



Promoting sport and the Olympic legacy
by **Emily Pitts**

The London Olympics is speeding towards us, with the associated rhetoric about legacy and the transformational impact it is destined to have on every person, young and old, in the UK and beyond.

Cost calculations range from £9bn to £12bn to the taxpayer, with additional revenue from private sources in the form of sponsorship, merchandising, tickets sales, TV rights totalling around £2bn. Venues, regeneration, and infrastructure are funded through the former, with the latter covering the direct costs of mounting the games. Additional concerns voiced through the popular media suggest that these costs fail to take into account the quagmire of additional services and operational costs in London and across the country, leading up to and during the event, therefore failing to reflect the true cost to the taxpayer of hosting the games.

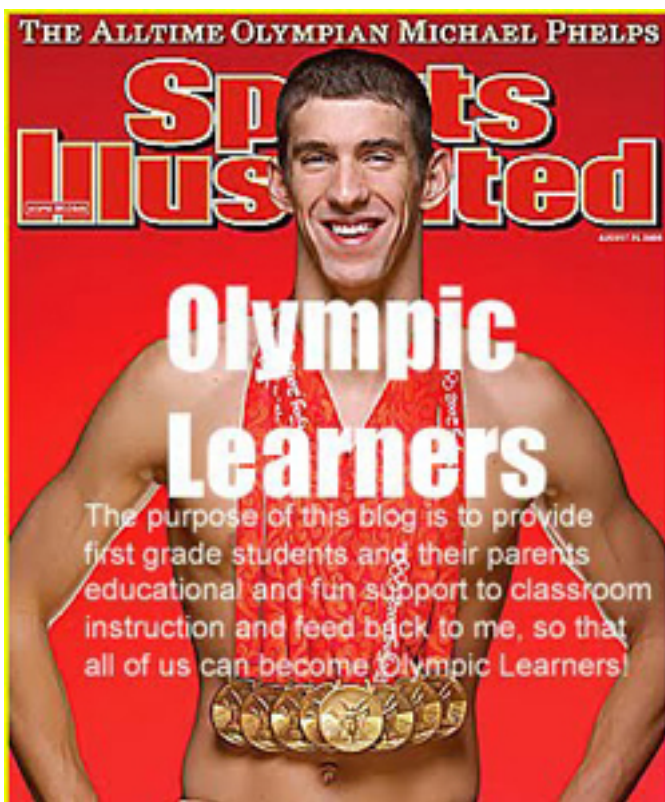
Operating currently and historically as a propaganda machine, the Olympic Games, even in the 21st Century is an event run by the elite class, featuring the wealthy and attended by those who can afford tickets. They're not a Games of social equity and are unlikely to become so, if you take the consistent trend of Olympians being publicly educated as the barometer – a mirror of public life. At Beijing around 50% of medals were won by those who attended private schools. About 7% of the population are educated privately – a disproportionate amount in relation to the large number of Olympians thereby produced.

This leads to the question – what is the aim of these Olympic Games? Is it to win the most medals possible, to be the best, to inspire a new generation of athletes, to raise aspirations, to demonstrate the country's power and wealth, to help people out of poverty or to keep the lower classes in their place?

If we take winning medals as our aim, given the statistics we would arguably have been in a much better position had we given promising pupils a place in a private school ten or fifteen years ago. Unencumbered by government dictat private schools can concentrate on what they do well and that is to produce competitive, well-educated children, with a rounded view of the world and an attitude that leads them to the top jobs and success. The alternative is, of course, to replicate the private school system within the state sector, with the reintroduction of competition in sport as a key component.

Politicians have touted the games as the answer to the dire social and sporting malaise, which

has draped the country arguably since the creep of non-competition in sport into the curriculum. Sport has been at the mercy of the namby-pamby yoghurt-knitting brigade for well over fifteen years now, sliding ever downwards towards the lowest common denominator, forcing high sporting achievers to dumb down and work as part of a team, work with less able partners and generally not do their best for fear of upsetting those children for whom sport is a beast of burden.



Whilst other subjects may have fallen marginally foul of this languor, sport has come off worst by far. Across other subjects competition in the form of 'who's going to get the best SATs results' is rife. How sport can have reached such a non-competitive position in comparison to other subjects is anathema. Reading and English are competitive – children are placed on streamed tables and choose books from different (graded) boxes. They compete to advance and become a 'free reader'. This system doesn't, however, account for children with dyslexia, as an example. It doesn't expect the 'free readers' to dumb down to the lowest level so that the dyslexics don't feel bad about their lot. For the dyslexic children, it's just tough. They have a choice between either working hard, developing self-control and determination or saying 'poor me' and blaming the system for their inadequacies, however induced. Some will blame the system and others will get on with it and do what every Olympian must do to obtain their success – work extremely hard, train their mind to overcome perceived and real obstacles and go beyond their own vision of their capability.

By removing competitive sports from schools we've removed the ability of children to understand the nature of competition and thereby left a nation of unprepared children; unprepared across the spectrum of competition in normal life – employment, sport and intellectual enquiry. To link this directly back to the Olympics as an 'aspirational tool' one wonders how we can possibly hope to engender excitement and enthusiasm in this once-in-a-lifetime event (or possibly twice in a lifetime if you're un/lucky), when most children have no true concept or experience of competitive sport and no idea of the commitment, focus and determination required to become a world-class athlete.

An article published in the [Daily Mail](#) in 2008 raised another 'issue' relating directly to the teaching of sport and promulgation of sporting prowess - the

Feminisation

of the teaching profession. The article tries to suggest that as a result of the women taking the majority of roles within the teaching profession 'leaves ...sporty boys unchallenged'. For this, read instead: there are not enough female teachers who are physically strong and capable sportswomen and accepted as such, from whom boys are willing to take instruction. The article fails to identify that women are consistently, in their own and other people's eyes, resigned and resigning themselves to unchallenging gender-stereotypical roles. We have to change our whole perception of what it means to be a woman and what we want our women to be in order to teach children – boys and girls - to achieve. It means raising the expectations of young women – expecting them to be strong, fit, have stamina and achieve the highest levels of attainment in all sporting disciplines – weightlifting, boxing, shooting included. Gloria Steinem discusses this wonderfully in her essay 'The Politics of Muscle'. As an aside to this, it's interesting that the principal leaders of the Olympic bid and those taking a lead role in the media following the success of the bid were men.

The ultimate argument for competitiveness, and hence for the Olympic Games as a beacon of physical excellence to which we should aspire, is simple - our primary function is to continue our race – we're competitive for a reason. We're not part of a team when we die. In natural selection terms we are designed in such a way that the best survive. In the grandest sense, the continual competitive degradation, particularly in the sporting department, signals another nail in the coffin for the human race. If we continue on the road of obesity, homogenisation, inertia and inefficiency, we're doomed. Despite this and although the government seems absolutely desperate for us to revel in the thrill and buzz of this wondrous event, the level of detachment of

the state-educated masses has been underestimated and, much like the Commonwealth Games in Manchester, will be long forgotten by everyone other than those directly involved as soon as it has passed.