

Celebrating Humanity? The Olympic Movement and Sporting Cultures



Brian Bridges

IHSS Conference on 'Improving the
Human Destiny'

Ideals of Sport and the Realities....

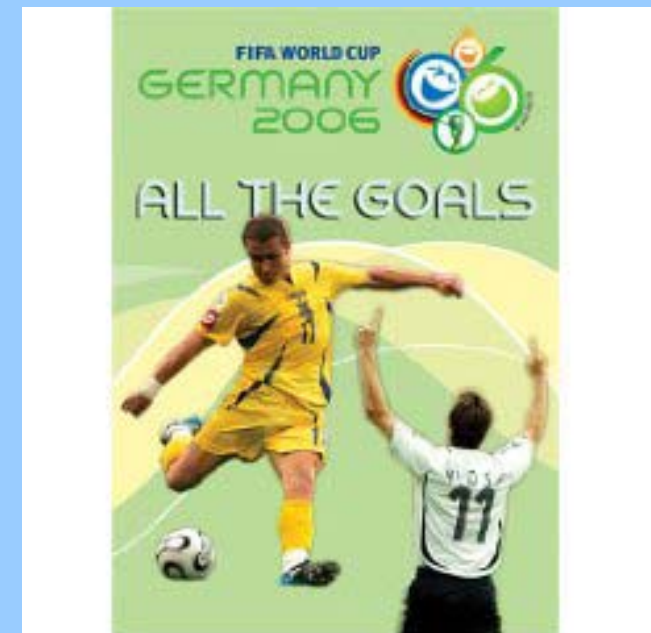
Structure of this paper:

1. Basic approaches to the role or uses of sport in society, locally and globally.
2. Aspirations and actualities of Olympism and the Olympic movement.



The Meaning of Sport

The term 'sport' has different meanings in different societies and at different historical junctures.



Modern sport is:

organised, rule-based, competitive, physical activity.

From muscular athleticism to....

While all societies developed some forms of physical 'sporting' activity (China has a physical culture that dates back millennia), 'modern' sport has been strongly influenced by 'western' experiences.

19th century sport in Britain/Europe focused on playing to the rules, honouring one's opponents, and developing 'healthy body, healthy mind'. (J.A.Mangan)

But male dominated and socially stratified.



....commercialism and globalization

In 20th century, increasing globalization of sports (including 'Americanization' and non-Western sports to the West). Part of popular culture.

Wider popular participation and watching, but also governmental ambitions to use sport for social developmental purposes.



Mega-events such as the Olympic Games and the soccer World Cups have demonstrated ever-closer connections with media, corporate enterprise, and mass consumption.

Sport and Society

Two perspectives:

1. Through their specific rule structures, sports are distinctive social practices, self-contained and separated out from the rest of social life.
2. Sports do not take place in a vacuum, but are part of the reality of the social world and their significance depends on the values placed on their practice by groups outside sport.

But does sport represent a 'duality' (Frank Kew's term), both apart from and yet part of the rest of social life?

Sports Pyramid



[modified version of Edward Grayson's model]

Free-for-all Fun and Exercise

Informal, maybe even unorganised. Closer to idea of 'play'. Recreational sports and folk games. Leisure/sport as an escape for adults from the rigours of working life.



Now often subsumed under slogans like 'sport for all'.

Healthy Competition

Healthy – good for your body (and your soul?)

Competition – emphasis on challenges, persistence, winning (and losing).

But single-mindedness can lead to unfair competition/corruption/cheating
and performance-enhancing drugs

Entertainment

Enjoyment (and not infrequently despair) from participating in and watching sport. From spectatorship comes fan-ship.

Yet, sport at the top level becomes another form of ‘show business’ -

cult of the individual,



high salaries,



less sportsmanship,

more media-driven.

Commercialization

Although much sport is dependent on voluntary service and private funding (school and local clubs), vast sums of money have been pumped into professional sport.



Politics and Power

Use of sport for domestic and international political purposes – fostering national identity, projecting images in international community, boosting voter support, and facilitating socio-economic change.



Violence

‘Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play...it is war minus the shooting’ (Orwell).

Violence amongst players and fans (hooliganism)
versus expectation that sports

socialization can reduce
delinquency.

Terrorism.



Beyond the Pyramid

Sport can have both idealistic/moral and utilitarian/instrumental underpinnings, but do the more 'negative' aspects of the top layers of the pyramid out-weigh the more 'positive' aspects of the lower layers?

Do sports make us feel better? Do they make humanity better?

IOC and the Olympic Movement

Although not one of the world's most powerful agencies, nonetheless the IOC (and the Olympic Movement) represents an international organisation which does generate a certain cultural power. It confers prestige and legitimacy on those who appear before the world on the Olympic stage.

Olympic History

Modern Olympics from 1896 to 1920s was partial at best in global membership but at least attempted to follow Coubertin's ideals.



From 1930 to 1980 the Olympics became more overtly political.



From 1984 onwards they have become increasingly dominated by commercial demands and support.

Olympism and the Olympic Movement

The Charter of the Olympic Movement states:

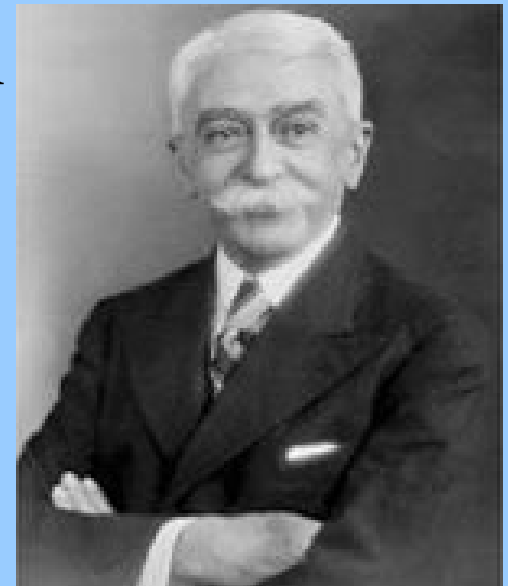
Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind.....The goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play....

Developing the Olympic Ideals

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who revived the modern Olympics in 1896, strongly believed in the moral value of sport.

A century later President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Juan Antonio Samaranch,

summarized the principles inspiring the Olympic Movement as: justice, democracy, equality and tolerance.



Dilemmas for the Olympic Movement (I)

Although the mission of the IOC and the Olympic Movement is to aspire to a better world – a non-commercial and idealistic venture – this mission inevitably requires huge human and material resources.



Not just the mega-events of the four-yearly Olympic Games but also the continuing promotion of Olympism need marketing.....and money.

Dilemmas for the Olympic Movement (II)

The Olympic ideal of ‘internationalism’ and promoting better relations between peoples, but the Olympic Games are pervaded by nationalism – anthems, flags, medal tables, national heroes and media patriotism. Does sport perform a cathartic function releasing tensions or merely exacerbate them?



Dilemmas for the Olympic Movement (III)

Despite Olympism being a movement for youth, surveys suggest fewer young people are interested in the Olympics.

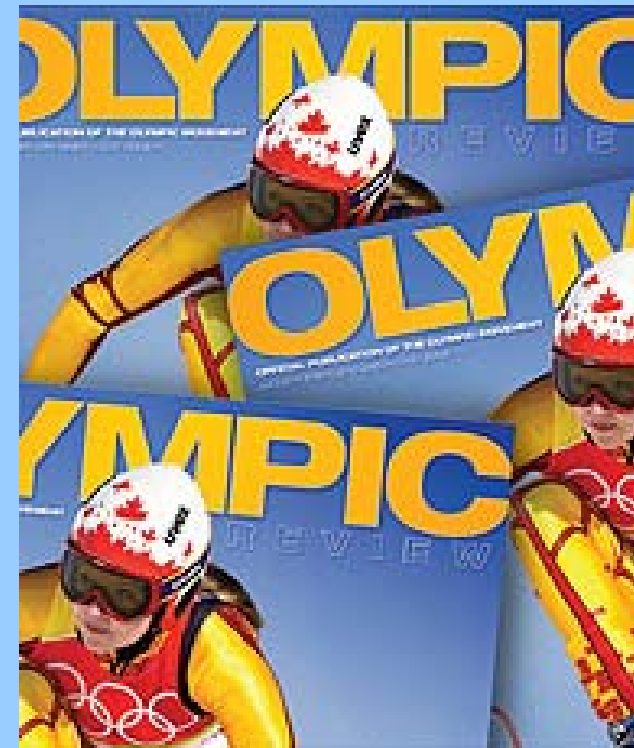
The IOC and the international sports federations have been slow to introduce new, 'popular' sports, and are in disagreement about whether the prime objective is grass-roots or elitism.

“Without mass sport, the Olympic Movement is a river without a source” (He Zhenliang, China's former IOC Vice-President)

IOC's Response: (1) Celebrate Humanity

A global campaign launched at Sydney 2000 Olympics, designed to

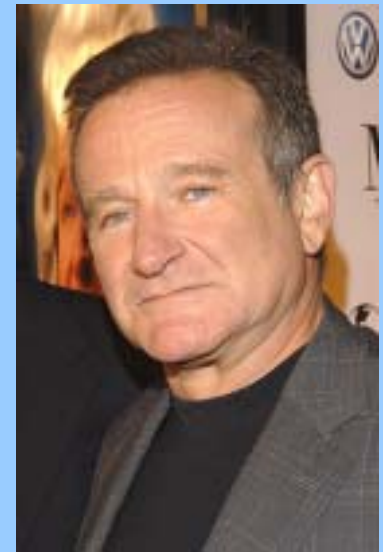
- (i) restore Olympic image after corruption scandals involving Winter Olympics site selection.
- (ii) highlight athletes' dedication, friendship, strength of character and joy in effort.
- (iii) give 'long-term vision' of 'brand' for sponsors (and consumers). (Joseph Maguire)



Robin Williams

“Many of my favorite Olympic memories were not gold medal situations. They were inspiring moments of humanity that transcended borders, obstacles and languages — and unified people around the world. I feel this campaign conveys that, and I am proud to be a part of it.”

*[He did the voice-overs
for the English language
versions of the IOC videos]*



IOC's Response: (2) Rejuvenating the Olympic Movement ?

1. First-ever Youth Games in 2010 in Singapore
2. First-ever IOC-sponsored International Forum on Sport, Peace and Development, May 2009
3. First Olympic Congress for fifteen years, in October 2009.

Rogge's Optimism

Can we all cooperate through sport to improve the lot of humanity?

IOC President Jacques Rogge:

‘We are gathered here today because we all share the same concern: in our ever-changing society, the socio-economic schism threatens to divide mankind ever more. The Olympic Movement is about people. It is people-centered, people-oriented and, one might dare say, a people’s movement. But more importantly, it is for young people, the so-called “Now Generation” without whom the very future of the world is in peril.’

(May 2009)



Do Sports Matter?

Even if the IOC, Olympic sports and, indeed, elite sport in general seem to fall short of those ideals set out by the nineteenth century educationalists and visionaries,

the spirit (moral and non-moral lessons) may still be alive in informal, unorganised youth sports – or recreational sports played with friends and strangers – and as such can play a formative role in our sense of self and of community.