

Chapter 1

The value of sport

Olympia
in the courses where speed is matched with speed
and a man's force harsh at the height.
And the winner the rest of his lifetime
keeps happiness beside him sweeter than honey.

Pindar¹

The Olympic Games epitomise modern sport. The three or four years preparing the bid followed, if successful, by a further six or seven years of planning and construction by the host city, the hundreds of television companies that broadcast the Games, the thousands of participants, coaches and officials that attend, and the hundreds of millions who watch the events from all points of the globe provide ample testimony to the prestige, popularity and global coverage of modern international sport. But it is not just the scale of the Olympic Games that sticks in the mind. The Olympics also provide an insight into the hold that sport has on the popular imagination. To reflect on the most memorable events of the last two or three Games provides a rich range of images of triumph and despair, unanticipated success and unexpected failure, and breathtaking good fortune and heart-breaking bad luck.

This range of images and emotions could be found in any major international sports competition such as the soccer World Cup, the Paralympics, the Tour de France and the World Athletics Championships. More importantly, these images and emotions can also be found, and for many of us experienced, in the vast array of sport played by those whose sporting aspirations are far more modest. Yet sports participation provides a powerful thread that links the Olympic gold medalists Stephen Redgrave and Matthew Pinsent and the Saturday afternoon rowers, Sonia O'Sullivan, Haile Gabresilasie, and Hicham El Guerrouj and fun-runners in the Berlin marathon, and Luis Figo and Gabriel Batistuta and the thousands playing in the Sunday morning soccer leagues. In addition to the many millions throughout the world who participate in sport, there is also the enormous number who experience the excitement of sport vicariously through spectating either at live events or through the media, especially television.

1. *Odes of Pindar*, translated by R. Lattimore, 2nd edn., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

The extensiveness and intensity of popular involvement in sport and its capacity to arouse an astonishing depth of passion both in participants and spectators is only part of the reason for sport's unique place in modern society. The particularity of sport in the modern world is also based on the fact that sport is a cornerstone of the global corporate media provision and is the subject of intense governmental interest. In addition, modern sport is also remarkable for the degree to which it stirs, on the one hand, associations with a classical past and, on the other, a belief that sport occupies a privileged position in society.

The deliberate association of sport with a classical past, especially through the Olympic Games, continues to provide a rich basis for the assumption of continuity with what many consider to be a time when sport was practised in a purer form and was less tarnished by its current association with excessive commercialism, professionalism, violence and drug abuse. For the founder of the modern Olympics, Pierre de Coubertin, the ancient Olympic Games provided a profound and powerful source of inspiration. The description of ancient games found in Homer's poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, provides a sharp insight into the interweaving of the athletic achievements of the warrior élite with the celebration of sport as an integral part of Hellenic culture. More importantly Homer also made clear the extent to which games and sports reflected a cultural ideal based on the complementarity of physical and intellectual excellence. The emphasis on the development of mind and body was based on a belief that true excellence was the product not just of physical prowess but of moral and intellectual qualities as well, and provided "a profoundly original conception and a philosophy of life"¹ that still resonates in our modern world and is particularly clearly reflected in the Olympic Charter. As McIntosh notes, "[that] sport in the days of Homeric heroes was noble there is no doubt", but he also draws attention to the fact that in later years "the religious and cultural functions of the Olympic Games and of other pan-Hellenic festivals were obscured and then destroyed by specialism and commercialism" and that "success in the Games was sought for narrow political ends both by states and by individuals".²

The desire to maintain continuity between ancient and modern sport, albeit based on a selective reading of the history of the ancient games, in part explains the strong tendency to see modern sport as either outside normal society or at least as occupying a privileged position in society. At one extreme, sport is seen as providing an oasis within the modern world where higher standards of morality, often the product of a romanticisation of late Victorian middle-class values, are practised when compared to the dubious

1. Segrave, J.O. & Chu, D. (eds.), *The Olympic Games in Transition*, Champaign, Ill: Human Kinetics Books, 1988.

2. McIntosh, P., *Sport in Society*, revised edn., London: West London Press, 1987, pp. 20 and 22-23.

and compromised character of everyday social, political and business behaviour. In part, this view is based on a belief that it is possible to sustain values within sport that are not simply a reflection of those to be found in wider society and thus exhortations to "fair play" and that "participating is more important than winning" are realised in competitive sport. Some substance is given to this assertion by emphasising the central place in sport of rules and their strict application. Much of modern sport is organised on a strictly meritocratic basis where quantification not only ensures that he or she who jumps higher, runs faster or throws further wins but also provides part of a clear and transparent set of rules of competition that, far from producing athletes that are "indoctrinated, regimented and repressed",¹ provide liberation from prejudice and bias.

If aspiration to a higher morality is part of the explanation for the distinctive position of sport in modern society then an equally powerful contribution is made by the long association between amateurism and sporting excellence. In most European and North American countries, the commitment to amateurism that dominated the bulk of the present century has left an indelible imprint on contemporary sport. For many, the legitimacy of sport's claim to higher moral values was reinforced by a definition of amateurism that attempted to protect competitive sport, and especially Olympic sport, from the corruption that prize money was thought to create.

Unfortunately, these views of modern and ancient sport are both highly inaccurate.

1. Brohm, J.-M., *Sport, A Prison of Measured Time*, London: Pluto Press, 1978, p. 112.