

## THE OLYMPICS: FOR WAR OR PEACE?

As London Olympic fever enters its final 12-month frenzy, it may be helpful to recall a few neglected aspects of the complex relationship between Olympism and peace.

Many people have heard of the modern Games' founder, Pierre de Coubertin; and will know something of the original Games held in Greece in ancient times. Less well-known is the 'Olympic Truce' which operated from 776 BC - 393 AD, when the Games were suppressed. It was accepted that during the Games there was a ban on hostilities between city states, and participants could make their way unimpeded to Olympia. It was the longest-lived institution of international law in the ancient, and the modern, world. Efforts have been made by the Greek government and the IOC to apply the Truce to modern conditions – with rather mixed results.

The 1994 Winter Games in Lillehammer, Norway, revived hope in conflict-torn Sarajevo. After diplomatic efforts, the Truce was observed, allowing an IOC delegation to visit the city and extend its solidarity to the population. In 1998, during the Nagano Games, tensions in the Persian Gulf were high. The observance of the Truce offered an opportunity to Kofi Annan to seek [a diplomatic resolution to the crisis in Iraq](#). In 2000 during the opening ceremony in Sydney, the South and North Korean delegations walked together under the same flag. However in 2008, war between Russia and Georgia broke out on the opening day....

Remember the film *'Chariots of Fire'*? It portrays among others, the one individual who was both an Olympic medallist and Nobel peace laureate (1959). Philip Noel-Baker was a British Labour politician and minister, diplomat, academic, an outstanding athlete, and renowned campaigner for disarmament. Noel-Baker won the silver medal in the 1500m in 1920. He later became a Vice-President of the IPB and was a co-founder of the World Disarmament Campaign. He startled audiences by saying: *"No Olympic Games yet has cost as much as the petrol used by military aeroplanes, in all countries, in one day!"*

The debate over whether the Olympic spectacle (or indeed, international sport as a whole) does more to fan the flames of nationalism than it does to forge transnational friendship is a perpetual one. Personally, I argue that the importance of the Olympics is over-rated – either for war or for peace. The causes of war are more profound than simply the excesses of patriotism; and similarly, the Olympic Truce is hardly a huge success and most peacemaking has no reference to sport at all. Consider the work of the UN and other peace negotiations; or the contributions of nonviolent movements.

Nevertheless, the Olympics are here to stay and may become an even bigger operation each time. So we should use the opportunities for peace promotion. But we should also bring a critical perspective to bear on the whole field of sport –remembering that a modern definition of peace must include human rights, gender equity, democratic participation by all communities, and a healthy scepticism about the doubtful blessings of privatization and corporate sponsorship.

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