Sport and harm

Peter Francis introduces the themed section for this issue

2012 marks the year in which the Olympic Games return to London, the first time since 1948 and the third time since the modern Olympics began in Athens in 1896. It is an exciting time. The Olympics are eagerly anticipated not least within this country where success in the medals table will be seen as a sound return from the millions of pounds invested in athletics since the introduction of lottery funding nearly two decades ago. The benefits of success, in a global environment where dreams are made, cannot be underestimated.

Yet hosting the Olympic Games offers the country much more than just an opportunity to demonstrate the nation's competitive 'edge' at the highest sporting level. Coinciding with the year of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, a global economic crisis and a prolonged period of austerity, success at the Olympic Games will no doubt provide the perfect opportunity for a flagging state such as Britain to rekindle stories of its 'greatness' whilst deflecting attention away from the woes of the nation both at home and overseas.

Suffice to say if the weather holds up, and if the athletes perform – and it is a big if on both counts – the country will be swept away in an euphoria of pride (and no doubt prejudice) – in celebration of the power of sport and the human condition. And so we should

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celebrate. After all, performing at the Olympics is the highlight of any athlete's career, the ultimate dream, the culmination of hours upon hours of training and lesser competitions in a myriad of faceless cities across the world. For the successful few, it is a time when winners are honoured and celebrities created.

Managing threats and preventing harm

The size and significance of today's international sporting events such as the Olympic Games mean that they are, especially post 9/11, potential targets for various forms of protest, extremism and terrorist activity. It is not surprising therefore, particularly given the significance of sport to the social, political, economic and cultural wellbeing of cities and countries worldwide, that there has developed an industry more than capable of managing the risks and potential threats that such sporting events can give rise to. It is perhaps also not surprising that the response involves a security complex of government, public and private sectors, commerce and media.

For some this is not without reason. There have been numerous attempts over the last four decades to disrupt a range of mega sporting events. Nevertheless, as **Kimberly Schimmel** reports, one of the real issues is whether the security response is *commensurate* and

appropriate to the potential threats and harms identified. In response, she suggests that while the threats are often grounded in local socio-political contexts, the approaches and strategies deployed are often international and global.

In an insightful companion piece on the securitisation of the Olympic City, **Pete Fussey** confirms that such approaches are repeatedly orientated around the core principles of 'command', 'control', 'co-ordination', 'communications' and 'intelligence', and involve strategies of militarisation, privatisation, technology and surveillance, environmental reconfiguration and behavioural regulation. For Fussey, the collision of multiple global and local processes '…form powerful drivers for the beautification, securitisation and overall "purification" of the Olympic City'.

Physical, cultural and social harms

Beneath the spectacle of contemporary sport, embodied so powerfully by mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games, lies perhaps an even more sobering theme – one in which the very Olympic 'touchstones' of sporting excellence – physique, strength, endurance, athleticism and dedication – are overshadowed by the darker forces of the human condition – the thirst for power, the quest for domination, and the search for success at all costs, whatever the potential for harm.

Sport is, and always will be harmful, not least because of the rivalries it generates, the competitive element that it embodies and the close physical contact that involvement in it often demands. It can be seen in all sports, whether it is gymnastics, boxing, rowing or rugby. It is often a consequence of a desire to succeed – the outcome of an overzealous training regime, a mistimed tackle or a miscalculation of fitness or endurance levels.

Yet the potential for harm in sport is not always a benign consequence of an individual's ambition and drive for sporting success, nor is it always appropriate, commensurate or indeed legitimate to the sporting activity undertaken. Just think of the evidence that has come to light in recent years about the misuse of performance enhancing drugs in cycling, or allegations of match fixing in cricket, or episodes of violence on the football field.

The relationship between sport and harm is nuanced, complex and diffuse. This is particularly the case when the harm moves beyond the physical to the cultural and social. It is here that sport can become a place for shady dealings, corrupt practices, and financial irregularities, the victims of which are often the very supporters who put their hands in their pockets to finance it in the first place.

The inter-connections between sport and harm are laid bare in a thought-provoking and provocative piece by the cultural commentator **Ellis Cashmore**. Sport has, in his view, '…morphed into an industry analogous to, if not contiguous with show business', whose harm outreaches the individual to the wider cultural and societal. Likening sport to a 'malign presence' that 'buttresses consumer culture', Cashmore notes the inability of sport to end the real social harms of the day – poverty, famine, peace.

This theme is also taken up by **Tess Kay** who critically examines the ability of sport to be an 'instrument for peace' in the service of international development. Acknowledging that sport has been used by non-governmental organisations and communities in the developing South to address a range of social problems, Kay suggests that as a fairly recent newcomer to the policy arena, sport must 'look to international development expertise to learn how to operate in this field'.

Power, lies and corruption

Of all the sports that have experienced the softer underbelly of social harm, football is perhaps the one that appears to have been most affected. Beyond the shine and gloss of a global 'brand' that has secured football's position as one of the leaders in entertainment, there within lies untold stories of social harm involving harassment, abuse, violence, intimidation and criminal activity. This is partly a consequence of the role football inhabits in contemporary society and partly due to its mass appeal secured through global television deals. It is also partly a reflection of the regulatory frameworks in place to detect, control and prevent wrongdoing on and off the field of play. Football is big business, the plaything of a few and the sport of the masses.

A review of the back pages of any number of UK newspapers will provide cursory evidence of the precarious financial foundations of a number of football clubs up and down the country, and of the less than honourable actions and ambitions of a number of those responsible for them. With a much greater knowledge of football, finance and fandom than such sensationalised reports offer, **John Williams** explores what he sees as the changing face of a crisis in modern football – one that is '... deep-seated, consequential and debilitating, one rooted in catastrophic failings in the funding and maintenance of the economic infrastructure of the domestic game itself'. Writing in the long shadow of football bankruptcy, administration,

debts and winding up orders, and within what he suggests is a bifurcated order of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', Williams highlights the extent and the consequences of financial irregularities for the game itself, and the resilience of the fan base to take on and develop new ways of working.

Football bankruptcy

Alongside recent stories of financial irregularities and football bankruptcy, the stigma of racism has once again brought shame over the professional game, this time as much on the field of play as off it. Allegations of racist name-calling have resulted in internal inquiries and police involvement, the consequences of which so far have included the imposition of bans and the involvement of the Crown Prosecution Service. In a reflective piece on the state of play in racism and football, **Mike Rowe** and **Jon Garland** highlight the historic and contemporary difficulties of responding to racist violence and harassment in football. Acknowledging that substantial efforts have been made to prevent and respond to racism in and around the stadia they also argue that there remain many deep rooted challenges facing those campaigning against racism in the game, not least the continued rising tensions between communities within society.

The final piece of the themed content concerns the media representation of sport, harm and crime. **Dino Numerato** explores the myriad of ways in which journalists contribute to the diffusion of corruption in contemporary sports. It is his contention that, although the mass media and journalists do not necessarily orchestrate corruption scandals, 'their involvement and possible contribution to corruption cannot be underestimated or side-lined'. ■

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