

TEN REASONS TO OPPOSE ALL OLYMPIC GAMES

... AND STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

There are lots of reasons to oppose Olympic Games as we know them, not just the 1996 or 2000 games but all of them. A brief outline of ten reasons is given here. The points made here summarise ideas analysed in far more depth and detail in various studies. Unfortunately, critical analyses of the Olympics receive virtually no attention compared to the massive governmental and commercial promotion of the Olympics. No criticism is intended here of dedicated and talented athletes and their supporters. Nor do I claim that there is no value at all in Olympic Games. Rather, my argument is that there are such big problems with them that it would be better to abolish them altogether.

1. Nationalism

The Games are an arena for power politics. The 1936 Berlin Games were used by the Nazi regime to bolster its prestige. The US government led a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games to protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet government led a boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Games largely as a pay-back for the 1980 boycott. The usual rhetoric is that sports and politics don't mix, but actually the Olympics have been political from the very beginning. Politics is involved in decisions about hosting the Games and about which countries can participate. Boycotts of the Games are used to exert political pressure. It is precisely because sports seem to be neutral that it is so effective to use them for political purposes. Governments, seeking the prestige of Olympic victories, organise the training of elite athletes. At the Olympics, competition between athletes is turned into competition between states. Athletes can't participate if their country doesn't. Victories by individuals and teams are treated as national victories, symbolised by flags and anthems and beamed around the world. Media coverage in particular countries is often biased towards the country's own athletes, reflecting and reinforcing nationalism. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), a highly undemocratic organisation, is composed of representatives from member countries. The IOC is a vehicle for international political struggle. Hosting the Games is seen as an opportunity for promoting national prestige. States of all political complexions, liberal democratic, communist, fascist, military, have embraced the Olympics, suggesting the lack of a moral core to the Games. The IOC has sought participation of all states, without applying any standards.

2. Commercialism

Corporate interests penetrate the Olympics through sponsorship of the Games themselves and through sponsorship of athletes and use of athletes for commercial purposes. The media foster the Games as a giant spectacle, promoting professionalisation and commercialisation. Visible athletes can cash in on lucrative endorsements. Sporting success becomes a means of selling products. Gold medals become a way for athletes and commercial sponsors to make money. Commercialism and nationalism have gradually turned the Olympics into an enterprise only for full-time athletes, professionals in reality if not in name. The Olympics have become big business mainly through television. The mass media use sport to sell programmes to advertisers. The Games, with their image as the ultimate sporting event, are a marketer's dream for reaching a global audience. Through massive television revenues, the IOC has become a major commercial enterprise itself, operating like a transnational corporation. Its decisions are increasingly dictated by money flows.

3. Competition

The Games are exclusively competitive. This means that most competitors are ultimately

losers. The focus is on a few top winners, whereas there are far more who struggle for years only to fail, sometimes due to bad luck or the machinations of sporting bodies. In any case, the nature of competition at an international level means that only a tiny fraction can end up ultimate winners. Competition with high stakes – Olympic medals – means that the aim becomes victory at all costs. The pressure to win encourages illicit drug use, secrecy in training techniques, attempts at psychological manipulation of opponents, and training and competing while injured. The emphasis on competition and victory means that forms of physical activity that are more participatory and cooperative are marginalised. Sport can be satisfying and beneficial, both physically and mentally, for nearly everyone in the community. This can only occur when the primary goal is participation, not victory in competition. The Olympic Games are elite competitions between athletes and between states. The obsession with Olympic success undermines the goal of cooperative, participatory sport.

4. Male domination

From the beginning, the Games have always had many more men than women as participants, coaches and officials. Female athletes have received less funding and have fewer Olympic sports in which to compete. Many national Olympic committees have no women members and send no women to the Games. The events included in the Games are mostly ones that give men an advantage, notably sports emphasising strength and speed. For example, most running and swimming events are over in a matter of seconds or minutes. Women are already much closer if not superior to men in ultra-endurance events, such as marathon swimming, but shorter events predominate in the Olympics. Similarly, events emphasising precision and skill rather than strength would give women a better chance. It would be quite possible to select or design events that would give women an equal chance to win in direct competition with men, but this has never been considered. Instead, women are expected to adapt to male sports. This also helps maintain the emphasis on competition rather than cooperation. Male domination in the Olympic movement reflects and reinforces the predominance of men in the sports that receive the greatest attention in most countries of the world.

5. Racism

The Games were set up by European elites and built on western sports. Through the worldwide publicity for the Olympics and the competition for national glory, more and more of these sports have been adopted in countries where they had no popular following. Many non-western countries have long histories of indigenous sports and games that do not fit the western model. These traditions have been submerged. The IOC is dominated by western perspectives on sport and appears to take no notice of non-western styles and traditions. This is not to mention the racism that can occur within and between Olympic teams.

6. Violence

Many sports, such as boxing, archery and the javelin, are modelled on skills for war. A number of sports involve violence themselves, including ostensibly non-contact sports such as basketball. The intense competition and partisanship linked to sports often cause spectators to become aggressive. On a number of occasions, sporting events have been the triggers for actual wars. In general, competitive sports reflect rather than reduce violence in the rest of society. The Olympics were set up to foster peace and harmony. Instead, they have simply provided another arena for the continuation of violence between

individuals in events and between states in the struggle for power and status. The awarding of the 1896 Games to Athens stimulated Greek nationalism, leading to a war with Turkey in 1897. The Olympic movement is powerless to turn its original goal of promoting peace into reality.

7. Celebrity

The Games foster a culture of celebrity that focuses on stars at the expense of non-elite participants. Spectators identify with Olympic heroes, attributing to them moral virtues such as courage and integrity. Yet the combination of specialist events plus a premium on winning means that Olympic athletes are often not suitable role models. They may develop certain skills and strengths at the expense of overall good health, compete at the expense of other commitments or value personal success more than competing fairly or helping others. This is not the fault of the athletes, but rather a symptom of an elite competition in which victors are glamorised by the media and become potent symbols of national success.

8. Technological intensification

Olympic-level competitions are increasingly a struggle between applications of advanced science and technology to equipment, training, psychology, and drugs (legal and illegal). In cycling, for example, victory goes as much to the swiftest bike as to the best cyclist. Bodies are treated like machines, as means to the goal of winning. The increasing role of sophisticated scientific and technological interventions means that individuals and countries without the most advanced facilities are handicapped, creating another dimension to the racism built into the Olympics. Steps could be taken to overcome this, for example by assigning standard equipment to competitors randomly, but this would not serve the interests of governments with a technological edge.

9. Spectatorship

Watching sports such as the Olympics serves to integrate spectators (especially men) into the dominant value system of competitive striving for success. Under the guise of enjoying entertainment and supporting ones favourite team or athlete, spectators of sport are inculcated with the assumptions that life is a competition, that the rules are fair, that most of the rewards go to the winners, and that losers have only themselves to blame. These ideas are convenient for keeping workers on the usual treadmill. It is because of the similarities between competitive sport and competitive business that sporting metaphors (the level playing field, scoring) are so prevalent in non-sporting arenas.

10. Government repression

Olympic Games are sites of reduced civil liberties. Because of the vast audience and huge symbolic value of the Olympics, various groups try to make their case through disrupting the Games, necessitating special laws and special policing to prevent disruption. Terrorists used the 1972 Munich Olympics as a stage. As the stakes become greater, so does the control over the opportunity to dissent.

A. Reform the Olympic Games

Various ideas have been presented to eliminate some of the problems with the Games. One is a permanent site such as Athens. This would remove the politics of site selection, in which making special gifts to IOC members has become routine. Another is to have multiple sites for the Games, so that the burden (financial and symbolic) on a single city would be reduced. Yet another is to have athletes represent only themselves and not represent countries. They could wear common uniforms. Team sports could be eliminated. This would reduce nationalist identification. These and other such ideas are good, but they are opposed by commercial and national interests and are unlikely to be introduced by the IOC, dominated as it is by these interests.

B. Use the Games as a site for political struggle

Another approach is to accept the Games as they are but to use them as a place for waging various campaigns. At the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, black sprinters on the victory stand gave a black power salute, with tremendous symbolic impact. Generally, though, this strategy is not very fruitful. It requires enormous efforts to become an Olympic athlete, yet opportunities to make political gestures are quite limited. For non-athletes, there are possibilities to make protests, but the Games do not provide a level playing field for political uses. Governments and corporations have the greatest opportunities for using the Games for their own purposes, whether through sporting successes, boycotts or just advertisements.

C. Challenge the Olympic Games

One approach is just to ignore the Games. This sounds simple but can be quite significant if one's relatives or friends expect enthusiasm for the Olympic spectacle. Another approach is to actively oppose the Games, for example by writing letters, circulating leaflets, holding protests, producing satires, boycotting commercial sponsors and many other techniques. This has the advantage of going beyond individual criticism. It would be hard to see quick results, though, given the global forces promoting the Games. A third approach is to promote alternative games. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were workers' games which avoided much of the nationalism and upper-class bias of the Olympics. The problem with this strategy is that any games that become a real alternative to the Olympics are likely to be caught up in the same sorts of problems, such as commercialism, competition and spectatorship. A fourth approach is to promote cooperative games (not Olympic-style Games but games that are actually fun) and other alternatives for the psychosocial functions of sport. Some forms of drama and role play may accomplish this. Much more investigation, including practical testing, is needed into functional alternatives to competitive sport. Presently, though, far more money and effort is devoted to the bio-mechanics of swimming, improved tennis rackets and designer drugs for athletes than to cooperative games.

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