

From One Brickpit to Another: The Ancient History of the Sydney Olympic Bid

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When the eyes of the world turn towards Sydney in the year 2000 few will take any notice of Sydney Park, a leafy parkland in the inner-city suburb of St Peters. Its appearance today gives no indication that the site was at the heart of a bold proposal to enable Sydney to play host to the 1972 Olympic Games. That few people realise the place of the park in Sydney's Olympic heritage is not surprising, as the proposed bid for the 1972 Games has largely been forgotten. Rod McGeoch makes no mention of it in his book, *The Bid*, beginning his story of Sydney's interest in staging an Olympic Games with the early 1970s proposal to bid for the 1988 Games.¹ The only historical coverage of the bid is contained in Ian Jobling's work on Olympic bids by Australian cities.² This article will make use of the official files relating to the proposal to build on Jobling's analysis and provide an expanded picture of this intriguing proposal.³

In the growing literature on the Olympic movement the fate of many bids by cities to host the games, and especially unsuccessful bids, has tended to be neglected. While the bid process itself has gained widespread attention, there has been little attention paid to the legacies of those bids. This case study demonstrates that successful bids often have a long history; in Sydney's case, the gestation period was over three decades. The recent success of the Athens bid for the 2004 Games, after its failure in 1996, provides another example of this.

More work also needs to be done on the post-Games history of bid cities — a range of issues relating to Olympic heritage. Olympic proposals usually involve grand plans to modernise the city and its amenities. What comes of these plans and proposals after the dream of hosting the Games has died? Do they simply fade away with the unfulfilled dream of hosting the Games, or is it possible that they feed into something else?

This article also raises questions about the motives behind Olympics bids. As Olympic bids have become increasingly larger and grander it has encouraged bidders to tack on many other projects to the bid. These may

include the remediation of industrial wasteland, the upgrading of a city's infrastructure, the improvement of urban sporting facilities and an enhanced profile for the bid city as an international metropolis. Bids (and world sporting events) allow many opportunities for political grandstanding, as politicians use and even manipulate the bid process to enhance their own profiles. Are bids simply attempts at headline grabbing? Or, are they serious and genuine attempts to use the Olympics as a mechanism for addressing the problems of a particular city? Or, are the bid organisers motivated by a variety of motives?

The 1972 Bid

The first mention of a possible Olympic bid by Sydney came in late 1962 during municipal elections. The Labor candidate for Lord Mayor, Henry Jensen, announced a proposal to develop 40 acres of former brickpit land owned by the Council into a modern sports centre. He bemoaned the lack of sporting facilities in the city and promised to deliver to the city a 'completely new major sporting area capable of being used and enjoyed by every citizen'. During the campaign Jensen stated that he hoped that the site could be developed 'so that Sydney can hold an Olympic or Empire Games'.⁴

Jensen became one of the key figures in the proposal to bid for the 1972 Games. He had risen through the union movement and then the ALP before entering local government politics. After spending six years as an Alderman of Randwick Council, including two as Mayor, he was elected to the City of Sydney Council in 1956. He served as Lord Mayor from 1957 until 1965, and then became a member of the Legislative Assembly. He earned the nickname 'Headline Harry', due to his many publicity-seeking proposals, such as a scheme for the Council to build helipads on city buildings.⁵ The St Peters sports complex was another of his high-profile proposals, as was the manner in which he embraced the Olympic bid proposal.

Following the Labor Party's success in the 1962 municipal elections Jensen sought to implement his proposal. He called a public meeting to discuss the issue, which was attended by over 30 different sporting bodies. The representatives from these bodies expressed their unhappiness about the present lack of adequate sporting facilities in Sydney and were supportive of Jensen's scheme. The proposal was to use an area of Council-owned land at St Peters, which had been acquired by the Council

for refuse disposal, as the site of the development. As each old brickpit was filled the site was reclaimed, and it was on this reclaimed land that Jensen proposed to develop the sports arena.⁶

A Football Stadium at St Peters

The most significant outcome of the meeting was that the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) offered to develop a football stadium on part of the site. The League was dissatisfied with its agreement with the Sydney Cricket Ground Trust for the use of that ground and sought to develop its own. William Buckley, the President of the League, offered to develop the St Peters site if the Council would provide it with land at low cost.⁷

The following year the League, in conjunction with Concrete Industries (Monier) Limited, showed off its proposal for a 120 000 seat stadium, which it claimed would be one of the most modern in the world and would give spectators an unprecedented level of comfort. The League agreed to finance this stadium itself. The football stadium was the first part of a plan which envisaged a much bigger sports centre (referred to as the City of Sydney Sports Centre), which would be developed on the site over a number of years as additional reclaimed land became available. It was anticipated that later facilities would include an athletics arena with accommodation for 60 000 spectators, a 20 000 seat indoor amphitheatre, a first-class cricket ground, an Olympic pool, and parking for thousands of cars.⁸

This was an incredibly optimistic plan, with many of the proposed facilities being even larger than those now being built for the 2000 Olympics. The League's proposal was, however, in keeping with Jensen's original vision and he gave his support to the proposal. Securing funding for the grand vision, which was estimated at costing over £20 million, would be a major difficulty. Even the NSWRL's plan to develop the stadium was regarded as unfeasible by many observers.⁹ The cost of developing the overall Sports Centre was certainly beyond the capacity of the City Council and could only be achieved with support from the State or Commonwealth governments. Such funding would be more likely if the site was developed for a major international sporting event, such as the Olympics.

This possibility was certainly in the minds of the supporters of the proposal, who saw the Olympic Games as a suitable target and a way of

realising the grand sports plan. Buckley stated that the League's proposal had 'been designed to cater for Olympic Games and be of international standard in every respect'. Jensen had similar thoughts and stated that the area needed to be developed with 'vision and courage so that in time Sydney will surely become the venue for the Olympic Games'.¹⁰ Thus, the ground was set for a bid by Sydney for the Games, although at this stage such a bid was definitely a long-term proposal. However, shifts in International politics led to the active consideration of an Olympic bid.

Catalyst for the Sydney Bid

The catalyst that led to Sydney's proposal to bid for the 1972 Games came from a decision by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to recognise the East German National Olympic Committee and allow the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) to compete as a separate team at all future Olympics. At a meeting with International Sporting Federations in Lausanne in April 1965 the IOC also declared that any city wishing to host the Games in the future would have to guarantee that no visa restrictions would be placed on athletes from any country. This was primarily directed towards NATO-aligned countries, which had previously refused entry to East German athletes unless they competed as part of an all-German team. Unless the relevant governments changed their policies many cities would no longer be eligible to host the Games.¹¹

Among those who were at the Lausanne meeting was W Berge Phillips, Secretary of the Australian Swimming Union, who was present in his capacity as President of FINA, the international swimming federation. Phillips was a Sydney solicitor who had become involved in swimming administration in the 1930s. A sometimes controversial figure, he figured in a number of disputes with athletes and administrators. Despite this, he rose to become President of the Australian Swimming Union and a major player in Australian Olympic politics. He became the only Australian to lead an international governing body when he was appointed to the Presidency of FINA in 1964. He later became the inaugural President of the General Assembly of International Sports Federations, which reflected his status as an influential figure in sports administration.¹²

Phillips realised that the IOC's decision would present problems for many cities wishing to host the Games. He felt this offered Sydney the opportunity of hosting the Games, and became the chief proponent of the proposed bid. He canvassed the opinion of other delegates and received what he considered to be a favourable response.¹³

On his return to Australia, Phillips set about publicising his belief that Sydney could host the Games and began to seek official support for his idea. In April 1965 he flagged this proposal in an interview which was published in the *Sun-Herald*, where he claimed that ‘Sydney would be ideal for the 1972 Olympics’. He also wrote to Jensen outlining his ideas and seeking the Lord Mayor’s support.¹⁴ Jensen met with Phillips and Hugh Weir, the Vice-President of the Australian Olympic Federation (AOF) and a member of the IOC, on 11 May 1965. Given Jensen’s vision for the development of the St Peters’ site, Phillips had clearly developed a promising strategy, and it is no surprise that Jensen embraced the concept. Jensen mentioned that the proposed NSWRL stadium could be utilised as the main stadium for the Games, provided the plans were modified to include an athletics track.¹⁵

Weir was more cautious and raised an issue that was to dog the proposed bid, the Commonwealth Government’s quarantine regulations, particularly in regard to horses. This problem had first surfaced at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, when the equestrian events were transferred to Stockholm. After these Games the IOC decided that in the future the Games would not be awarded to any city unable to conduct equestrian events. Weir felt that unless the policy was changed it would rule out a successful bid by Sydney.

Phillips, by contrast, was not overly concerned about this issue. He claimed that as a result of the decision regarding East Germany, other bids for the Games would be unlikely. Phillips believed that the IOC would be prepared to allocate the Games to Sydney regardless of the inclusion of equestrian events?

Phillips then took his proposal to the AOF, which passed a motion on 15 May 1965 ‘wholeheartedly’ supporting and approving any application by Sydney to host the 1972 Games. The question regarding equestrian events was raised, but the delegates decided to take a ‘calculated gamble’ that this issue would not stymie the bid.¹⁷ Phillips admitted openly the opportunism of the proposed bid: he stated that Sydney only stood a chance to secure the Games because of the political situation that excluded most other interested cities. He also claimed that the 1972 Games were a one-off opportunity for Sydney to stage the Games, since he believed that the political situation would have been resolved by the time the 1976 venue was allocated. No Australian city would then have a chance since the Melbourne Games of 1956 was still a comparatively recent event?

Following the AOF decision, Jensen formally took the proposal to the City Council and sought its approval to approach the Premier and Prime Minister to seek their support for the bid, especially in terms of funding. Jensen stated that 'I consider that the City of Sydney could undoubtedly stage the 1972 Olympic Games in a manner which would bring credit not only to the City of Sydney but to the Australian nation' and that the Games would bring 'incalculable prestige to the City'. His fellow Aldermen shared his enthusiasm and approved his request.¹⁹

Media Response to the Games Proposal

The proposal also received generally positive coverage in the press. The *Sunday Telegraph* ran front-page coverage of the proposal, with its main headline stating that 'Sydney's Games Chances Grow'. Its sports columnist, international cricketer Sid Barnes, was supportive stating that Sydney could stage the Games 'and do it well'.²⁰ The *Sunday Mirror* was particularly favourable towards the bid, with an editorial stating that 'We Must Get the Games!' It claimed that the political circumstances provided Sydney with an opportunity to host the Games which may never present itself again, and that this opportunity needed to be seized. Another story in the paper referred to a 'Games Bonanza!' and mentioned that staging the Games would provide the city with new infrastructure, as well as the most modern sporting venues possible. Reference was also made to the publicity value of the Games and how this had benefited Rome and Tokyo.²¹

The *Sun-Herald* took a more cautious line. Its sporting editor agreed that hosting the Games would be beneficial for Sydney in terms of the construction of much-needed sports facilities, but argued that winning the Games would be a pyrrhic victory because of the political factors involved. He lamented the 'mounting political intrusion in international sport' and claimed that it could eventually result in the demise of the Olympics.²² Such sentiments reflect the beginning of wider public concern about the future of the Games, and these intensified as a result of the boycotts of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

While this dialogue continued, the issue of the equestrian events remained a thorn in the side of the bid. Despite Phillips's early optimism, Jensen was becoming increasingly concerned and saw it as the crucial issue that could determine the success of Sydney's bid. He wrote to Professor R Bain, the Dean of the Faculty of Veterinary Science at Sydney

University, to seek his opinion. Bain produced a ten-point proposal on how the risks of contamination could be minimised 'to a point where it might be acceptable to the quarantine authorities'. Bain was not overly confident noting that the Commonwealth Director of Veterinary Hygiene, Lt-Col KS McIntosh, would 'be a very difficult man to convince'.²³

Following this initial flurry of activity the pace of events slowed. Jensen waited while a preliminary budget was prepared to cost the proposed sporting facilities for the Games. When this was completed the total cost for staging the twenty sports on the Olympic calendar was estimated at £15 000 000. This was a substantial sum of money, but this was where the St Peters Stadium proposal was crucial. The cost of building a 100 000 capacity athletics stadium represented £7 000 000 of the total estimated cost. If the NSWRL's proposal to build a stadium at St Peters was successful, then the cost of providing facilities for the Games would be only £8 000 000. Jensen stated that this would make staging the Games 'an inexpensive proposition'.²⁴ Given reservations about the cost of staging the Games in Sydney, it can be seen that the St Peters Stadium plan was essential to make the bid economically realistic.

Jensen then approached the Premier of New South Wales, Robert Askin, seeking State Government support because the bid would require substantial investment by both the State and Commonwealth governments. Jensen specifically asked Askin whether the State Government could guarantee financial assistance towards the staging of the Games. In addition to the cost of the construction or improvement of sporting facilities, other works, such as a Games village, had to be built. The bid would also require substantial modifications to the city's infrastructure? Askin undertook to explore Jensen's proposal.

The State Government records relating to the proposal are unavailable, but there is strong evidence to suggest that Askin was never supportive of the bid proposal. In addition to being sceptical about Sydney's ability to stage the Games, Askin was particularly wary of the financial estimates produced by Jensen. He referred the figures to the State Treasury for analysis, but the Sydney *Morning Herald* claimed that 'the government has little confidence in the estimate'. Such scepticism would have been fuelled by the lack of detail and documentation provided by Jensen to justify his estimates. This lack of documentation was a legitimate concern, and the fact that the estimate also failed to include the cost of building the athletes' village or the necessary improvements in infrastructure made it

highly likely that the real costs would have been considerably greater than Jensen's £15 000 000 estimate. The State Government position was also obviously influenced by the severe cost blow-out associated with the building of the Sydney Opera House during this same period.²⁶

The long and difficult history of Sydney's Opera House demonstrated the problems, both political and financial, of realising any grand project in Sydney. Labor Premier Joe Cahill formed a committee in 1954 to advise on constructing the Opera House but the building did not begin until 1959 and it took another fourteen years before its final completion in 1973. Like Jensen's Olympic ambition, the Opera House was a grand vision put forward by politicians to put Sydney on the world stage and perhaps, along the way, cover up some of Sydney's perceived infrastructure problems. The construction of the Opera House was plagued by escalating cost: the original budget of \$7 million (or £3.5 million) represented a small fraction of the eventual cost of \$102 million, which was only achieved after controversial cost-cutting measures.

The Sydney Olympic proposal suffered because it coincided with the most difficult and controversial period in the history of the Opera House. The Askin-led Liberal Country Party Coalition came to power in 1965 largely because of its attack on Labor's handling of the Opera House project, and relations between the Government and the Opera House architect, Jorn Utzon, were deteriorating seriously.²⁷ Having capitalised on the funding problems of the Opera House, Askin was understandably reluctant to commit his Government to another high-profile project that could seriously drain the State treasury, especially one proposed and championed by a high-profile Labor politician.

It appears that Askin felt although he never explicitly stated it that the Games' proposal was little more than grandstanding by Jensen. Was this a fair appraisal? What were the motives behind the proposed bid? Clearly the headline-hunting Lord Mayor recognised that the proposal would gain significant public kudos, and this was obviously one of the reasons why he had so enthusiastically supported the Phillips proposal. But to argue that this was his sole motive does Jensen a disservice. Jensen recognised that a successful bid would have many benefits for Sydney. The city had a genuine dearth of sporting facilities and hosting the Olympics would attract Commonwealth and State Government funding that would remedy the situation. Supporters of the bid were also aware of the tremendous publicity which would result from hosting the Games,

and that this was an attractive way of boosting Sydney's international image. The grand vision and mystique of the Olympics, especially in the era before they became increasingly tarnished, was also a powerful force in building support for the proposal. It is likely that the promoters of the bid had mixed motives, with no single issue being dominant. It is probable that this is the case with many Olympic bids, which are based on a amalgam of often diverse agendas.

The Visa Issue Destroys the Bid Proposal

While the various authorities were considering the Sydney proposal, events were overtaken by a decision that effectively destroyed the proposal. The Modern Pentathlon World Championship was scheduled to be held in Melbourne in 1965, and among the participants was to be a team representing East Germany. Before the event took place the Commonwealth Immigration Department refused to issue visas to members of this team unless they competed as members of an all-German team? The Commonwealth Government had chosen to follow the policy of other members of the western alliance in this regard. This decision meant that Sydney would be unable to comply with the IOC regulation that all athletes participating in the Games be guaranteed visas.

The New South Wales Olympic Council sought advice from the Department of External Affairs concerning the Australian Government's policy regarding visas for overseas athletes. The Department noted that there could be problems with athletes from countries whose governments were not recognised by Australia: these included East Germany, Communist China, North Vietnam, North Korea and Outer Mongolia. However, apart from East Germany, it stated that these problems were minor and should not contravene the IOC regulations.²⁹

With regard to East Germany, the Department of External Affairs stated it recognised the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) as the only freely and legitimately-constituted German Government and that it followed the policy adopted by the Allied Control Authorities (Britain, France, and the United States) with regard to East German athletes. This policy stated that travel documents would only be issued for East German athletes who took part as members of an all-German team, or who competed in their individual capacity. The Allied Control Authorities would also want to 'satisfy themselves that the sporting event was not exploited by the East German athletes for political purposes',

which included the displaying of the East German flag and emblem, and the reference to the German Democratic Republic in any official proceedings and publications?

This ruling effectively killed the proposal and no official bid was made to the International Olympic Committee. Sydney's proposed bid was doomed by the very issue that had given rise to Phillips's initial proposal. Even without this decision it is unlikely that the bid would have been successful. The problem of the prohibition on the importation of horses into Australia was never resolved. Funding the Games was also a concern, especially given Askin's scepticism, and this was never adequately dealt with.

Ultimately the proposal was a victim of poor planning and a limited research and knowledge base. Because the bid proposal was cobbled together hurriedly, there was never a clear understanding and articulation of all the issues involved. The proposal was always an opportunistic attempt to cash in on the political crisis over East German participation and was never able to move beyond this to become a well-planned and competitive bid. Ironically, the NATO restrictions on East German athletes were relaxed prior to the IOC's awarding of the Games, allowing Canadian, American and West German cities, along with Madrid, to bid for the 1972 Games, which was won eventually by Munich.³²

Legacy of the Bid Proposal

Although the proposal failed, it did leave a significant legacy. It was the first time that Sydney had considered hosting the Olympic Games, and it put the Games on the city's agenda, and may have helped to sow the seeds for the successful bid for the 2000 Games. Jensen, by articulating the vision, lit the flame for a later Sydney bid. The 1972 bid was influential in other ways, particular in its proposal to remediate a disused industrial site as the main venue for the Games, a concept that was at the heart of Sydney's successful bid for the 2000 Games. When the Olympic flame is finally lit at Homebush in 2000 Sydneysiders would do well to spare a thought for Berge Phillips and Harry Jensen and remember these two pioneers who blazed the trail for Sydney as a potential Olympic host.

Following the demise of the Olympic bid plans, the rugby league proposal to develop the St Peters site into a sports arena also fell by the wayside. The land was eventually developed into open parkland.³³

NOTES:

- 1 R McGeoch and G Korporaal, *The Bid: How Australia won the 2000 Games*, William Heinemann, Melbourne, 1994, p. 29.
- 2 Ian Jobling, 'Olympic Proposals and Bids by Australian Cities', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 11, no. 1, Nov. 1994.
- 3 The official files used are those held in the City of Sydney Archives and contain correspondence to and from the Lord Mayor, as well as additional material. There are two relevant files, one referring to the proposed Olympic bid (CRS 34 2679/65) and the other referring to the proposed St Peters Stadium (CRS 34 1227/63). Further material is held in the New South Wales State Government Archives (Premier's Correspondence File 76/583), but this is subject to a 300-year embargo, and was not available for consultation.
- 4 *Kings Cross Weekly*, 14 and 28 Nov. 1962.
- 5 Renato Perdon, *Sydney's Aldermen: A Biographical Register of Sydney City Aldermen 1842-1992*, Sydney, 1995, p. 53; *Daily Telegraph Mirror*, 12 July 1993.
- 6 Notes of Public Meeting, 22 Mar. 1963 (CRS 64 1227/63).
- 7 Notes of Public Meeting, 22 Mar. 1963. For information on the causes of the NSWRL's dissatisfaction with the Sydney Cricket Ground Trust and its desire to secure its own ground see *Sports Novels*, June 1963, pp. 48-50; *Daily Telegraph*, 21 Mar. 1963; *Sun-Herald*, 12 Jan. 1964. It is interesting to note that both the Victorian Football League and the South Australian National Football League were also in the process of attempting to secure their own grounds during this period, and the conflicts between these football bodies and the cricket-dominated administrations of the major grounds would be a fertile area for further investigation by historians.
- 8 *Concrete Industries News*, Jan. 1964, pp. 1-4.
- 9 *Sun-Herald*, 2 May 1965.
- 10 *Concrete Industries News*, Jan. 1964, p. 3.
- 11 Letter from W Berge Phillips to Harry Jensen, 28 Apr. 1965 (CRS 34 2679/65).
- 12 H Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, UQP, Brisbane, 1994, pp. 165, 271.
- 13 Phillips to Jensen, 28 Apr. 1965.
- 14 Phillips to Jensen, 28 Apr. 1965; *Sun-Herald*, 25 Apr. 1965.
- 15 Minute by Town Clerk, 14 May 1965 (CRS 34 2679/65).
- 16 Minute by Town Clerk, 14 May 1965.
- 17 Phillips to Jensen, 18 May 1965; *Sun-Herald*, 16 May 1965.
- 18 *Sun*, 5 May 1965.
- 19 Minute to Lord Mayor to Council, 21 May 1965 (CRS 34 2679/65).
- 20 *Sunday Telegraph*, 9 and 16 May 1965.
- 21 *Sunday Mirror*, 16 and 23 May 1965.
- 22 *Sun-Herald*, 2 May 1965.
- 23 Letter from Professor R V S Bain to Jensen, 26 May 1965 (CRS 34 2679/65); Letter from Jensen to Bain, 28 May 1965 (CRS 2679/65).
- 24 Preliminary Estimate of Providing Sporting Facilities for Olympic Games (CRS 34 2679/65).
- 25 Letter from Jensen to Askin, 3 Sept. 1965 (CRS 34 2679/65).
- 26 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 Oct. 1965; Letter from Askin to Jensen, 15 Oct. 1965 (CRS 34 2679/65).
- 27 A Hubble, *The Strange Case of Eugene Goossens and Other Tales from the Opera House*, Collins, Sydney, 1988, pp. 15-18, 84; J Yeomans, *A Guide to the Sydney Opera House*, Sydney Opera House Trust, Sydney, 1971, pp. 38-47.
- 28 Letter from Town Clerk to Department of External Affairs, 20 Oct. 1965 (CRS 34 2679/65).

- 29 Letter from Department of External Affairs to New South Wales Olympic Council, 5 Oct. 1965 (CRS 34 2679/65).
- 30 Letter from Department of External Affairs to New South Wales Olympic Council, 5 Oct. 1965.
- 31 *Sun-Herald*, 24 Apr. 1966.
- 33 After the failure of the Games proposal, the NSWRL's bid to develop the stadium began to slowly fade away. Finally in 1967 the League advised the City Council that it would not be proceeding with the project. It claimed that problem of securing a large enough parcel of land at the site was the reason behind its decision, although it seems likely that the problem of securing funding (something that a successful Olympic bid would have helped to overcome) also played a significant part in the decision. See, Letter from NSWRL to Town Clerk, 14 Sept. 1967 (CRS 1227163). In the following years the League was associated with a number of different plans to develop a new stadium. One of the most prominent of these was a plan to build a new stadium at the disused industrial site at Homebush Bay. This site in turn became associated with the 1970s proposal to bid for the 1988 Olympic Games. Following the State Government's decision not to proceed with this bid the League had to wait until the opening of the Government-funded Sydney Football Stadium in 1988 to secure a ground to call its home. The inadequacies of this ground, especially its limited capacity, almost immediately led to calls for a new stadium. These calls became one of justifications for Sydney's bid for the 2000 Games, with the NSWRL almost immediately being seen as a likely tenant for the new Olympic Stadium. Thus the relationship between the League and the Olympics in Sydney has come almost the full circle since the St Peters Stadium proposal of the 1960s.