



Paying your way to the Olympics

DR DAVID M. PRITCHARD

Do we provide enough support for our Olympians? As the London Olympics approach, the stock answers to this question are being rehearsed.

Some insist our political leaders do not "get" the Games. The managers of our Olympic team claim our Government overlooks the "obvious" benefit of Olympic success and spends much less on it than our competitors do.

Others argue just as earnestly that our idolising of Olympic victors comes at the expense of our scientists, artists, doctors and teachers.

Is it possible to advance this perennial debate? What is needed is analysis of the benefits that Olympic medals bring. By studying why the ancient Greeks idolised their Olympic victors we might get fresh insights into how we benefit from the Games.

The Greeks would have shaken their heads in disbelief at our support of Olympians. They did not spend scarce public funding on getting athletes to the Games.

Individuals were ready to compete at the highest level because their families had paid for an athletics teacher.

Olympians paid their own way to Olympia and their own expenses during the Games, and the compulsory month of training before they took place.

Despite this, the Greeks valued Olympic success even more highly than we do. Each city-state gave its Olympic victors, for life, free meals in its town hall and free front-row tickets for its own local games.

These were the highest hon-

ours the Greeks could give, usually awarded only to the likes of victorious generals. The only other way that a city-state had to raise its international ranking was to defeat a rival in battle. The outcome of such a contest was uncertain and could cost the lives of many citizens.

Thus a Greek city-state judged a citizen who had been victorious at the Olympics worthy of the highest public honours, as they had, at their own expense, raised the city-state's standing in the world without the need of fellow citizens to take the field.

The managers of our Olympics team may not be good at explaining the nature of this benefit. But the Greeks were. A good example is a speech about the victory of an Athenian in the chariot contest at the Olympics of 416 BC. The son of Alcibiades explained that his father had entered seven teams, more than any other before him, because he had understood the political advantage that victory would bring his city-state.

What made an Olympic victory so politically valuable was publicity. The Games were the most popular festival in the Greek world. The stadium at Olympia seated 45,000. The result was that whatever took place at the Games became known to almost the entire Greek world, as ambassadors, athletes and spectators reported what they had seen.

The Greeks exploited this opportunity. At the Games, city-states set up dedications of arms, which advertised their military victories over one another. Some of these war memorials were even placed in the Olympic stadium.

There was, then, the potential for all of Greece to learn of the victory that a polis had gained by the success of one of its Olympians.

That Greek city-states viewed Olympic success as important for international standing is apparent in their adverse reactions when it was perceived that one of their Olympians was deprived of victory unjustly.

In 322 BC, for example, Callippus of Athens, the Olympic pentathlon winner, was judged to have bribed his opponents and so was fined and stripped of his victory. Athens sent its foremost political leader to Olympia to try to have the judgment appealed. But Hyperides failed and his city boycotted the Games for the next 20 years.

We still view Olympians as representatives in a system of competing states. Thus a lesson from ancient Olympians is international sporting success improves our international standing. Ancient Olympics do provide some justification for the increasingly large sums we spend on our Olympic teams.

But we must not push these parallels too far. We are not ancient Greeks. International competition is no longer confined to sport and war. New bodies, such as the G20, OECD and the United Nations, increasingly rank states in terms of education, prosperity and level of democratisation.

In this new order we hold our own only when we invest just as heavily in scientists, artists, doctors and teachers.

** David Pritchard is senior lecturer at the University of Queensland and author of Sport, Democracy and War in Classical Athens (Cambridge University Press).*