

# 'Cute, Loveable Characters'

## *The Place and Significance of Mascots in the Olympic Movement*

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For those of us raised in the 1970s, it seems almost inconceivable to imagine an Olympic Games without a cute, cuddly mascot, proudly presented as the 'soft face' of the Games. Their place in Olympic promotional efforts is now well established; yet, it is just over a scant thirty years since the first official Olympic mascot was introduced to the world. Since then, mascots have appeared in a range of animal, human, and inanimate forms, some more recognisable and appealing than others. It would, however, be naïve to regard mascots as simply an endearing symbol designed to promote the ideals of the Olympic movement and secure community support for the Games. Their strategic role as marketing agents is certainly apparent, though what may be less evident to mainstream audiences are their ideological and political functions.

Mascots are polysemic texts, upon which a series of meanings can be inscribed. They are at once advertiser, community builder, and educator and may also serve as a link between the past and the present. Mascots are anthropomorphized, embodying human personalities and traits, which allow them to communicate a range of social, cultural, and political ideologies. In addition, mascots are essentially intertextual, referring to, and requiring knowledge of a range of established cultural meanings and stereotypes in order for them to resonate with audiences. They provide communities with a material expression of their self identity, as represented by and through their sporting team(s), whilst at the same time they supply teams with an attractive image to sell and for fans to consume. For professional franchises, mascots are incorporated into their public relations initiatives. A mascot may sign autographs, hug children, high-five teenagers and be used to generate "team spirit," "community goodwill" as well as "brand recognition."

This article presents an initial analysis of mascots in order to explore their role in the production of both community and product loyalty. Mascots in this study are positioned within the broader context of advertising characters that are used to engender an emotional relationship between consumer and brand. Specifically, this paper examines Olympic

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mascots, focusing on their marketing initiatives, their role in the dissemination of the philosophies of Olympism, and their incorporation into the overall visual identity of a Games. This paper explores the meanings of the Sydney 2000 mascots, Syd, Olly, and Millie, in their capacity as advertisers and educators, and in their efforts to promote civic, national, and brand identity within the context of an ongoing historical discourse about mascots. At the same time, it discusses the success of 'Fatso the Fat-Arsed Wombat,' introduced by Rampagin' Roy Slaven and H. G. Nelson, two television sports comedians, as a counter-mascot to the official characters. This article argues that despite efforts to promote the Sydney 2000 mascots within the Australian and international communities, their success was mitigated by the overwhelming popularity of Fatso, a mascot that appeared on the surface to be subversive, but which actually functioned effectively as an advertising character.

### Origin of the Species

The notion of associating a mascot with a sporting team has been naturalized across the course of the twentieth century to the extent that the establishment of a new team or event demands that the issue of a mascot is carefully considered when developing the corporate image or brand identity. No longer do mascots emerge gradually as an expression of community and/or team values; they are crafted alongside the team logo, colours, and uniform as an integral part of the team's marketing strategies. Nevertheless, the concept of a mascot remains a modern innovation, appearing in English for the first time in the late nineteenth century. The English word 'mascot' derives from the French 'mascotte' (1867), meaning "faerie friend or sorcerer's charm." The French term was inspired by the Provençal 'mascoto,' meaning 'sorcery,' which itself derived originally from the Medieval Latin 'masca,' meaning 'witch' or 'spectre.'<sup>12</sup> The expression arrived in England in 1881 after a successful French opera by Edmond Audran about a farm girl who brought luck to those around her was translated into English. *The Mascot*, as the opera was then titled, cemented the link between a mascot and luck for an exclusive few.<sup>3</sup>

Mascots, then, were thought to bring good fortune to those who owned them, and early athletes and sporting teams adopted talismans and charms to give them a superstitious edge. The concept of the mascot gradually expanded to include animals, inanimate objects, and even abstract concepts or geophysical conditions. The process of linking sports teams with animal mascots may have emerged, Syndy Slowikowski suggests, from ritualized hunting practices in traditional hunter-gatherer societies, and are reminiscent of animal totems.<sup>4</sup> They may thus have roots in shamanist rituals whereby the power and strength of the hunted animal is thought to have been assumed by those who don its hide. The symbolic link between animals and sports teams, she further contends, represents a continuation of this "good-luck fetishism," and their incorporation in a team's insignia could signify "a trophy" of the slain beast.<sup>5</sup>

There is no precise starting date for the use of mascots in sporting teams. Yale University lays claim to the first athletic mascot in the United States, with the acquisition of 'Handsome Dan,' a bulldog that was donated to the University by a student in 1889.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that sporting mascots emerged around the same time that advertisers were beginning to utilize characters in their advertising, and national and other symbols were being promoted as a means to engender collective loyalties.<sup>7</sup> Character advertising, like mascots, first appeared in the late nineteenth century and designed to communicate the essential qualities of a product to consumers. The Quaker Oats Company was the first to use a character, adorning packaging with a small picture of an austere Quaker, who was thought to symbolize wholesomeness, quality, and value for money.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the twentieth

century and beyond, these product mascots have developed complex personalities that are intended to impart a sense of fondness and friendship. Rather than being direct salespeople, character advertisers operate as a kind of visual shorthand, reminding consumers about products, rather than directing them to purchase. Such advertising strategies are expected to generate long-term consumer loyalty and to strengthen brand recognition. Characters are effective in such approaches because they are designed to connect emotionally with consumers by producing meanings, or a story, about a brand.<sup>9</sup> These symbolic representations were a critical component in the branding of particular companies and products in the nineteenth century and it is in this context that sporting mascots emerged.

Whilst team mascots may not have been 'invented' purely as sales initiatives, there remain similarities between mascots and character advertisers. Just as character advertisers symbolized the qualities of a product, sports mascots were supposed to reflect the team and by association, the broader community. Mascots still, on one level, function as a good luck charm, which may be integrated into a range of superstitious, pre-game rituals.<sup>10</sup> Yet, on another level, the role of the mascot has exceeded that of talisman and they now contribute to the development of a franchise's public profile.



### **Mascots and Community Identity**

Given that, traditionally, sporting mascots have been linked to teams, not individual athletes, they have played an important role in the generation of collective identities. Just as flags and anthems denote a nation,<sup>11</sup> a mascot can represent more than just a team: it may symbolize a town, community, or other social collectives. Their ability to contribute to the construction of community identity derives, in part, from their place in the local history and the invented, shared traditions that surround the celebration of the team. Mascots operate as a link between past and present, opening the door between generations to jointly revel in past memories of sporting glories. It is a community touchstone that allows a point of connection between, for example, children and their grandparents. Christopher Geist describes how his high school mascot, the bulldog, was more than a symbolic representation of the school through which students could establish a sense of belonging.<sup>12</sup> He suggests "that the bulldog *is* the community," a means through which former students can "remember what it felt like to burst through that paper Bulldog, to pin on the image, to wear the school jacket, to scream wild exhortations to the fighting Bulldogs on the field."<sup>13</sup> But Geist also suggests that memories of the school team were a way for him to connect with his father. The mascot, he argues, remains the "one constant feature" shared by generations alike,<sup>14</sup> symbolizing the community's unity, spirit, and timelessness.

The community identity expressed in and through sporting teams is often founded on the fact that the name of the area is embedded in the team name. This fixes the team to a

particular geographical locale, whilst the mascot is arbitrarily linked to the community by virtue of its association with the team. There is a trend, however, towards expanding the geographical component of team names beyond a city or town, as in the case of the Carolina Panthers. In more recent examples, however, place names have been abandoned altogether. The Australian football team, North Melbourne, which was founded in 1888 and adopted its kangaroo mascot in 1950, is now known simply as the Kangaroos in an effort to expand the profile of the club nationally and enhance its potential supporter base.<sup>15</sup> Thus, at the professional level, mascots may be less capable of linking fans with a geographic community, particularly in the age of the nomadic franchise, and in these instances, mascots function almost entirely as marketing initiatives.

### **Mascots as National Symbols**

The importance of mascots to national and community identity is not unlike the significance of state floral or faunal emblems that are used to differentiate or unite communities.<sup>16</sup> The selected design may derive from the native plant or animal life, thus emphasizing difference, or it might be a symbol that links a smaller community to a larger collective. Many former British colonies, for example, incorporated British or imperial signs in their emblems and national symbols, though this is not to say that former colonies remained singularly derivative in their national imagery. These national symbols soon found their way into emerging international spoiling contests.

By the late nineteenth century, and despite the best efforts of the gentleman amateurs, international sporting competition had become a political arena in which nations were able to demonstrate their physical and, by association, national vitality on the world stage.<sup>17</sup> The colonies of the British Empire, where independence movements were gathering momentum, were not immune to using sport as part of their nationalist campaigns. Many representative sporting teams in former British colonies made a concerted effort to differentiate themselves from the imperial centre. The growing use of indigenous flora and fauna, industries, and agricultural symbols in coats of arms and other heraldic insignia was, by the early twentieth century, replicated in the naming of national sports teams. Linking sports teams to powerful animals might have been prevalent in North America; however, in settler societies of the British Empire, native animals and plants were often selected as a means of forging national difference. The Australian rugby team, for example, on its way to the British Isles for its first rugby test matches in 1908, adopted the 'Wallabies' as its mascot, an animal that signified a distinct Australian fauna and distinguished them from the imperial centre.

In specific areas of the community, a mascot can become so imbued with a sense of national, ethnic, or political identity that it may eclipse the significance of national flags and anthems. In South Africa during the post-apartheid era, there was a strong resistance to replacing the national Springbok mascot, particularly for rugby, despite the fact that for the majority of South Africans, the symbol represented racism, oppression, and extreme discrimination. More (white) people were willing to abandon the old national anthem and flag in favour of new "rainbow nation" symbols; however, the Springbok was deemed irreplaceable in rugby.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to securing a range of collective identities, sports mascots operate as public relations operatives for the teams they represent.<sup>19</sup> In this role they function overtly in the direct marketing of the team, its merchandise, and the products of its sponsors. More covertly, however, are the activities designed to simply familiarize consumers with a particular franchise. Mascots, for example, may visit local hospitals, launch community programs, shake

hands with sponsors and fans or engage in other charitable activities. This is partly philanthropic, partly a means to raise the profile of the team within the community, and also partly a recognition that highly paid players may be less inclined to personally support such promotional campaigns.<sup>20</sup> Thus, mascots are used to consolidate the presence of the team within the community.

By contrast, mascots that are used to promote specific sporting events rather than a team do not have the same purpose of emotionally connecting a community with its athletic representatives. These event mascots are designed with quite specific marketing purposes in mind. Whilst they are recent additions, it is now rare to find a set of games without some kind of mascot, which, along with logos, emblems, symbols, colours, and fonts, contributes to the overall corporate image of an event. It is an integrated marketing program in which the "brand identity," and particularly the "visual identity," is carefully constructed and protected, with extensive descriptions of the role, personality and marketing attributes of the mascot(s).<sup>21</sup> For this reason, they are not designed to generate a long-term sense of loyalty, particularly as they have a limited life-span. These mascots are used instead to encourage a short-term familiarity with an event and to blend in with, and reinforce, the overall 'look' of the games.<sup>22</sup> This has important implications for sponsors and other merchandisers who associate their products with both the event and the mascots. Raising awareness of the games translates into raising awareness of the sponsors' products. Olympic mascots, therefore, are not designed to bring good fortune, except, perhaps, for the organizing committee, which is seeking a healthy return on its investment.

### **Olympic Mascots**

Since 1972, when Waldi the Dachshund was officially incorporated into the Munich Olympics marketing program, every Olympics has adopted at least one mascot, typically derived from the local flora and fauna. Some have been more lucrative than others, ranging in popularity from Misha the Bear in 1980 to Izzy the 'Whatizit' in 1996. Since the 1988 Calgary Winter Games, there has been a proliferation in the number of mascots associated with the Olympics, perhaps initially to ensure gender equity but subsequently to increase their merchandising potential.<sup>23</sup>



Olympic mascots fulfill multiple functions and are incorporated into initiatives designed to sell more than just the Games. The *Official Report* for the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles reveals that: "The mascot serves to inject a sense of personality into the Games, capturing the styles, traditions and cultures, in an animated form, of the people of the host country."<sup>24</sup> Despite personifying distinctive national characteristics, Olympic mascots, like the host cities in which they are housed, are marketed as regionally unique but also as representative of the Olympic movement's philosophy of Olympism. Mascots are created with personalities that are both global and local, exemplifying national characteristics as well as a range of Olympic-appropriate traits. The Athens 2004 website, for example, reveals that

Olympic mascots "embody the universal Olympic Ideals; the fundamental values of the Olympic Games: Friendship between people and nations, the spirit of fair play and the universal celebration that are the Games."<sup>25</sup> The website further suggests that mascots are the only means to present these ideals to the general public in a "simple, optimistic and cheerful manner."<sup>26</sup>

Mascots are constructed to signify not just general principles of Olympism, but also specific mottos of the movement as a whole. The 1984 Los Angeles mascot, Sam the Eagle, was said to be "universally recognized as an incarnation of the ideals cited in the Olympic motto: Citrus, Altius, Fortius."<sup>27</sup> The 2002 Salt Lake City mascots, a hare (Powder), a coyote (Copper), and a bear (Coal), were also selected as each animal represented one aspect of this motto.

### **Olympic Mascots and Corporate Identity**

Olympic mascots are intended not to generate an exclusive long-term consumer loyalty to a team, but are designed to create widespread appeal by promoting and even protecting the event's corporate identity. The Salt Lake City Organizing Committee (SLOC), for example, used the launch of its mascots to divert attention from the bidding scandals that dominated the Olympic headlines at the end of the 1990s. SLOC stated that it was planning a 'family' oriented launch, because it was "eager to have a community celebration and put the focus back on the Games as being good for kids."<sup>28</sup> The mascots were thus used to create a conservative, apolitical image for the event that would rescue the tainted reputations of SLOC and its members.

Within the Olympics, corporate identity is carefully integrated with that of the host city more broadly to produce an effective delivery vehicle to disseminate its overall 'image.'<sup>29</sup> The promotion and advertising of the Olympic host city is a delicate balance between conforming to Olympic traditions and expectations, and simultaneously imbuing the event with a distinctly national flavour. This requires organizers to "[connect] visually the values of the Olympic ideal within the context of the values of the host city."<sup>30</sup> As sporting events are incorporated into larger entertainment, investment, and tourism strategies that promote cities on a world stage, the event's brand identity is carefully planned to reflect positive and desirable attributes of the host.<sup>31</sup> The extensive crafting of a city's image, which forms the bulk of an Olympic bid, attests to the importance of coordinating every aspect of what Rod McGeoch, who spearheaded Sydney's bid for the 2000 Games, calls a "sophisticated international marketing exercise."<sup>32</sup> Logos, and later mascots, are used to promote the essence of a host city and this carefully conceived corporate image is aligned with the city and nation more broadly. The mascots' characteristics and personalities thus resonate with the event, the city, and the Olympic identities.

More broadly, Olympic mascots often exemplify cultural, national, and political stereotypes. They are cultural narratives that resonate with dominant visions of the nation and complement other promotional strategies, such as tourism. Since Waldi the Dachshund reaffirmed a German national stereotype in 1972, Olympic mascots have typically personified various features of the host nation utilizing either established cultural representations (Misha the Russian Bear in 1980), patriotic icons (Sam the Bald Eagle in 1984), myths of historical origin (Haakon and Kristin in 1994), or distinctive flora and fauna (Syd, Olly and Millie in 2000). Despite some more abstract figures in the 1990s (Cobi, 1992 and Izzy, 1996), by the new millennium mascots had returned to characters that embodied idealized regional or national characteristics. The 2006 Turin Winter Olympic mascots, Neve and Gliz, already

had both Olympic and national objectives before they were even released. The mascots were to "incarnate the dream of an Italian Olympic Winter Game" (sic) and "represent the Olympic values" as well as "symbolise the topical Italian way of conceiving and living life in a passionate way."<sup>33</sup> Since their introduction, Neve and Gliz have been designed to "reflect the spirit of the Italian Olympic event: passion, enthusiasm, culture, elegance, and love of the environment and of sport."<sup>34</sup>



Following the public ridicule of the inflatable kangaroos on pushbikes during the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Closing Ceremony, Sydney organizers searched for mascots that would be Australian but that would steer clear of the obvious choices of the kangaroo and koala.<sup>35</sup> Instead, they opted for mascots that, whilst a little more obscure, were symbolic. Two of the three mascots were official emblems of the State of New South Wales, of which Sydney is the capital; the platypus is the faunal emblem, whilst the kookaburra is the state bird. Both of these, as well as the echidna, are found throughout Australia, making them both locally relevant as well as nationally significant. The three mascots together represented the "earth, air and water," the basic elements of the natural realm, tying in effectively to the Sydney Olympics' stated 'green' objectives.<sup>36</sup> The use of native animals not only showcased Australia's wildlife to an international audience, but also further distinguished Sydney and Australia from other Olympic hosts. In published reports, however, the graphic designer responsible for the three creatures referred to the mascots as "exotic wonders"<sup>37</sup> rather than "natives," which essentially describes the animals from the standpoint of a foreign "Other," contributing to the notion of Australia as a foreign, unknowable world.<sup>38</sup>

The purpose of the Sydney 2000 mascots was outlined clearly in the Sydney Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (SOCOG) image guidelines: "Syd, Millie and Olly's role [was] to communicate the ideals of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. . . . Their mission [was] to inspire, entertain, inform and embrace."<sup>39</sup> They were designed variously to "help promote the positive values of the Games," to "represent a variety of Olympic ideals," to function as "communicators" or "educators," to be "youthful ambassadors," despite being ageless, and to be the "Face of the Games."<sup>40</sup> According to John Moore, SOCOG's general manager for marketing, the selected animals "really personified what Australia and Australians are all about."<sup>41</sup> This was highlighted in the official *Image Guidelines* that confirmed the mascots "reflect the essence of the Australian lifestyle and its people."<sup>42</sup> The names and personalities were linked closely to SOCOG's claim to be the first Olympics of the new millennium, confirming that mascots are carefully integrated into and reinforce the overall identity of the

event. Syd, named for Sydney, was said to embody "the vigour and energy of Australia and its people." Olly, named for the Olympics, apparently personified "the Olympic spirit of generosity and universal friendship". Millie, short for millennium, was an 'optimist. . . whose eye is firmly focused on the future."<sup>43</sup> The mascots' personalities were well-catalogued, with a full complement of personal characteristics, likes and dislikes, as well as a comprehensive historical narrative that contextualized their selection as official Olympic mascots.

### **Olympic Mascots and Historical Narratives**

The construction of an historical narrative that frames the Olympic mascots is a useful way of securing their acceptance by the public. Mascots may borrow from national historical traditions or be based on a fictionalized cultural history, which is not unlike the (mis)use of history in the broader legitimization of Olympic traditions and symbology.<sup>44</sup> In the case of Olympic mascots, their efficacy as a promotional tool is enhanced by the construction of an historical foundation that provides tenuous links back to a distinctive national past. Integrating the mascot into national narratives provides the character with a sense of historical authenticity, which validates it as an appropriate representative symbol. The 1994 Lillehammer mascots, Haakon and Kristin, were, for example, loosely based on a medieval folktale that described the origins of a unified Norway and were intended to be "appealing symbols of. . . the traditions of the host city and nation."<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the pair were supposed to be representative of Norwegian children today, ancient in dress, but modern in behaviour and outlook, "open, happy, free and curious."<sup>46</sup> The complex cultural and political tale was simplified and retold within the Olympic context as a means of promulgating a glossy image of Norway to both its own population and a broader international audience.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the Athens 2004 website proudly declared their mascots, Fevos and Athena, to be "the link between Greek history and the modern Olympic Games."<sup>48</sup> These mascots were based on seventh century BC clay figures, though critics have suggested that the modernized versions resembled Bart Simpson more than ancient Greek sculpture.<sup>49</sup> Whilst the Athens organizers had originally intended to use an owl, the traditional symbol of Athens, the idea was discarded because of similarities with the 1998 Nagano Snowlets. Organizers thus confirmed that they had sought a "flexible design that would differentiate the Athens mascot from its predecessors, and underline the unique quality of a Greek Games."<sup>50</sup>

The use of historical symbols and narratives in the construction of an identity for an Olympic Games is evident in the case of Sydney 2000 where Australia's indigenous heritage legitimated the mascots through the provision of a timeless pre-history and also supplied a distinctive national past to reinforce a sense of difference from other Olympic Games. The use of indigenous iconography and stereotypes in the production of sporting mascots is an area that has generated a significant level of scholarship in recent years. Most of the recent analyses of mascots have focused on the cultural appropriation of Native American images for North American professional, college and high school sports teams,<sup>51</sup> whilst in terms of Olympic and other multi-event competitions, there are fewer analyses. Victoria Paraschak has analyzed a number of Canadian-hosted Commonwealth and Olympic Games and concluded that indigenous images were "selectively constructed . . . [to] fit within the naturalized, dominant images already existent . . . [which] portray native cultures in a static, pre-history."<sup>52</sup> In the case of the Sydney 2000 mascots, the historical context that was developed for the mascots drew on an appropriated indigenous culture, which was used to create an Aboriginal "legend," explaining the mascots' selection and role in the Olympics:

One hot summer evening not so long ago. . . The sky was split in two by a spectacular storm of thunder and lightning. As the wind howled through the

bushland valleys and rain turned the dusty earth into a river of mud, three young Australian animals were swept from their homes. Blown by the wind and rain they desperately searched for shelter. As if by fate, all three reached a protected hollow at exactly the time and huddled together for safety. Suddenly, the storm stopped and 2,000 stars lit the night sky. The three animals sat up and blinked at each other in surprise. The echidna and the platypus stared at one another's shiny bald heads and pointy snouts and grinned; the kookaburra took one look at their odd features and immediately burst out laughing. As other beasts emerged from their hiding spots, the Spirit of the Southern Cross announced that the three young animals had found their way to a special place in Sydney called Millennium Park, and that at the dawn of the new millennium people from all over the world would come together here for a dazzling festival of sport and culture, a global celebration of peace, friendship and universal understanding. The Southern Cross asked the three animals if they would be the official mascots for this great event. Each animal accepted the honour with a solemn nod and a full heart, aware that this was a responsibility outside their present understanding, but determined to do their very best. In honour of their new role, each was given a name, an Olympic attribute, and the mark of the Southern Cross. . . . United by their unique destiny, the mascots formed a friendship, and as the journey towards Sydney 2000 Olympic Games began the mascots worked tirelessly to fulfill their special duty.<sup>53</sup>

The Olympic Mascot Legend, an invented 'Dreaming' story, validates the mascots with a pseudo-indigenous heritage. The inclusion of indigenous iconography and mythology in the overall Sydney 2000 'look' was a concerted effort to imbue the design with a sense of 'Aboriginality' that would visually differentiate Sydney's bid and subsequent Games from its rivals. This approach, described by Darren Godwell as "indigenous branding," was also evident in the 2000 Opening Ceremony.<sup>54</sup> Essentially, organizers believed that an authentic, and above all different, vision of Australia could be captured in and sold through indigenous symbols and imagery.

SLOC similarly incorporated elements of Native American culture into its 2002 Olympic ceremonies, and fashioned a set of mascots that relied on an invented Native American mythology to "reflect American West and Tradition of Storytelling."<sup>55</sup> Mitt Romney, SLOC CEO, linked the mascots to the local indigenous culture advising that:

We are thrilled to present these three mascots for the 2002 Games as representatives of the land and culture of Utah and the American West. Their stories are a wonderful translation of a Native American legend into the symbolism of the Olympic movement. The theme of swifter, higher, stronger crosses the boundaries of time.<sup>56</sup>

As a result, the corporate identities of both the Sydney and Salt Lake Olympic Games were reinforced with the reliance on an authentic and individual indigenous heritage.

### **Olympic Mascots as Advertisers**

In addition to the promotion of national ideologies, Olympic mascots fulfill overt economic functions and serve as marketing devices for the Games and its sponsors. Given their appealing design as animated creatures that are easily transformed into cuddly toys, mascots are unashamedly constructed to appeal to children and to contribute to the familial marketing of the Games. Following the release of Sydney's mascots, NSW Olympics

Minister Michael Knight praised the selection and suggested that: "While they will appeal to people of all ages, I expect children will really fall in love with them" and Australian IOC member Kevan Gosper agreed that: "Above all, a mascot should be attractive to children – and these three are favourites that the children of Australia and the world will love."<sup>57</sup> Mitt Romney reiterated that the 2002 "mascots give children a link to the Games. They are cute, lovable characters."<sup>58</sup> Most recently, the Athens 2004 organizers directed its designers to develop mascots that would target a "young audience."<sup>59</sup>

Part of the motivation for targeting children through Olympic marketing campaigns is to develop an awareness of the movement, which in turn delivers an audience to the event's sponsors. Mascots are used extensively in marketing initiatives that appear under the guise of "Olympic education,"<sup>60</sup> and the SOCOG *Image Guidelines* explicitly stated that its mascots had a role as "educators."<sup>61</sup> The Olympic mascots were incorporated into school-based curricula, teaching schoolchildren in areas ranging from mathematics, to physical co-ordination, and social skills. Some of the activities in the formal Olympic education kits, including collecting and sorting Olympic sponsors' logos, had the more direct purpose of raising brand awareness; nevertheless, the mascots were effective marketers within Olympic education activities as they subtly blurred the boundary between educator and corporate representative.<sup>62</sup>



Linking mascots to not only the Games but also to sponsors in the minds of consumers is a lucrative prospect. Syd, Olly, and Millie, for example, were expected to generate \$150 million in merchandising sales, with their images appearing on "everything from pens to bed linen."<sup>63</sup> According to a note in the *Journal of Olympic History*, SOCOG approached the producers of TV shows, theatre performances, Internet sites, and CD-ROMs to flood the children's market with products emblazoned with their mascots. Despite the fact that SOCOG's image guidelines expressly prohibited the use of mascots as "salespeople," sponsors such as McDonald's and Cadbury used the mascots quite overtly in the direct promotion of their products.<sup>64</sup>

In order to appeal to children and the ubiquitous 'families,' mascots, since 1980, have become decidedly childlike in both appearance and design. They are largely juvenile, with well-defined, 'loveable' personalities. Negative or aggressive characteristics are not part of a typical mascot's makeup, though some may be described as charmingly roguish. To entice children, mascots, like their character-advertising brethren, are invariably described as positive role models, who are "friendly, cute, helpful" and with only enough "mischief in them to appeal to kids and to prevent them from becoming completely dull, syrupy creatures."<sup>65</sup> The Athens mascots, Fevos and Athena, were portrayed as "simple and joyful, full of vitality and creativity, perhaps mischievous and hence loveable."<sup>66</sup> Similarly, the 1994 Winter Olympics mascots, Haakon and Kristin, were said to be "spirited, playful and bold and perhaps even a

little naughty.<sup>67</sup> Sam the Eagle had to be recreated as a "warmer, more friendly eagle" to dispel the bald eagle's image as "rather stem and aloof," which may explain the anatomically disturbing decision to change his wings to arms.<sup>68</sup> Syd, Olly, and Millie were also depicted as "unselfish, dynamic and optimistic" by SOCOG.<sup>69</sup> Mascots, in this way, are designed to be less explicit salespeople and more like a "winsome, trusted friend" who offers products in the "spirit not of hucksterism, but of joyous friendship."<sup>70</sup> For each character there are lengthy operational and procedural manuals to ensure that their personalities, actions, and look remain consistent.<sup>71</sup>

Significantly, the similarities between the various Olympic mascots' personalities are obscured in the public consciousness because mascots from different Games do not appear together. The next mascot is only released once the previous Olympics have ended. Their bland and uninspired personalities may become apparent, however, if Olympic mascots are placed in competition with alternatives. This was the situation in which SOCOG found itself during the Sydney Games.

### **Subversive Mascots?: The Fat-Arsed Wombat**

Whilst Olympic organizers work hard to ensure their mascots are embraced by consumers, not all are successful. Syd, Olly, and Millie were never well loved by the public, with one American journalist describing them as "too cute . . . too similar, too something."<sup>72</sup> Their lack of popularity was only magnified by the runaway success of an unlikely hero of the Sydney Games, an apparent anti-Olympic mascot that appeared on late-night television.

During the 2000 Olympics, sports comedians Rampagin' Roy Slaven and H.G. Nelson (aka John Doyle and Greig Pickhaver) were given a two-hour time slot each night on host broadcaster Channel 7. Roy and H.G. were well known to Australian audiences through their irreverent national radio show, *This Sporting Life*. They had appeared on television, venturing into the variety, game show, and election coverage genres, before settling back into sporting commentary. Roy and H. G. had achieved cult status by 2000 and their show, *The Dream*, was a cheeky carnivalesque examination of all things Olympic.<sup>73</sup> Hiring Roy and H.G. to present a live show each evening; was no small risk for Channel 7. As host broadcaster, the network had responsibilities concerning the presentation of the Games and the promotion of the tenets of Olympism. Roy and H.G. were highly critical of SOCOG, the IOC, and various members including then president Juan Antonio Samaranch and Dick Pound. They ridiculed popular athletes and stirred national passions by comparing Australia's medal tally with New Zealand's each evening. Their shows contained overt drug references (not of the performance enhancing variety), debates about the distribution of condoms to athletes as well as a new sporting parlance, which was used to commentate events from the day's action.

*The Dream* also had its own mascot. Introduced in the first episode, Fatso the Fat-Arsed Wombat was endowed, not surprisingly, with an oversized rear end. He first appeared as an animation that walked across the bottom of the screen and deposited droppings as a sign of his approval or disapproval of the on-screen action, but later appeared on the show in plush form. Fatso was described by H.G. as a "tremendously likeable, interesting sort of wombat," whilst Roy explained that during "poor sportspersonship or appalling play, he'll waddle out and let the big arse do the talking."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, his appearance on screen coincided with less than outstanding athletic performances.

Despite an avalanche of viewer requests to purchase their very own Fatso, he was never merchandised.<sup>75</sup> Although initially Roy and H.G. announced on the second episode of their

show that he would be available "very soon" and indicated sponsors were clamouring to manufacture Fatso, the apparent disapproval of both SOCOG and the Australian Olympic Committee meant that Fatso was destined to remain an endangered species.<sup>76</sup> At the end of the Games, Fatso was auctioned, raising in excess of \$A80,000 for charity.<sup>77</sup>

In keeping with the satirical spirit of the program, Fatso parodied Olympic mascots and was juxtaposed against SOCOG's insipid, easily forgettable characters as well as the Australian Olympic Committee's (AOC) official mascot, the boxing kangaroo. In clearly showing their disdain for the over-hyped and over-commercialized mascots, Roy and H. G. renamed SOCOG's representatives "Syd, Olly and Dickhead," whilst the boxing kangaroo was both dismembered on air to demonstrate its flimsy design and criticized for its anatomically incorrect design (there was no pouch). Whilst Fatso shared personality traits in common with archetypal advertising characters (fun, friendly, loveable), he nevertheless served as something of an anti-mascot, celebrating not triumph of the human spirit, but failure, accidents, and embarrassment in Olympic performance. He did not overtly endorse any products nor did he promote any particular philosophy, That the wombat was not visibly commercialized may account for much of his success and certainly confirms him as a 'subversive' mascot, particularly when the AOC's boxing kangaroo was a blatant revenue raiser.

The boxing kangaroo<sup>78</sup> had gained widespread popularity in the Australian sporting consciousness after the 1983 victory by *Australia II* in the America's Cup yachting competition.<sup>79</sup> It was embraced as an icon of Australian sport, on one level representing the underdog and on another, providing an alternative to the national flag, The commercialization of the boxing kangaroo and its elevation to the status of "official" mascot of the AOC,<sup>80</sup> replacing the less visible "Willy the Koala," meant that its potential to operate as an informal national symbol was undermined. It is perhaps for this reason that Fatso was so readily embraced by the Australian public. He was constructed as the mascot of the "little Aussie battler" and affectionately referred to the "people's prince" or the "people's mascot." The fact that Fatso could not be bought or sold, and guests on the program who received the rare Fatso stickpin were warned not to trade them, meant that he became an untainted icon, a "pure" symbol of the Australian disregard for officialdom.<sup>81</sup>

Fatso was also considered a genuine threat to the official mascots whose purpose was to raise both funds and the profile of the Games. Soon after his appearance at a number of Olympic medal ceremonies, including, famously, the presentation of the gold medal for the 4x100m men's swimming relay, Fatso was embroiled in controversy. He was not formally 'banned' from the medal dais by the AOC, despite HG making this announcement during a broadcast,<sup>82</sup> however, his appearance on the Olympic podium as swimmers and other athletes accepted their medals was in direct contrast to their directives that the boxing kangaroo should accompany athletes during official ceremonies.<sup>83</sup> The decision to put images of medallists onto stamps meant that Fatso was immortalized by Australia Post and circulated even more widely. Given his prominence, he was direct competition for the official mascots, and the AOC was "reportedly annoyed that Fatso [would] jeopardise [their own] marketing campaign,"<sup>84</sup> and as such regarded him almost as a form of "ambush marketing."<sup>85</sup>

Of course, Fatso's rejection of mainstream Olympic commercialism was a critical part of his mystique. He was loved and popular with the public but remained unattainable, just beyond reach. The average consumer could only experience 'the little guy' vicariously,

through medal ceremonies, through celebrity athletes, through television. And yet Fatso was commodified, not merely an unsullied symbol of Australia's irreverent humour. He operated successfully in and for a commercial enterprise. His presence on *The Dream* contributed in no small part to its success, which meant that Fatso was in part responsible for delivering a large number of viewers to a late-night timeslot (and its advertisers) that would normally struggle.<sup>86</sup> Whilst he may have appeared to be an anti-Olympic hero, he was a critical part of Channel 7's Olympic marketing program. Despite his economic function, Fatso's 'pure' image and material elusiveness meant that he was popularly conceived as a subversive icon that rejected mainstream Olympic ideologies. His operations as a covert and highly effective agent of Olympic commodification were enhanced by his ability to successfully create an emotional bond, even love, between brand and consumer whilst completely obscuring the commercial dimension of his activities. He was the perfect mascot.

### Conclusion

Sports mascots operate in a broad range of areas depending on whether they represent a professional franchise, a local team, or an international event, like character advertisers such as the Energizer Bunny or the Pillsbury Doughboy, team mascots are designed to develop an emotional bond between the consumer and the brand. As such, they encourage a relationship with a brand rather than representing a directive to purchase. Event mascots, however, have a slightly different role. They are implemented to raise public familiarity with the event and deliver an audience to its sponsors. Olympic mascots have a further dimension in that they are designed to represent not just the unique characteristics of a host city or nation, but the philosophies and creeds of the broader Olympic movement. They are 'glocal' creatures, simultaneously representing local difference and global unity.

Given their quite specific ideological and didactic imperatives, Olympic mascots in recent times have struggled with their broader appeal. The ambivalence that the Australian public showed towards the mascots of the 2000 Sydney Olympics was juxtaposed against the success of an anti-mascot, a product of a comedic television program broadcast during the Games. But even in the case of Fatso the Fat-Arsed Wombat, the commercial characteristics of mascots are exposed. Despite his positioning as a working class, 'Aussie battler,' Fatso was an effective part of the commercial programming that delivered a large audience to the show, to the network and, thus, to sponsors. His 'pure' image and inaccessibility meant that Fatso could operate as the perfect Olympic mascot by obscuring the distinction between 'trusted friend' and 'Olympic spokesperson' and drawing upon Australian feelings of anti-authoritarianism.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> *On-line Etymology Dictionary*, Accessed 13 July 2004 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.etymonline.com/m3etym.htm>.
- <sup>3</sup> See the *American Heritage Dictionary* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> Synthia S. Slowikowski, "Cultural Performance and Sport Mascots," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol., 17, no. 1, 1993, p. 24.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> *Yale Bulldogs official site*. Accessed 9 July 2004 from the World Wide Web: <http://yalebulldogs.collegesports.com/trads/dani.html>.
- <sup>7</sup> McCrea Adams, "Advertising Characters: The Pantheon of Consumerism." In: Sonia Maasik & Jack Solomon (eds). *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994), pp. 359-368.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> David Altschul, "Weaving character development into an engaging brand story," *Brand Packaging*, February/March 2004, n.p.; see also Robert W. McChesney and John Bellamy Foster, "The Commercial Tidal Wave," *Monthly Review*, vol. 54, no. 10, 2003, p. 1-16.
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- <sup>11</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Mass-producing traditions: Europe, 1870-1914." In Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 263-307.
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- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 572.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> For more information, see the Kangaroos website at [www.kangaroosfc.com.au](http://www.kangaroosfc.com.au).
- <sup>16</sup> Prys Morgan, "From a death to a view: The hunt for the Welsh past in the Romantic period," in Hobsbawm and Ranger, pp. 43-100.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Holt, *Sport and the British. A modern history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- <sup>18</sup> Douglas Booth, *The Race Game. Sport and Politics in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 206-21.
- <sup>19</sup> Svoboda, p. 4.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.

- <sup>21</sup> Brad Copeland and Jason Hirtler, "Game Image Matters," *Olympic Review*, Aug/Sept, 2002, pp. 55-7.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Paula Welch, "Cute, little creatures. Mascots lend a smile to the Games," *Olympic Review*, Sept/Oct, 1988, pp. 436-41; William H. Wardle, "The mascots of the Calgary Winter Games," *Olympic Message*, no. 30, August 1991, p. 16.
- <sup>24</sup> *Official Report. 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, Volume 1*, p. 246.
- <sup>25</sup> *Athens 2004 Official Website*. Accessed 14 July 2004 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.athens2004.com/>
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> *Official Report. 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, Volume 1*. 1984, p. 246.
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- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 5.
- <sup>38</sup> Tara Magdalinski "Homebush: Site of the Clean/seed and Natural Australian Athlete," in Patricia Vertinsky and John Bale (eds.), *Sites of Sport: Space, Place, Experience*, (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 101-114.
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- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>42</sup> SOCOG (1998) *Sydney Olympic Image Guidelines*. Sydney: SOCOG, n.p.
- <sup>43</sup> "The mascots of the Games of the XXVII Olympiad," *Olympic Review*, Feb/March, 1997, pp. 5-8.
- <sup>44</sup> Tara Magdalinski, "Reinventing the Australia for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games," *International Journal for the History of Sport*, 17 (2/3), 2000, pp. 305-322.
- <sup>45</sup> Arild Vollan, "Modern Mascots of Medieval Origin," *Olympic Review*, no. 286, 1991, p. 372.
- <sup>46</sup> *Lillehammer Olympic Winter Games Official Report* Vol. 2 (English), p. 150.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- <sup>48</sup> *Athens 2004 Official Website*.
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- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>51</sup> See for example Charles Fruehling Springwood, *Team spirits: The Native American mascots controversy*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).
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- <sup>53</sup> "The mascots of the Games of the XXVII Olympiad," p. 6.
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- <sup>55</sup> *Salt Lake City Olympic Games Website* (2001). Retrieved 9 March 2001 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.saltlake2002.com>.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>57</sup> "The mascots of the Games of the XXVII Olympiad," p. 8.
- <sup>58</sup> *Salt Lake City Olympic Games Website* (2001). Retrieved 9 March 2001 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.saltlake2002.com>.
- <sup>59</sup> *Athens 2004 Official Website*.
- <sup>60</sup> For an extensive analysis of the commercial aspect of Olympic education programs, see Tara Magdalinski, Kim Schimmel and Timothy J.L. Chandler, "Recapturing Mystique: The Corporate Invasion of the Classroom," in John Nauright and Kim Schimmel (eds.), *GlobalSport The Political Economy of Sport* (London: Macmillan, in press 2004).

- <sup>61</sup> SOCOG (1998) *Sydney Olympic Image Guidelines*. Sydney: SOCOG, n.p.
- <sup>62</sup> F. Shaker, "Corporate (Content: Inside and Outside the Classroom," *Education, Limited CCPA Education Project*, 1 (2), 1998, pp. 1-35.
- <sup>63</sup> "Olympic News Notes," *Journal of Olympic History*, vol. 1, 1999, p. 46.
- <sup>64</sup> A range of sponsor memorabilia depicted one or more of the mascots next to sponsors' products.
- <sup>65</sup> Ruth Shalit argues that "fuzzy, non-descript" advertizing characters with saccharine personalities do little to enhance brand identity. Ruth Shalit (2000, 23 March). The Inner Doughboy. *Salon.com*. Accessed 16 July 2004 from the World Wide Web: <http://archive.salon.com/media/col/shal/2000/03/23/doughboy/index.html>
- <sup>66</sup> *Athens 2004 Official Website*.
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- <sup>70</sup> Ruth Shalit (2000, 24 March) The Mr Peanut Chronicles. *Salon.com*. Accessed 16 July 2004 from the World WideWeb: <http://archive.salon.com/media/col/shal/2000/03/24/doughboy2/index.html>.
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- <sup>73</sup> Roy and H. G. followed up *The Dream* with *The Ice Dream* for the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics and *The Cream* for the 2003 Rugby World Cup.
- <sup>74</sup> *The Dream*. 18 September 2000. Channel 7.
- <sup>75</sup> Fraudulent Fatsos were distributed after the Olympics. See Bob Hart, "Fatso's fame fires a flurry of frauds," *Herald Sun*, 14 February, 2001, p. 20.
- <sup>76</sup> There were, however, reports that a second Fatso existed, and this was the one that made appearances with athletes on the medal dias. See Margot Saville (2000, 26 Sept) "Meet the arts end of Fatso," *Sydney Morning Herald*. Accessed 1 October 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.olympics.smh.com.au/news/2000/09/26/FFX53G2EJDC.html>.
- <sup>77</sup> Bob Hart, "Fatso's fame fires a flurry of frauds," *Herald Sun*, 14 February, 2001, p. 20.
- <sup>78</sup> The Boxing Kangaroo image is believed to have been developed during World War II when RAAF pilots stationed in Singapore had them stenciled on the side of their aircraft to distinguish them from British planes.
- <sup>79</sup> The flag was raised on the yacht as it departed and entered the harbour.
- <sup>80</sup> The Australian Olympic Committee purchased the rights to the boxing kangaroo in 1993 from failed business entrepreneur and *Australia II* syndicate chair Alan Bond.

See John Huxley, "Watch out! Boxing kangaroo gets a metrosexual makeover," *The Age*, 24 July, 2004, p. 3.

- <sup>81</sup> Richard Sandomir, "Irreverent take on the Games," *The New York Times*, 27 September, 2000, p. S7.
- <sup>82</sup> Brad Walter and Steve Mascord (2000, 24 Sept) "How Fatso the wombat stuffed the boxing kangaroo." *Sydney Morning Herald*. Accessed 1 October 2000 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.olympics.smh.com.au/news/2000/09/24/FFXS7KEQHDC.html>.
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- <sup>84</sup> 'Fatso' gets up the noses of Committee, p. 21.
- <sup>85</sup> Peter Gotting, "Games sponsors get federal protection," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October, 2001, p. 27.
- <sup>86</sup> *The Dream* had over one million viewers each evening, with over two million tuning in for the final show. See Geraldine Brooks, "Summer Olympics 2000. Ah, superb! Our diver went splat! An Aussie show pokes fun at cloying TV coverage and skewers sports, too," *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 September, 2000, p. A8.