, prisoners of their own geography, the Games offered a step towards maturity and a gentle exercise in multiculturalism long before that word entered the dialogue of politicians and academics”.

Let me give you another Melbourne quote I have come across from Herb Elliott, an Australian Olympic icon, a gold medal winner in the 1500 metres, one of the great world athletes, never beaten over a mile or 1500 metres in his career.

Herb speaks here of his memories as a youngster going to Australia’s first Olympic Games in ’56. and he says:

“There is nothing in the world like being in the Olympic city during the Games. The brew is one of excitement and anxiety, colour and athletic endeavour that, when taken in deep draughts by any youngster with natural ability, saturates the brain with aspirations that can lead to all sorts

of juvenile resolutions. How lucky I was that my mother and father in 1956 took me from Perth to Melbourne for the first time and put me in contact with all of this.”

So I look at it this way. You can bet that there is some kid out there somewhere right now, who, if we do this properly, will go to our Games in 2000, and who in 10 or 15 years time will be writing the same way about how the wonderful memory lingered and the experience changed his or her life in the way Herb Elliott’s did. And not necessarily a life in sport, of course, at the elite level, but any walk of life in which the values of determination, doing your best, fair play, team work and the pursuit of excellence matter.

That’s what the Olympics are really about and those

are the values we need to see splendidly and unambiguously reflected in the Games which Australia will next year host.

I am confident when they are running the final of the 400 metres around that wonderful stadium in Sydney, the atmosphere will be electric. And on the last day of the Games when they are running the marathon through the streets of Sydney I am here to tell you now that they will be lined up eight deep along ANZAC parade. And the predominant mood, I believe, will be - that was great, can we do it again.

And when the buzz, and the cheering, and the excitement, and the emotional high, and the tears to the eye, have passed and the quiet has come again in Sydney and we return to our everyday lives, I think that the memory and the sense of pride and our sense of self worth and the values we have helped restore to the Olympic Movement after a time of trauma will

probably be the legacy that counts, even more than the dollars, more than the bricks and the mortar. That’s why I’m doing it.



Aerial of Sydney Olympic Park

LATE COMMENT

Since I wrote the above, we have had the response from the Australian public to our first offer of Olympic tickets. We received 317,000

individual applications - more than Atlanta’s 311,000 and fourteen times larger on a per capita basis.

This magnificent response reassures us that the Australian people have been able to make the critical distinction between what is ephemeral and what is real, between organisational and political controversies, on one side, and the athletes and their love and mastery of sport on the other side.

It confirms to us the IOC chose well when it chose Sydney to host the Games of the new Millennium; and that next year we will see sixteen days, and with the Paralympics sixty days, of unequalled excitement, colour and life - that Australia will stand global centre stage like never before with all the quality of our country there for the world to see - and that those who are there will remember the experience for the rest of their lives. S.H. 7 July 1999.