

Olympic Legacy: Inspiring a Generation?

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One of the key questions about the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics is about a physical activity 'legacy'. Will the biggest sporting spectacle on earth 'inspire a generation' to become physically active and to participate in sport? Only last week the Prime Minister, David Cameron, appeared confident that there would be such a legacy when he claimed that sport in schools in the UK is likely to be influenced positively by the Olympic spirit. Yet, the evidence from previous Olympics tells a different story. No Olympic Games has ever led to a sustained participatory legacy although, to be fair, London is the first to set out explicitly to provide one. So, as the Olympics approach and the torch relay winds its way around the country, concerns about delivering an Olympic legacy are becoming more pronounced. The reason for this concern is simple: a 'legacy' (or 'legacies') is what we hope to get in return for all our financial investment. As sports mega-events become ever more bombastic, expectations for a 'legacy' rise accordingly. This means that while British viewers will be interested in Team GB's position on the all-important medal table, the Coalition government will be hoping, inter alia, for an increase in participation in grass roots sports, sports competitions and physical activity.



How will the participatory objectives be met? In 2011, the current government radically reduced funding for the reportedly successful School Sport Partnerships scheme (funded by the previous government). Funding was re-directed towards the development of intra-school sports competitions and an annual, Olympic-style programme of 'School Games'. The rationale behind this move was that involvement in traditional forms of competitive sport would stimulate more school children to engage – and remain engaged – in sport and physical activity. Research has shown consistently, however, that many children are put off by too much competitiveness in school sport and that initial positive experiences of physical activity and sport are crucial to individuals' long-term engagement. It is also important to ensure that children and young people have opportunities to engage in a wide variety of activities, and that they develop levels of skill and competence that give them the confidence to participate. Encouraging sustained participation in sport and physical activity is a much more complex affair than simply watching and trying to emulate elite sport performers. Research is clear on this point: the higher the elite sport performance being watched, the less likely 'ordinary' people are to be inspired to emulate what – in most cases – they cannot hope to achieve.

There is little doubt that there will be a participatory spike in some sports associated with the London Olympics; witness the 'Wimbledon effect' on tennis courts around the country over the next few weeks. This spike may be greater still if Team GB reach their target of 4th in the medal table and achieve a haul of 48 medals from at least 12 different sports. Yet, the realisation will soon dawn that very few of these individuals can hope to become the next Mo Farah or Usain Bolt. And what will they think when they arrive at their local facilities to find that they are of poor quality, are expensive to use, or have no appropriate coaching to help them to succeed?

So – back to the big question – how can we tap into the 'feelgood' factor generated by major sports events and capitalise on the transitory 'Olympic effect' to generate sustained participation in sport and physical activity? The answer to this lies in developing a long-term strategy to create sports and physical activity experiences for children and young people that actually meet their individual learning needs. We have tried batch-processing children through one-size-fits-all programmes and we know they don't work – ask many adults about their own school PE experiences. To do better, we need to ensure that teachers and coaches have the nuanced skills and professional training that will enable them to engage and inspire children in life-long sporting habits. It should also go without saying that we need appropriate facilities for all those who show an interest. With these things in place, a one-off mega event like the London Olympics could add impetus to participation in physical activity and sport. Without it, we are unlikely to witness a long-term participatory Olympic legacy.

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