

# *'Peaks, Troughs and Snouts - Shades of the Olympic Ideal'*

David Headon

With only months to go to Sydney's Games, I am certain that the Olympics web sites are getting thousands, probably tens of thousands of hits a day. The opening paragraph of the one I accessed (<http://www.aafla.org/OlympicInformationCenter/OlympicPrimer/OlympicPrimer.htm>) makes interesting reading for the curious global citizen: 'Every four years, athletes from around the world come together to celebrate the Olympic Games. These Games are the world's great festivals of athletic competition and international friendship'. Baron Pierre de Coubertin is quoted on the same masthead extolling, in famous phrases, the virtue of competing, not winning – 'not the triumph but the struggle'.

These are sentiments with which only the most disengaged or disenchanted among us would disagree, sentiments which largely accorded with the experience Australians had – up close and delightfully personal – in the 1950s. But how well do they match up with Sydney's new millenium experience so far? As the Olympic Games have expanded so dramatically since Melbourne, 1956, so has the framework by which we measure and judge the event. Sydney's Games are imminent and yet, despite the regular gala festivities at Darling Harbour and other sexy locations, despite the best efforts of Olympic mascot Millie the echidna and her mates, genuine talk of celebration, festival, athletic excellence and international camaraderie still seems inappropriate at best – at worst, in stark contradiction to the experience on the ground.

As first source for a way of articulating the dilemma, let me start with the comments of SOCOG chief, Sandy Hollway – variously described for a good year or two as 'affable' (constantly), level-headed, a cool head, a real professional, diplomatic, personable, reliable and trustworthy, yet a man whose star has been clearly in the descendant in recent months because of the ticketing debacle. Late last year he summed up the north and south poles of the problem far better than I could. On the one hand he declared: 'We have a chance to draw into Australia, regardless of barriers of race or culture, people of the world in the best Olympic

traditions'.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, perhaps caught off-guard, certainly caught truth-telling, he said with disarming simplicity: 'As a project, [Olympics organisation] is very big, very nasty and very ugly'.<sup>2</sup>

At sporadic intervals over the past twelve months, attempts have been made to camouflage this distressing reality, particularly by Murdoch tabloids like the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*, which have striven to get us all concentrating on the positives – on, as a *Telegraph* editorial put it in September last year, the 'intangible feeling which stirs the very heart that we call the Olympic spirit'.<sup>3</sup> 'Let us embrace our Games with pride', the paper exhorted its readership, 'let us cheer our athletes as they strive for glory'. Predictably, the New South Wales government's embattled Olympics Minister, Michael Knight, chipped in with his two cents worth: 'From today the emphasis should be on fun. The people of Sydney need to enjoy the Games and not worry too much about the negatives'.<sup>4</sup> Don't worry too much about the negatives. I am reminded of the republican campaign song in a recent American presidential election: Bobby Ferrin's empty jingle, 'Don't Worry, Be Happy'. Nero fiddling comes to mind, too. The ticketing revelations of November 1999 loomed.

When my wife and I were having coffee recently and she asked about this paper, I mentioned first my chosen title: 'Peaks, Troughs and Snouts: Shades of the Olympic Ideal'. I thought there was a certain relevant point to the play on the dual meanings of 'trough', but she was having none of the crafty scholarly stuff. Oh, no. You're not another one of those Jeremiahs, she quizzed. You're not going to add your name to the growing list of critics. I hope that will not be the case and yet, by the same token, I do not intend to heed the advice of the NSW Olympics Minister either. Don't worry, be happy. I suspect I'm not the first to resist Mr Knight's hopeful imprecations, and I will not be the last.

What I want to do is reflect on the Olympics, Olympic ideals and the Olympic experience, from an Australian point of view. Fifty thousand revellers in Sydney, one year out from the Games in September last year, roared their approval for these, the 'Party Games'. The 'Friendly Games'. The 'Athletes' Games'. Well, what sort of a party has it been so far? To answer this, I need to start with the wise words of the Olympics Website, and the original Olympic vision, and then apply those words to the Australian experience, 1996–2000. From the apparent sincerity of cyberspace, to the facts of the coalface. My conclusion will ask: where to from here?

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The compelling philosophy of Olympism, as described in the Olympic Charter, talks of:

... exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.<sup>5</sup>

The goal of the Olympic Movement is to 'contribute to building a peaceful and better world', educating youth through the encouragement of 'mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play'. At the Opening Ceremony, as we know, one athlete, chosen as the representative of all competitors, takes the oath:

In the name of all the competitors I promise that we shall take part in these Olympic Games respecting and abiding by the rules which govern them, in the true spirit of sportsmanship, for the glory of sport and the honour of our teams.

Pierre de Coubertin in point of fact was implacably opposed to the participation of one half of the world's population – women – but that does not concern us here. What global citizen, what parent, would not passionately endorse the quality of the philosophy expounded. Will and mind, combined, exalted. A peaceful and better world. Ethical principles, fair play, the true spirit of sportsmanship.

Over the last couple of troubling years it is surely the force of these sentiments that has had all sport tragics, life tragics, big and small, Sandy Hollway to Sandy Stone, desperate to keep the focus on this image of the Games. The world competing, the fastest wins. Sport wins, and global culture too. Richard Cashman, Centre for Olympic Studies Director, primed this pump in the pages of the University of New South Wales' journal, *Uniken*, in 1998, in a piece entitled 'Olympics is mind, body and spirit'. He extolled the regenerative value not just of sport to Olympism, but also of culture and the environment. He wrote of the genesis of the Cultural Olympiad in 1912 and its application, nearly a century on, to Sydney 2000.

Two of Australia's most celebrated athletes, 1500-metre great Herb Elliott and mighty marathoner Rob de Castella, the one on ABC radio and the other in his column in the *Canberra Times*, early in 1999 implored us all to keep our eyes on the prize. In the midst of the Salt Lake City bid scandal, Herb Elliott served it up not to unprincipled Games officials but

to the media for its pervasive role.<sup>6</sup> Deek, incredibly, commenced his article this way:

One of the great dangers facing the Olympic movement as a result of the relentless negative publicity of the past few weeks is loss of confidence by sponsors.<sup>7</sup>

He only just stopped short of condemning giant American finance organisation John Hancock for its decision to withdraw sponsorship on the basis of documented Olympic corruption,

Now, I instance Herb, Deek ... Richard ... not to criticise. Rather, to point out how similar they are to most of us. True believers all, like most of us. When Dick Ebersol, the NBC sports chief, in September 1999 spoke of Sydney's unique and astonishing beauty, our national chest puffed with pride. The call that went out about the same time for some lucky four thousand Sydney householders to 'share the spirit, share a bed' – figuratively speaking, I'm sure – with relatives of visiting athletes, has no doubt been massively over-subscribed. This is what the Olympic experience should be about. This is what we want desperately to believe in. Herb Elliott, Kevin Berry, Raelene Boyle, Tracey Holmes – all of us – want the Melbourne experience all over again. The apparent verities of the past. The 'Chariots of Fire' thing. Duncan Armstrong putting the weights on Biondi. Gould gliding to the wall. Bill Roycroft jumping – or so it seemed to a ten year old boy in Newport, on Sydney's northern beaches back in 1960, jumping clear to the stars. For gold.

But the old verities no longer hold. FJ Holdens, Sharps soft drinks and the jutting square jaw of Chesty Bond are gone. When Juan Antonio Samaranch voiced the fateful word 'Syd-iney', back in September 1993, this Newport boy, six years of age in Melbourne, and now pushing fifty, decided to make this Olympics even more special by gathering and reading as much as I could in the years from Atlanta in 1996 to Sydney in 2000. I'll bet there are tons of Australian sport tragics out there who joined me. For a few years now, we've been absorbing the Olympic news in the papers, from the tabloid populism of the *Telegraph* to the considered, quality journalism of, say, Marian Wilkinson and Jacquelin Magnay in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. And we've been reading the literature, books like the Simson/Jennings *Lords of the Rings* (1992), *The New Lords of the Rings* (1996), Christopher Hill's *Olympic Politics* (1992), Harry Gordon's *Australia and the Olympic Games* (1994), and even the deplorably written but entertaining recent Macmillan pot-boiler by Pat Sheil, *Olympic Babylon* (1998).

And where has that left us true believers, sport tragics, with six months to go until Sydney? I'll tell you. Stuck in the mire of the Olympics, new-millennium style – full of domestic politicking, cultural embarrassment, litigious speculation, drugs, a ticket fiasco, tests, bands and Michael Knight. Four specific areas must be discussed : first, the IOC, and its recent performance, from head man down to rank-and-file members; second, Australia's Olympics organisers; third, the issue of drugs and drug-testing; and, finally, the issue of reconciliation and Australia's indigenous population. In early September 1999, Charles Perkins, one of this country's best-known Aboriginal activists said this:

A tidal wave is building up and the world is going to be looking at us through the microscope of 20,000 to 30,000 international media. My strategy is to tell the world that Australia, with all its wonderful people and great sporting prowess, has a huge skeleton in the cupboard.<sup>8</sup>

Lowitja O'Donohue, former ATSIC chief, and Pat Dodson, former Reconciliation Council chairman, supported him. The signs are there.

First, then, the IOC. Three men have dominated Olympic politics since Athens in 1896. Given the lofty ideals of Olympic philosophy, we might expect much of them. Role model material? Categorically not. The first, de Coubertin, with his misogynist tendencies and unfortunate support of the Nazi Olympics in his dotage, at least formulated an appealing set of standards for the modern Olympics. Avery Brundage, President of the IOC from 1952 to 1972, held fast to the amateur principle, but the complete Brundage package is disturbing. His obsessive pursuit of Jim Thorpe, public involvement with extreme right wing organisations in the United States and sympathy for Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitism make him a deeply troubling figure.

Not as troubling however, as the incumbent, Juan Antonio Samaranch, president of the IOC since 1980 and still firmly ensconced. When the *Weekend Australian* in its 23–4 January 1999 editorial analysed recent IOC performance under the heading 'Olympic ideal besmirched by corruption' it skirted, as just about everyone other than Vyv Simson and Andrew Jennings in *Lords of the Rings* has skirted, around Samaranch's fascist past and beleaguered IOC incumbency. Commenting on Samaranch's abruptly different management style to his predecessor, Lord Killanin, Harry Gordon in *Australia and the Olympic Games* spoke of Samaranch's keenness to restore 'a kind of nobility to the IOC'.<sup>9</sup> In or out of context this

is a misleading reference. Any objective analysis of the IOC under Juan Antonio Samaranch can only confirm agreement with *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Jacquelin Magnay, who summed up Samaranch's IOC organisation in singular terms on 6 February 1999: 'Backdoor deals, self-promotion, expediency, doublespeak and an amazing twist of the truth. ..'. If she had added elitism and culpable decision-making, we would be getting near to the mark. What price idealism? What price now the glorious Olympic Charter? The Olympic Oath?

Sydney's extraordinary fate is to have the very Games when, at long last, twenty years of the would-be imperial Samaranch style has received, as one paper put it, the 'blowtorch'.<sup>10</sup> The man who, during the week Sydney celebrated one year to go to the Games, restated his pride in his ugly fascist past, was under more pressure during 1999 than the previous eighteen years of his presidency combined.<sup>11</sup>

The revelations began in earnest in January and quickly spread: from the naming of corrupt IOC officials from mainly African and South American countries, to the sordid sweeteners of the Salt Lake City bid, to the implication of Australian IOC member Phil Coles, to the implication of the Sydney bid itself. Our bid. In mid-February 1999, Coles was forced to stand down from Games activities following allegations he had acted unethically by accepting four free trips to the United States. For the true believers, this was potentially the unkindest cut of all. Phil Coles was right there in the pantheon of Aussie doers. He reputedly got himself to the 1960 Rome Olympics on the back of lamington drives. Variousy described as a good mate, a 'knockabout bloke' and the 'Bondi battler',<sup>12</sup> the Coles revelations had us all feeling like the American lad who, on hearing of his hero 'Shoeless' Joe Jackson's complicit role in the infamous fixing of the 1919 World Series, asked with disbelief: 'Say it ain't so, Joe?' Well, say it ain't so Phil. Not only snouts in the trough, allegedly Australian snouts.

It got worse. Glenda Korporaal in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 13 February 1999 asked the question we were all afraid to ask:

As the Olympic corruption cyclone rages around the world, the question is how long Sydney organisers can maintain the firewall between the 2000 Games and the growing scandal.

Not long, as it turned out. The Sheridan Report in March 1999 identified six categories of breaches in the Sydney bid. The *Canberra Times* editorial of 17 March caught the prevailing public mood precisely:

The Sheridan report will leave a bad taste in the mouths of many of those ordinary Australians who were jubilant on the day in September 1993 when Sydney was officially awarded the Games. There was no doubt in anyone's mind then that Sydney had won on its merits: clean air, beauty, world-class facilities. What was not to like?

The Sheridan Report, an impressive document by the former South Australian auditor-general, reserved its most severe censures for the IOC. Its – the IOC's – guidelines were utterly unworkable. More to the point: what the report clarified was that the publicly disgraced IOC members—including Augustin Arroyo from Ecuador, Jean-Claude Ganga from the Republic of Congo, Lamine Keita of Mali, Paul Wallwork from Samoa – and the boy from Bondi, Phil Coles – these were small fish. Small fry. As Philip Hersh commented in the *Chicago Tribune*:

... [the IOC, the] self-appointed guardian of a movement empowered to promote health, peace and equality through sport, had shown again it ruled with the condescension of a feudal lord ... The IOC won't fry its big fish. In fact, they share a table while minnows are served up on a platter of false righteousness.<sup>13</sup>

With a statement as feudal as it was questionable, President Samaranch opted for the moral high ground, saying that the IOC must clean its house, root out unethical behaviour.<sup>14</sup> By late September 1999, Phil Coles had been stripped of all Olympic responsibilities except going to the IOC meeting in 2000; President Samaranch prepares for 'Syd-iney' and a feted retirement.

Confronted by an issue of such magnitude, the true believer might be excused for thinking that the personalities of the main players would be quietly subsumed by the firestorm of apparently systemic bidding bribery and the ticketing revelations. Not so. New South Wales students of the Games, in particular, have had to wear Kevin Gosper's party-line utterances as (according to one commentator) an 'errand boy' for Samaranch,<sup>15</sup> Games Village mayor Graham 'Richo' Richardson's typical, though in his new job utterly misplaced arrogance and, above all, the performance of New South Wales Olympics Minister Michael Knight. Does anyone have a kind word for Mr Knight? One newspaper columnist speculated that Knight is an Atlanta plant whose mission is to sabotage our Games so that we don't outshine the Americans.<sup>16</sup> Another said

'prune him' as deadwood. Another issued him marching orders. Another said he's out of step.<sup>17</sup> Not just the monumental marching bands cock-up, which prompted the litany of headline puns, but his range of mistakes – mistakes which led Glenda Korporaal to catalogue the failings and question his competence.<sup>18</sup> In recent months he has looked for all the world like someone in constant search for the next fall guy.

The bands debacle deserves a brief mention. What a sorry saga. This, as the *Canberra Times* headline trumpeted, was 'SOCOG's gold medal bungle'<sup>19</sup>: first, to endorse a bad cultural decision to hire the bands; then to be spooked by the bleatings of the radio station 2UE shock jocks who baa for a living; and then to be spooked again by the reaction to the bands' sacking – a reaction in the first instance seemingly shaped by one 'Gordon Dillow', columnist for the *Orange County Register* in California. That's like being muscled by the 'Whoop Whoop Weekly'. Mr Dillow described Australians as 'loud and obnoxious when they're beered up', a country which had 'cravenly weasled out of' the deal with American school students.<sup>20</sup> If not for the Americans, Mr Dillow reminded us all down under, all Australians would be speaking Japanese. Faced with such trenchant criticism from a journalist with world-wide status like Mr Gordon Dillow – and the prospect of World Projects Corporation legal action – Michael Knight said he'd play 'hardball' and then played very softball. What we witnessed at the end of the day, the *Canberra Times* mused, was 'a gold-medal-winning performance in that great Australian sport, the knee-jerk'.<sup>21</sup> The upshot was that big event guru, ceremonies director Ric Birch, was told that his Opening and Closing Ceremony plans would be closely monitored by SOCOG – specifically by a special committee headed up by ... Michael Knight. If you think this is a bit like putting John Howard in charge of Sorry Day, or John Laws in charge of the Australian Broadcasting Authority, or Juan Antonio Samaranch in charge of an Olympics ethics review, you'd be right.

But the most unfortunate impact of the two-month band saga, the all-year snouts-in-trough saga and the continuing bribery allegations and the ticketing rorts, has been to remove from the pages of our newspapers the central issues of drugs in sport and Aborigines. We continue to read barely a word about the implications of the decisions taken at the February 1999 World Conference on Doping in Sport. The thoughts of something like two hundred speakers a day at that conference resulted in the production of the Lausanne Declaration. In effect, the IOC backed away

from its five-year campaign to formulate a common two-year penalty for serious drug-taking. The final decision on penalties has been left up to the individual sporting bodies. What this means is that the mega-professional sports like cycling and soccer, which needed to feel the pressure of a compulsory banning, can please themselves. The opportunity is now there to contest a ruling, based on 'exceptional circumstances'. Little wonder that there is, as Matthew Stevens declared in the *Weekend Australian* in February 1999, a 'global crisis of confidence in the Olympic movement'.<sup>22</sup> We are now in the hands not only of well-heeled individual sports able to thumb their nose but, as the Princess Royal Princess Anne put it, 'well-lawyered athletes'.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, the issue of Aboriginal protest. In September 1999, several of Australia's most distinguished Aboriginal leaders confirmed their determination not to boycott the Games but to protest indigenous issues during them. It will be a very big stage, far bigger than that provided by the Commonwealth Games in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland in 1982. Yet the experience of Brisbane, as Aborigines were swept off the streets by police (and hopefully out of sight), was a chastening and unforgettable one. Renowned Australian poet and Queenslander Bruce Dawe spoke for many of us in his poem *Watching the '82 Games'* when he captured the sense of split loyalties during the Commonwealth Games:

Funny ... I couldn't concentrate upon  
 the athletes, white and black, within the gates,  
 for those with fewer friends who sat outside.  
 I cheered, of course (Michelle, Tracey, Lisa,  
 and Raelene capping her career with gold),  
 was proud (who wasn't), kept count of the tally  
 – the Poms were trailing ... or so one *might* have said,  
 had not conscience urged suppression of  
 such dangerous thoughts – *these* were 'the Friendly Games'!  
 Forget the tallies. These were anonymous,  
 no electronic score-board blinked their times,  
 no anthems played,  
 their dais was the street and the loud wagon.  
 Suffice to say: they featured in the perennial  
 alternative Games, and fought on for the lonelier  
 gold that comes later, the red and black of history.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding the token motion moved in parliament in August 1999, this Australian Prime Minister's record, this Aboriginal Affairs Minister's

record, this government's record, has been the worst in at least thirty years. When I was asked by Richard Cashman, way back in November 1996 to provide the editorial for the first issue of the Centre for Olympic Studies' occasional magazine, *Olympic Impact*, I wrote this:

Quite simply, the Olympics are too important to allow the means by which we promote ourselves to be left solely to officials, coaches and advertising agencies – and to doctrinaire politicians bent on undermining the social and legal advances of recent decades. Could someone have a word in the ear of the Prime Minister ... [and tell him] that our Aboriginal policies in 2000 will be subjected to the strictest international scrutiny.<sup>25</sup>

Well, no-one did – and they are. The host of journalists from, say, Indonesia and France, must be licking their chops. Indonesia's then Foreign Minister Ali Alatas confirmed as much during the early days of the East Timor crisis. John Pilger's much-publicised television documentary, 'Welcome to Australia', only strengthened international resolve.

The experience of the last couple of years has shown us that the Olympics must be re-invented in the new millennium. The scale is too big, sponsorship dollars too prominent, drugs too available. The idea is too good to be left solely in the hands of the IOC. In the opinion of many global citizens, the organisation has forfeited the right to be the *only* service provider.

Much as I would like to believe in Vice-President of the IOC Anita Defrantz's model of a new millennium of zero poverty, no wars and drug-free athletic competition,<sup>26</sup> knowledge of world history and close to fifty years exposed to the nature of the human condition tells me otherwise. It cautions me not to hold my breath in anticipation.

We need concrete action which might, in the first instance, be built around the athlete activism that Kevin berry has regularly alluded to. Coach activism. Rank-and-file people action. It starts with complete re-organisation of IOC culture, built in the future around the strong representation of athletes past and present, host-city bidding transparency and the curtailment of a commercial sponsorship paradigm now out of control. If that means artificially smaller Games, so be it. If it means all athletes get housed, once again, in the same village, so be it. Let's get back to an Olympic Games *of* the athletes and *for* the people, to a Games that

dignifies rather than degrades Kevin Berry's passion for this grand ideal. For his is a passion that just about every global citizen shares.

## Notes

- 1 *Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday, 15 September 1999.
- 2 *The Sun-Herald*, Sunday, 19 September 1999.
- 3 *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday, 16 September 1999.
- 4 *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday, 16 September 1999.
- 5 <http://www.aafra.org/OlympicInformationCenter/OlympicPrimer/OlympicPrimer.htm>
- 6 See report on Elliott's comments: Jeff Wells, 'Sorry Herb, you've missed the bus', *Daily Telegraph*, Thursday, 18 February 1999.
- 7 Robert de Castella, 'Olympic movement needs its sponsors', *Canberra Times*, Tuesday, 16 February 1999.
- 8 See Andrew West, 'Such a shame says Perkins', *The Sun-Herald*, Sunday, 12 September 1999.
- 9 Harry Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, 1994, p. 343.
- 10 *Weekend Australian*, 16–17 January 1999.
- 11 See Natasha Bitá, 'Make them the best: Samaranch', *Daily Telegraph*, Wednesday, 15 September 1999.
- 12 See *Weekend Australian*, 'The Olympic rings of fire', 13–14 February 1999, p. 21.
- 13 Quoted in Robert Messenger, 'King Cole and merry old Seoul', *Canberra Times*, 19 June 1999.
- 14 See 'The dirty half-dozen hit back at IOC chiefs', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 March 1999, p. 37.
- 15 See Piers Akerman, 'Prune SOCOG's deadwood now', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 1999.
- 16 See Miranda Devine's column in *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1999.
- 17 See, for example, Akerman, op. cit.; Sue Williams. 'Knight out of step over bands issue', *The Sun-Herald*, Sunday, 1 August 1999.
- 18 Glenda Korporaal, 'Are we doomed to repeat the sins of Atlanta', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 September 1999, p. 11.
- 19 'SOCOG's gold medal bungle', editorial, *Canberra Times*, Thursday, 19 August 1999.
- 20 See 'Games anger swamps embassy', *Daily Telegraph*, Saturday, 3 July 1999.
- 21 'SOCOG's gold medal bungle', *Canberra Times*.
- 22 Matthew Stevens, 'Prince of the past shames the Games', *Weekend Australian*, 6-7 February 1999.
- 23 See 'Dopes fail the test'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, 6 February 1999.
- 24 Bruce Dawe, *Towards Sunrise – Poems, 1979-1986*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1986, p. 42.
- 25 David Headon, 'Plastic Roos and Christine Anu', *Olympic Impact*, No. 1, November 1996, p. 2.
- 26 Keynote Address at 'The Olympics in the Next Millennium' Conference, University of New South Wales, Wednesday, 22 September 1999.