

LESSONS FROM THE ANCIENT OLYMPICS

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DO WE PROVIDE ENOUGH SUPPORT FOR OUR OLYMPIANS?

As London 2012 approaches, the stock answers to this question are being rehearsed. Some insist that our political leaders do not “get” the Games. The managers of our Olympic team claim that our government overlooks the obvious benefit of Olympic success and spends much less on it than our competitors. 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 Olympic medals bring. A good place to start is with the lessons of history.

The Greeks would have shaken their heads in disbelief at our support for 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 out of their own pockets for the private classes of 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.

In spite of this, the Greeks valued Olympic

success even more highly than we do. Each *polis* or 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 honours were otherwise only afforded to victorious generals and other public benefactors of the highest order. That they were given to victorious Olympians puts beyond doubt that the Greeks believed that such victors benefited their city-states significantly.

A good example of this belief comes from a speech about the victory of an Athenian in a chariot contest at the Olympics of 416 BC. In it, 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 which victory would bring his *polis*. Their victorious athletes were “in the name of their city before all of Greece”.

The Games were the most popular festival in the Greek world. The stadium at Olympia seated no less than 45,000 people. The result was that whatever took place at the Games became known to almost the entire Greek world, as ambassadors, athletes and spectators returned home and reported what they had seen.

The Greeks exploited this opportunity. At the Games, city-states set up dedications of



Back to the future: An amphora from 340/39 BC shows an umpire announcing the victory of an athlete in a local games in Athens. The athlete carries a crown, ribbon and palm frond as prizes

arms, which advertised their military victories over each other. 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 which a *polis* had gained by the success of one of its Olympians.

The only other way which a *polis* had to raise its international ranking was to defeat a rival city-state in battle. The outcome of such a contest was uncertain and could cost the lives of many citizens. Thus a *polis* judged a citizen who had been victorious at the Olympics worthy of the highest public honours, as he had, at his own expense, raised its standing and done so without the need for his fellow citizens to take the field.

We still view Olympians as our representatives, and are part of a system of competing states. But we must not push these parallels too far. International competition is no longer confined to sport and war. Newer bodies, such as the G20, OECD and the UN, increasingly rank states in terms of education, prosperity, and level of democratisation. In this new order we will hold our own only when we invest just as heavily in our scientists, artists, doctors and teachers.

Dr Pritchard's new book *Sport, Democracy and War in Classical Athens* will be released in January 2013

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