

# Comments on 'Swimming with the Big Boys'?

**Bruce Kidd**  
**School of Physical and Health Education**  
**University of Toronto**

I was in a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation television studio when the news of Sydney's selection for the Olympic Games of 2000 was announced. I jumped up and cheered. As I had been telling viewers all that afternoon, I thought Australians deserved the Games after a century of contributions to the Olympic movement and three successive excellent bids, and I was impressed by Sydney's imaginative athlete-centred, internationalist, and environmentally conscious proposals. While I had no doubt that Beijing Games would eventually have a liberalising effect upon China, and provide fascinating opportunities for intercultural exchange with the rest of the world I feared that the country's aging leadership would interpret a favourable vote as an endorsement of (or at the very least, indifference to) its repressive ways.

So it is with disappointment and concern that I read Douglas Booth's and Colin Tatz' indictment of the manipulative strategy by which the Sydney bidders won the Games and co-opted critics and questioners back home. Like them, I am concerned that the extravagant style of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the vagaries of the bidding process undermine popular support for the goals and activities of the Olympic Movement. In the case of Sydney, their article prompts the fear that when difficult choices have to be made - as more realistic cost estimates force the paring of budgets - the organisers may well abandon the broad, progressive promise of their original bid.

But unlike the impression given by Booth and Tatz, I believe the Olympics - and the Sydney Games - are worth fighting for. There's much which needs to be changed,' but on the whole, I think the Coubertin Olympic movement has been a plus for humanity. Within the

realm of sports, perhaps the most accessible form of popular culture in many countries, it has affirmed the importance of intercultural communication, fair play, inclusion and whole person development far more consistently than any other major sporting organisation. Certainly in my own country, it has provided a humanistic alternative to the misogynist, instrumental, xenophobic nationalism often preached and practised by the leaders of professional ice hockey, Canada's hegemonic sport. We should continue to be critical of the patriarchal biases of the IOC, National Olympic Committees, International Federations, and Organising Committees, and to push for parity in representation and other forms of gender equity, but we should remember that the Olympic Movement has done far more to recognise and celebrate the sporting woman than the ruling bodies in the popular non-Olympic sports, such as baseball, cricket, and the various codes of football.

In terms of internationalism, neither Coubertin nor any of his successors ever held the utopian notion that the Olympics would bring war, insurrection and social decay to a halt, as Booth and Tatz allege. But they did hope that through the activities they encouraged participants and audiences would learn to respect the differences in the 'other' and resort less frequently to violence to settle conflict. Surely, this remains a worthwhile and not impossible goal. While here, too, there is much to be done, I am convinced that the Olympics have already made a dent. In the case of Korea, contrary to what Booth and Tatz suggest, a group of social scientists who studied the Seoul Games found that the IOC's diplomacy contributed to (as well as benefited from) the reopening of trade and political relations which we now call 'the end of the Cold War'.<sup>2</sup>

Certainly the Lillehammer participants' emotional and financial support for the beleaguered inhabitants of Sarajevo, and their ambition to sustain a liberal, multicultural state against their ethnically genocidal neighbours, and Liv Ullman's and Thor Heyerdahl's moving reading of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights during the Closing Ceremonies let 3.6 billion television viewers around the world know

whose side the Olympic movement is on during the tightening conflicts of our times. It's difficult to weigh the effect of such diplomacy and symbolic solidarity on the outcome - and clearly they are not enough - but as we know from the long anti-apartheid campaign in sports (and other historic struggles) they do carry some clout.

It's also incorrect (and naive) of Booth and Tatz to decry the presence of politics, including aggressive lobbying, in the Olympic movement. While Coubertin eschewed electoral politics, he knew full well that his project was 'political' in the sense that it was an intervention for social change. 'We are rebels, gentlemen', Coubertin told delegates to the Sorbonne Conference of 1894, which approved his proposal for modern Games. He intended that the Games would serve as a 'demonstration project' for his social philosophy of Olympism, and strengthen the material conditions and social practices for its realisation.

What we need today is better politics.

To ensure that his project would be in the hands of friends, Coubertin created the system of 'delegation-in-reverse' by which IOC members are co-opted (usually by the IOC President) and kept on until they reach seventy-five. It is this practice which makes the IOC virtually unaccountable, and individual IOC members targets for all manner of threats and pressures. I have long felt this process in urgent need of reform, but given the number of constituencies which participate in the Olympic movement, it has been hard to find an alternative on which a significant number will agree. But the pressure for change is growing, and even Juan Antonio Samaranch has mooted the idea of fixed four-year terms for IOC members.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps as Forbes Carlile of Sydney wrote some months ago, 'Sydney and Australia have seven years to make the Games the best ever. From that position of strength ... Australians have the opportunity to rally support from other nations for big changes in the body controlling Olympic Games and the nature of Olympism.'<sup>4</sup>

At the very least, there should be intervention in Sydney, to ensure that the needs and interests of girls and women, the indigenous peoples

and other marginalised groups are fully considered; that the infrastructural investments enhance (rather than detract from) the long-term development of opportunities for healthy physical activity and other social needs, in a harmonious relationship with the natural environment; and that the Games are not captured by the elites and the transnational corporations for their narrow commercial and ideological gain. Many previous host communities - most recently Calgary, Barcelona and Lillehammer - significantly increased their benefits and improved the Games held in their names by such interventions.

While Booth and Tatz play a useful role in demystifying the IOC, I fear that their pessimistic conclusion leads to the paralysis of cynicism. Instead, I would urge Australian sport scholars to increase their Olympic activities in the years ahead.

In the first place, I would encourage them to enable and intervene in the public debate, and in doing so, insist that the IOC and the Sydney organisers live up to the humanitarian promise of Olympism, and to contribute their research and good sense to the public debate on how it can best be done? In particular, they should work to ensure that the process by which the Games is planned and conducted involves and is broadly accountable to all the constituencies in Sydney and Australia, not just the sports and corporate interests.

Coubertin (and at least the most enlightened of his successors) had the ambition of intervening 'to advance the world historical project', as John MacAloon has often said. That's a daunting task, to be sure, but given the human labour and material and ideological resources that will be expended and the size and the scope of the numbers involved, that ought to be the goal - and the measure - of the Sydney Games. What does Sydney have to say about itself and the human experience as we enter the second millennium (on Christian counting)? How can a festival of international sport and culture help realise that vision?

In the second place, if you have not already done so, I urge my Sydney and Australian colleagues to undertake a systematic,

interdisciplinary analysis of the Sydney Games, along the lines of the investigations pursued by the Centre for Olympic Studies at the Autonomous University of Barcelona in connection with the 1992 Games. Such research would contribute the growing body of critical scholarship on the Olympic movement and its economic, political, social, spatial and cultural impact upon the host region and the international interrelationships which revolve around the Games. Being close to the site gives you an unparalleled opportunity to study the developing plans for the Games and their effects first-hand, and would be an indispensable resource for your colleagues elsewhere. Your reputation for ambitious collective work has already been established in the area of sports history, so I am confident the results would be first-rate. I wish you all the best for that important and exciting undertaking.

## NOTES

1. See my 'A New Orientation to the Olympic Games', *Queen's Quarterly*, vol. 98, no. 2, 1991, pp. 363-74.
2. For example, Wojciech Liponski, 'The 1988 Olympics as a Catalyst for Changes in the Attitude of Polish Society toward the Republic of Korea'; Arnd Kruger, 'The Seoul Olympic Games in the German Press: A Divided Nation Views Another' and James Riordan, 'The Tiger and the Bear: Korean-Soviet Relationships in the Light of the Olympic Games'; in Kok Byong-Ik, ed., *Toward One World Beyond All Barriers*, Seoul Olympic Sports Foundation, Seoul, 1990, pp. 249-310, 311-30, 331-45 respectively.
3. Symposium on the Agenda of the Olympic Centennial Congress, Lausanne, 10 Apr. 1994.
4. Letter to the Editor, *Swim Canada*, Feb. 1994, p. 14.
5. See my challenge, 'Realising the Aspirations of Olympism', to the Bid Committee for the 1999 Pan-American Games, 19 Apr. 1993, Winnipeg, Manitoba.