

The Olympics don't win gold, which is silver

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Along with an estimated 3.8 billion others, I've been watching the Olympic Games on television this week. I'm always amazed at what genetically special human beings are able to do when they dedicate their lives to mastering one particular physical skill.

Since I'm angry at being left off the American delegation, I'm practicing my competitive sitting for 2016. I may also enter daydreaming in the heavyweight division and joking around as a lightweight.

Unlike my across-the-board athletic talents, most Olympic gold-medal winners are built for and trained in only one sport. You don't see weightlifters running marathons or basketball centers falling off a pommel horse. Even run-throw-jump decathloners aren't expected to be able to swim, sail a boat or write a poem. Can Mr. Medal, Michael Phelps, dunk a basketball with either hand? No, and neither can I, which makes us even.

If we were to hold a farm Olympics, it would have events like non-cardio tractor driving in both steel seat and cushion, mortgage renegotiating and Congressional lobbying.

The Olympics rewards specialization. What happened to "well-rounded" and "best all-around"? I always get a whiff of performing-monkeyism when these individuals dazzle me with their practiced routines.

At the end, 302 gold medals will have been awarded. The vast majority of the 14,000 Olympians will fail to medal.

Failure of different types is built into the Olympics and everything else we attempt. Some, like the American men gymnasts, will beat themselves, a particularly mean thing to live with. Others will do their best and fall short. In the scheme of things, that's ok.

Pierre de Coubertin, the French aristocrat who started the modern Olympics in 1896, understood that for every winner there were inevitably many who failed to win. ("Failure-to-winner" is a more palatable term than "loser." Michael Phelps is not a loser because he failed to win the 400-meter individual medley on Saturday.)

Coubertin, unlike the mandarins who now live off this slice of modern life, recognized that sports are better when they're about something bigger than winning. "The important thing in life," he said, "is not the triumph but

the struggle; the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.”

It’s hard to see much of this original Olympic ideal on the playing fields of London.

Coubertin revived the Olympic games to promote peace and cross-cultural understanding through *amateur* athletic competition.

He had trouble persuading his French countrymen to invite Germany, the victor in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War that France had started over the Spanish invitation to Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, a Prussian, to become King of Spain in a new constitutional monarchy.

Even though Prussia won the war, Leopold, the Prussian favorite, was ultimately ignored in favor of an Italian prince, Amadeo of Savoy, who ran home after a couple of years upon declaring the Spanish to be “ungovernable.” Amadeo is remembered for his philandering and several things that happened on his first wedding day—his best man shot himself, the bride’s wardrobe mistress hanged herself and the palace gatekeeper slit his own throat. (This is what happens when politicians have the right birth certificate.)

A few genuine amateur athletes show up every four years to blow a breath or two on the embers of Coubertin’s vision.

But his notion of promoting peace is largely talked but not walked. It hangs out on a seldom-visited, blah-blah corner of the official “Fundamental Principles of Olympism”: “The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.”

In place of advancing peace, nation-state medal mongering has become the core value for many countries in the Olympics.

The majority of medals end up in the hands of wealthier countries where training, nutrition, opportunity and other forms of support are most available. Had Michael Phelps been born a Chadian in Chad, he would not have spent much of his life doing laps in an Olympic-size swimming pool under a coach’s eye no matter how long his arms or how big his feet.

American television viewers are shown the overall “medal count” of the top countries each night. It’s easy to assume that individual and team medals reflect a country’s virtuosity ranking in the world, which is a nicer way of describing resources devoted to winning.

Even poor countries like Cuba and East Germany can harvest a disproportionate number of medals when they invest their scarce resources disproportionately in state sports. Their rationale is simple: medals are

thought to prove the superiority of the political economies and ideologies that produce the athletes who win them. And just to make sure, East Germany juiced up all of its athletes with anabolic steroids and other chemicals for 20 years, leaving many with permanent health problems.

A gold for most-disgusting moment should have been awarded to 260-pound Charles Barkley for intentionally and gratuitously elbowing 174-pound Herlander Coimbra, a 24-year-old economics student from war-ravaged Angola, during the first half of the Dream Team's first game at Barcelona in 1992. The inimitable Barkley -- "I don't know anything about Angola; All I know about Angola is they in trouble; Well, he [Coimbra] might have pulled a spear on me." -- wanted to send a bully's message to those bare-bone Africans that American pro hoopsters ruled the global court in a way that went beyond making a 46-1 run and beating Angola 116-48.

I would have been proud of America that day had Michael Jordan and Magic Johnson walked Barkley to the bench in a symbolic fraternal ejection. That would have been team leadership and Olympic sportsmanship.

We've come a long way from the days (1912-1948) when the Olympic games awarded medals for architecture, literature, music, painting and sculpture. I notice that even then the Olympics never had an event called, "weekly ranting," in which I might have made the team. I've never been given an adequate explanation for this act of discrimination.

And speaking of rants. Ron Paul is known for bawling and stomping about the Federal Reserve creating money that's not backed by precious metals. Has anyone heard peep one out of him about the fact that gold Olympic medals are 92.5 percent silver, 6.16 percent copper and only 1.34 percent gold?

Many things have changed since Theodosius, the Roman Emperor, banned the Olympics in 393 A.D. after 1,000 years, because Christians considered the festival a celebration of pagan gods, which it was. Back then, women were prohibited from entering or even attending. Athletes competed buck naked and oiled up. They received a crown of olive leaves for winning.

The most remarkable old-timer was Italian wrestler Milo of Croton from the 6th Century B.C. who is the only Olympic athlete to win in six games. It's reported that he consumed 20 pounds of meat daily, along with 20 pounds of bread and 18 pints of wine.

It's also said that he once ate a four-year-old bull in one day. The National Cattleman's Beef Association will be featuring Milo in a new eat-more-beef campaign.

I should add that Milo ended badly—he was eaten by a pack of protein-starved wolves.

Even though the Olympics are no longer about what Coubertin wanted them to be about, they are fun to watch as long as I remember that it's better for France and Germany to be fighting in a swimming pool than on a battlefield, winning isn't everything and every gold medal is mostly silver.

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