

# A critical perspective on the Olympic enterprise

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**Mike Marqusee argues that the ceaseless injunction to consume, cheer and celebrate the Olympics has made the enjoyment of competitive sport something it is not and never should be - mandatory.**

I enjoyed my afternoon at the Olympics, sitting in my public lottery assigned £50 seat at the ExCel, with a fine view of the men's boxing. And I enjoyed it not least because I was finally able to watch the sport itself without the surrounding hype and the layers of commentary. For a moment there was only that pleasure which is special to sport: the spontaneity of a story being fashioned in front of your own eyes, once and once only (despite digital repeats), robustly itself and not pretending to be anything else.

As a lover and student of sport for many decades, I don't need to be reminded how compelling sport can be. But I've also learned what sport is not and that over-stating or mis-stating its importance does it no favours. As one, the media are demanding, cajoling, whipping us into appropriate displays of Olympic enthusiasm, particularly in relation to British competitors and especially British victories. Breathless BBC commentators reiterate the same round of superlatives - 'unbelievable,' 'incredible,' 'amazing,' 'brilliant,' 'unbelievable' - telling us again and again how unique, how special, how extraordinary these Olympics are. It feels like they're the ones on performance enhancing drugs, not the usually sober, poised and realistic competitors. The boosterism is relentless.

We're all being enjoined to get out and back Team GB, regardless of the particular event or the particular competitors, as if there were no other elements in the spectacle. No matter what the context, no matter how minor or major the sport or what role it actually plays in our lives and imaginations, and entirely disregarding the merits of the opposition, we must reproduce the same emotion, the same enthusiasm. As a fan, I'm always sad to see sports reduced to a hollow chamber for a one-dimensional national chauvinism. The human phenomenon we call sport is far more interesting than that.

Sadly, at the ExCel, after the refreshment of the boxing came the utterly formulaic torpor of a video package in which celebrities and former Olympians waxed banal on the 'atmosphere' that makes the Olympics special and the 'unforgettable' moment we're part of. Sorry, but generally I prefer to decide for myself - or let time decide - if something I've witnessed is unforgettable. Olympic competitions, like other sports competitions, as any sports fan knows, are not an uninterrupted succession of climatic highs. The boring and the (relatively) mediocre play a necessary role. Commentators rush to squeeze the events and results into preferred narratives and to draw an apposite moral lesson. Even Cameron seems to think it's his job to tell us what we should learn from (successful) Olympic performances. These lessons are invariably platitudes which tell us little about either sport or the outside world. It's as if there's a fear of letting us draw our own meanings, exercise our own powers of interpretation.

So let me exercise mine. The Olympic podium is a symbolic package: individual excellence at the service of the nation-state under the overlordship of multi-national capital. Which is why the supreme Olympic gesture remains the Tommie Smith / John Carlos 'black power' salute of 1968 - two medal winners overturning the symbolism, refusing to let their individual excellence serve the forces that degraded them and their people.

The government, LOCOG and much of the media, having failed to allay public discontent over the expenditure and the legacy, have resorted to a Victorian claim for the morale boosting effects of elite sport, as a source of inspiration and emulation, which will 'save' children from poverty or crime. The big Olympic message is that individuals can overcome their environment or disadvantages through determination and self-will. This is entirely in keeping with the neo-liberal ethic, the cult of individual success in a competitive market.

This reading of sport ignores two fundamental realities. First, the critical role of collective support for each of the performers, not one of whom could have developed their skills to Olympic levels without the immense infrastructure of social support which makes it possible to realise individual talent. And secondly, the fact that elite sports performers are by definition exceptions. For the great majority, including many with athletic abilities, environment is not transcendable, no matter how 'determined' they are. The neo-liberal message will be re-echoed in the coming Paralympics, where individual triumph over circumstances will be feted - even as the government subjects the disabled to punitive discipline, denying them the support needed for independence. The paradox is that at the core of this micro-managed spectacle, this superstructure of manipulative messages, of corporate and national branding, is a phenomenon whose essence is its unpredictability, its uncontrollability, its sublime indifference to all extraneous narratives.

Sport, even encased in the Olympic armour, retains an autonomy; each competition operates under impersonal self-contained laws. Unlike art, or the opening ceremony, sport cannot be orchestrated. Indeed, that's a condition of its legitimacy. It does not unfold according to a pre-conceived scenario, or illustrate a pre-conceived 'lesson'. Once the gun is fired or the clock starts, competitors are subject only to the egalitarian law of the level playing field, something otherwise conspicuously absent in our world. This is why we celebrate a Jesse Owens, an Abebe Bikila, a Cathy Freeman - because they used the level playing field to overturn (for a moment) historical hierarchies. This unpredictable, uncontrollable, objective core of competitive sport, the source of its drama, is at odds with today's Olympic package, which is increasingly an exercise in micro-management - from physical security to intellectual and cultural property to the formation of subjective interpretations.

It's worth remembering that the Olympic league tables ranking nations by their medal tallies have no official status and are not formally recognised by the IOC. They are a media invention that rose to prominence during the Cold War, when the comparative medal haul acquired political significance for both sides. Nonetheless, this unofficial league table has become, in effect, a determinant of state policy, in the UK as elsewhere. Funding is dished out in accordance with medal targets. So to justify the expenditure on sport, Team GB must reach its London 2012 targets. But investment in sport - as even billionaire football club owners learn - is never secure or straightforward. It is always subject to sport's inherent unpredictability (especially in a one-off event like the Olympics, where a single error can nullify years of preparation), to countless contingencies, not least the great unknown of the opposition. These days our boxers, swimmers, gymnasts etc. are every bit as state subsidised as the Cubans and East Germans of old, who were reviled for their spurious amateurism.

Today, the advanced capitalist societies rally under the standard of elite ultra-professionalism, a state and corporate sponsored professionalism presented as the epitome of individualistic dedication, single-mindedness, self-will. Egocentric qualities from which, somehow, it's asserted, the community automatically benefits. There is a case for state support of elite sports performers, but in

relation to the overall objectives of 'sport for all', i.e. public health, it's as dubious a strategy as trickle-down economics. The Olympic hype has helped me understand an observation made by the philosopher Slavoj Zizek. Under the old regime, he says, the command was 'Thou shalt not' whereas under the new it's 'Thou shalt' - a ceaseless injunction to enjoy, consume, spend, celebrate, cheer, smile. Or as Olympic sponsor Nike says, 'Just do it'. All of which is in its own way as oppressive and self-distorting as the old prohibitions.

I've been an Olympic follower since the Tokyo games of 1964 but I perfectly understand that many people do not share my interest, and there is no civic requirement for them to do so. It's not only non-sports fans who resent the way these Games are being imposed on our attention at every turn, or the exaggeration of the significance of particular results. The Olympic boosterism treats competitive sport as something it is not and never should be - mandatory. To be itself, sport needs to be a freedom exercised, an option not an obligation. The injunction to 'stop moaning' or 'whingeing', projected across the media, should be roundly rejected, not least by genuine sports fans.

The issues raised in and around the Olympics are not trivial: security in the context of the war on terror and the erosion of civil liberties; outsourcing and casual labour; the global ethics of giant corporations; the colonisation of the commons through the super-enforcement of intellectual property rights; the subordination of local needs to the imperatives of global capital. These are not peripheral questions that can or should be wished away - and the success or failure of British competitors, or even of 'London 2012' as a one-off event, will have no bearing on any of them. Sport does offer a kind of escape, an alternative, exterior focus (like Shakespeare, a Twilight movie, or a game show). But it is not a vacation from critical thought. I find no difficulty thoroughly enjoying the best of the competition without compromising for a moment a necessarily critical perspective on what the Olympic enterprise has become.

**Mike Marqusee**

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\* From Red Pepper:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/a-critical-perspective-on-the-olympic-enterprise/>