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Olympics 2020

Have you seen the Olympics?

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The British press tries to whip up the same nationalist fervour about some rider winning the gold in the horse dressage as England getting to the finals of the Euros but it does not really work. How many nations have the tradition or more importantly the resources to compete in the equestrian events? A medals table is seen as the patriotic arbiter of everything without taking into account the size and resources of each nation or how many people actually play a particular sport. Certainly, you cannot avoid all the nationalist hype. But unlike football, a lot more consideration is given to the achievements of athletes from other countries and at least lip service is given to the internationalism of the Olympic ideals.

Why is it being held in the first place given the risks of Covid? Financial considerations certainly overruled any health issues. The games were given the go-ahead in the face of a global pandemic and against the wishes of the majority of the Japanese people. Money always talks, there are huge amounts of commercial sponsorship which flow into the bloated coffers of the International Olympic Committee. Leading up to the venue selection there is a great amount of blatant and more subtle backhanders given by countries keen to stage the games. The blazers – mostly men – who run international sport do not want to pass up on the junkets and freebies connected with venue selection or at the Games themselves. Despite Toyota pulling out as a sponsor because of Japanese opinion the big corporations – often selling distinctly unhealthy products – relish an event that pulls in a global audience of 206 countries.

Compared to football the Games are more international and more inclusive. 11,000 athletes take part and despite the death of amateur status across all sports, there are still many competitors who have the experience of a lifetime without much chance of a podium or of any financial reward. No money is given with the medals even if some national federations provide incentive payments as part of athletes' contracts. There are commercial rewards for the very top field athletes – Usain Bolt is a prime example – and some medallists may extend their sponsorship income but these are a small minority. To an extent some core values connected to sports still exist at the Olympics – trying to improve on your personal best, connecting with people across the world, executing movement and skills in often spectacularly beautiful ways, working in a team and just enjoying something you are good at and love doing.

Of course, life in our unequal and exploitative society is never that simple and the pressure to win at all costs – which capitalist ideology fuels on a daily basis – leads athletes, often pushed by their coaches, to take performance-enhancing drugs. Who can forget one of the fastest 100-metre races ever run in Seoul (1988) 'won' by Ben Johnson who was disqualified for using performance-enhancing drugs. Another five of the eight finalists were later proved to have used similar substances. Only three out of the ten fastest 100 metres runners of all time have been tested as 'clean' – Usain Bolt was one of them. Long before the restoration of capitalism in Russia and Eastern Europe the athletes there were just as much, if not more reliant, on taking drugs to enhance their performance. East German women particularly were given testosterone to improve their speed and strength. Non-capitalist, publicly controlled sport aligned itself with the prevailing global ideology but also with the notion that sporting success somehow proved the superiority of those post-capitalist societies.

Some coaches have also used their power over younger athletes to abuse them sexually. National federations have in the past been reluctant to open up about such cases. Thankfully due to the courageous stand taken by some gymnasts in the US and elsewhere this is now harder to conceal. Young athletes fully committed to performing at their best are vulnerable to the demands of the top coaches that can make a difference to their chances of success.

The Olympic ruling bodies have always pretended that politics can be separated from the sport. Hence the accommodation to the Nazi regime in the 1936 Olympics or the non-condemnation of the Mexico City massacre of students in 1968. When John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised a clenched fist in a black power salute on the

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winners' podium during the US national anthem the International Olympic Committee (IOC) did not raise a finger in their defence and collaborated with the US Olympic body's decision to send them home. Their future careers and earnings were destroyed and they experienced a lot of racist harassment. During the closing episodes of the Cold War, the US and some allies (ironically not Thatcher) boycotted the Moscow 1980 games and the USSR, Eastern Europe and Cuba retaliated in kind for Los Angeles in 1984.

Coverage of the Tokyo games this year has been limited by the commercial deal the IOC did with Discovery/Eurosport which means the BBC, instead of having 3500 hours of coverage, will only have about 350. Apparently, the Tories' continued squeeze on the BBC finances has meant they could not outbid their competitors for the TV deal. Free-to-air coverage is essential if everyone, irrespective of income, is to have a chance to follow the sports they practice or enjoy watching. All the waffle about the legacy of big sporting events resulting in increased take-up of healthy activity is nipped in the bud if those who often suffer most from obesity – the poorest – cannot even watch the games. Gradually more and more sports will be on subscription channels and then only available to those that can afford the high monthly charges. The Labour Party could have taken up the issue of free to air sport much more strongly and with the new cricket tournament the 'Hundred' on BBC and Sky attracting viewers it shows there is an appetite for top quality sport on terrestrial TV, and it would be a vote winner in my opinion.

Two highlights of the first few days – from a home country perspective – have been Adam Peatty's win in the 100 metres breaststroke and Tom Daley finally winning gold in the synchronised diving at his third Olympic games. Their reactions afterwards differed a great deal. Peatty, who is now unbeaten in over seven years in this event, went on and on about how his winning gold in a swimming event is going to help change the 'British mindset' after all the travails of the Covid pandemic and lockdown. This is just tabloid hyperbole. On the other hand, Daley, sat between the Chinese and Russian silver and bronze winners and their attendant press corps talked about his role as an openly gay competitor with a husband and child. China and Russia do not allow gay marriage. I think Tom Daley knew perfectly well what he was doing so hats off to him.

The medals table is always prominent in all the press coverage. But really it tells you more about the global economic order. Sometimes there have been alternative medal tables based on population or Gross Domestic Product. Here you get a different sort of league table where countries like Cuba, Jamaica or New Zealand do very well. If you look at it from a comparison between the advanced capitalist countries and the global south then it is clear that the former has an inbuilt advantage in a number of sports where training facilities, equipment and technical support are key. So along with equitation we could list cycling, rowing, sailing, kayaking, fencing, tennis, golf, shooting as just a few sports where the global south never really gets a look in. Unsurprisingly this is where Britain does quite well because of its position in the capitalist global order. Put another way Britain does well in sports where you are sitting down! The Global South scores better where the initial costs of training and doing the sport is relatively low so African and Caribbean athletes dominate much of the track athletics.

With the reduced coverage this year the fun of finding out about new or unfamiliar sports is diminished. No longer will you be dragged into working out how they score in fencing, judo or dressage. Nor can you become the pub bore as the new specialist of such sports. How many of us also work out how much better or quicker they are than you are at a particular sport. I worked out that the swimmers were at least nearly 3 times faster!

Despite all the politics I am still moved by the beauty of a gymnastic sailing through the air and get a kick out of someone overjoyed because they have come sixth in a race but have managed to achieve a personal best. Like art, the best sport has a transcendent quality not quite reducible to anything else.

Source [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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