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The Quixotic search for the Olympic ideal

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The Olympics are like Christmas: the hype and excess are repellent and betray the very ideals of the thing. But like Christmas, occasionally there's a moment that makes the whole production seem almost worthwhile.

There's plenty wrong with the Olympics. First off, the games' ostensible role in promoting international goodwill by way of athletics is bogus. Not only are there the boycotts, including the U.S. no-show at the 1980 Moscow Games and the Soviets' pass on Los Angeles in 1984, but there is also the specter of terrorism. And that's not just post-9-11, post-Madrid, post-London, post-Mumbai, but pre all that: eleven Israeli athletes were killed at the 1972 Munich Olympics. The idea that the world is coming together peacefully to celebrate athleticism seems hollow given the \$900 million being spent on security for the Vancouver Games.

Terrorism aside, why should one expect goodwill to arise from the Olympics? The games are about which country can garner the most medals: Count up the golds, silvers and bronzes to see who wins. Yes, of course, it's a competition, from which it follows that there are winners and losers, but the Olympics' emphasis on nationality, on division and ranking by country is obsessive. In what possible way does this promote international goodwill or cooperation? How are boorish Americans chanting "USA, USA," or locals hissing at the U.S. anthem contributing to global fellowship?

There is also a theory that the athletes are ambassadors for their countries, and will return home still emanating the warm glow of their late night chats with competitors from other nations. I doubt it, but perhaps it's so. Still, how do I meet a just returned Olympic athlete and have this international bonhomie rub off on me? I wonder if the jet set who are in Vancouver as spectators will declare the international goodwill they accrued abroad when they touch down at Logan or T.F. Green?

Olympics boosters are not satisfied with the games as a sporty version of the U.N.; they also try to sell it on the basis of economics, that the two-week spectacle is a boon for the host country. To the contrary - I think that any nation that loses its bid to host the games should feel greatly relieved. It was only in this century that citizens of Montreal finished paying for the 1976 Olympics. The price of holding the Olympic Games is astronomical, and the long term economic benefits dubious. A simple one-time association with the Olympics does not generate the revenue necessary to pay for the cost of building the facilities and staging the event.

True, the Olympics provide a good excuse to spruce up the place and upgrade the infrastructure. However, the games also result in the purchase of a raft of expensive stadia, botched public transit projects, and excessive highway landscaping at a time when more basic needs such as education, housing and health care go begging. If the government - that is the taxpayers - doesn't want to pick up the tab, the show is turned over to the private sector, and we saw how wonderful that was in 1996 in Atlanta.

While a boondoggle for their host, the Olympics are big business and have become inseparable from the world's largest corporations. How could it be otherwise? NBC paid \$820 million for rights to broadcast the 2010 winter games. Not surprisingly, the marketing and the TV ads are excessive, and the Olympics is relentlessly brought to you by the usual suspects: Coke, McDonald's, and Visa. Once the ads (including relentless promos for NBC shows), treacly human interest stories and talking heads in the studio are done, there isn't much time left for athletics. NBC sure isn't going to aim the cameras at a bunch of people with unpronounceable names playing weird sports and leave it at that; no, you are watching a production.

But isn't the Olympics ultimately about the athletes you say? Let's look past the bribery and influence peddling to obtain the games, the gargantuan price tag for the host country, the gulag like security, the inconsistent judging, the overproduced presentation of the thing, and recognize that the

games wouldn't exist without the athletes. Yes them, those paragons: dopers, prima donnas, sore losers and ungracious winners.

So resolved, the Olympics are out of control, a mockery of the ideals of Ancient Greece, a gross spectacle, a disgrace. Yet, still, I'll put all the above in one jumbo set of parentheses and acknowledge that there is still a sliver of something there. A simply unbelievable ski jump. An insanely fast bobsled ride. A perfectly placed curling rock. An athlete emerges from obscurity and becomes a household name, not because of scandal, wealth or surgically altered breasts, but just because he or she is incredibly good at skating, skiing, or hockey. The up-and-comer steps into the spotlight and dazzles. The old timer reaches back and delivers one more time.

Yes, such moments will be hyped, but they're not fake, and do allow you for the moment to forget about the sponsors, the doping, the terrorists, the bombastic announcers and just be amazed at what the human body and mind are capable.

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