

After Tokyo, we should bring the Olympic charade to an end

David Goldblatt

The travelling circus shows the ugly side of sport – displacing citizens, bullying athletes and endorsing cruel regimes



‘With the exception of Barcelona, no modern Games has raised a host city’s rate of economic growth, levels of skills and employment, tourist income or productivity.’ Photograph: Ian Waldie/Getty Images Sport
Sat 24 Jul 2021 10.00 BST

-
-
-

The empty seats in the stadiums of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics

are a blessing in disguise, for the sporting spectacle, no matter how good, will not be able to dispel the fact that this super-spreader event is being held in the midst of an unprecedented public health crisis and against the wishes of the vast majority of the Japanese public. In so doing, the International Olympic Committee – which earnestly believes

itself to be the leader of a global social movement – has been revealed as no more than the travelling circus of the global sports industry, ready to make sure the broadcasters get what they need come what may.

Not that these Games and the IOC's standing weren't deeply flawed prior to the pandemic. As at every Olympics, costs have spiralled and Japan will have to stump up more than \$30bn (£22bn), of which the IOC will not be paying a cent. Along the way there has been the usual combination of **expensive white-elephant stadiums**, **allegations of corruption** in the bid process and in **allocating contracts**, and the **forced eviction** of citizens from their homes.

Advertisement

Sold as the “Recovery Games” – celebrating the nation's revival after the 2011 tsunami and nuclear meltdown – Tokyo's softball competition began this week in Fukushima, a region in vertiginous demographic decline, still awash in nuclear waste.

Paris, Los Angeles and now Brisbane are signed up to host the next three summer Olympics, and the IOC continues to argue that its Games catalyse economic growth and leave positive urban and sporting legacies. Yet **the research is unequivocal**: with the exception of Barcelona 1992, no modern Games has raised a host city's rate of economic growth, levels of skills and employment, tourist income or productivity.

Similarly, the claim that the Olympics raise the level of sporting participation is a myth. After London 2012 – the only Games to actually take the proposition seriously – **activity rates fell** because the government's austerity programme led to the widespread closure of sporting facilities.

Olympians might inspire other Olympians – but as physical and psychological outliers they have absolutely no impact on the behaviour of the general public. Ask the Finns, who abandoned the state-sponsored pursuit of medals and spent the money instead on active transport and accessible facilities. They barely win anything any more, but they have the most active and healthy old people in the world. In Britain we have a sack of gold and an obesity crisis.

The urban programmes that accompanied Seoul 1988 and Beijing 2008 saw **almost 2 million** people displaced. More recently, Rio was staged on the back of over 60,000 people who had to get out of their homes and businesses: they were often intimidated and moved to

inferior and distant housing. The vast majority were barely compensated. And then there are the police sweeps that clear homeless and mentally ill people from previously public spaces.

Of course, where someone is suffering, someone else is probably benefiting, and the Olympics have proven fabulously profitable for construction companies, the corrupt officials and politicians who have handed out contracts to them, and property developers. The local police and national security agencies are also considerable beneficiaries given that security costs are now around \$2bn. Rio didn't build a single community sporting facility but its riot police got the very best in new Kevlar-plated armour and Tasers.

In a desperate search for legitimacy the IOC has championed clean sport and embraced environmentalism. But the former has been fatally undermined by the **light-touch treatment** meted out to Russia after its unprecedented programme of state-sponsored doping. And the environmental record of the Games has been dismal. Beijing was more polluted after its Olympics than before. Pyeongchang, Rio and Sochi all saw the destruction of protected natural habitats.

Covid has at least reduced the usual gigantic carbon footprint of the Games. However, it is hard to see how these and future emissions, however much offsetting the IOC is planning for, can be justified at a time when the speed of the climate crisis means most previous hosts of the Winter Games will soon have insufficient snow to hold them again. Tokyo, now regularly experiencing burning, humid summers, has had to shift the marathon 1,000km north to Sapporo.

The quixotic notion that the Olympics could be a champion of human rights – and that staging the Games would open up authoritarian hosts to international norms and scrutiny – was **completely undermined** by Beijing 2008, then **rendered risible** by the Sochi Winter Games in 2014. Next year's Beijing Winter Olympics, to be conducted alongside the genocidal repression of the Uyghurs, will be grotesque; and woe betide any athlete that wants to exercise the rights to free speech and protest while they are there.

This is all true to form for the IOC. On the eve of the 1968 games, the Mexican government slaughtered over 300 protesters in cold blood and launched a war of terror on the student movement that opposed it. When the then IOC president, Avery Brundage, was asked to comment on the matter, he replied: "I was at the ballet." He then reacted to the greatest ever display of athlete activism at the games – **the black power salutes** – by destroying the careers of Tommie Smith and John Carlos.

The IOC's history is one of genuflecting before power and violence, and bullying the athletes it claims to revere.

An Olympic Covid spike could yet kill more people in Tokyo than the Mexican state managed with mere bullets, and the IOC's ruthless suppression of athlete protest is primed with new regulations. The committee won't get the irony though, because it does not learn from its mistakes and it does not engage with its critics.

Self-selected for the entirety of its history, the IOC appoints no independents, tolerates no critical voices and is completely opaque in its operations. The idea that such an organisation should have special status at the UN and claim sovereignty over the global governance of sport is untenable.

Sport does offer an extraordinary canvas for the celebration of human possibilities. It is a universal language in a perilously fragmented world. It deserves better than to be captured by the IOC, better than to be drowned in its pieties and bound to its pernicious business model.

A Covid emergency aside, it is too late to abandon the Tokyo Games, but it is not too late to bring this charade to an end. The Chinese Communist party can make all the artificial snow it likes in 2022, but we should simply refuse to watch. Paris 2024 can be the final fond farewell. The IOC should dissolve itself and its assets be passed to a new democratically constituted body for global sport. Los Angeles would lose the Games, but Hollywood can take out the first option on the story.

- David Goldblatt is a journalist and author of *The Games: A Global History of the Olympics*.