The Modern Olympic Games — 1896, 2016 and Beyond: Can Elite Sport Spectacles Incite Movement among the Masses, or Do They Merely Foster Spectatoritis?

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In the autumn of 1896 readers of the first volume year of the American Physical Education Review — now known as the Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (JOPERD) — learned about the first Olympic games of the modern era, which were reborn on Orthodox Easter Sunday, April 5, 1896 (Clark, 1896). Among other things, those games produced the first Olympic champion to be crowned in 1,527 years (Olympic.org, 2015). The American James Brendan Connolly won the "gold medal" for his performance in the hop, skip and jump — known today as the triple jump — on April 6, 1896, in the grand marble Panathenaic Stadium in Athens, Greece (Clark; Olympic.org, 2015). (The original first-place medal was not made of gold, but of silver. For those living in or traveling to the Boston area, a statue of Connolly is located in South Boston at Joe Moakley Field [Russo, 2012]. He also finished second in the high jump and third in the long jump at the 1896 games.)

But this Viewpoint is not about James Connolly or any other individual Olympian. Nor is it a historical account, social critique, or tribute per se. It does not seek to set the record straight on any controversial matters, nor does it enter into the debate about challenges facing the games (e.g., commercialization, doping, ethics, facilities, gender verification).

Rather, it is about realizing the to-date unmet potential of the Olympic Games to inspire and support a global physical activity revolution. This is something that the Olympic Games sought to do even before their official (re)introduction to the modern world at the close of the 19th century (Cardinal, 2005; Freeman, 2015; Georgiadis, 2001; International Olympic Committee, 2015). It is also part of the unifying power of this global phenomenon that began to blossom 120 years ago, the seed of which was planted centuries before.

Realizing de Coubertin’s “Double Dream”: Precursors to the Modern Olympic Games

Most people recognize Baron Pierre de Coubertin as the father of the modern Olympic Games (Lucas, 2001), though the Greek author, journalist, newspaper editor and poet Panagiotis Soutsos articulated the vision for the games and wrote convincingly about them several decades earlier in an effort to incite Greek culture (Young, 1996). Additionally, country-specific and/or local communities in Canada, England, Greece, Sweden and...
the United States had staged their own version of Olympic games before they were formally reborn as an international event in 1896 under the auspices of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which was established in 1894. Baron de Coubertin created the IOC and was a tireless promoter of the movement and the games (Freeman, 2015; Lucas, 2001).

The baron’s interests in revitalizing the games were, at least in part, motivated by his belief that France, his native country, was weak and sorely in need of quality physical education, which he believed would help strengthen the nation (Freeman, 2015). Quoting Baroness Maria Rothan de Coubertin, widow of Baron Pierre de Coubertin, Lucas (2001) captured the baron’s vision for the games and what they might someday accomplish. According to Lucas, the baroness said in a 1960 interview, which occurred shortly after her 100th birthday:

My husband was crazy…crazy about his wildly idealistic “Double Dream.” He spent all of his own monies and all of my even larger fortune in pursuit of this “dream.” It was his hope that his re-created modern Olympic Games would, some day, bring together in a single city the greatest athletes in the world. From every nation on Earth. And that thrilling, remarkable athletic performances would come about. But through watching others, might something positive happen? Or is watching, but not doing, the folly of those with too much leisure time? Would passive amusement in an effort to escape boredom, something Nash (1932) called spectatoritis, contribute to the growing propensity of people to observe rather than to do and promote passivity rather than activity?

More than a half-century ago, Bandura and colleagues convincingly showed that people can and do learn through observation, imitation and repetition (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963). Clark (1896) reported observing children imitating some of the Olympic athletes in Athens, but he also questioned whether the excitement was sustainable. Regardless, he fully acknowledged that the games were much more than a “mere athletic contest” (p. 22). Knowing this, might the Olympic Games, and perhaps other widely viewed sporting events (e.g., Asian Games, Federation Internationale de Football Association [FIFA] World Cup, International Cricket Council World Cup, Super Bowl [National Football League], Tour de France, Wimbledon Tennis), not only serve to entertain mass audiences but also inspire in those audiences a sense of ambition, creativity, multiculturalism, mutuality, peace, understanding and wonderment? Additionally, might they help the viewing audience recognize the importance of physical activity infrastructure, policies and programs for all people, as well as encourage, motivate and support the viewing audiences’ own physical activity participation?

As Clark (1896) observed, “there cannot be good athletes without a knowledge of how to care for the body, and…a nation which takes no interest in physical education cannot produce a team of really first-class athletes” (p. 19).

The Olympic Games of Yesterday: Athens, Greece, 1896

In many ways the broad, noble visions articulated above are what Clark (1896) recounted in his article about the first modern Olympic Games, though he also made observations about the sorry state of some athletes’ physical constitution and apparent lack of knowledge, as well as the idea that there were hundreds of people doing physical activity at the games, whereas tens of thousands of people were watching the games. But through watching others, might something positive happen? Or is watching, but not doing, the folly of those with too much leisure time? Would passive amusement in an effort to escape boredom, something Nash (1932) called spectatoritis, contribute to the growing propensity of people to observe rather than to do and promote passivity rather than activity?

The Olympic Games of Today: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2016

Over the past 120 years the Olympic Games have grown immensely (Table 1).

### Table 1. Olympic Games of 1896 versus Olympic Games of 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Olympic Games Location and Year</th>
<th>Athens, Greece, 1896</th>
<th>Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countries participating</strong></td>
<td>12 (i.e., Australia, Austria, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Sweden, Switzerland, United States of America)</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Athletes</strong></td>
<td>241 (men only)</td>
<td>~10,500+ (men and women)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sports</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Events</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Venues</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Clark (1896); Olympic.org (2015).

*Estimate derived from the London Olympic Games of 2012.*
With 206 countries expected to participate at the 2016 Olympic Games, their potential reach is even greater than that of the United Nations (n.d.), which has 193 participating members. (This Viewpoint was written several months before the 2016 Olympic Games. The games were projected to cost $5.6 billion in 2009, and by 2014 the projections were at more than $15 billion [Woods, 2016]. This is not uncommon, with cost overruns averaging 179 percent for the last 17 Olympic Games.) This is compelling evidence that the Baron de Coubertin’s first dream has been realized. Today, the Olympic games are regarded as:

…one of humanity’s greatest heritages. The games transcend the boundary of sports as an ensemble of cultural codes — simultaneously embracing politics, economy, history, philosophy, and art, which are the essence of humanity. Through global sporting competitions that transcend boundaries and barriers, the Olympics communicate with and touch the world. The games act as a catalyst to amalgamate various races, ethnic groups, and cultures. Furthermore, they create unique and sustainable legacies for subsequent generations through global proliferation of the sublime value of the Olympics, the materialization of ideology, and the Olympic culture. (Park & Tae, 2016, p. 170)

Their growth and enduring operational success is due in large part to their conceptual basis in and commitment to the Olympism philosophy (Table 2).

Operational success does not happen by accident or through blind allegiance to idealism. Rather, it is the result of careful and deliberate planning, derived from authentic reflection and a commitment to constant and never-ending improvement (Robbins, 1991). Toward that end, and in an effort to help achieve the baron’s second dream, the IOC has identified six current global activities to focus on. They are development through sport, education through sport, peace through sport, sport and environment, sport for all, and women and sport (Olympic.org, 2015). These all connect to something much larger than the Olympic Games’ ceremonies, events, festivals, individual and team performances, medal counts, nationalism/national pride and “sport” per se.

For example, “sport for all” refers to encouraging “physical performance opportunities for all members of the community, the emphasis being placed more on participation than performance standards” (Kent, 1994, p. 418). In other words, getting and helping all people — not just competitive athletes, aspiring competitive athletes, or the athletically inclined — to live a more physically active lifestyle. With physical inactivity being the fourth leading cause of death in the world (Koh et al., 2012), there is obviously much room for improvement in this area.

The Olympic Games of Tomorrow: Pyeongchang, South Korea (2018), Tokyo, Japan (2020), Beijing, China (2022), and Beyond

The subtitle of this Viewpoint is, “Can Elite Sport Spectacles Incite Movement among the Masses or Do They Merely Foster Spectatoritis?” The evidence to date suggests that they do more to encourage spectatoritis than they do to incite movement among the masses (Bauman, Murphy, & Matsudo, 2013). Given their widespread reach and the values and benefits associated with living a healthy, physically active lifestyle, this is an unfulfilled promise of the Olympic movement, and one that requires immediate attention and rectification.

Table 2. What Is Olympism? What Is the Goal of the Olympic Movement?

| What Is Olympism? “Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.”
| What Is the Goal of the Olympic Movement? “The goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.”

Source: http://www.olympic.org/olympism-in-action

Bauman et al. (2013) proposed a public health framework for guiding such efforts (at least for the host countries) including, among other things, the conversion of developed and renovated physical activity facilities and infrastructures for use by the general population after the games. But how about non-host countries and/or cities?

The Olympic Games can be used to promote and encourage active, healthy lifestyles for all by showcasing lifelong physical activities, not just “elite sport” and the training programs and regimes associated with achieving elite status. Doing more to encourage all people to participate would be a positive step forward (Wilson, Pate, Lamb, & Daniels, 1979). It is also consistent with the ultimate goal of the physical activity education fields, which seek to help people establish and maintain active, healthy lifestyles (Cardinal, 2015). This includes helping people develop the requisite attitudes, knowledge and skills associated with maintaining lifelong physical activity and health habits, as well as supporting public policy initiatives aimed at building healthy and supportive environments in which safe, effective and inclusive physical activity and health-enhancement opportunities are made available to all people (Cardinal, 2015).

Conclusion

The story of how the 2016 Olympic Games — and future Olympic
Games — will be remembered has yet to be written, but each Olympic event presents a remarkable opportunity to make advances. Will this year’s Olympic Games incite an international physical activity revolution among the mass viewing audience? Will future Olympic Games serve to perpetually reinforce such efforts, as well as address new and emerging issues that will help to make the world a better, healthier place for all people? Clark’s (1896) conclusion from his paper published 120 years ago is worth repeating here:

…the Olympic games will prove a source of lasting benefit to the world, by scattering broadcast the doctrine that the body must be educated as well as the mind, and that, to do best works as individuals and as a nation, we must have mens sana in corpore sana. (p. 22)

While the Olympic Games have yet to incite physical activity among the masses, they do hold great promise and potential for doing so. Health, physical education, recreation and dance professionals are challenged to do their part, by finding ways to advance Olympism, the Olympic movement (see Table 2), and the current global activities of the IOC for the betterment of all humanity and the success and sustainability of future generations.

References

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