
China, the concept of athletics is automatically associated with its competitive aspect. Many of China's best athletes have been trained in settings characterized by highly repetitive regimens and a single-minded focus

on training, which can even be detrimental to physical health. In some cases, an athlete's well-being is considered a small price to pay for the sake of winning an athletic event. Such ruthless "training for the gold" has left

THE MAKING OF A TRUE ATHLETIC SUPERPOWER

By Xu Jilin

I was in Canada during this year's [2004] Olympics, where I followed the Games online. I soon noticed that, in contrast to the average Chinese citizen, most Canadians did not follow the Olympics as intently as I had expected. Also, in contrast to China's crazed "race for the gold," Canada—a major First World power—managed to win just one gold medal. However, Canadians' subdued relationship with the Olympics is certainly not indicative of a dislike for athletics; in fact, it shows their true appreciation for the athletic spirit.

Immediately upon my arrival in Vancouver, I was struck by the vast expanses of lush greenery throughout the city, all of which, I soon learned, are completely open to the public at no charge. From my Vancouver apartment, a 10-minute walk in any direction brings you to acres of verdant parkland. While the city's parks are generally as quiet and still as the water of a secluded lake, they buzz with excitement on evenings and weekends. You can watch, or even join in, a game of soccer, football, Frisbee or baseball, as young boys and girls, dressed in vibrantly colored sporting outfits, hold their own "Olympics." Just as at any other sporting event, the blast of the referee's whistle rings sharply in your ears. Yet, unlike the situations to which we are accustomed in China, you can be sure that every call is the result of impartial judgment, rather than of bribes or pressure. The difference is that here competition is not the primary motivation; everyone just wants to relax and to take a break from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Apart from a few residential green areas designated for private use, most of these well-maintained parks are completely open to the general public. Anyone, whether rich or poor, can enjoy these spaces at no cost. Some of my fellow citizens may be surprised to learn that many of the same people who appear indifferent to the Olympics come out here every day to exercise and stay in shape: rowing boats, skiing, playing ball, swimming and jogging. While their country may be a minor player in the race for gold medals, Canadians' incorporation of physical activity into their daily lives qualifies Canada as a true superpower in the field of athletics.

The situation in China is exactly the opposite. While we put on great airs of self-congratulation at the Olympic Games, athletics has come to play an increasingly minor role in the average citizen's daily life. Let's not even delve into the problems in the countryside. Suffice it to say that one is unlikely to find so much as a Ping-Pong table or a basketball hoop in the impoverished mountain villages stretching across our rural hinterland. Yet, even in wealthier urban regions such as Shanghai, Beijing or Guangzhou, where can the average citizen go to play a game of ball or to run a few laps? Virtually none of China's so-called public athletic facilities are open free-of-charge to the taxpayers who fund them. Once schools go on break, their gates are locked tight. There is little hope that nearby residents will be able to use the facilities, since even students need to navigate a bureaucratic minefield to use the facility during summer vacation. Within residential areas, community centers and clubs offer comprehensive athletic facilities, but all are purely profit-driven, requiring residents to pay for memberships in addition to a monthly facility maintenance fee.

As China's cities grow increasingly congested, parks continue to be eaten up by developers, and the air

countless retired athletes suffering from debilitating injuries and illnesses.

These trends clearly indicate the incorporation of far

grows thick with toxic car exhaust. These trends create an environment that is far from amenable to the individual pursuit of athletics. It is one of the great ironies of our era that in expansive metropolitan areas, stretching as far as the eye can see, it is nearly impossible to find a decent place to jog.

Of course, not every athletic facility in Canada is free. For example, one must pay a fee to use public swimming pools and golf courses. However, even at profit-driven facilities, fees correspond to the average citizens' purchasing power; a game of golf in Canada costs no more than the average citizen's daily food expenditure. Thus, at the golf course near my Vancouver residence, rather than the "big bosses" or "gold-collar" types that make up the majority of golfers in China, you are much more likely to see a couple of elderly men out to have some fun for the day.

Canada is a country known for its high taxes and extensive welfare benefits. The government here does not use its tax revenues to nurture a tiny, elite group of athletic stars dedicated to capturing gold medals at the Olympics. Instead, the government actually uses tax revenues for the taxpayers' benefit, by building a network of public athletic facilities and public spaces throughout the country. This allows every citizen, rich or poor, a chance to take part in all types of athletics and to enjoy leisure activities, fresh air, greenery and sunshine. This is the main distinction between China's and Canada's approaches to athletics. Here in Canada, athletics is not a tool to flaunt the nation's strength and prosperity, but rather an indispensable part of daily life.

Watching the Olympics from Canada, I have been beset by extremely mixed feelings. I do feel a sense of pride for every gold medal that the Chinese team wins, but I also feel a twinge of sorrow whenever I

too many corrupting factors, antithetical to the original athletic ideal and at odds with the best in human nature. I must clarify that I am addressing my criticisms here to our professional athletic programs; there are

think about the price paid by our people for these medals. Athletics in China, from the grassroots to the central government, and from youth athletic schools to the national Olympic teams, is fixated upon one objective and one objective only: medals. Every athlete's ultimate goal is to win a medal at the international Olympic Games, or failing that, at China's own mini-Olympics, the National Games. Thus, the athletic endeavor is left with only one meaning and one goal: beating your opponents and winning a medal. This has created a brutal winner-takes-all mentality in which those who win gold medals become national icons, while everyone else, even runners-up, are just "losers." No one really cares about incorporating athletics into the average citizen's daily life, or even thinks about the true meaning of the athletic endeavor. It is as if the only way that we can experience the joy of athletics is through the supposed "national glory" of Olympic gold medals.

What a sad state of affairs. The Olympics come around only once every four years, yet we Chinese citizens must continue to live our lives, day in and day out. Does it really make sense to sacrifice so much, to banish athletics from our daily lives, just for the sake of a couple tiny gold medals? If we really must choose between winning gold medals at the Olympics or providing our citizens with athletic opportunities and a healthier lifestyle, then I would recommend taking Canada's path. We might become a minor player in the Olympics, but in doing so, we would become a true athletic superpower.

Translated by Kevin Carrico

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