



HOW TO KEEP THE GAMES AS A PREMIER EVENT?

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When I was asked to make a modest contribution on the theme “How to keep the Games as a premier event”, I felt that I first had to deal with the negative overtones of this question.

Because the mere suggestion that the Games were not the premier event would imply failure on my part as an International Olympic Committee (IOC) member and on the part of the entire Olympic Family. We could simply define the premier event as being more important than the number two and three events together. But the fact is that, as an event, the Olympic Games are in a class of their own.

In his contribution, Lord Sebastian Coe made the following eloquent statement: “The Games signify the most universal and unique social phenomenon for bringing together the peoples, cultures and countries of the world, the most successful movement for building international goodwill, cooperation and interaction and the embodiment of a set of values relevant to all societies.”¹ I could not agree more. But note that Lord Coe did not once use the word “sport”. There is in fact no event – sporting or otherwise – that can be compared to the Olympic Games. The Olympic Games are the ONLY premier event and it is up to us to strengthen them.

Today I would like to look at some of the challenges the Olympic Movement is facing. And I should like to share with you my views on how we could strengthen the Olympic Games, and make them even more future-proof and beneficial than they already are. In doing so I shall take on board the many valuable contributions submitted to the Virtual Olympic Congress on this particular theme.

CHALLENGES

We face many challenges: pressure to deliver the “best Games ever”, the enormous expense involved in hosting the Games, and commercial and political interference. There is also the need to strike a balance between tradition and evolution, between universal participation

and participation by the best athletes, between control and flexibility, between the hardware needed for the Games and post-Games utilisation, and between our core business and the responsibilities that go beyond the event. Finally, there is the need for balance between the various actors that belong to the Olympic Movement.

ESSENTIALS

With so many challenges, we have no time to waste. But we need to focus our actions. We have to decide on the essential factors that make the Games the premier event. There are of course different viewpoints about what the term “premier” implies, but I identify three interrelated essentials that deserve our attention.

The first is about delivering top-level sports. The competitions between the world’s best athletes in individual or team events must always remain at the heart of the Olympic Games and they must be at least as important as the world championships of each sport. The sports on the Olympic Programme must therefore be those that are the strongest and add most value.

So, to strengthen the Olympic Games as a premier event, the Games must be about international competition at the highest level with the finest athletes participating in the sports that are most relevant and in line with the expectations of future generations. What is more, the Games themselves must be an excellent product and experience. Other Olympic or National Olympic Committee (NOC) related multi-sport events should be complementary to the Games instead of copies. I could imagine for instance the Youth Olympic Games becoming a test run for future Olympic sports instead of a gathering of Olympic hopefuls, performing at sub-Olympic level.

So that was the first essential. The second and third go beyond delivering top-level sports. They are about the Games as a platform.

Our primary focus must remain on sport. The competitions are what the Games are all about. And given its independence, the IOC cannot take the lead in addressing political matters. At the same time, however, we should not be too nervous about the fact that our event is considered an essential global platform by non-sports actors. We should actually take pride in that. Of course, hijacking the event for political purposes is totally unacceptable and we should always be on the alert that this does not happen. But I believe that this kind of recognition from outside the world of sport confirms the Olympic Games’ premier status.

So, to strengthen the Olympic Games as a premier event we must not oppose but welcome others from outside the Olympic Movement who consider the Games to be a platform their causes can benefit from. Of course, they must show respect, and the Games and the athletes participating must not be affected.

The Games are also a platform for development, which brings us to the third essential.

To introduce the third essential I would like to quote Lord Coe once again. He wrote that “the Olympic Games provide a uniquely powerful platform for sport and a vehicle for developing sport globally, but also a platform for the many different and positive roles sport can play in our communities and societies and a vehicle for spreading the benefits of sport.” The Games are indeed a catalyst for change in the host



community, but they are also a catalyst for change elsewhere. And we are becoming increasingly better equipped to monitor the impact of the Games.

So, to strengthen the Olympic Games as a premier event we must invest in Games-related sustainable development, delivering positive long-term community benefits and legacies through sport. A new, integrated focus on community change and sustainable development will definitely strengthen the premier status of the Games and contribute to a better world through sport.

In conclusion, I believe that the Olympic Movement, the IOC in particular, has the obligation to invest in these essentials. At the same time, I want to stress that the principles of Olympism should form the firm basis. NOCs and other members of our family are now overstretched by the demand for diversification. The principles provide them with guidelines in making choices so that they can concentrate their resources where they really have an impact. I am convinced that this will strengthen the Olympic Games as a premier event in these ever-changing times.

1. See contribution by Sebastian Coe to the *Virtual Olympic Congress*, "Why the World needs the Olympic & Paralympic Games more than ever", in Contributions: XIII Olympic Congress Copenhagen 2009, p. 141