



## The way the ancient Greeks idolised Olympic victors gives fresh insights into how we benefit from the Games

DAVID PRITCHARD IN MY VIEW

**D**O we provide enough support for our Olympians? As the debate intensifies about Australia's performance at the London Olympics, the stock answers to this question are being rehearsed.

The leaders of the Australian Olympic Committee insist that we will just have to spend more to secure the "obvious" benefits of Olympic gold. Others argue just as earnestly that such benefits are "spurious". They hold that our splurging of public funding on elite sportsmen comes at the expense of our scientists, artists, doctors and physical education teachers.

Is it possible to advance this perennial debate? What is needed is analysis of the benefits which 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 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 were the highest honours which the Greeks could give.

They were otherwise only rewarded 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.

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.

In 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.

He knew that "the city-states of victors" became renowned. Alcibiades believed that Olympians



**THE BEGINNING:** Greek actor Maria Nafliotou, playing the role of a high priestess, lights the Olympic flame near the Temple of Hera in Ancient Olympia, Greece, where the Olympics were born in 776BC.

were representatives of their polis. Their victories were "in the name of their city before all of Greece".

What made an Olympic victory so politically valuable for a polis was publicity.

The Games were the most popular festival in the Greek world. They attracted thousands of people.

### International competition is no longer confined to sport and war.

The stadium at Olympia seated no fewer than 45,000 spectators.

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 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. Such a victory gave states of oth-

erwise no importance rare international prominence and those which were regional powers uncontested proof of the worth which they claimed in relation to their neighbours and competitors.

That the Greek city-states did view Olympic success as important for their international standing is

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 he had, at his own expense, raised its standing and done so without the need of his fellow citizens to take the field.

We still view Olympians as our representatives and are part of a system of competing states. Thus a lesson for us is that international sporting success improves our international standing.

The ancient Olympics do provide some justification for the increasingly large sums which 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 UN, increasingly rank states in terms of education, prosperity, physical health 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 physical education teachers.

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

## Oh brother, spare us this bogan shuffle

IF you've been watching the Olympics coverage recently, it's unlikely you've been spared Channel 9's desperate attempt to advertise the new season of *Big Brother*.

They've got Stefanovic cameos, shuffling, and a promise of controversy and drama between new housemates.

But isn't this whole concept a bit redundant in 2012?

It's been 11 years since BB first took off, and a lot has changed since then.

I remember being genuinely curious about the program in 2001. The tagline "Big Brother is watching" seemed so ominous.

The concept of shoving strangers into a house and watching them 24/7 was vaguely original.

With Gretel Killeen as host it was a smorgasbord of bogan antics, and boy, did we enjoy it.

Across Australia, an average of 1.4 million of us watched season one, while 1.7 million tuned into season three. The show was axed after eight



### IN MY VIEW

HANNAH SINCLAIR

seasons after audience numbers had collapsed. I like to think of the early part of 2001 as a simpler time, before Snooki but just after Nikki Webster.

A time before blogging and iPhones, when *The Simpsons* was still on Channel 10 at 6pm.

It was also a time when we happily let Sara-Marie captivate us with her bum dance. It was stupid, but we loved it.

Our attention spans are much shorter now. It takes minutes for something to go viral, only hours for it to be "old news".

Whether it's cooking or building, photography or modelling, we like to watch people doing

things. If Channel 9 thinks we're going to stay interested in these clowns mooching around on the Gold Coast, then it probably should think again.

I know I'll be too busy Facebooking while simultaneously Tweeting what I had for lunch. Most of my friends would rather Instagram their coffee than sit staring at the television watching other people do nothing.

Whether we like it or not, we've all become each other's housemates.

We're too busy playing our own game of *Big Brother* to give a toss about some bogans we've never met in a house that's not even a real house.

*Big Brother* is no longer a television concept, and no amount of Sonia Kruger host shuffling is going to change that.

I doubt whether we'll see another season after this one.

**Hannah Sinclair is an intern at The Punch. This article was first published by [thepunch.com.au](http://thepunch.com.au)**



### THE LAST WORD

MARTY SMITH

#### MOUTHING OFF

(1) Country song title: *We Used To Just Kiss On The Lips But Now It's All Over*. (2) Palindrome: Ma is as selfless as I am. (3) Avoid clichés like the plague: All that glitters is not gold. (4) Question in need of an answer: Is there ever a day that floor rugs are not on sale? (5) I am not making this up: British billionaire Sir Richard Branson's Makepeace Island, near Noosa on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, is heart-shaped.

#### INSIGHT

"Enter at your own risk!" – written on a doormat.

#### QUOTE, UNQUOTE

"With all the unrest in the world, I don't think anyone should have a yacht that sleeps more than 12." – Joe (Tony Curtis) in the 1959 film *Some Like It Hot*.

#### KEEP COUNTING

**6195** – In episode 6195 of the television series *Neighbours*, seen in Australia on July 1, 2011, Susan and Karl Kennedy (Jackie Woodburne and Alan Fletcher) talked about an adventure holiday in Peru.

#### JUST A THOUGHT

The really frightening thing about middle age is the knowledge that you'll grow out of it.

#### REMEMBER WHEN

Today is August 14, the 227th day of the year. On this day:

**1886:** Arthur Dempster, the physicist who built the first device for measuring charged particles, was born in Toronto, Canada.

**1933:** Australian author (Arthur) Bryce Courtenay was born in Johannesburg, South Africa.

**1943:** Political journalist Laurie Oakes was born in Newcastle, New South Wales.

**1948:** The Olympic Games in London closed.

**1957:** Peter Costello, fanatical supporter of AFL club Essendon and former federal treasurer, was born in Melbourne.

**1960:** Singer-actor Sarah Brightman was born in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, England.

**1964:** Radio station 5AD listed The Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night*, from the film of the same name, as Adelaide's No. 1 hit single.

**1966:** Actor Halle Berry was born in Cleveland, Ohio.

**1973:** US blues artists Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee performed at the Adelaide Town Hall.

**1978:** Actor Kate Ritchie, host of the new Channel 10 reality series *Don't Tell the Bride*, was born in Goulburn, New South Wales.

**1979:** A rainbow in Wales lasted for more than three hours.

**1988:** Racing car designer Enzo Ferrari died in Maranello, near the city of Modena, Italy.

**1991:** Researchers at a biotechnology company in Melbourne said they expected to produce blue roses in two years.

**2004:** Dymocks listed *The Unforgiving Minute*, by Australian environmental scientist and adventurer Tim Jarvis, as Adelaide's best-selling book.

[www.chopchopfacts.com](http://www.chopchopfacts.com)

#### TODAY'S THOUGHT

My Father's house has many rooms . . . if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

**John 14:2-3 Bible for Today**