

The Church will be an Olympic winner



The Church will be an Olympic winner. A priest involved in preparations for the Olympics says the Games will be an extraordinary moment for Catholics in Britain

For Londoners the 2012 Olympic Games are like the proverbial Marmite: they love them or they hate them. Few are indifferent.

Some Londoners are getting out of town now that the Games are upon us. Many, as time goes by, will wish they hadn't gone away. For there is more – much more – to the Games than meets the casual eye. Viewed with the optic of faith the Olympic Games (July 27 to August 12) and the Paralympics (August 29 to September 9) may reveal the glory of God that is, as St Irenaeus of Lyon said, humanity fully alive.

This sort of summer is unlikely to be repeated in our lifetime. After all, uniquely on this planet, this is the third time a city has hosted the Games: 1908, 1948 and now 2012.

Sport, as anything human, has its ambiguities. It can bring out the best or the worst in us. The worst can put a brake on sport. In the past century the Olympic Games had to be cancelled three times.

Looking at the dates it is plain to see why. In 1916 they were scheduled for Berlin, in 1940 Tokyo and in London for 1944.

The original Games – the first of which was just a single sprint race – were situated in Olympia precisely because this was the site of the oldest sanctuary dedicated to Zeus, the paramount god of the Greeks. In other words, the original Games were religious festivals. Their competitors and spectators were on pilgrimage. But by the fourth century AD they had come to be seen as something pagan and were suppressed by the emperor – either Theodosius I in AD 393 or his grandson, Theodosius II, in AD 435 – as part of their policy to bring Christianity on board as the official state religion.

Two phrases tightly associated with the Olympic movement, often attributed either to the International Olympic Committee or to the founder of the modern Olympics, were in fact born in the hearts and minds of two Christian clerics: one a French Dominican and the other an American Episcopal bishop. To be fair, Baron Pierre de Coubertin acknowledged both.

The first, the Olympic motto, *citius, altius, fortius* (“faster, higher, stronger”), was the brainchild of Fr Henri Didon OP, a French priest. The second, “Not the winning but the taking part”, came in a sermon by Ethelbert Talbot, Bishop of Central Pennsylvania, at St Paul’s Cathedral on the middle Sunday of the 1908 London Olympics, as he tried to calm the storm of anger generated by both the British and American teams as they accused each other of cheating.

When in 1896 Baron de Coubertin got the modern Olympics out of their starting blocks in Athens, opinions about this new-fangled idea were mixed. Some thought they were a Trojan horse, a neo-pagan ploy to further reduce the influence of the Church. Others were convinced they would bring peace on earth to men of good will by channelling aggression from conflict to competition.

Pope Pius X, now a saint, was in favour. Another pope, John Paul II, was very strongly in favour of sport and the Olympic and Paralympic Games. From his own experience first as a schoolboy playing football – often in goal for the Jewish team to even things out a bit – he knew that sport could not only unite communities but also develop virtues. Over his pontificate he made scores of statements encouraging practitioners of sport to aim for the best: to go way beyond mere dreams of Gold and seek to find God’s presence within sport.

In our one holistic life, sport reminds us that our “PIES” of life: our Physical, Intellectual, Emotional

and Spiritual dimensions are tightly interwoven and mutually influential. Hence the importance of pep talks and trying to psych the opponent out. Virtues such as self-discipline, perseverance, patience, commitment, living in the present of the present in which God is present, going beyond one's comfort zone and a whole host of others are transferable to other areas of life – not only at work but deep into the domestic church in every home.

Sport is potentially sacramental. The beauty of sport, the respect and appreciation for even opponents, the bringing together of people from just about every corner of our global city brings us into a Trinitarian lifestyle and – with those who have the eyes of faith – enables us to see God's presence in our humanity.

Jesus Christ said that “what you do to the least of mine you do unto me” (Mt 25: 40) has its corollary, namely that what “the least of mine” does to us Christ does unto us. God comes to us through others. God's beauty is there in sport at its best. The glory of the Incarnation will be palpable, once again, in this summer's Games.

Who cannot be moved by the effortless, graceful movements of gold-medal gymnasts or divers? How can anyone who knows anything about design not be smitten by the sheer genius and artistry of a Creator when seeing the skills, determination, generosity and courage of the best in sport? And not always in bodies that are reflections of classical beauty: just look at the Paralympians.

The first Games for athletes with spinal cord injuries, veterans of World War II, were held in 1948 in Stoke Mandeville. In 1952 athletes from the Netherlands joined the Games and the international movement, now known as the Paralympic Movement, was born.

The first Paralympic Games were organised in Rome in 1960, just after the Olympic Games. Since then the Paralympics have been regularly synchronised with the Olympic Games.

The 2012 Games are not there only for the competitors, spectators, support teams and media. They are an opportunity for so many people living around Britain to welcome and take care of the hundreds of thousands of sport pilgrims to London and the 10 other Olympic venues around the country.

More than Gold is an ecumenical initiative organising and coordinating teams of Games Pastors – lay people and ministers. You will spot them by their high-visibility waistcoats and baseball caps in NATO blue. They will take care of our foreign visitors in London and show them how to buy an Oyster card and deal with the many other problems that new-comers to a huge city have to face, as well as serving tens of thousands bottles of water (planning for the contingency that the sun will shine and people will be thirsty rather than wet).

The 2012 Games provide a unique opportunity for British churches to be seen for what they really are. By playing its part in the programmes of outreach, hospitality and to service, every parish can help tell a different story as it offers care and attention to foreigners, turning strangers into friends who will remember London – and its churches – with gratitude and perhaps give thanks to God.

If you cannot or do not want to be involved in the 2012 London Games, please pray that they achieve their full potential as vehicles of the Holy Spirit and are, indeed, perceived as chariots of Divine Fire. Spirituality is there waiting to be re-discovered in sport.

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