



The Olympics: Delighting God or Celebrating the gods?

BY JOHN BYL

The media blitz that is Olympic advertising began months ago. These ads appeal to the part of me that delights in the outstanding achievements of dedicated athletes and the coming together of nations in a peaceful pursuit. But there is also a part of me that mourns when I think of past Olympic scandals, political maneuvering, and the disproportionate role that money plays in these games.

Let's take a closer look at how the righteousness, peace, and joy of the kingdom of God both do and don't play themselves out in the Olympic Games.

How "righteous" are the Olympics
when viewed from a kingdom perspective?

RIGHTEOUSNESS?

The Olympic Games are not simply an event—throughout the Olympic Charter they are described as a movement. The ancient Olympics were dedicated to Zeus, the competitive father of Greek gods and goddesses. Pierre de Coubertin founded the modern Olympic Games in 1896, intending it to be the humanistic ideal for the approaching 20th century.

So how "righteous" are the Olympics when viewed from a kingdom perspective?

It is right to encourage talented athletes to reach new heights using their gifts. It's also right for us to delight in watching their performance. But if righteousness is to prevail in the Olympic Games, there is much work to be done, especially in the areas of commercialism, gender equity, and the structure of the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

The Olympic charter opposes "any political or commercial abuse of sport and athletes" (Chapter 1:2:10). De Coubertin believed that participating in the Olympics was more important than winning. However, in a commercialized world the difference between gold and silver can be significant; most often only gold leads to lucrative endorsements and sponsorships. For most athletes to do well, their Olympic dreams need to become a full-time job that can only be funded by wealthy states, sponsorships, individual wealth, and/or bank loans taken out in anticipation of lucrative endorsements.

The media promote the Games as a giant spectacle—the ultimate international sporting event. NBC paid \$3.5 billion for the rights to broadcast the summer and winter Games held between 2000 and 2008. For advertisers, the Games are a marketing dream. International companies like McDonald's, VISA, and Coca-Cola, which have the means to spend millions on advertising, shape the Games—even negotiating the time of day certain events are held and broadcast in an effort

to gain the most exposure. Through massive TV revenues (30-second spots run as high as \$500,000) the IOC has become a major commercial enterprise, operating like a transnational corporation.

These riches often starkly contrast with inequitable treatment of the poor in some host cities as a result of Olympic events. For example, during the 1996 Atlanta Games it was reported that police arrested 9,000 homeless people for begging and loitering during the eight months leading up to the Olympic Games. They also shunted homeless people as far as 180 miles away from the Olympic venues during the games. The city created a "vagrant-free zone" in part by installing armrests on park benches to prevent people from sleeping on them. This begs a conscientious individual to ask, is it possible for a host city to balance the delight in athletic performance with the needs of the poor?

And what about gender equality? Females were barred from the ancient Greek games. De Coubertin considered his modern Olympic Games to be "the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athletes... with the applause of women as reward." Although times have evolved, currently only about 35 percent of the athletes are female. In addition, female athletes receive less funding and have fewer Olympic sports in which to compete. Most Olympic sports emphasize strength and speed, which favor men, over endurance, precision, and skill, which favor women. In a world where both man and woman were created very good, the structure of today's Olympic Games still contains gender discrimination.

The structure of the IOC itself is also far from ideal. Less than 10 percent of IOC members are female, and no IOC members are practicing athletes. When the Utah scandals broke in 2000, the IOC promised to make the Games more democratic and accountable and to include more athletes. Unfortunately, little movement has been

Speaking of the Olympics...

The Olympics are coming; are YOU prepared? We can't help you much with the physical aspect, but we *can* give you a bit of a mental workout—even if you don't plan on tuning in to the Games. Try the following 10 questions, pertaining both to the Olympics and sports in general, to stimulate some healthy, thought-provoking debate with your family, your friends, and even yourself:

1. As Christians, what role should sports play in our lives?
2. Can becoming a professional athlete and competing in the Olympics be a worthy calling in life?
3. What message does the increasing use and abuse of performance-enhancing drugs send about our society's ideals?
4. How does the competition aspect of sports, especially at the Olympics, override the sense of fellowship and community?
5. Is it possible for winning and fellowship to co-exist in sports?
6. When it comes to sports, should schools strive for excellence or maximum participation?
7. At what point has an athlete proved himself or herself? Is there such a thing as too many gold medals?
8. What would happen if medals weren't offered at the Olympics? Should there even be a reward for the winner(s) of a sports game?
9. As spectators, what role(s) do we play in the grandiose Olympics and professional sports franchises?
10. What activity would you like to see become an Olympic event?

—Kaitlin Hasseler, *Banner* staff

made in that direction since then. Giving more power back to the participants and less to this Olympic “old boys” club is much needed.

PEACE?

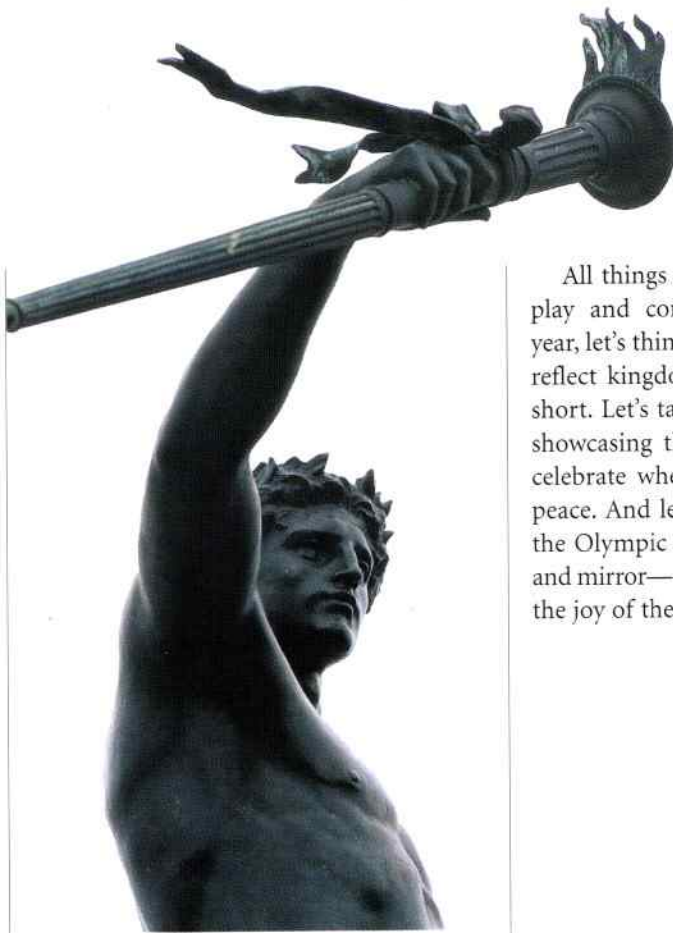
The Olympic Charter states that the IOC “participates in actions to promote peace” (Chapter 1:2.4). It is true international athletic events can foster delight in our cultural differences, but often they serve to increase nationalism and patriotism to levels that are unhealthy or even dangerous.

In 1897, a year after the first modern Olympic Games were held in Greece, Greece and Turkey went to war. Historians identify increased nationalism as one of the factors behind Greece’s aggression. Was the timing a coincidence? Possibly, but maybe not. There are many other instances of Olympic contests turning into political confrontations. At the 1956 Melbourne Games, held just weeks after Soviet tanks entered Budapest to quell an uprising, the water polo semifinals between the USSR and Hungary degenerated into a bloody melee. And who can forget the cold-war-fueled elation in the United States when its hockey team defeated the Russians?

A number of years ago I attended the International Children’s Games. Children from many different countries met to compete, to stay with families from the host country, to exchange uniforms with athletes from other countries, and to participate in international social events. I left those games wondering how I as a citizen from my country could ever go to war with citizens from other countries with whom I had just shared athletic contests and meals. The Olympic games, at their best, can reflect this strong sense of unity as well.

JOY?

I love physical activity, games, recreation, and athletics. I see them as creationally good activities to participate in. I have many fond memories of watching past Olympics and I look forward to more



amazing races, contests, and performances in this year’s Games. A multisport international event like the Olympic Games has huge potential to help us experience godly delight. After all, Scripture tells us that God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim. 6:17).

Unfortunately, the gods of dollars, national pride, gender superiority, and personal power are all part of the darkness that affects the Olympic Games. But that doesn’t have to be the last word.

Recently I spoke with a national-level rower who described her faith journey. She felt and was coached to believe that if she continued advancing her goal one step further, she would eventually find happiness. She soon realized that even if she won an Olympic gold medal, she would still feel pressure to pursue a second gold or a third. Happiness would always be elusive. During this process she was introduced to God and committed her life to a living relationship with him since then. She now dedicates her time to helping other rowers perform well, along with studying how false dreams of happiness can motivate athletes.

All things are created good—including play and competition. In this Olympic year, let’s think hard about how the Games reflect kingdom values and how they fall short. Let’s take delight in physical bodies showcasing their God-given talents. Let’s celebrate when nations come together in peace. And let’s savor the moments when the Olympic Games transcend themselves and mirror—if only for fleeting moments—the joy of the kingdom of God.



Dr. John Byl is a professor of physical education at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario. He is a member of Fellowship Christian Reformed Church, Ancaster.