



Opinion

Five-rings bling and patriotism

John Old



It's easy to have an opinion about the Olympics. Most of those I come across seem to be gripes, typically falling into three categories.

First, there is the cost of the whole thing, particularly for venues which it appears will be used once, and then urgently need an alternative use. Isn't it possible to do the whole thing on a shoestring, like in 1948? (Except it would cost a fortune to rebuild a tram system for the athletes to ride on the way to the stadium.)

Second, isn't the whole patriotism thing hopelessly overdone? Shouldn't we simply see the best performers in action, irrespective of where they come from?

And finally, why is it necessary to have increasingly overblown and elaborate ceremonies? If stilt-walkers are essential, why not have a stilt-walking event?

The trouble is that in many ways, these three are now what the Olympics are about. As a purely sporting event it suffers that there are only a minority of sports which are really big box office, and virtually all of those are either, like motorsport, one-day cricket, pro boxing or American football, unrepresented at the Olympics or, like football, basketball or tennis, distinctly junior versions of the real top-flight competitions held elsewhere. Just about the only Olympic sport with real standalone mass appeal is track and field, and that has suffered badly from the various doping scandals. (Virtually the only branch of athletics that has not been affected is marathon running, and it's not a coincidence that it hasn't had a high profile drug embarrassment.)

The plain fact is that the Olympics only really presents the highest level of competition in sports for which the average sports punter won't even punch the

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remote, leave alone pay good money and give up the time to watch. So to get the interest, and the money, coming in, we need the fancy venues, the razzmatazz and the flagwaving. Like many other Britons, I can be as indignant as the next man if I think my taxes are likely to be blown on architectural white elephants, but come 2012 I might well go along out of curiosity, not at the sport, but to see where my money has gone. And there's no denying that the quickest sellouts at any Olympics are not bent sprinters but the opening and closing ceremonies.

As for patriotism – apparently “Britain” – or someone claiming to speak for “Britain” – has a target of 35 medals for this year's Olympics, and a lot more for 2012. Now a lot of these appear to be in sports like yachting and rowing, which aren't normally even back page news, but swaddle them with the flag, and they become everybody's baby.

The relationship of the Olympic Games to sport is roughly the same as that of a blockbuster West End musical to the dramatic and musical arts. The performances might not actually be that good, and you might not even recognise the tunes, but who cares? Come and gawp at the scenery, be dazzled by the effects, and have a good night out. This is sport for people who, essentially, don't like sport.

John Old is a freelance economist, writer and management consultant.