

Olympics should lose the self-importance

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Now that the flame has been extinguished in Beijing, it's time to put to rest something else related to the Olympics: the idea that the Games are somehow more than global sporting event.

Since the Olympics' re-birth in 1896, the organizers have sought to infuse the Games with the notion that they represent a "movement." This concept is reflected in the Olympic Charter, which suggests that sport must serve "the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity."

Perhaps that was once the case. But no longer. It's difficult to say when the end of the fabled "Olympic Spirit" happened. Suspending the games during the World Wars? The terrorist attacks in Munich? The advent of the "corporate era" launched in Los Angeles in 1984? Frankly, it doesn't matter. What matters is that the IOC still believes in its cause célèbre, and that's just going to lead to more problems for them.

Witness China 2008. With their grand charge in hand, the IOC delivered the Games to China with the naïve belief that, in doing so, they could exact pressure on the entrenched Communist regime. That leverage, the thinking went, could be used to open up the Middle Kingdom to the idea of free expression and human rights. The end result? Not so much.

Athletes were widely admonished by both the IOC and their own countries' organizing committees to avoid any displays or demonstrations that would draw attention to issues that might prove 'uncomfortable' to the host nation. Those who still tried to do so (like former speed skater Joey Cheek) were, shall we say, "dis-invited" from attending the XXIX Olympiad.

Chinese citizens who were brazen enough to apply for demonstration "permits" for one of the three designated protest zones in Beijing were frequently detained. In the case of Wu Dianyuan, 79, and Wang Xiuying, 77, their permit request resulted in their being sent to labor camps for a year of re-education.

It's also been suggested that resurgent nationalism brought on by hosting the Olympics will have negative consequences for Chinese territories. Specifically, China is sending its gold medal winning athletes to Hong Kong immediately prior to that province's elections as a way to spur pro-Beijing sentiment. Should pre-democracy parties fall short of 21 seats in the legislature, a distinct possibility, Beijing will have a much freer hand in drawing up legislation designed to exert more control over Hong Kong.

And the Olympic Truce? Two words: South Ossetia.

By failing to live up to its promise, the IOC has tarnished the Olympic brand. That's potentially damaging to the longterm value of the Games, because they can be seen as being unable to deliver

on its fundamental brand attributes. Over-promise and under-deliver. That's the death knell of a product, as any brand manager will tell you.

So let's call the Olympics what it is: a global sporting event. A fantastic, one-of-a-kind, grand sporting event where remarkable physical accomplishments happen regularly over a two-week period. But let's stop conferring on it the status of "social movement."

Some may suggest that eliminating (or at least subjugating) these concepts of idealism will diminish the Olympic brand. Quite the contrary. Other comparable global sporting events, specifically the World Cup, are widely admired and perform well financially without artificially aligning themselves with "human dignity" and "the harmonious development of man."

Further, there's economic benefit to doing so. In addition to protecting the Olympic brand, removing this increasingly unfounded veneer of social movement also frees up the Olympics to increase its effectiveness as a commercial enterprise. For example, quaint traditions like prohibiting corporate signage from the interior of stadiums and arenas can be eliminated, thereby opening up broad and valuable revenue streams from their corporate sponsors.

The Olympics will always be able to attract and dazzle a global audience by showcasing the pinnacle of human performance in sport. Stubbornly insisting, however, that the Games have a mandate to promote human rights and dignity only hastens a slow, steady slide into hypocrisy and, ultimately, irrelevance.

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