

SPORTING SYMBOLISM ON AN INTERNATIONAL STAGE: THE RIGHT TO APPEAL TO HUMANITY

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I. INTRODUCTION

For many years sports administrators and event managers fostered and maintained the myth that sport is apolitical. However the presence of nationalist symbols such as flags and national anthems perpetually rebut this position. They represent the overt assertions of identity by nation states, seeking to limit the national symbolism of oppressed peoples.

The structural sanctions created and enforced by the International and National Olympic Committees challenge the very values that these organisations purport to champion. At a time when major sporting organisations are increasingly unwilling to check the insidious influence of drugs in sport, why are they dogmatically opposed to individual expressions of principle? Why was there such opposition to Cathy Freeman raising both flags of the nations she represents? There is nothing apolitical about modern sport.

II. AUSTRALIAN RACE RELATIONS AND SPORT

Through the research efforts of Australian historians such as Colin Tatz and Max Howell, the early picture of Indigenous peoples' participation in sport began to emerge.

In earlier colonial days, sport was explicitly applied by the church and mainstream society as a tool of socialisation. This largely remains the case today.

While the continent was being invaded by aspiring farmers and pastoralists through the nineteenth century, some effort went towards assuaging the

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early days remained that Indigenous peoples were savages, and incapable of adapting to European conceptions of civilisation.

However, as unfounded racist belief gave way to experience and personal contact, views were altered somewhat. What was always a marginalised minority view gained currency. If Aborigines had the right training, they could make small steps towards the civilisation being created by the European colonisers.

The first approach to Indigenous relations was one of denial and extermination. That is, deny any Indigenous rights, and then to pursue a policy of dispersal. The second official government approach became known as assimilation. The intent being to assimilate the Indigenous peoples into the lowest rungs of mainstream Australian society.

It is within this official policy of assimilation that English sport was introduced and encouraged amongst Aboriginal people. As in England, sport was considered a fine tool to train young men into ways of the Empire and to inculcate the values of the British ruling class.

Early research on the engagement of Indigenous peoples and sport in Australia, indicated that whilst socialisation was the intent, the reality was something else. Contrary to popular belief of the time, sport as an institution was neither separate nor isolated from the whole of society. It is surprising that this earlier unfounded belief persists in some circles even today.

Just as the nineteenth century Australian society was an ignorant, Eurocentric and racist society, nineteenth century Australian sport assumed similar traits. It is from this start that Australian sport developed into the behemoth that preoccupies much of Australian society today. Just as there is racism in Australian society, so too is there racism within Australian sport. Just as there are stereotypes that reinforce racist conceptions of peoples in Australian society, so too there exist stereotypes that reinforce racist conceptions in sport.¹

III. DE COUBERTINS'S GAMES

In 1896, the first modern Olympics were held in Athens, Greece. De Coubertin's public campaign to reconstitute the Olympic Games of ancient Greece began some four years earlier in 1892. In his first public address on the concept of a revitalised Olympic Games, de Coubertin talked of a "halo of grandeur and glory, that is the patronage of classical antiquity".²

This is rhetoric promoting a vision of the highest order. De Coubertin wasn't making a pitch for corporate sponsorship of a golf tournament. His vision was

1 In this paper, reference to sport means English sport and, thereafter, mainstream Australian sport. Indigenous games and pastimes continued in some capacity throughout the earlier years of colonisation. The values and motives of Indigenous societies were also assumed in the constructing and play of Indigenous games. In more recent developments, Indigenous participation in mainstream Australian sporting pastimes and sport has provided a vehicle for challenging the dominant social values presented by non-Indigenous Australian society.

2 H Gordon, *Australia and the Olympic Games*, University of Qld Press (1994), p 18.

bigger and sought ideal values. Australian Olympic historian, Harry Gordon, in his acclaimed book "Australia and the Olympic Games", also writes of de Coubertin's vision for the Olympic Games. Gordon notes that:

[de Coubertin] saw the Olympic movement as being much more than a vehicle for four-yearly carnivals of sport; to him it embodied a philosophy, moulding a wholeness of character, intellect and body.³

Quite clearly, de Coubertin envisioned the modern Olympic Games as an occasion to promote higher human ideals.

To some, these ideals were an ambition for peace between nations. Other researchers have instead suggested that de Coubertin was more interested in education. Either way, de Coubertin was not satisfied with the persistent tribalism of nineteenth century Europe and, on the cusp of a new century, believed that there should be a vehicle to promote and encourage better human ideals and values. It just so happened that the Frenchman saw the ancient Olympics of Greece as having this potential.

De Coubertin considered the classical Greek qualities of equality, aesthetics, argument and reason, scholarship, citizenship and democratic process as aspirational qualities that should be emulated.

Whilst many historians and researchers have alerted us to the partisan application of these classical values, de Coubertin nonetheless saw a revitalised Olympics as a means to promulgate such values internationally.

I'm not too sure if de Coubertin would have considered issues such as television ratings, market share, capitalisation, brand recognition or media profiles as important features of the prospective modern Olympics.

So at the end of the twentieth century, just over one hundred years since the hosting of the first modern Olympic Games, it is time to reflect upon de Coubertin's vision. What's more, it is time to reflect upon de Coubertin's ambition, and assess whether the modern Olympic Games sustain the aspiration for higher ideals.

IV. THE POTENTIAL OF SPORT TO PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS

One of the biggest and most enduring myths surrounding sport is the notion that sport is, and should remain, free of politics.

Sport was never free of politics. Of course, the politics was not necessarily of the more familiar partisan politics of established political parties. Instead, the politics within sport took the form of the more subtle politics that permeates society.

The politics of everyday society is the vehicle of protected power and influence. This same power proclaimed men better than women, and determined that whites were more human than blacks. This power conceived and

3 *Ibid*, p 18.

constructed the 'chain of humanity' to rationalise and encourage European colonisation and imperialism.

This wasn't the power of some omnipresent being, it was the power of self-interest, the power of privilege, the power of perceived influence. At some level, everybody understands this agent of power. Some call it a sense of instinct. Others characterise it simply as human nature. Others know it as selfishness and greed. No matter its nomenclature, or *modus operandi*, it delivers the same results. Above all else, this power seeks to install the needs and wants of one sector of society above all others. The same politics inhabits every corner of modern societies. So too does this politics inhabit sport.

Herein lies the paradox of hope - if left unchecked, sport merely reflects the broader politics and dominant values of society, but at some level sport can become a vehicle to propagate and represent alternatives.

Sport has the capacity to produce magic, a special magic that goes to the spirit of humanity. It is a magic that refreshes, and revitalises and furnishes hope - a magic that belongs to our souls. And while it is true that sport is not the only life experience that can generate magic, it is by far the most accessible occasion to experience it.

Moreover, for oppressed peoples who are denied many other avenues for positive life experiences, sport has been a critical outlet and source for this soul affirming magic. As Indigenous cultures and spirituality have revitalised, this movement has reopened and renewed wells of humanity for Indigenous peoples.

However for many years mainstream sport provided an accessible instance where Indigenous peoples could experience magic. Maybe with the continued revitalisation of Indigenous cultures this interest will wane but, until then, sport will maintain a significant role within Indigenous communities around Australia.

This magic isn't confined to Indigenous peoples. The mainstream preoccupation with sport, in large, can be linked to this magical quality. For everyday people, existence is dominated by activities that detract from the life affirming - the mundane of work, cleaning, car payments and television news. Although, every now and then, the soul is revitalised - it might come from family, loving partners, art, friends, religion, nature, or a football game.

Obviously, these examples are arbitrary and the boundaries are not rigid or natural. Whilst the locus of the experience is personal and particular, however the point remains the same - sport can and does generate magic.

So the task now becomes how does the politics of everyday life connect with the magical moments of sport?

In de Coubertin's mind, the connection was through the revitalisation of the Olympic Games. The modern Olympic Games were a deliberate attempt to foster and promote the magic of sport. Sporting activities were deliberately engaged to promote shared values and further knowledge and understanding through shared experiences and increased personal contact between athletes. In this venture, competition was downplayed for the sake of fellowship.

For the modern Olympic Games, the joy would be found not in the winning but in the participating. Rewards came not from finishing first, but from attending.

To some extent, this logic challenged the dominant cultural (and therefore political) positions of the day. But just as ancient Greece would restrict its ideals of citizenship and democracy, so too would the social mores confine the conception of a French aristocrat - initially at least.

As the popularity of the modern Olympic Games has increased, there have been parallel changes in societies around the world. The last century has provided some significant changes. To some extent and in some fields, this change has been quite unexpected.

The confluence of those international trends often breaks the surface in the most public of occasions. The intense glare of international attention is no longer restricted to military engagements. The social movements of the twentieth century have successfully promoted an objective, shared message and motivated individuals to act. A significant feature of these alliances has been their capacity to draw support from across historical divides. And so it is with the Olympic Games.

The modern Olympic Games promoted its internationalist values and philosophy of Olympism. The present International Olympic Committee President once described Olympism as the pathway to peace and understanding for all peoples.

The games allegorical and literal challenge to the physical, spiritual and intellectual efforts of individuals is further represented by its motto – “*citius, altius, fortius*” (faster, higher and stronger).

De Coubertin’s philosophy of Olympism and the modern Olympic Games are intended to encourage and, to some extent, embody the struggle of humans to greater deeds and ideals. The Olympics are about being motivated to contribute and foster human communion.

In this regard, the Olympic Games are expected to depart from the ordinary and the mundane. The modern Olympic Games therefore become the vehicle to inspire these higher human qualities. In this sense, sport becomes merely the medium.

And as far as stages and spotlights go, sport is wonderful. Aside from the potential to spark those magical personal moments, sport has developed its spectacle through technological and industrial developments. At the most extreme this means ‘made for television’ events, but at its simplest it means improved bats and balls for sporting codes. All in all this has contributed to sport’s broader exposure.

However sport is not isolated from society. Just as there are radical shifts occurring within nation-states and societies around the world, so too are these influences occurring within sport. Sport is not impervious to the modernisation of societies around the world. The globalisation of cultures and societies represents another dominant trend. The Olympic Games has been influenced by this modernisation process.

However, through marketing, packaging, branding and promotion, the modern Olympic Games has sought to create an image and conception that is seen to be above these global shifts. Most significantly, the Olympic movement has moulded its media and public image around the event’s tenuous links to the

Greek Olympic Festivals. In fabricating a sense of continuity and history, the modern Olympic Games has exploited de Coubertin's vision.

In more recent experience, this exploitation has been through more commercial and media related avenues. In this application the popular support and exposure of sport, especially the Olympic Games, has been packaged as a unique marketing opportunity for willing interests - whether they be marketing, media, corporate or commercial, or government. It is argued that the credibility and esteem of the sporting event can in some way be subsumed by marketing and advertising strategies that seek to link the sporting event with a message and/or product being promoted. These products are not confined to commercial possibilities. Governments and nation-states have frequently engaged the same media and advertising apparatus to promote official messages and themes.

For the modern Olympic Games, these issues have always been present. Initially it was de Coubertin's deliberate promotion of the values of the European aristocracy. Supplementing this ambition, de Coubertin sought to further the English conception of an educational process whereby sport offered a vehicle for socialisation. Again, the intent was to inculcate the upper class values and mores.

In the thirties the German government, headed by Adolf Hitler, sought to use the 1936 Olympic Games to promote the dominance of the Aryan race. These Olympics have since been characterised as the 'Nazi Olympics' because of their close association to the promotion of the Nazi political agenda of the decade.

Subsequently, the Olympic Games of the 1960s and 1970s were often discussed with reference to the 'cold war' politics of the era. The contentious politics of the day were frequently painted as a backdrop to the hosting and participation within the Games.

Then into the 1980's and public standoff between the 'super powers' of the USA and the USSR provided a similar backgrounding for the Games. The boycotts of 1980 and 1984 caused much consideration and debate about the continued presence of ideological politics on the international stage.

And whilst the official Olympic movement and the organisations of its superstructure made appeals to free the Olympics of politics, the argument defied any logic. The modern Olympics were founded within politics. De Coubertin sought to promote a political ideology. The entire Olympic organisational structure and culture promoted the politics of class and wealth, and these characteristics remain. Therefore, in reality, the only way this request for the Olympic movement to abandon politics would be effected, is by abandoning the entire conception of the modern Olympic Games.

At this stage, this possibility is not likely. There has been too much money invested for the option to be plausible. While the money itself is not the root cause of the Olympic movements problems, the current politics of opportunism is insidious - undisclosed, rampant self-interest and greed akin to cancer.

An alternative to the option of abolishing the Olympics is for the movement to adopt principles of openness and honesty in all its dealings. Let there be not misinterpretation or underestimation - this project will require nothing less than an organisational transformation.

V. THE POSSIBILITIES FOR SYDNEY AND THE NEW MILLENIUM

The Olympic movement could consciously consider and examine the philosophy, political positions and values it does reinforce and promote.

This should include examining whether the Olympic movement wants to continue paying lip service to de Coubertin's vision of ancient Greek ideals. Furthermore, the Olympic organisation must consider moving into the next millenium with a more inclusive and refined sense of social justice, international standards and the advocacy of the indivisible human rights.

With this reappraisal, the Olympic movement will turn to the truly heroic campaigns to defend human ideals. The Olympic Games will also begin to approach and advance the vision of their founder.

Today, the Olympic movement carries the burden of a grotesque hypocrisy.

On the one hand, the overt, explicit commercial exploitation of the Olympic Games seeks to fabricate by association values rarely generated within business. Since the posting of a profit in the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, the relationship with commercial interests has predominated as never before. This association has seen the Olympic movement wholeheartedly embrace commercialisation and capitalism as welcome political ideologies that can be fostered through its network.

It is a disgrace that these ideologies are exalted above the classical human ideals that de Coubertin aspired to and hoped the modern Olympic Games would promote. Corporatism should never supercede the right to free speech. The practice of media manipulation for commercial gain should never defer social justice. Commercialism must never supercede the right to freedom of expression. Sponsorship must never supercede freedom of association. Superficial political correctness should never supercede principled leadership.

Yet the modern Olympic movement continues to pursue these very corporate values at the expense of its commitment to individual human ideals. For as long as the modern Olympic Games solicits the support of 'top' sponsors, rather than pursuing an agenda that aspires to improving human rights around the world, it holds itself up for ridicule.

The modern Olympics can not claim to respect any heritage with the ancient Greek games whilst it places injunctions upon individual freedom of expression. Nor can the modern Olympics retain any sense of self-respect if it continues to forbid individuals from identifying with social and political causes of their own choice.

What's more, the modern Olympic movement will never extricate itself from ethical considerations by sustaining injunctions, codes of conduct, of individual contracts which prescribe who and what athletes are allowed to discuss with members of the media. The prohibition of such personal and individual expression fails de Coubertin's intent that the modern Olympic Games provide a

source of inspiration to strive for the highest manifestations of human endeavour - physical, cultural and intellectual.

There is no better embodiment of this very striving than in the international struggle to improve the enjoyment of human rights. And the personification of this struggle is found in the every day lives of the oppressed peoples.

The capacity should never be unduly influenced by the fear of being disqualified from the Olympic Games, by being afraid of or being confined to quarters within the Athletes' Village, or by the threat of financial fine. The right of individual athletes to express personal opinions, for example, to lend moral support to the struggle of Australia's Indigenous peoples for recognition of their very existence within their own country, should never be threatened by a fabricated Athletes Code of Conduct.

How is it possible that de Coubertin's ambition for higher ideals was so easily dismissed in favour for a media fabricated, dehumanised, corporate sponsored event for the elite? It would be unlikely that such a blatant coercion would be sustained by any defender of the ideals of human rights.

With the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games less than one year away, the pressure is building.

The Australian Government must undertake a sincere and frank process of reconciliation and recognition of Indigenous peoples. In so doing the Australian Federal Government must respond to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) in March 2000, and explain why the racially discriminatory amendments to the Native Title legislation remain. They must answer to the UNCERD on the governments' belated periodic reports which present information for consideration by the Committee on the report of the stolen generation, and statistics pointing to the massively disproportionate over-representation of young Indigenous peoples in the juvenile justice system.

Additionally, the Federal Government must explain to the World Heritage Committee how the development of a Uranium mine within Kakadu World Heritage Area will not detrimentally affect the 'social and cultural' values of the Park, and specifically the Mirrar people upon whose country the proposed Jabiluka mine is located.

Furthermore, the Federal Government of Australia must prepare an appropriate response to the victims of the Federal Government policy of assimilation. The Federal Government must move beyond statements of belated compromise fashioned from political opportunism.

Lastly, Australia's Federal Government must assist and facilitate in the process to generate an honourable agreement of co-existence between our First Nations peoples and those who have arrived here over the last two hundred years.

The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games can both support and advocate the resolution of these outstanding human rights issue or it can perpetuate the very same abuses of the past two centuries of colonialisation by simply ignoring its responsibilities. The Sydney 2000 Games can not fabricate some happy native

sideshow in a vain attempt to market the 2000 Summer Olympics as some jolly attraction of light and fun in the Southern hemisphere.

Individual athletes must never subvert their personal political beliefs in a state of fear for the duration of their stay within the 2000 Olympic Games. These individuals must be free to express their opinions. These athletes must be free to associate with whomever they please during the duration of the Games. These individual Australians must never fear official repercussions for expressing their support for the pursuit and observance of the very ideals that the founder of the modern Olympic Games would have urged them towards.