

The Best, the Worst, and the Juiced: the Need for and Suggestions to Improve the Olympics

By Charles H. Calisher

calisher@cybersafe.net



The emblem of the Olympic Games is composed of 5 interlocking, colored (blue, yellow, black, green, and red) rings on a white field. It was designed in 1913 by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games. The rings signify passion, faith, victory, sportsmanship, and work ethic ("ethics" is not mentioned, except as "sportsmanship," but is expected).

Each night during the Olympics a summary of the day's events is presented on television and details provided in newspapers, on radio, and on the web. What we are told about are the highlights, that is, the events that the media feel are important and will be watched by large audiences. Fencing, badminton, and handball usually are not mentioned here, unless one of the competitors falls, plays poorly, or is shown to be a person of the sex opposite of that we all assumed her (rare) or him (very rare) to be, although the athletes competing in those events have practiced most of their lives to perfect their skills. This seems rather inane. Why is the 100-m dash of greater interest than taekwondo? I don't know, but it is. Not many people are interested in watching weight-lifting and the participants in those events perform before audiences comprising their relatives, friends, and biased judges, as well as those whose IQs are so low they could not figure out how to obtain tickets to the basketball competition.

There is a problem with keeping score of the scores. For one thing, at the 2008 Olympics, as in the past, the world's economic superpowers were leaders in the medal counts. In Beijing, the 10 nations with the largest economies took the major share of both gold medals and total medals. For another, if China, with a population of 1.3 billion people (plus or minus the population size of Croatia) wins 60 medals, then the proportion of medals won by China is 60/1.3 billion, or ~1/22 million people. In 2008, China won 100 medals (1/13 million people). In 2008, Netherlands, with a population of 16 million, won 16 medals (1/1 million people) and Australia, with a population of 21

million, won 46 medals (1/460 000 people). However, the country with the highest proportion of medals to population is Jamaica, with about 2.5 million people and 11 medals (~1/240,000). Some of these countries are getting their money's worth, some not.

It is amazing to me that anyone from Afghanistan could find the proper conditions to train for anything except survival, but when Rohullah Nikpai of Afghanistan (population about 15 million but that changes daily) won a bronze medal in 158 kg taekwondo in Beijing, that meant that Afghanistan was "better" (more successful per million population) than Egypt, Malaysia, Republic of South Africa, Sudan, Venezuela, and Vietnam. On a per capita basis, which country has done best?

Better question: who cares? Are we talking about the superiority of an individual country or about the superiority of an individual athlete or athletes? What, exactly, is the purpose of these "games"?

For many years, some national Olympic programs have perverted the idea and ideal of "sports," screening potential athletes early in their lives, making them attend special schools for athletes, drugging them, fostering the maturation of some and fostering the focal immaturity of others, much as farmers nurture cattle and corn. One can look upon such a system as one that cultivates and promotes excellence, but one can also look upon it as unnatural selection, the opposite of Darwinian evolution, more like an exhibition of faith in Lamarckianism. A slap on the wrist is insufficient. These countries should be thrown out of the World Trade Organization and lose their seats in the United Nations for at least 4 years after the last female gymnast on their team attains menarche.

Better still, more hydrodynamic swim suits, more supportive shoes, and more flexible vaulting poles, as well as improved techniques and altered rules, have provided

a constellation of changes improving times, heights, and distances. Comparisons between standards for modern events and events of decades ago are simply not reasonable.

The bottom line is that medal totals, which speak of countries, might better be ignored and individual medals, which attest to the expertise of individual athletes, might better be emphasized.

It is not only the summary scoring that should be changed, it is the events themselves that need attention. Who, after all, watches badminton, except for a few hundred thousand people in Asia? Who watches super power-lifting, except for a few hundred thousand people in Europe, Kazakhstan, and Crazistan, plus 4 in a bar in Nebraska?

EVENTS

The majority of participants in Olympics events are true athletes (people trained or gifted in exercises or in contests involving physical agility, stamina, or strength), people who can do things the rest of us can only dream of doing (such as high jump and pole vault). They then practice, practice, practice until they are participating at the highest level possible for them. Some enter events that take strength, considerable efforts and practice (weight-lift, hammer throw), but are not “prototype” athletes. The body of an athlete more than likely is not the same as the body of a beer-drinker, except for hammer throwers.

According to legend, the first Olympic Games were founded by Heracles (Hercules), a son of Zeus, but the first Olympic Games for which there are records were held in 776 BCE. At those Olympic Games, a naked runner, Coroebus, won the sole event, the stade – a run of approximately 192 m. One possibility for increasing enthusiasm for the modern Olympics might be to have all the participants compete naked. The more I think about this, the better I like the idea; I could always go to the refrigerator for a beer when the men are competing.

For nearly 1200 years, the Olympics were held each fourth year, until in 393 CE the Roman Emperor Theodosius I, a fundamentalist Christian, abolished the games because of what he perceived as their pagan influences; no surprise there.

Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympics and the first modern games were played in 1896 in Athens. de Coubertin

had attributed the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 to the lack of vigor of French soldiers. After studying the education of German, British, and American children, de Coubertin decided that it was exercise, more specifically sports, that made for a well-rounded and vigorous person. The vigor of French soldiers does not seem to have improved because of the Olympics.

Rather than limiting Olympic events to the original tests (pole vault, sprint, shot put, weight lifts, swimming, cycling, target shoots, tennis, marathon, and gymnastics), we now have archery, “athletics” (what?), badminton, basketball, beach volleyball (This clearly is not a sport, it is an excuse for men to watch women wearing the fewest pieces of clothing possible and yet remain decent - the number of pieces that would not get them arrested in the host country; you can bet that it is illegal in countries where burqas are *de rigueur*), boxing, cycling (BMX, mountain bike, road, track), canoe/kayak (flatwater, slalom), diving, equestrian, football, fencing, gymnastics (artistic, rhythmic), trampoline, handball, hockey, judo, modern pentathlon, rowing, sailing, shooting, softball, swimming (normal and synchronized), tennis, taekwondo, triathlon, table tennis, volleyball, weightlifting, water polo, wrestling, and wushu. No medal is given for wushu because no one knows what it is; I believe it has something to do with spicy fish. In addition, a new or “exhibition” sport seems to be added at each Olympics, but these usually do not persist.

It is my personal, and likely peculiar, opinion that no event should ever end in a tie. A tie is like kissing your sister. It's okay, but it isn't good enough. They should keep playing until someone wins.

I have some suggestions for the Olympics Committee to consider:

Slush skating: Skating on ice is not an easy task but with practice and a few ankle dislocations and ligament tears, it can be learned. What would be difficult would be skating on thawing ice, slush. Figure slush skating, slush hockey, and slush curling would be much more challenging than when done on sissy-smooth ice.

Rhythmic wrestling: Why not? Synchronized swimming is a rhythmic exhibition, as is rhythmic gymnastics. There could be rhythmic complementaries for every sport, with wrestling as a demonstration sport at the next games, which will be in London. I would look for-

ward to seeing rhythmic wrestling, with the participants in tutus with attached ribbons.

Competitive trampolining: The audience members could sit on the edges of their seats watching international competition in trampoline routines. Bouncing up and then allowing gravity to do much of the rest would involve the possibility of a broken arm or leg or neck, which at least would provide excitement, much like auto racing. Combined with boxing, it could be a sensation. Italian likely already has a word for "boxolining."

Synchronized swimming with defense: At present, synchronized swimming is not a sport. It is a sort of soggy dancing. The participants are skilled, no doubt, but unless a game has a defensive component, it isn't really competitive (c.f. golf). If someone is not in front of you with a foot or hand in your face, screaming obscenities at you, then it is an exhibition. I have always wondered whether if one of the synchronized swimmers drowned the other(s) also had to drown. I suggest that a person from an opposing team be allowed into the pool to try to disrupt the routine. Couldn't be any worse than boxing, could it?

Water polo: In Melbourne in 1956, Hungary and the Soviet Union clashed in water polo. Clashed is the right word. An anti-Soviet revolution in Hungary had been squelched by the Red Army and the Hungarians were more than somewhat angry. They pledged to defect. The Hungarians lead the Soviets 4-0 before the game was ended in the final minute to prevent angry Hungarians in the crowd reacting to a Russian punching a Hungarian poloist in the eye. By that time, the water in the pool was bloody, seen world-wide on TV. In the final, the Hungarians won the championship by defeating what was then Yugoslavia 2-1. Only half the Hungarian Olympic delegation defected after the games. Following an initially successful revolution and a few weeks of freedom for Hungary, the Soviets kidnapped the premier and general under a white flag and invaded Hungary. Irrespective of this heroic, if disturbing, history, why not re-introduce some violence to this otherwise boring game (which really is water-logged handball)?

Total herpetic lesions: Most of the athletes entered into Olympics events are healthy, red-blooded, young, and somewhat stressed. It is almost certain that some of them have herpesvirus infections. Perhaps at the end of the Olympics, even as part of the closing ceremonies, the person who has provided evidence of the most

herpetic lesions could be recognized to receive a special award, on TV, with his or her parents watching.

2000 km run: The marathon is named after the fabled run of the Greek soldier Pheidippides, a messenger from the Battle of Marathon who ran to Athens. (The accuracy of this legend is in doubt.) No matter the origin, the marathon is a long, arduous, and often agonizing race of about 42 km. It is similar to the Iditarod, except without dogs, sleds, snow, and cold. Most marathon runners finish the race, so why only 42 km? Why not 1000 km, or even longer? And why not make it one-way? The runners could see most of Texas, part of Alaska or Siberia, glorious parts of other countries or, in Europe, many different countries. They would need an accompanying team or assistants to help with shoe changes, meal preparation, water provisioning, and acyclovir but that would be a small matter relative to the scenic beauty of the sponsoring country. Having the runners not end their run in a stadium with a cheering crowd but, instead, having them run away from the starting line, perhaps to Athens (no matter where they begin) means we would not have to see them fall, stagger, vomit, and otherwise ruin the evening or day. An ambulance could be sent to collect the winner and the losers would just have to find their own way back.

Javelin catching: Nearly anyone can throw a javelin; it's just a matter of distance. Were javelin catching elevated to the level of a sport we might have more interesting competitions, with the losers awarded "participant ribbons." Both competitions could be held at the same time.

Shooting: If ever there was a militaristic and primitive sport, this is it. Not as bad as boxing, of course, because in boxing people actually hit other people. In shooting sports, inanimate targets are used and no one gets hurt. There is no fun or risk in that, at least for the shooter. I suggest that losers of the preliminary rounds be given guns with live ammunition and be used as the targets. Then, when a shooter misses, the target could fire back. In that way, the shooter will not be so relaxed and smug and maybe even give a second thought to shooting and its purpose.

"Citius, Altius, Fortius" ("Faster, higher, stronger"): It ought to be clear by now that drugs are used widely by competitive athletes. There is no reason to keep testing these people; they are rarely caught anyway. Rather, all sports might be divided into two categories, "users" and "non-users." The "users" could show us just how fast, high, and strong a human body can be taken, and the "non-us-

ers" could show us what hard work and natural ability will allow. The children whose governments enroll them (essentially kidnap them) in athletic "factory farms" from an early age could then be divided into the same two categories, so that we would have (a) non-enrolled, non-users, (b) enrolled, non-users, (c) non-enrolled users, and (d) enrolled users. Those in category (a) would receive solid gold (or silver or bronze) medals and the others would receive cardboard cut-outs of medals spray painted with gold, silver, or bronze paint. A reasonable alternative would be to award only a single medal. Anyone who finishes second or third or last is a loser (not the winner) anyway.

Furthermore, why give Michael Phelps 8 gold medals when all he did was swim? He should have received one gold medal for "swimming" and if he wanted a second gold medal he should have had to compete in another sport, such as goodminton or hammer catching.

Politics: No nation that is involved in suppressing people in their own country, suppressing people in another country, or even thinking about doing so should be considered eligible to host the Olympics games. Such a rule would provide some of the smaller countries with the opportunity to advertise their tourist attractions, including the bodies of their healthy citizens, if there are any.

Public health and medicine: What could be more practical than having competitions in saving lives and its allied fields? Ambulance races, cast setting, heart transplanting, long distance laser treatment, underwater birthing, manuscript editing, obese patient lifting, steroid masking, diag-

nostics, biopolitics, committee composition ... the possibilities are endless.

Finally, in the "good old days," when amateurs, the sons and daughters of rich people, were the only competitors (assuming that no one cheated before the modern era), we could be certain that the athletes were competing for the sake of competition, not to demonstrate how selective breeding and training is an example of social excellence. More recently, the Soviet Union, East Germany, Cuba, and a litany of other places changed the way things were done. They identified their athletes, trained them, gave them jobs ("factory workers" who did not work in factories, "students" who did not go to school, and "sugar cane cutters" who cut no canes, for example), and called them amateurs, when they really were professionals. The United States began to lose at sports we invented, so we simply insisted that professional athletes be allowed to compete. The mask then was off and now we have professional amateurs and amateur professionals and so on. It's a mess but, given how important money is these days, particularly to people who already have money, no reversion to the "good old days" is on the horizon. This may be disgusting, but at least we can see what can be done by humans if they try and if they are enhanced by steroids and other supplements.

Suggested readings:

Don't be ridiculous. No one has published anything useful or honest regarding Olympics perversions or improvements.