

DAVID MILLER



# IGNITING THE GAMES

The Evolution of the Olympics  
and Thomas Bach's Legacy

Foreword by  
Sebastian Coe



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## BACH'S BRINKMANSHIP, PUTIN'S ATROCITIES

THE OLYMPIC Games, renovated gift by Pierre de Coubertin, generates idealistic social and community attitudes. Can this biennial festival survive the respective barbarities of Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, the fortunate less extreme autocratic digressions by other despotic, ambitious politicians with their wars, totalitarianism and social contrivances? A frightening scenario.

The human race has endured, and mostly displaced, political and geographic empires throughout time, sometimes painfully. The virtue of Ancient Greece's Olympic Games has been promotion of our wiser, predominant, integrated nature: an instinctive sense of survival, of collective welfare and neighbourly association irrespective of race, creed or colour. Above all, the Olympic Games personify honour between rivals and friends, individual or nations, winner and loser, the capacity thereby to be at ease within our soul. Truly remarkable throughout history is our ability to arise with dignity out of catastrophe, as in the wake of two world wars. Even in the event of a further conflagration we can be sure – whenever the closure of the evil horror of Putin's demented empire-restoration against valiant Ukraine – of that nation's ultimate civil restoration; of Syria too, obliterated by Assad. The Olympics teach us what is good about ourselves.

Yet the risk now confronting the IOC, as its German leader Thomas Bach strives, champion of fair play, to install a transformational future, is the possible collaboration between two contemporary would-be empires, Russia and China, which could fracture the Olympic Games for decades. As observer of the last five IOC presidents, I embarked on this assessment of Games continuity, being a witness to Bach's welcome radical initiatives, with optimism. As I write, the empire lust of a Russian mass murderer, of a Chinese totalitarian dictator with designs on Taiwan and Hong Kong, portends a long-term east-west division of the globe and dissolution of Olympic ideology: universality of an attempted integrated global social equilibrium.

Do not underestimate the inflammation within what, if extended, is a war against the world: it encompasses war against truth – not the first of its kind – waged by the Kremlin's fake propaganda war. The current alarmed IOC president cannot contemplate potential Olympic termination. An apocalyptic outcome of enduring Russian annihilation could be collapse of the IOC's 'industry' in Lausanne: never mind the flamboyant, tourist Olympic Museum, but of the elaborate new headquarters, employing 600, from which 90 per cent of its multi-billion-dollar sponsorship and broadcast income subsidises many of the national Olympic committees and international federations, a majority of the latter based in Switzerland. A moral calamity in the 'minor' arena of sport hangs upon Putin's obsession and IOC victimhood. Inevitable Russian exclusion from Paris 2024 could be the trigger for their terminal banishment by an Olympic Movement equally angry and astonished on behalf of humanity.

And what if China should align with Russia? The danger is that Putin, or a successor, might attempt creation of a rival multi-Games among acolyte nations and thereby crush Bach's maxim of universality, with potential collapse of the IOC. May fortune countenance Bach's clairvoyance. Anne Hidalgo, mayor of Paris, stated on 17 March 2022, 'We will

make a decision when the time comes. Vladimir Putin is breaking international law. Russia is already suspended from the Olympic Movement until December 2022, a decision on 2024 will be made by the IOC.'

How could the IOC conceivably welcome the return of a nation that thronged to fill a stadium in celebration of Putin's slaughter of women and children and historic cities of a sovereign, law-abiding nation, the perpetrators championed by the Kremlin and hundreds of fake news campaigners? Having survived World War Two, and thus far atomic capability, the world in general has become selfishly materialistic: if you desire something, therefore you deserve it – even someone else's country. The democratic world will resent competing with a nation whose military, invading unprovoked a sovereign country, assassinates mother-and-child refugees, detonates an entire rail station crowded with civilians.

In any Olympic era, the moral heart of the IOC lies with the president attempting to offer a canopy of ethics amid our multiple mundane failures. First was the partially unstructured benevolence to all (at that time amateur) by de Coubertin. Next, by Belgian banker Compté Baillet-Latour's *laissez-faire* insensitive acceptance of Hitler's intended genocide. Swedish Sigfrid Edström's diplomatically included the Soviet Union. Irish Michael Killanin's genial but inadequate grappling with professionalism, apartheid, friction between international federations and national Olympic committees, and successive boycotts of 1976–1980 left the IOC perilously weak. Spain's transformative Samaranch embraced sponsorship, professionalism, division of winter and summer Games, the return of the suspended South Africa, and established an Ethics Commission post-Salt Lake voting scandal. Gentle Belgian Olympic sailor Rogge nursed economic stability but a decade of stalled modernisation. The idealist Olympics have persistently been sabotaged by alien political thrusts.

Committed constitutional reformer Bach is harassed by Russia's endemic cheating, plagued by financially scared

bidding host cities, by fractious North Korea, a global virus pandemic; perhaps terminally, the simultaneous empire ambitions of two of the three most powerful Olympic nations, each afflicted with territory kleptomania. Bach has been unwavering in upholding Olympic ethics. He would have perhaps been wiser sometimes to remain outside the political fray: his plea for peace during Beijing's ceremonies invited embarrassment in a contrived moral partnership with two conspicuously untruthful superpowers intent on world domination. This diminished rather than emphasised any degree of political power by a sporting bureau: a moral and social force entrenched in integration.

Throughout Bach's nine years at the helm thus far, while initiating his Agenda 2020 election manifesto of constitutional and financial reformations, shrewdly designed to save the IOC from its own vulnerability, he has been aware that maintaining the loyalty of the three most powerful nations, China, Russia and USA, was essential, not least financially, to the equilibrium of the Olympics. Never mind that, immediately prior to Tokyo's Games of 2020 – postponed to 2021 – the Olympic world had been largely caught off guard by the IOC Executive Board's sudden revelation of the 'advance' election of Brisbane as summer host city for 2032 – four years ahead of a normal seven-year preparation. A rainbow financial breakthrough, yet with Russia's invasion immediately following the Covid-ruptured Beijing Winter Games, the IOC now stood on a precipice.

Warring Russia and sycophantic partner Belarus then being suspended from hosting or participating in all global sport, a now retaliatory revenge withdrawal by Russia from the IOC, together with half a dozen sympathetic nations from the seven-decade former Soviet Union, would scupper Bach's triumphal objective of universality. Should China merge with such a Russian subterfuge, a whirlwind of allegiance from acolyte, beneficiary nations in Africa, Asia and the Middle East would destroy the Olympics. The mission fervently espoused by Bach could perish.

As Putin's tanks rolled into Ukraine, Bach reflected, 'A Games exclusively between nations of political alignment would sacrifice the plateau of universality. Allegations of racism are levelled against many countries, but provided the Olympic Charter is observed by all *within the Games*, the IOC must remain politically neutral. If we become politicised, we are lost. We cannot vie with one country against another, so of course we will always have our critics.' Yet observation of that principle of universality leaves the IOC in a moral cleft stick: is not protection of China's Uighur Muslims as significant as should have been that of the Jewish population at Berlin 1936, of ostracising Russia for their slaughter in Ukraine? The IOC is not the democratic world's conscience, but that is how it tends inexorably to be judged.

Moreover, the IOC is presently viewed as not being even-handed: Russia currently barred from all international involvement, yet Russia's two IOC members – Shamil Tarpishchev, president of Russian tennis, and two-time Olympic pole vault champion Yelena Isinbayeva – retaining their IOC membership. In short time, Switzerland's minister of sport, Viola Amherd, advocated their suspension. No doubt aware of the possible disintegration of the Olympic Movement on account of Putin's war, Bach was anxious to stress that sporting sanctions 'are not against Russian athletes or Russia's NOC, but for innocent competitors' "protection" in otherwise potentially hostile international competition'. Yet why would Russia not be excluded from Paris 2024, as were Germany from Antwerp 1920 and London 1948? Loyalty to some 'clean' Russian athletes – as at Rio, Pyeongchang, Tokyo and Beijing – is nothing beside loyalty to the democratic world in the face of unrestrained barbarity.

Tarpishchev and Isinbayeva extended hostility by failing to attend the concluded IOC Session post-Beijing Games. Bach acknowledged: 'Our relationship with the Russian government has dramatically deteriorated over the past years. My appeal to "give peace a chance" at the Closing Ceremony

was to political leaders across the world. Our relationship with Russia's leadership has worsened following the doping scandal, the cyber attacks and even personal attacks to individuals in the IOC and Olympic Movement. The political, social and economic consequences of the Ukraine war are a turning point in world history and we cannot ignore this. The IOC is conscious, and regret, that we cannot live up to our mission – the uniting power of a peaceful sports competition, though it encourages us to work even harder.'

Bach had celebrated the relative success, under Covid duress, of both Tokyo's and Beijing's Games prior to Putin's bloodshed, 'Above all was the judgement of the athletes at both Games – so grateful that they were still achieved within the pandemic, additionally that despite negative polling beforehand, the majority of the population of both host countries proudly followed events once underway on television and were unaffected by imported Covid infection.'

True, but how could anyone rationally evaluate future Olympic Games of Paris 2024, Milan-Cortina 2026 or Los Angeles 2028 during the spring of 2022 amid bombardment of bounteous, beautiful Ukraine? Prior to the invasion, Bach was optimistic. 'I sensed the Olympic Movement had been strengthened,' he forecast, 'by two Games that had been the most widely viewed thus far, that the accusations they would be irresponsible virus-spreaders was wholly disproved by rigorous control. While contemporary youth is watching less live broadcast television, social media and TV streaming, plus different new markets, generated at both Tokyo and Beijing prominently the widest viewing ever, at Beijing higher than for Pyeongchang in 2018. Advertising ratings in France were the best ever. With our revolutionary, economising host candidate procedure that we introduced in 2021, and the election of Brisbane 2032 11 years ahead, we already have city enquiries contemplating 2036 and even 2040.'

Yet the IOC, and whoever its president, is in moral limbo regarding the Olympic Truce. Upholding that historic

principle from Ancient Greece is dependent not upon the IOC – albeit permanent observer within the United Nations – but the honour of politicians. Of murderer Putin? Yet which way to turn for the IOC when harassed from every quarter, not least by Germany's *Atleten Deutsche*, demanding 'Image Sporting Rights' from sponsorship's billions, or by Rob Koehler, general secretary of agitprop Global Athlete and its commercial ambitions. The IOC is threatened not least by the avarice of competitors whom it exists to promote.

The preferred loyalty of any IOC president should be the athletes, vouched by Bach from the day of his election, but the IOC is administratively handcuffed by its own constitution: Olympic Games entry is via national Olympic committee (NOC) team selection, and thereby the aura of every Games is infused with nationalism – and many governments' perceived return on financial investment (not least in Britain) – as much or more than by individual honour. The last five IOC presidents have, to some degree, trailed unavailingly in the wake of rampant nationalism. As Malcolm Knox of the *Sydney Morning Herald* shrewdly observed during Rio 2016, 'The Games are not about you or me individually, but a special place in the world intended to celebrate sport universally ... yet simultaneously they become wild in overt nationalism.' Terrifyingly, sick Putin is more overt than Stalin or Hitler. Where would lie Bach's pragmatism when Putin's butchery terminated, without inadvertently destroying universality among the innocent, which he craved? Might we hear an echo of US university professor of political science Jules Boycoff, 'Let the athletes march at the Opening Ceremony sport by sport, not by nation.' Sound sense, but who would finance the marchers?

In the maelstrom of responsibilities crowding the IOC, one single word remains too often elusive: honour. Long before Canada's Olympic swimmer and senior IOC member Dick Pound failed in his 2001 challenge to succeed president Samaranch, he proclaimed, 'If the IOC's branding of

symbolism, ritualisation and honour is forfeited, de Coubertin's precious legacy will be lost.' Samaranch, a constitutional revolutionary over 20 years, by inattention all but squandered honour in the late 1990s: Bach, the first Olympic champion to be elected president, may now metaphorically need one or two moral world records in the manner of legendary pole vault champion Sergey Bubka from Ukraine (defeated for leadership of World Athletics by Seb Coe).

Despite constant criticism, much of it from the hypocritical USA, Bach could not have been more actively dedicated to IOC survival, as I sense from recording the last five IOC presidents. He reflects, 'The myths of Olympic competition reach beyond performance, go beyond values such as the Truce or governance by rules, of fairness, anti-doping. De Coubertin's objectives were not simply ethical for the sake of sport, but for social education and the concept of peace, thereby are still a major pillar of our drive for universality. The crises we have experienced in recent years have been partially on account of a triangular conflict within the idealistic concept that sport unites us: firstly, the parallel ambition of nations and potential individual medal-winners – a few hundred – to be top dog; second, the quieter motivation of the other 10,000 hoping to discover a perspective of the rest of the world; lastly, the magnet for governments and their political motivations.'

These present the IOC with what become intolerable options in this intended Garden of Eden, so often corrupted by political empires. The Olympics are a gift from history. As Barack Obama remarked prior to Rio 2016, 'The Olympics are not going to end wars, eliminate poverty, but build a sense of common humanity, of empathy. The Olympics transport us to another place ... particularly for Americans, who generally feel that unless there's bad news out there, we don't need to know much about elsewhere. The Olympics offer our introduction to the world.' Chief Dan George, celebrated native American, escaping the US for Canada, author of that memorable memoir

*My Spirit Soars*, and campaigner to protect Indian-American reservations prior to construction for the Calgary 1988 Winter Games, proclaimed, 'To satisfy the common longing in all of us, we must respect each other.'

Having long been a commentator of the Games, tell me this: what is the historic similarity between the regal patronage of King Edward VII at London's Games of 1908, and Xi Jinping's winter festival of 2022? I will address this conundrum in a moment. Humanity's insatiable greed, whether geographic, political, financial or tribal, generated a lust for creation of empires across four millennia, many of dynastic Chinese origin: the largest, though relatively brief in the 13th century, led by Genghis Khan, stretching from Hungary to the Sea of Japan; the longest by Egypt, 1550 BC – AD 473; stridently by France, then most recently, more modest Britain, 1603–1997. Putin's newly energised but economically vulnerable Russia, and insatiable ogre China's Pacific ambitions, spark a contemporary fuse. With nursery-like posture, Western politicians pressed the IOC to confront China's alleged genocide of their Muslim minority – a cop-out by politicians shy of imposing serious retribution of financial penalties rather than evasively ride on the back of boycott by token 'rubber-duck' athletes or faceless party-poopers diplomats.

Back in 2021, Bach had stressed, 'The IOC is not a supra-world government which in the cause of upholding human rights can strip China of hosting rights – to which we elected them – because of alleged incarceration of ethnic Uighurs. Boycotts of the Olympics, on three occasions, achieved nothing. If sport can play a role in society, it lies in strengthening co-operation between neighbours, giving the young hope for a better future. The Olympics do not have responsibility, or the capacity, to solve human rights issues which generations of politicians have been unable to master.' Yet only days later, a gaggle of political poseurs from the European Parliament was calling on 'member governments and embassies to decline invitation, to attend the Games'.

As veteran IOC member Dick Pound observed, 'The only authority that can command a government is a nation's own population.' In advance of China's hosting, the IOC reached a four-Games deal with China Media Group, controller of the nation's central television, extending a long-term partnership through to Brisbane 2032, the previous contract being 2014–2022. The new deal was well in excess of the previous \$550m. The cynical will say expedient: the survival of world sport is dependent on such financial advantages, obliging the IOC to covet Chinese markets. NBC's advance US advertising for Beijing 2022 had already surpassed previous levels, exceeding those advertising rates for Tokyo 2020 or Rio 2016.

So what about human rights in China? There are few empires which have gently relinquished power over their subordinate territories, though the British, in the evolving headwinds of the 20th century, attempted to do so with courtesy. Yet how would the British feel if, say, euphemistically, the Isle of Wight or the Isle of Man were 'owned' by China as financial assets, as were Hong Kong and Kowloon by the British from 1841 and 1860 respectively? The British Empire came into existence by a conspiracy of nature: an island race that developed naval power across the 16th to 18th centuries which outgunned colonies of France, Spain and Portugal: this alongside the mining of coal that propagated the steel industry revolution ahead of world rivals.

In protecting its empire, 1900–1950, Britain engaged in over 80 military skirmishes (excluding two world wars), predominantly protecting Queen Victoria's crown jewel of India and colonial Africa. It still strategically and controversially owns the Falklands and Gibraltar with uneasy tolerance from Argentina and Spain. When Britain attended Antwerp's Olympic Games of 1920, fourth in the medals table, it was in the wake of the British Army's 'Bloody Sunday' crushing of Dublin's separatist republican campaign, with the death of 300, and subsequently 4,500 interned. At Melbourne 1956, Britain could hardly protest at the Soviet Empire's suppression

of Hungary's Budapest Uprising, having dejectedly failed in company with the armed forces of France and Israel, to retrieve its one-third share of the Suez Canal from rebellious President Nasser. No foreign government exerted attempt to suspend British Olympians. And avaricious France? Prior to late 18th-century domestic revolution, monarchic tentacles had occupied swathes of Caribbean, African and Asian jewels. Occupation of Algeria only ended with independence in 1962 after 130 years of conflict and some 200,000 deaths in pernicious mutual disputes.

Preceding Beijing's Winter Games, a platoon of US politicians – in concerted demand for the Games to be shunted elsewhere – displayed blindfold perspective of the USA's status as the, hitherto, most accomplished industrial and supreme military power: created by its immigrant domestic 'geographic' empire, partially dependent on an African slave population which had been denied for much of four centuries the rights of social integration, alongside subordinated indigenous Indian Americans. The USA's presence for the inaugural modern Games at Athens in 1896 came in the wake of the final 'ethnic cleansing' of 300 Indian American souls at Dakota's Wounded Knee, the final atrocity in a century's murder of folklore heroes revered to this day: witness Jim Thorpe's continuing domestic and cultural memorabilia. Travis Tygart, head of America's anti-doping agency, is reluctant to debate the imposition of President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830, in which 17,000 Cherokee natives were marched, together with 2,000 slaves, on the Trail of Tears from Mississippi into Georgia, 5,000 dying of disease or starvation. Few remember that as the USA team departed for Tokyo 1964, Alabama's Robert Shelton was assembling the 50,000-strong 'United Klans of America': KKK already armed with their flaming crucifix insignia for assassination of Black Integration Freedom Fighters across Georgia and Mississippi, all, of course, in the name of honourable Christian faith. The recent Black Lives Matter campaign, extending worldwide, is a continuity of the

racial inequity which disfigures the incredible achievements over the last two centuries of what has been, until now, humanity's most triumphant nation: industrial, cultural, scientific, medical.

There has seldom been an empire with a clean slate in human rights. Well-intentioned as Britain may have been in command of the Indian subcontinent, my mother-in-law, as the daughter of an army officer, had an employee sleeping on the bedroom doorstep to keep the snakes at bay. Many British military incursions involved north-west frontier protection prior to Mahatma Gandhi's independent campaign for empire release in 1947. Queensland, scheduled to host Australia's third Summer Games in 2032, will need to guard against lingering racism against Aborigines, by organisations such as the Australia Defence League, or 'Reclaim Australia', with continuing defamation of prominent sporting stars such as Adam Goodes, never mind the deification of Aborigine Cathy Freeman at Sydney 2000.

Now recall London 1908 and comparison with Beijing 2022, and the sense of entitlement as grandiose superpowers dominate the globe to a degree in which rival governments are mostly reluctant to challenge, even condemn, a host's foreign strategy or social conduct. While Edward VII eagerly graced White City Stadium, in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan in mid-1908 there was an uprising by indigenous Wad Habuba, the British Army instantly responding against religious opposition to Christian rule, and local desire to restore the Mahdist State under leadership by a veteran of the Mahdist War, Al-Qadir Muhammad Iman Wad Habuba. Britain dispatched two infantry companies to quell the uprising, led by Ernest Dickinson, governor of Blue Nile Province. Many were killed: meanwhile, packed houses in west London revelled in a glut of medals. Britain's exclusive team of judges were so prejudiced against all comers that, four years later in Stockholm, the International Athletics Federation had been created to rationalise authority in track and field.

Elements of Britain's empire linger. In 2019, Westminster found itself under obligation to end its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible under order of the International Court of Justice. The Chagos Islands had been retained by the UK during negotiations for the independence of Mauritius in 1968, the islands occupied for 'defence purposes' by the UK and USA. The entire Chagos population was forcibly removed between 1967 and 1973 and prevented from returning, dispersed elsewhere. The United Nations emphasised 'protection of the human rights of those concerned' for the required reinstatement: a reversal of the Windrush scandal, many West Indies immigrants welcomed to Britain to aide post-war recovery then being declared 'illegal' seven decades later.

Across the globe, societies historically repeat their errors, seldom learn. The universality that Thomas Bach has pursued since becoming an administrator 40 years ago remains elusive. The eternal joy available in the Olympic Games was still discernible in Beijing's Winter Games: the contest against malign social nature has been recurrent: Athens initially reluctant inaugural host; Paris 1900 many months protracted; St Louis 1904 racist; London 1908 and Los Angeles 1932 nationalistic; Berlin 1936 racist; Japan 1964 threatened by Indonesia's President Sukarno with prior 'separatist Games'; apartheid South Africa, suspended 1964–1992; Mexico 1968, police corrupted; Munich 1972, terrorised; three political boycotts in 1976, 1980 and 1984; political intimidation Seoul 1988, Beijing 2008, Pyeongchang 2018, Beijing 2022. Despite Bach's reforms, the IOC – benevolent in principle yet often erratic in aspects of membership enlistment – will continue to be hounded by governments, whether dictatorial or democratic: provided it survives. Contemporary life is dominated by temperamental extremists: a sense of entitlement, echoed at Boris Johnson's Bullingdon Club at Oxford University, by property billionaire Donald Trump, or empire-ambitious autocrats.

How fortunate for a century has been sport: governed – mostly – by rules which the majority respected. I was in awe of Russian sport since watching Moscow Dynamo, unknown, aged ten, on Pathe's news reel in 1946. My mother, a rebellious middle-class English teenager, joining a Belarus balalaika orchestra fleeing Lenin in the 1920s, cherished Russian culture. From numerous visits – stretching from Saint Petersburg to Siberia – I have trusted and admired Russian friends, yet can I henceforth believe a word they say? My polite message to the IOC president, for protection of the Olympic Movement as Putin's plunder of Ukraine persists, is unequivocal: remember Winston Churchill's observation of 1945, 'The Soviet Union is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.'

The Olympic family should exclude Russia unconditionally until Putin is either imprisoned or deceased, and thereafter subject to stringent conditional qualification at any events. Even fleeting familiarity with Russian history over centuries provides confirmation of Russia's unusual generic blend of courage and brutality: experienced by Napoleon and then by Hitler, the latter in the sieges of Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) and Stalingrad (Volgograd): philosophically, never surrender, if your colleagues do so, shoot them. Bach may not have encountered the analysis by Slava Malamud, experienced immigrant Russian-American sports columnist, source of US agency Sports Examiner: Malamud denounces Soviet/Russian sport and politics being 'inseparable and synonymous'; that for the Kremlin, since the Bolsheviks, Western sport was for the urban university elite, in Russia for the proletariat. For Stalin, international competition was acceptable only if victory was guaranteed. The first USSR football entry was for Helsinki's Olympics 1952: losing a replay against Turkey, the coach and all players were expelled permanently from the sport. Lev Yashin, heroic goalkeeper of the 1950s, symbolised national mentality: defending the border.

The appalling conflict for Bach's Olympic 'universality' maxim is that Putin's barbarism is supported by Russian

Orthodox priests and by the bulk of Russia's population, contrary to Western supposition: an echo of Christ's crucifixion approved by pontificate; disbelief that the weak shall inherit the earth. Dominic Lawson recalls in the *Sunday Times* that aristocratic French historian Astolphe de Custine, visiting Russia in 1839, recorded, 'Russia propagates tyranny as palliative to anarchy: that despotism is an endemic gene.'

Bach needs to acknowledge that Russia and Russian sport is more than just about making friends. Remember blood in the water polo pool at Melbourne's Olympics of 1956, post-Budapest anti-Soviet uprising.

Renowned historian Anthony Beevor relates in *Russia: Revolution and Civil War 1917-21* (Weidenfeld): 'Victims were bound with barbed wire and pressed into ice holes, skewered alive, roasted in train-rail furnaces, impregnated with rats then obliged to gnaw their way free. For ruthless inhumanity, the Bolsheviks were unbeatable.' This is recurring now in Ukraine, yet morally blindfold, idolised tennis millionaires lament forfeiting their ranking points at Wimbledon. How shameful.