

Of Nations and Olympians

At about this time of the year, quadrennially, we are mesmerized by athletes at the peak of their prowess, displaying skills ordinary mortals can only dream of. The man credited with reviving the modern Olympics has been quoted as saying “*The important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part; the important thing in life is not triumph, but the struggle; the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.*”

I wonder what the good French Baron would say about current Olympic practices. I’m only going to touch on one small aspect, pertaining to sometimes amusing recruitment practices, not widespread doping, cheating, bribing of top officials during site selection, etc We’ll leave that to others.

Let’s go back to a distant Olympics, the 1936 XI Olympiad, held in Berlin. A centerpiece of the Olympics is the 26.2 mile marathon. After all, the race has Greek roots, named after the city of Marathon, where the Greeks vanquished a numerically superior Persian force. The 1936 winner was Son Kitei, representing Japan. But Son was really a Korean named Sohn Kee-chung. Korea was under Japanese occupation and Sohn was not allowed to use his Korean name. The bronze medal winner was also Korean. But the papers in Korea were not allowed to identify them as Korean. Sohn finally got his recognition and international fame when at the age of 76, he carried the Olympic torch at the opening ceremonies of the 1988 XXIV Olympiad held in Seoul.

For the 2004 Olympics in Athens, the Greeks tried to field a baseball team. There weren’t enough Greek ballplayers who could compete at the international level against powerhouses like Cuba and Japan. So they recruited Americans. With national pride at stake, Greek officials made a requirement that the players have Greek heritage. At least one grandparent had to be Greek. They managed to field a team consisting of former college and minor league players. Too bad Milt Pappas (full name Miltiades Stergios Papastergios) was too old to pitch. Milt played 17 seasons and won over 200 games in the majors.

At the 2012 London Olympics, 11% of the U.K.’s athletes were foreign born. Since the U.K. is a multicultural nation, perhaps more so than the United States, that is not surprising. However, some of them became citizens only months before. One athlete had previously competed for two other countries. The British press dubbed them Plastic Brits. An irrepressible reporter asked an American born athlete to recite England’s national anthem. She couldn’t. To protect the guilty, we won’t name her.

Filipinos are basketball crazy. Americans brought basketball and baseball to the Philippines, but unlike the Japanese, who embraced baseball, the vertically challenged Filipinos fell in love with basketball. The Philippine national teams once dominated in Asia, but other countries grew their skills and the national team, now called Gilas (Tagalog for elegance), has not been able to qualify for the last 9 Olympics. As a fast track solution, they tried to import foreign players. If other countries can do it, so can the Filipinos. Foreign basketball players meant Americans,

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usually African-American. The latest object of Philippine basketball affection is six foot eleven inch Andray Blatche.

First, it was claimed that Andray was Filipino-American. Even Andray himself joked about being part Filipino. The charade didn't last long. President Noy Aquino came to the rescue, and with the stroke of a pen, Andray was officially a Filipino citizen. Andray is no minor league player, he was drafted by the Washington Wizards and played nine respectable seasons in the NBA before switching over to the Chinese basketball league. Alas, it was not enough. Playing in a pre-Olympic qualifying round, Gilas lost to the French team led by San Antonio Spurs' Tony Parker. In a do or die game, Gilas then lost to the New Zealand Tall Blacks. In both games, Andray was the top Gilas scorer, building a small lead in the early going, but the team faded in the stretch. Gilas might be working on Plan B. Does Andray have a brother?

Chinese players totally dominate table tennis. Their caliber of play is so far above the rest of the world, that the world imports Chinese players. All the while you thought made in China referred to sneakers, toasters and smartphones. At the Commonwealth Games a couple of years ago, the women's doubles medalists, representing Singapore, Australia and Canada, were all born in China. So goes the former British Empire. One of the "Aussies" had even played for Poland before going to Australia. But at least Singapore has a connection, their population being 75% ethnic Chinese. China's players have routinely won the Olympic gold and silver, leaving the rest of the world to compete for bronze. But then it is another Chinese born and trained player representing another country. In women's singles, the U.S.'s best hope is Yue "Jennifer" Wu.

Belarus, formerly the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, was once a powerhouse in gymnastics. But their gymnasts kept immigrating to the United States. So they turned the tables. One of the gymnasts representing Belarus is a teenager from California. She has never visited Belarus. I wonder if she could locate Belarus on the map. A player on the women's basketball team is an African American playing in the WNBA. She couldn't make it to the Dream Team, so why not Belarus? I'd like to ask her, "what's the capital of Belarus"?

We now return to the exhortation of Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The athletes truly make the Olympics. Let them represent themselves. No more country flags or logos. Kuwait's athletes compete under the Olympic flag, after Kuwait was thrown out of the games. Two of them have won a gold and a bronze medal in Rio. Compete naked, like the Greeks. I bet that would hike the ratings. While the ancient Olympics were in progress, a truce was declared, requiring all conflicts and wars to stop. For this reason alone, maybe we should hold the Olympics every year.

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