The fire within

The nearest I got to Olympic glory was the national development squad for the 1988 Commonwealth Games triathlon team, from which I withdrew prematurely with what my coach insisted on calling a 'spectacularly ill-timed pregnancy'. Perhaps that's why I 'backed the bid' for London 2012 and signed up as a volunteer long before I began to ask critical questions about what the Olympic brand actually means.

Even in an Olympic year, almost all sports hold a world championship as well. The Olympics are less about finding a champion than about putting on a sporting mega-event — which, if you'll forgive a dose of sociological jargon, is defined as a:

*'... ritualized, rationalized, commercial spectacle and bodily practice that creates opportunities for expressive performances, disruptions of the everyday world and affirmations of social status and belonging.'*¹

Since the days of ancient Athens, the Olympic Games have been an opportunity for society to celebrate the aesthetics of the perfectly-honed human body (to this end, the athletes competed in the nude). And they have also long been oriented to celebrating an ethical ideal — everything that is good and pure and fulfilling about competitive sport and those flawless, focused individuals who take part in it. *Anima sana in corpore sano*.

But the Olympics are also about access, and denial of access, to the training, facilities, and social and technical networks that underpin sporting achievement. They involve powerful vested interests whose marketing advisers understand the commercial significance of the Olympic brand (my Gamesmaker experience is sponsored by — among others — McDonalds, Cadburys, and various companies with alleged 'unethical' investments). Scratch the surface of this brand and uncomfortable questions emerge about race, sex, country, class, and, most of all, politics. As we saw in Tokyo (1964), Seoul (1988), Sydney (2000), and Beijing (2008), there is no better way for a

country in social and economic transition to flex its muscles than through the rapid, on-schedule construction of state-of-the-art facilities, new transport links, efficient logistics, carefully-choreographed supporting ceremonies, and a high-profile development initiative for a designated 'underprivileged' group.

Some have argued that the Olympic brand is now so tied to the logic of capitalist modernity that the spectacle of sporting excellence is achieved at an unacceptably high moral and political price. 'Boycott London 2012' is a social movement gathering pace, though its list of reasons to do so (occupation of Afghanistan, refusal to return the Elgin marbles, inappropriate choice of venue for certain minor sports) may strike some people as eclectic.

Soon I will attend my first training event, pick up my Gamesmaker uniform, and confirm my shifts as a GP at the Olympic Village GP-led health centre. While the 'pro' and 'anti' lobbies continue to debate what the Olympics is really about, I suspect I will be gainfully occupied seeing athletes who have run out of their inhalers, developed a fever, or require postcoital contraception.

Trisha Greenhalgh,

GP in north London, Professor of Primary Health Care at Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, London.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X641537

REFERENCE

1. Horne J, Manzenreiter R. An introduction to the sociology of sports mega-events. *Social Rev* 2006; **54**(2): 1–24.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Trisha Greenhalgh

Global Health, Policy and Innovation Unit, Centre for Primary Care and Public Health, Blizard Institute, Barts and The London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Yvonne Carter Building, 58 Turner Street, London E1 2AB, UK.

E-mail: p.greenhalgh@qmul.ac.uk