

Special Edition • August 24, 2016

Rio Retrospective: Seven Takeaways

*Better Together ~ Awesome Americans ~ Brits break the mold
The Lochte et al Incident ~ The Games Aren't Over ~ The Press Matters ~ Criticize This!*

We received many encouraging messages from readers who enjoyed our 17 consecutive days of Olympic coverage during the Rio Games. Watching the Games closely from build-up to fruition offers some perspectives with sharing. Now that everyone has had a couple of days to breathe here are seven takeaways from the Games:



(1) *The Games are special because the whole world is in one place at one time*

The ancient Olympic Games were a religious festival held in honor of the Greek god Zeus and held annually at Olympia. There, athletes of the city-states gathered and competed in athletic contests amid other religious rites, amid a temporary truce between those city-states.

That aura has come down to us many centuries later and the symbols harken back to ancient times. That's important. In a time of short attention spans and so little shared culture between people and nations, having representatives of 206 nations in one city, on one field at one time is something that never happens ... except at the Olympic Games.

It's a reminder that remarkable things are possible when we set our collective minds to it. For that reason, the Games remain special.

(2) *An amazing performance by the American team*

The United States team was projected to win the most medals in Rio, with estimates of around 100. But for the U.S. to collect 121 medals and win the most gold, silver and bronze medals, and by our

eight-place scoring system, to roll up 1,280.6 points to 824.5 for China and 759 for Great Britain is astonishing.

Of the 121 American medals, 33 came in pool swimming and 32 in track & field athletics: 65 or 54% of the total. No one saw that coming. The U.S. swim team won just 20 medals in Olympic events one year before, at the 2015 World Championships, and the track & field team was even worse, at 18. *To go from 38 combined medals to 65? That **hallucinatory** ... but it happened.*

Add in all of the other successes in gymnastics, judo, tennis, wrestling and many more and you have one of the greatest performances by a national team in Olympic history, and the most medals won by any national team since Seoul in 1988, the last Olympic hurrah for the Soviet Union.

What makes this truly incredible is that the United States Olympic Committee (and the U.S. national governing bodies who oversee each sport) receives **zero governmental funding**. That's unique among all 206 National Olympic Committees in the world.

The privately-funded USOC gets its revenue from a percentage of the U.S. television rights paid to the International Olympic Committee, from U.S. sponsors of the Games and from domestic sponsorships and supplier rights sales. The bottom line is that all of it is based – in the end – on advertising sales, because you and I and millions of other people watch the Games endlessly. NBC won the ratings battle on every night of the Games – that's two weeks worth – something no other event can do.

In this election year, there is a continuous debate inside the U.S. about "American Exceptionalism." Not in the Olympic Movement: the U.S. is exceptional, both on the field and the way it funds its preparations.

(3) *How 'bout those Brits?*

We've [documented](#) the consistent decline in medal counts for host countries in the Games following the edition they host. Great Britain won **more** medals!

Dominant in cycling and very good in track & field, canoeing, equestrian, golf, gymnastics, rowing, triathlon and others, the Brits won 67 medals and were a clear third in the Games, ahead of a slimmed-down Russian squad.

That result came at a cost, of course. [Reports](#) note that funding from the national lottery for British Olympic-sport preparations from 2013-16 came to £ 274 million (~ \$361.2 million U.S. at current exchange rates) and the London papers have made great sport of calculating the "cost-per-medal" based on the funding allocated to each sport. The British won 133 places in the top eight, out of a total team of 366 competitors – 36.3% – or better than one in three. That's tremendous.

Russia, with 291 competitors in Rio (compared to the 389 they wanted to send) also did well. Their athletes earned 108 diplomas for places in the top eight: 37.1%, even better than the Brits (the U.S. had a ridiculous 217 place-winners out of 555 athletes: 39.1%).

And on our table of team scorers (see our [wrap-up issue](#)), some 119 nations scored at least a point

(eighth place or better in a single event). In what event do people from 119 countries earn recognition for being among the top eight in anything?

Good for them!

(4) *The Lochte et al incident: Doc Rivers was right!*

Now for the dark side of the Games. The victims-turned-vandals saga of U.S. swimmers Ryan Lochte (a 12-time Olympic medalist), Gunnar Bentz, Jack Conger and Jimmy Feigen at a gas station on August 14 was a blot on the otherwise well-behaved American team in Rio. Two items stand out:

- ¶ Three key words from Lochte in his NBC interview with Matt Lauer: “I was intoxicated.”
- ¶ Sage advice from Los Angeles Clippers head coach Doc Rivers, that he has repeated many times: “Nothing good happens after midnight.”

The American swimmers were at the Rio gas station where the incident took place just after 6 a.m. (according to the surveillance camera footage) after a night out at Club France following the end of the swimming events.

It’s not clear exactly what happened and an investigation is underway. But what likely will happen is the following:

- ¶ Lochte will be on an apology tour for a long time.
- ¶ Lochte and perhaps some of the other swimmers, depending on the findings, will be suspended by USA Swimming, the U.S. Olympic Committee, the international federation for swimming (FINA) and the International Olympic Committee, or some combination of them.

Believe it or not, there is precedent for situations like this. In 1988, U.S. relay gold medalists Troy Dalbey and Doug Gjertsen were sent home from Seoul and suspended for 18 months after “stealing” a marble lion’s mask from a hotel bar.

Dalbey told a reporter, “[W]hat we did was wrong. I don’t know why we did it. It was just like, ‘Hey, this is cool. Let’s take it to dinner with us.’ We were going to take it back. We never intended to steal it.” But it got the two swimmers sent home and suspended (excellent recap report from [Swimming World Magazine](#)).

What will be the impact of a suspension on Lochte? He’s already lost his sponsors, but from a swimming perspective, he can continue training and even a two-year suspension would leave him eligible for the U.S. team at the August, 2019 World Championships in Gwangju, South Korea. Lochte is 32 now; can he realistically be a factor at 35 or 36?

The future of the other swimmers is perhaps more important; they’re entering the prime of their swimming careers: Bentz, 20; Conger, 21; Feigen, 26. Their development could potentially be stifled.

Worth remembering: “I was intoxicated.”

(5) *The Games aren't over until the drug testing is done*

Great to see medals distributed and anthems played, but the results of the Rio Games won't be over for years.

Not only are doping tests continuing, but the samples will be frozen for future re-testing. Remember that nearly 100 positives were [announced](#) from the 2008 and 2012 Games in May and June and more testing is still going on from those Games.

The record books for Rio will be re-written several times before they are closed.

(6) *Hold the funeral: the press really matters*

There has been lots of discussion about the implosion of newspapers and the written press in the U.S. and elsewhere. Maybe so, but don't try to sell that to the Rio 2016 organizers.

For the 2016 Games, the press mattered a lot, and to Rio's detriment.

The overwhelmingly negative pre-Games media coverage – driven by the written press, in newspapers and online – held down the expected excitement in many quarters for these Games.

"I'm actually surprised at the lack of interest and talk about the Olympic Games this year in our cigar shops" [wrote](#) the owner of a major cigar-store chain in the Northeast U.S. Guys who smoke cigars not talking about the Olympics? Are you kidding? But he wasn't alone.

The continuous torrent of criticism of the Games in general and Rio in specific created a storyline in which no athlete was ever mentioned. Their moment in the sun was eclipsed by costs, scandals, pollution and a horrific recession which has roiled Brazil for two years (and now continues, unimpeded by the Games).

It got better by the time the competitions started, but by that time, a lot less people cared.

That's a problem that the IOC and the whole Olympic Movement is going to have to get their heads around and quick. There are solutions, but they require discipline, planning and continuous adjustment ... like players on a team working for a common goal, yes?

(7) *Criticize This!*

There are legions of critics of the Olympic Games in general and of the Rio Games in specific (and Sochi before it and Beijing before that and ...), mostly concerning the cost of putting on the event, the legacy, why athletes aren't paid so on.

Here's an exceptionally [silly one](#) that misses the entire point of the Games, which is peaceful athletic competition between nations.

In reading these media "critiques," the one element that stands out is the lack of criticism of the

athletes. If the competitions are good, either as theater or as competition, or both, then the Games are good.

In a world where everyone wants to be independent, sport brings people together. No better demonstration than in Rio when Neymar excited a nation with a penalty kick to win the Olympic gold medal for Brazil in football. That was a great moment for Brazil (true, not so great for Germany).

So be critical of the IOC members and their highly-secure hotel; who cares. If the Games are good, then explore ways to make the program less costly, more accessible and better for the stakeholders. The hold the owners – the IOC – accountable. In the end, it's their Games.

One more thing: in the ancient Games, the organizers at Olympia paid no prize money to the winners. That was the duty of the city-state which sent them, which generally rewarded Olympic winners quite lavishly. And so it is today, that governments and National Olympic Committees honor their athletes who have had success with honors, money and tributes.

The Greeks had it right then, and the Games have it right now.

About the Author

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