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OLYMPIC EDUCATION AND THE YOUTH OLYMPIC GAMES

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SUMMARY

This paper examines the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) from the educational point of view – and in particular through a consideration of the Culture and Education Programme at the first YOG 2010 in Singapore. It is based on an analysis of the development of the idea of the YOG, and on contemporary information and reports. Inevitably, many of my sources are “official” ones, and so may be rose-tinted, so it is probably wise to approach them with a certain amount of caution. But it is difficult to get better information when the major media showed so little interest in the event.

Key words: Youth Olympic Games, education

INTRODUCTION

The YOG developed from Jacques Rogge’s brainchild, the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF), first held in Brussels in 1991, and were first mooted during the IOC session in Guatemala City in July 2007, with Rogge as president. It was first held in Singapore, 14–26 August 2010, with about 3500 athletes between 14 and 18 years of age (birth years 1992–1995) from all 205 National Olympic Committees, and the 2014 edition will take place in Nanjing, China. The sports programme in Singapore encompassed all 26 sports on the program of the London 2012 Summer Games, albeit with a limited number of disciplines and some changes of events. (See SYOGOC, 2010). Innsbruck was the venue for the first Winter YOG, from 13–22 January 2012, and future editions of the YOG will follow the traditional cycle of four years, with Summer YOG in the year of the senior Winter Olympic Games and Winter YOG in the year of the senior Summer Olympic Games (OG).

However, the YOG is not supposed to be only a replica of the OG, but to be special in some ways as a Youth edition of the OG – one of which is the Culture and Education Programme (CEP). While every OG have an accompanying cultural programme, there was a specially devised CEP at the YOG, and a special effort was made to integrate it into the Games and to address the young athletes. If successful, the Olympics might thus achieve a format of the

kind that the father of Olympism, Pierre de Coubertin, might have wished for – a blend of sport, culture and education (see Fundamental Principle of Olympism 1, IOC, 2010, 10).

Significantly, without the inclusion of the CEP, the YOG might not have existed at all:

“The IOC had been thinking about it for many years but when we talked about a purely sporting event the response was pretty negative. But when we talked about a different kind of event in which sport, culture and education were equal, an event based on Olympic values, people said, ‘Ah, maybe this is something we should explore’” (Felli, 2009, 35).

So the vision of the YOG became one of not simply sporting competition, but also of education, and of “engaging and inspiring young people around the world to participate in sports and adopt the Olympic values” (IOC, 2007). Traditionally, the aim of the EYOF was bring together the most talented athletes from around the world to participate in high-level competitions, perhaps as a stepping-stone to the OG. But the idea of the YOG was also that the sporting competitions should be held in an educational and cultural environment, so in addition to their stay at the Youth Olympic Village, the athletes encountered an educational and cultural programme to provide experiences and to support learning. In other words, the aim was to “prepare the athletes for becoming true Olympians” (IOC, 2007).

As Rogge said (2009, 33):

“The Youth Olympic Games are about much more than competition. They are about educating young athletes in Olympic values, healthy lifestyle, and social responsibility. Therefore, the Cultural and Educational programme is as important as the competition itself.”

Education belongs to one of the three main aims of YOG that were identified for this event at the XIII Olympic Congress of 2009 in Copenhagen in the Factsheet for Theme 4 (Olympism and Youth):

- to provide a platform to the 14- to 18-year-old elite athletes in all Olympic sports and introduce to them the Olympic spirit at a younger age;
- to combine the sports event with an educational programme linked to important issues such as the fight against doping and healthy lifestyles;
- to reach out through young people worldwide on the basis of appealing and powerful communications initiatives that allow young people all over the world to benefit from the sports and educational programme offered to the athletes and the public at the YOG (IOC, 2011a).

In addition, there was a clear idea that YOG participants should feel some social responsibility as accompanying their privileged role as YOG participants:

“Whether they go on to become sporting champions or end up mapping out careers in other fields, we want the YOG participants to go back and be ambassadors in their communities, embodying and promoting the Olympic spirit and values” (Rogge, quoted in Slater, 2009, 42).

Culture and Education Programme (CEP)

The CEP was regarded as one of the most innovative elements of YOG (IOC, 2011b, 4). Of course, athletes learn a lot through their actual sport practice, but this is usually quite narrowly-oriented learning, aimed at increasing performance in a variety of ways. However,

what is suggested here is that being an Olympic athlete does not yet mean to be a *true Olympian*, and thus education is required to support them in *becoming* one. And while this can be said about adult Olympians too, younger ones are an easier target for education with a view to developing "... a new generation of new athletes with a higher awareness of societal issues and problems linked directly to their practice of sport" (IOC, 2007). True Olympic athletes are thus not only just well-performing athletes, but also fully developed people with wider views, knowledge and interests in global and societal issues. This is a high expectation, but it is in line with Olympism – as seen, for example, in the Olympic Charter (IOC, 2010, 11).

So, what was the CEP about? As outlined in the IOC *Factsheet* (IOC, 2011b, 5), through the CEP, athletes had the opportunity to:

- learn** about important global and sports topics;
- contribute** to the environment and society;
- interact** and build friendships with other young people from around the world;
- celebrate** the Olympic Movement and the diverse cultures of the world.

The young Olympians were exposed to variety of topics in a variety of ways. The topics they could explore were encompassed in five themes, with seven formats and 50 activities (IOC, 2011b, 4–5):

The Five Themes

1. Olympism: Activities reflecting this theme included the Olympic Gallery exhibition which traced the origin, philosophy, structure and evolution of the modern OG to the present day.
2. Skills Development: Interactive workshops were conducted for the young Olympians to reflect on various facets of a professional athlete's career, including personal development and managing transitional phases in life.
3. Well-Being and Healthy Lifestyle: Beyond the interactive workshops and exhibitions that promoted healthy eating for the young Olympians, this theme also dealt with the issue of doping prevention in sport.
4. Social Responsibility: Young Olympians learned about their roles as responsible members of their own communities, and how they could be responsible global citizens by taking part in environment-related activities and workshops that support sustainable development initiatives.
5. Expression: Evening festivals, as well as daily roving performances, offered a programme of musical performances, dance acts and inspirational Olympic-themed artwork, aiming to promote a celebration of youth, cultures and friendships.

The Seven CEP Formats

1. Chat with Champions: The young Olympians had the opportunity to get up close with role models, and hear them share personal and inspirational stories about the Olympic values of

excellence, friendship and respect. Role models shared their personal experiences through dialogue sessions that were conducted in an entertaining talk-show format (IOC, 2011b, 5).

2. Discovery Activity: Through interactive exhibitions and workshops, the young Olympians explored topics relevant to their journey towards becoming champions in life.

3. World Culture Village: The World Culture Village, located in the Village Square, was a focal point for international visitors to interact with one another. There were cultural booths, hosted by young Singaporeans, representing each of the 204 participating NOCs and independent participants. Hosts at each booth invited visitors to explore different cultures and take part in fun activities and traditional games.

4. Community Projects: The young Olympians and local community organisations came together to participate in fun activities like drumming and circus arts. Through these activities, the young Olympians made friends with other participants, learned about social responsibility and were encouraged to give back to their own communities.

5. Arts and Culture: Activities in this area were those mentioned in the “expression” theme above.

6. Island Adventure: Here, the athletes worked together in teams to go through confidence-building courses, water activities and physical challenges, to bring out the values of teamwork, mutual respect and friendship. These activities were held at one of Singapore’s offshore islands – Pulau Ubin.

7. Exploration Journey: This was a half-day “green experience” to HortPark and Marina Barrage, two of Singapore’s newest environment-themed attractions. HortPark offered a terrarium workshop and garden tour. The terrarium workshop taught the importance of our ecosystem by providing the young Olympians with materials to create a mini-garden in a glass bottle that mimics our ecosystem; and young Olympians also learned about environmental issues at two themed gardens, where they had the opportunity to reflect upon and discuss environmental issues and green initiatives in their home countries. At Marina Barrage, the young Olympians learned about sustainable water management through three different activities.

In addition, two programmes were introduced to support the CEP:

Young Ambassador Programme: For the first edition of the YOG, the IOC launched – on an experimental basis – a new programme entitled “Young Ambassadors” to encourage and motivate young athletes to participate in the YOG and in the cultural and educational activities in particular. Twenty-nine NOCs were invited to select a young person aged 18 to 25 years. The Young Ambassador was required to promote the Culture and Education Programme to young people, particularly among those athletes qualified from his/her NOC.

Athlete Role Models: The Athlete Role Models (ARMs) were in Singapore to mentor the young athletes who attended the YOG. Among other activities, the ARMs spent time with

the athletes and participated in activities during the Culture and Education Programme. YOG athletes were encouraged to engage in conversation with the ARMs, who attended the competitions, visited the Youth Olympic Village and featured in “Chat with Champions” forums designed to inspire and educate the participants with personal accounts of their own dreams and experiences, and the challenges they have overcome (IOC, 2011b, 5–6).

And, finally, attempts were made to involve young people other than the athletes in aspects of the YOG, such as in presenting, announcing and reporting. For example, there was a **Young Reporter Programme**, in which 29 young people aged between 18 and 24 from the five continents were chosen to take part. They were either journalism students or people who had recently started their careers in this field. This initiative provided the budding reporters with a cross-platform journalist training programme and on-the-job experience during the YOG, from blogging to photography, supervised by professionals in the fields of broadcast and print journalism, social media and photography.

The Culture and Education Programme Examined

According to the IOC official documents, the CEP was considered to be a success (e.g. IOC 2011b, 5). However, we should expand on that a little. First, let me make four positive observations concerning the CEP:

- There was an educational programme (and this is sensational enough in itself). Might we look forward to something similar one day in the OG?
- Somebody had given much thought and planning to it – in terms of both content and method – and resources were committed to it.
- There was a genuine attempt to reach out beyond the fortunate few to be directly involved in the YOG, to the general public (and to youth in particular), using innovative methods, including “new media”.
- The educational and cultural programmes were explicitly organised according to Olympic values and principles.

Those responsible deserve great credit for this. But let us give the programme some thought, since there is always something to improve for the future editions. While Rogge (2009, 33) said: “... the Cultural and Educational programme is as important as the competition itself”, this is hard to believe. It will take considerable time and effort to achieve this, even if it is indeed a realistic aspiration. In the perceptions and expectations of most athletes, coaches, parents, etc., it is still the performance that really matters. One coach speaks of the necessity to “combat possible distractions” that might stand in the way of a successful performance (e.g. Jurmain, 2010, 36), and many reports just describe the performances, without any mention of education (e.g. Turner, 2010). And even when education is positively acknowledged, it is often in brief and in general, for example: “I’m delighted that our athletes have fully embraced and enjoyed the wider Youth Olympic Games experience; including the mixed nations sport competitions, and the culture and education programme activities” (in Degun, 2010a). This is in contrast with the frequently

much more detailed descriptions of the sporting performances. All in all, the over-riding motif of commentators was: it was good experience and good preparation for the “real thing”, for those athletes expected to go on to an OG. Only a few commentators, such as Rogge (in his less extravagant moments, e.g. see Reynolds, 2010) and Moynihan (2010) strike a realistic yet optimistic balance, recognising that the YOG are primarily about world-class athletic performance, albeit in the service of wider educational and social goals.

But now, if educational and social values are to be regarded as having such importance in the context of what many see as simply a sporting competition, it will not be enough to have an educational programme only for the athletes. The CEP is unlikely to have substantial and long-term effects if it is an island of Olympic education in a sea of indifference. So the Olympic education effort must be extended into wider constituencies, in order to support the work done in a brief period for a small number of athletes at the YOG. There has to be some attempt to integrate the work of the CEP into a wider structure, including, for example, the provision of programmes for coaches, parents, spectators, journalists, educators, friends, etc., as well as programmes run within national Physical Education curricula, and by the National Olympic Academies.

Whilst it is true that new media were used in innovative ways to address and engage the youth of the world, there was not much effort to address others through the usual media – and so, most of the parents, educators, researchers and spectators did not get much information. The possibility of addressing wider groups of audience was not realized. No matter how dramatic or powerful a short YOG experience might be for the participants, Olympic Education requires the participation of many people around the athlete in his formative years, and so different ways must be found of influencing these groups, too.

In the case of the Young Reporter Programme, a small number of young journalists were identified to work and learn at the YOG (IOC, 2011b, 6). Whilst hiring youth reporters for youth games was an interesting idea, their reports in fact were not so innovative, but rather copied the usual style of the adult OG (and world championships), in which the over-riding emphasis was on results and medals, with national media reporting heavily on their own national participants.

Anything that calls itself “Olympic Education” must draw attention to the educative value of sporting competition itself. It is not enough to see the YOG as a merely convenient *venue* for education. While topics like healthy lifestyle, doping, environment, etc. were covered by the CEP, there was not much evidence of engagement with sport-specific topics, such as highlighting the internal values of sport and sport ethics. Although, of course, athletes learn something implicitly about these issues by participating, this is not enough, if they are to hand these values on. They need to understand, in an explicit way, what is the ethical and educational significance of Olympic sport, and to learn to formulate responses to various difficulties and challenges.

Since one mode of learning is in the actual practice of sport, it was important that at least part of the sports programme was prepared with a view to reinforcing some Olympic values that we do not usually see at the adult Olympics. For example, mixed gender and mixed nationality teams opened up possibilities to highlight the values of equality, friendship and respect by allowing the athletes to meet and cooperate with new and foreign friends, and this generally received very positive feedback from athletes.

For example, in modern pentathlon, Nathan Schrimsher from the USA and Leydi Laura Moya Lopez of Cuba were chosen at random as a team for the boy/girl mixed relay. Nathan said, “I really don’t know all the politics and stuff. The people – we’re all the same.” Nathan and Leydi finished 16 of 24. “She doesn’t speak much if any English. I don’t speak any Spanish. But, he said, we got along really well [...] we both do speak pentathlon” (Shokooi, 2010).

However, while there were some attempts to emphasise Olympic values, not all of these were presented at all disciplines. There is some evidence that some NOCs did not take the event too seriously – for example, by not sending their best athletes – and that some of the events did not have world-class quality. Some YOG policies contributed to this. For example, in the team sports, the rules ensured that some top teams were not even eligible. (Only one team per country across all 4 team sports.) There seems to be a contradiction here between the aspiration of “universality” (= give everyone a chance) and “excellence” (= admit only the best).

In football, for example, where FIFA policies excluded all the best teams, the effect on the spectator was considerable, and so the YOG football events could not fulfil the Olympic role of motivator through excellence. We should also spare a thought, on the ground of fairness, for the better teams, who were not given a chance to participate, and who might feel deprived of the opportunity. On the other hand, it might be that the YOG would “feel” rather different if the quality were to rise to the elite level overall. If the YOG become more “important” for more NOCs, the values might begin to slide in the direction of the OG, with sports competition being hugely more important than any CEP values.

On a practical level, it is not clear just how much of the CEP was accessible by how many of the athletes, and what its effect on them actually has been, given differences in motivation, educational level, language competence, etc. Some information is available, such as: “For instance, over the duration of the 12 days, almost all the 3600 athletes visited the World Anti-Doping Agency and UNAIDS booths in the Youth Olympic Village” (IOC, 2011b, 5). But it is not clear just how many athletes were participating in other kinds of activities, how many really participated in discussions, what were the learning outcomes, etc. One major problem with discovering the results of the CEP is that there is (to my knowledge) no evidence of an evaluation programme, to assess the actual educational impact on the athletes.

In addition, we should note that the education of a child or a youth takes place over a very long period of time. Even though I would judge that the CEP was a success on its own terms, the YOG should be seen not as an end, but as a means – as a motivating event, that needs to be followed up at home in various ways in order to be effective. And for this to happen, NOC’s will have to take the issue of Olympic education much more seriously and systematically. Work in schools and sport clubs is necessary, so that CEP outcomes are not just short-term and soon-to-be-forgotten experiences for a small group of fortunate youngsters.

Importantly, something like this seems to be happening in the host country: “Olympic education, with its focus on values, has taken on a new momentum with Singapore’s 2010 hosting of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games. Using MOE support material, as well as their own school-designed initiatives, schools now show evidence of incorporated aspects of Olympism in their programs, because the government is encouraging them to develop

values education through PE. With a new drive on *soft* skills, the subject is being challenged to address its holistic role *of, by and through* the physical” (McNeill & Fry, 2010, 15). A similar effort was made in Greece around the Athens 2004 OG (see Mountakis and Parry, forthcoming), but unfortunately this did not have a long-lasting effect. So the legacy is important, and there is more to be done in every country that brings up new Olympians, not just in host countries.

Finally, there is some evidence that the CEP experiment at the YOG might have stimulated thinking towards the innovation of a similar programme at the OG. IOC President Jacques Rogge said, “We are most definitely considering introducing a limited culture and education programme into the traditional Olympic Games. There is definitely a place for it. It’s too late for London [in 2012] but perhaps in Rio. We have to see how we can adapt it for the different age category” (Degun, 2010b).

CONCLUSION

Young athletes (even child athletes) have always participated in the OG, but the YOG represents a new step towards the systematic distribution of elite sport into the child population, since 14–18-year-old athletes were all very recently child athletes. This suggests that it is essential that serious efforts are made towards an effective education and culture programme at the YOG. To the great credit of the IOC and the Singapore hosts, the organisation of and provision for educational and cultural activities set new standards for a sporting event, and it will be interesting to see how this develops.

In its official publication, the IOC expresses high hopes for the YOG, as the “flagship” of the IOC’s youth strategy. Its aims for the sporting and educational/cultural programmes are:

- to bring renewed life and vigour to the Olympic Movement;
- to inspire young people around the world to take up sport;
- to create a true community between the youth of the world and the participants;
- to help athletes to become better human beings, true sportspersons, ambassadors in society for sport and the Olympic values.

This is a lot to ask from a small cohort of youngsters from around the world, but it seems that the YOG are bringing new ideas and setting new standards for the OG. To anyone interested in Olympic Education, they are a breath of fresh air.

The Innsbruck Winter Youth Olympic Games 2012 will host over 1000 young athletes representing their countries in the seven sports on the programme: biathlon, bobsleigh, curling, ice hockey, luge, skating and skiing, with a limited number of disciplines and events. As in Singapore, there will be a Culture and Education Programme, with workshops and forums on the Olympic values, healthy lifestyles, anti-doping, etc., designed to develop a new generation of athletes with a higher awareness of societal issues and problems linked directly to their practice of sport. Communication with youth is another key feature, through internet forums, chats and blogs, and other new media. It will be interesting to see the extent to which these hopes and aspirations are met in future editions of the YOG, both summer and winter.

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OLYMPIJSKÁ VÝCHOVA A OLYMPIJSKÉ HRY MLÁDEŽE

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SOUHRN

Článek zkoumá olympijské hry mládeže (YOG) z hlediska výchovy – věnuje se zvláště Kulturnímu a vzdělávacímu programu 1. letních Olympijských her mládeže 2010 v Singapuru. Je založen na analýze vývoje myšlenky Olympijských her mládeže a současných informací a zpráv. Samozřejmě většina zdrojů je „oficiálních“, a tedy možná vidí vše příliš růžově, proto je pravděpodobně moudré k nim přistupovat s opatrností. Avšak získat lepší informace není snadné, protože hlavní média se o tuto akci zajímala velmi málo.

Klíčová slova: Olympijské hry mládeže, výchova

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