

# Chapter 1

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## Introduction and Background

It is now several years since I completed the research for my last Olympic book, *The Best Olympics Ever? Social Impacts of Sydney 2000* (2002), and a critical update of the politics of Olympic bids and preparations in the post-bribery and post-September 11 era is long overdue. In *The Best Olympics Ever?* and in my earlier book, *Inside the Olympic Industry: Power, Politics, and Activism* (2000), I examined the threat posed by the Olympics to the basic civil rights and freedoms of residents in bid and host cities, most notably, the right to a free press and freedom of assembly, as well as the criminalizing of poverty and the housing and homelessness problems that have been associated with hosting the Olympics. I also documented the work of anti-Olympic and Olympic watchdog groups in the United States, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere as they challenged the Olympic industry and worked toward mitigating negative social and environmental impacts (Lenskyj, 2000, chapters 4, 6, 7; 2002, chapter 7).

Since 1998, the Western world has been the target of a largely successful public relations campaign sponsored by the Olympic industry. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), as well as organizing committees in Salt Lake City, Athens, Torino, Beijing, Vancouver, and London, and numerous bid committees around the globe, have dedicated their efforts to restoring the Olympic image after the damaging bribery scandals that I analyzed in *Inside the Olympic Industry* (chapters 1–3).

As I explained in my earlier work, I use the term *Olympic industry* to draw attention to the characteristics it shares with other global corporations, many of which are Olympic sponsors. In doing so, I challenge the uncritical use of benign-sounding terms such as *Olympic movement*, *Olympic family*, and *Olympic spirit*—which promote mystique and elitism,

while obscuring the power and profit motives that underlie Olympic-related ventures. Just as progressive voices in the 1980s introduced the concept of the fitness ‘industry’ to reflect how fitness initiatives of the 1970s had been coopted and corporatized in most Western countries, the concept of Olympic industry draws attention to the fact that sport is only a minor component of these multinational operations.

### **Olympic Impacts, Olympic Resistance**

The first eight years of the new millennium have witnessed ongoing campaigns by antiglobalization activists to address the ever-growing gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” that is in large part a result of global capitalism. Within the antiglobalization movement are the activists in Olympic bid and host cities who continue to monitor relationships between the Olympic industry and global capitalism, most notably, the gentrification of low-income, inner-city neighborhoods and the inflation of rents and real estate prices. Much of part I of this book is informed by their work, as I continue to investigate Olympic impacts and community resistance in the recent host cities of Barcelona (1992), Atlanta (1996), Sydney (2000), Salt Lake City (2002), and Athens (2004), the future host cities of Beijing (2008), Vancouver (2010), and London (2012), and the unsuccessful bid cities of New York and Toronto. The case studies that I present demonstrate how politicians, developers, corporate leaders, and Olympic supporters use the Olympics as a catalyst for urban redevelopment and infrastructure projects, largely at taxpayers’ expense. Redevelopment of inner-city neighborhoods, displacement of low-income residents, and the destruction of working-class communities proceed according to demands of the Olympic timetable.

A three-year study recently released by the Center on Housing Rights and Evictions in Geneva (COHRE, 2007) provides detailed analyses of global Olympic-related housing impacts. The COHRE report presents indisputable evidence of negative impacts on low-income renters and homeless people in every Summer Olympic Games host city since 1988, including displacement, forced evictions, escalating housing costs, reduced availability of affordable housing, and the criminalizing of homelessness. I will elaborate on COHRE’s findings in the next three chapters.

### **The Missing Piece of the Puzzle: Education**

My earlier research also attempted to discover how and why the Olympics hold virtually universal appeal and, for the most part, manage

to avoid the kind of public, media, and academic scrutiny to which their multinational counterparts are frequently subjected. In discussing these questions, I focused on the role of the mass media, using Chomsky and Herman's propaganda model to explain how corporate elites were successful in "manufacturing consent" (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Chomsky, 1989). In part I, I continue to investigate pro-Olympic bias in media treatment of bids and preparations. However, in part II, I approach these questions from a different starting point, by analyzing Olympic education and athlete/role model rhetoric. My aim is to investigate the mechanisms used by the Olympic industry in the socialization of children and youth that lead them to think about sport in general, and the Olympics in particular, in largely uncritical ways. I demonstrate how assumptions about the positive relationship between children and adolescents, on the one hand, and sport and sporting role models, on the other, are entrenched in schools and communities in most Western countries. In my critique of these practices, I identify recent challenges to universalist assumptions about sport and naturalized rhetoric about athletes as role models, particularly in light of the "fallen heroes" phenomenon fueled by recent exposés of doping. Additionally, in chapter 7, I examine a different kind of "fallen hero": prominent female athletes, including Olympic sportswomen, posing nude for calendars.

Since the 1970s, the influence of the Olympic industry on children has become increasingly evident, with Olympic athletes serving as role models and curriculum materials presenting Olympic facts, figures, and ideologies in the guise of Olympic education for school-age children. I will demonstrate how Olympic education and role model programs play a major part in promoting a positive view of all things Olympic.

### **Some Notes on Method**

In 1998, I joined Bread Not Circuses (BNC), a community-based Toronto coalition of antipoverty, housing and homelessness, and environmental advocacy groups that had opposed Toronto's 1996 Olympic bid and was at that time monitoring and later opposing Toronto's 2008 bid (Lenskyj, 2000, chapter 4). BNC was active until 2001, when the IOC announced that Beijing, and not Toronto, would host the 2008 Games; however, BNC members continue to support and work with Olympic watchdog groups in Vancouver and elsewhere. My experiences as an activist in Toronto, as well as in Vancouver and Sydney, form the basis for some of the following discussion. When this is the case, I make it clear that the evidence I present comes from experiences and observations as a participant in community-based anti-Olympic and Olympic

watchdog organizations and as a recognized Olympic critic in various public and university contexts. The cutoff point for data collection was June 2007.

Additionally, while recognizing the limitations, I make extensive use of mainstream media sources, for the following reasons. The mass media undoubtedly play a central role in keeping the Olympics in the news and disseminating information on Olympic issues. Compared to the millions who watch Olympic sport on television, the people who witness the Games firsthand are relatively small in number. What most people know about the Olympic Games and their players, they learn by watching television, scanning the Internet, and reading newspapers, sport magazines, and books. Since the bribery crisis, there has been an increasing volume of information available to the public on various authorized Olympic Web sites, including official reports as well as the expected promotional content. However, apart from journalists and selected researchers, few people have direct access to the most powerful members of the “Olympic family”—the men and women on bid teams, organizing committees, national Olympic committees, international sport federations, and the IOC. Therefore, by using materials readily available through the mass media, including newspapers and the Internet, I am in a sense putting myself in the place of a typical Western, middle-class consumer of popular culture and sport. This is not to suggest that I am neglecting the relevant scholarly literature; however, I do not purport to be providing a comprehensive literature review of Olympic-related research. Much of the historical and sociological research in Olympic studies, including work generated in university centers for Olympic studies in Europe, Canada, and Australia, fails to take a critical or social justice approach (Lenskyj, 2002, chapter 6).

While some Olympic researchers may point to their “insider” sources, whether human or documentary, as evidence that their work has special legitimacy and validity, I am taking the opposite viewpoint as a community-based activist. The hypothetical person in the street cannot gain entry to the IOC archives in Lausanne, Switzerland, or even most meetings of a local bid or organizing committee, and their records are difficult, sometimes impossible, to obtain through freedom of information requests. In a democratic society, I would argue, it should not be necessary to have direct access to Olympic “insiders” in order to obtain sufficient information to evaluate their activities. Nor is it appropriate for members of bid and organizing committees to attempt to placate their critics by selectively providing them with materials they are not prepared to make public to all citizens. In 2000, when BNC criticized the budget put forward by Toronto’s 2008 bid committee, our group

was offered the opportunity to view the detailed financial plan, but only on the condition that the member who had this privilege would not make it known to others.

Since the early 1990s, members of Olympic watchdog groups and investigative journalists seeking full disclosure by bid and organizing committees in Toronto and Sydney have had limited success (Lenskyj, 2000, chapter 4; Lenskyj, 2002, chapter 1). More recently, as I document in chapters 3 and 4, similar patterns have emerged in Vancouver, New York, and elsewhere. My earlier research, as well as the subsequent discussion, reveals a widespread culture of secrecy surrounding Olympic bids and preparations, especially on financial matters. These conclusions are supported in the 2007 COHRE report on housing impacts, which identified serious problems of transparency and barriers to community participation in Seoul, Barcelona, Atlanta, Athens, and Beijing (COHRE, 2007). I fully endorse COHRE's recommendations (p. 204) calling for accountability and transparency on the part of all those involved in Olympic megaprojects, particularly in the areas of housing rights and human rights.

### **A Radical Perspective**

Radical sport scholars deconstruct sporting practices and policies and advocate social transformation (change that begins at the roots), rather than taking the liberal path to social change that relies on reforming existing systems. What constitutes radical is historically specific. For example, some contemporary observers may view early feminists' opposition to female involvement in sporting competition as conservative but, in the context of male-dominated sport in the 1920s and 1930s in Canada and the United States, their agenda was in fact radical. They wanted to prevent female sport from emulating the excesses of the prevailing male model, with its overemphasis on winning, its commercialism, and its elitism. They were concerned, too, about the inappropriate (hetero)sexualizing of female athletes and male spectators' excessive interest in their appearance rather than their athletic performance. Working toward an alternative model of sport, these feminists attempted to maximize female participation at the recreational level and to keep the leadership in women's hands. They recognized the impact on women's career paths, as well as on the nature of female sporting competition, if men were permitted to take over coaching and officiating women's sport. However, early feminists' relatively uncritical espousal of the "female frailty" myth as popularized by male medical experts was not radical, nor was their tendency to rely on essentialist arguments about women (Lenskyj, 1986).

More recently, feminists in the 1980s who lobbied the IOC for more Olympic events for women may have seemed radical to their mainstream opponents, who characterized them as “women’s libbers” or worse, but their agenda was reformist. For the most part, they accepted the Olympic sport model uncritically and simply wanted a bigger piece of the Olympic pie. The fact that synchronized swimming and rhythmic gymnastics—stereotypically “feminine” (heterosexual) sports—were among the new sports added to the Olympic lineup around that time demonstrated some of the unanticipated consequences of well-intentioned liberal initiatives (Lenskyj, 2003, chapters 4, 5). Some of these contradictions become apparent in chapter 7 as I examine the “nude calendar” phenomenon.

The radical approach that I take here has ethical implications; it is not neutral, and it may appear subjective. I am approaching all these issues from a social justice and equity perspective, in order to develop an analysis of interlocking systems of oppression, particularly classism, racism, and sexism, and their impacts on disadvantaged populations in Olympic bid and host cities. As a teacher and educator since 1964, I am also taking an ethical stance when I deplore the exploitation of children and youth to serve the interests of the Olympic industry and its corporate sponsors through the activities known as Olympic education. Finally, by documenting the initiatives of community-based anti-Olympic and Olympic watchdog groups, including those in which I participated, I want to counter the mainstream tendency, in both the mass media and the academy, to neglect or dismiss the work of community activists who are critical of the Olympics.

### **Academic Freedom and Olympic Research**

Since half of this book is devoted to an analysis of sport- and Olympic-related education involving children and youth, the broader issue of university-based Olympic studies, which includes research and teaching, deserves some attention. Having examined the university connections to the Olympic industry in earlier publications (2000, pp. 124–31; 2002, chapter 6), I suggest that the material benefits and cultural capital gained by academics who are generally supportive of the Olympics may contribute to the chilly climate experienced by more critical sport scholars. This is not to deny that, like other tenured academics, most critical scholars write from a relatively privileged position.

A more significant force that is threatening academic freedom, specifically freedom to engage in social criticism, is the increasing corpo-

ratization of universities in Western countries. The Olympic industry and its sponsors constitute one of many global corporate forces that influence university administrations and jeopardize academic freedom. Universities' increased reliance on private funding and the growth of market-driven programs, particularly in business and technology, have been a key concern since the 1990s (Coady, 1999; Pannu, Schugurensky, & Plumb, 1994; Patience, 1999/2000; Quirke & Davies, 2002). A university entering into a partnership with a corporation may threaten the academic freedom of both faculty and students, by granting corporate funders the right to influence research, to suppress the publication of unfavorable findings, and to hold exclusive licenses on patentable discoveries. In the interests of academic freedom, it is important for all university links to the Olympic industry and its corporate funders to be disclosed, particularly contracts such as Reebok's and Nike's (former and current Top Olympic Program sponsors) that specifically prohibit persons affiliated with the university from criticizing these companies. Naomi Klein's pioneering research uncovered the extent of such constraints on academic freedom (Klein, 2000, pp. 96–97). Perhaps it is unrealistic to argue that, in the current fiscal climate, university administrations should avoid all contracts with censorship clauses or "gentlemen's agreements" that threaten academic freedom. But, at the very least, progressive voices can demand transparency so that the rules of the game are clear.

In light of the precedents set by corporations, it is likely that informal understandings exist between other arms of the Olympic industry (national Olympic committees, local bid and organizing committees) and university centers for Olympic studies. Many Olympic sport historians and sport sociologists are affiliated with centers that derive some of their funding from national Olympic committees or from the IOC. While this does not necessarily interfere with their academic freedom, they may believe that it is prudent to avoid appearing to legitimize Olympic critics, particularly in bid or host cities where the local media have demonized all anti-Olympic activists.

Alternatively, the vicarious excitement generated by unofficial membership in the so-called Olympic family and what I term the "goose bumps" effect of rubbing shoulders with Olympic athletes and other sporting celebrities may lead some researchers to see the Olympics through a less than critical lens. As Olympic critics John MacAloon (1984) and Douglas Booth (2004) have proposed, the official televised version of the Olympics, with its emphasis on sporting stars and record-breaking performances, may limit researchers' historical focus and lead them to ignore alternative perspectives and narratives.

Arthur Johnson's observations on academics and American professional sport are relevant here, particularly in view of the fact that stadium construction has been the focus of extensive controversy in recent bid and host cities, including Atlanta and New York (Johnson, 1998). On these issues, Johnson concluded that "academics have been [ineffective] in bringing about any change in the debate that surrounds the stadium issue, let alone in bringing about a demise to the corporate welfare system that supports professional sport in the United States." He went on to ask "whether it is the strength of the emotionalism of sports, the lack of power of academics within urban politics, the lack of respect given to policy analysis in decision-making circles, or other factors that lead to such little success" (Johnson, 1998, p. 581). Since public intellectuals do in fact have significant influence in many other political arenas, it seems likely that Johnson is correct when he suggests that "the emotionalism of sports," particularly professional and Olympic sports, contributes to these trends.

One liberal perspective holds that there are progressive men and women, including academics, who share the concerns of radical critics and are working within the system to try to bring about change. I have heard criticism of scholars like myself as "tame academics," a label that implies we have been duped by the radical left. It is true that activists and academics whose politics are closer to the radical end of the political spectrum have joined Olympic bid and organizing committees in the hope that their interventions will be effective. In Toronto and Vancouver, for example, some community-based housing and environmental activists served short terms on bid committees in attempts to shape a more progressive agenda. However, as I demonstrate in chapter 4, recent events in Vancouver suggest that corporate interests and a law-and-order approach to inner-city social problems have generally prevailed.

### **The Personal is Political**

Feminist scholars since the 1960s have supported the notion that the personal is political, as did C. Wright Mills years earlier when he identified the links between personal problems and social issues. These principles have direct relevance for university-based Olympic critics. Academic freedom, scholarly debate, collegiality, objective peer evaluation, and respectful disagreement are among the key values of the university. The principle of academic freedom implies recognition of links among the personal, professional, and political lives of members of the academic community. In my own university, for example, criteria for tenure and

promotion decisions include, as well as research and teaching, service to the university and the community. For a sport sociologist, service to the community might constitute membership in an Olympic bid committee or equally valid membership in an Olympic watchdog organization. In each example, the person's professional background and personal and political beliefs influence his or her engagement in civil society and role as a public intellectual.

In a rare example of integrating the personal and the political, UK researcher Celia Brackenridge devoted a full chapter in *Spoilsports* to her experiences and reflections while researching the controversial and personally challenging issue of sexual exploitation in sport (Brackenridge, 2001, chapter 8). Among other disclosures, she noted that the British Olympic Association had withdrawn permission to interview elite athletes about sexual exploitation because of concerns about what she might uncover (Brackenridge, 2001, p. 153; 2003). Having been engaged in Olympic research since 1992, I have anecdotal evidence of university-based critics who have been directly or indirectly silenced by Olympic industry officials; some documented Australian examples are included in my earlier book (2002, chapter 6).

The academic freedom of students is also precarious. On some sport-related debates on campus, graduate students have told me of the caution they exercise in publicly aligning themselves with positions they believe will be unpopular with professors on whom they rely for reference letters. One varsity athlete told me that, after she publicly took a position opposing a proposed levy to fund a new stadium, she became the target of harsh criticism from the coach and other players (Lenskyj, 2004). Students in physical education and kinesiology programs, like their instructors, face the challenge of gaining sufficient distance from their personal investment in and love of sport, including Olympic sport, to be able to critique it as a social institution. Although some appear to find this impossible, many have succeeded in developing cogent analyses of Olympic politics (for example, O'Bonsawin, 2006; Wensing, 2004).

### **Olympic Studies Research**

A 1999 Olympic studies conference in Sydney, held in the wake of the IOC bribery scandal, was the scene of a controversy involving academic freedom. Two IOC presenters, Anita DeFrantz and Jacques Rogge, who later succeeded Juan Antonio Samaranch as president, had jokingly asked delegates to "forgive" them for accepting gifts from the organizers. As academic Tara Magdalinski pointed out, their response "makes not only

a mockery of the reform process, but denigrates those who are genuinely concerned about these allegations of corruption” (Magdalinski, 1999, p. 27). After conference organizers had tried unsuccessfully to obtain an apology from Magdalinski, the (predominantly male) group voted to apologize on behalf of their (unrepentant, younger, female) colleague (Booth, 2000).

The incident demonstrates the inherent problems of mingling “Olympic family” members and academics and blurring the lines between Olympic cheerleading and scholarly debate. Academic freedom in the university setting, I would argue, means that members of the audience are not required to treat speakers as “guests” or to refrain from challenging them. Indeed, students and faculty usually relish the opportunity to confront controversial visitors, or controversial homegrown speakers, in public forums. Olympic connections are often seen as rendering guest speakers worthy of unqualified admiration and respect, and academic freedom is seriously compromised in these situations. For their part, some Olympic “guests” may be unprepared for the role of keynote speaker in academic settings. When their presentations are largely descriptive and uncritical, they may be unable, as well as unwilling, to answer challenging questions. Organizers are therefore responsible for any difficult situations that arise—not to issue apologies but rather to select more appropriate speakers in the first place.

Undoubtedly Sydney 2000 Olympics have left their mark on postsecondary education in NSW. A 2002 publication from the University of Technology Sydney titled *The Contribution of the Higher Education Sector to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games* (Cashman & Toohey, 2002) recommended that all universities provide training for students involved in the staging of future Olympic Games. It went on to state that prominent IOC and national Olympic committee members, apparently with no other credentials than their Olympic connections, should be encouraged to speak at university-sponsored conferences. Recommendations such as these continued to blur the lines between academics and “Olympic family” members (except for those who fall into both categories). Similarly, in a recent Canadian initiative, the Canadian Olympic Committee’s “Olympic Voice” program offered the services (for a fee) of Olympic athletes and “Olympic hopefuls” as speakers in university and college courses, with their elite athlete status appearing to be their main qualification (Olympic Voice, 2006).

On the related topic of university-sponsored public forums on Olympic issues, organizers often display the same tendency to include more pro- than anti-Olympic speakers. In a notable exception—a panel discussion organized by University of Toronto Faculty of Physical

Education and Health graduate students in February 2006—the numbers of supporters and critics were relatively balanced. However, in February 2004, when I participated in the University of Toronto President’s Circle Forum on the topic Vancouver 2010: What Does This Mean for Canada and Our Athletes? I was the sole critic. In fact, had one of the four panelists not been absent due to illness, I would have been facing an Olympic skier, an Olympic television broadcaster, and a national coach.

Olympic studies centers within universities continued to expand in the first few years of the 21st century, although some have been short-lived. In a recent initiative, the Australian Center for Olympic Studies was established at the University of Technology Sydney in 2005, following the closing of the University of New South Wales center. Tellingly, the new center’s home, the School of Leisure, Sport, and Tourism, was located in the Faculty of Business and launched by the prerequisite “Olympic family” member, a representative from the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC). The AOC connections were emphasized in promotional material, and the business-related aims of the center included “gathering information on the organization of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games...to assist in the organization of similar future events” (Australian Center for Olympic Studies, 2006).

A 2004 report confirmed the general assumption in Olympic industry circles of a close link between Olympic studies centers and future bid and games organizers internationally. The IOC commissioned the Center for Olympic Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) to conduct a study of the global status of Olympic studies in order to develop an international network. “The final purpose of this network is to enhance knowledge about the evolution of the Olympic movement and to increase the dissemination of the Olympic values” (UAB, 2005, p. 2). Existing ad hoc relationships among centers, research groups, legacy institutions, Olympic academies, scientific associations, libraries, and “individual experts” were cited as barriers to “effective dissemination.” One of the recommendations called for the UAB center to “mediate” between the IOC and the other groups, “ensuring that knowledge generated by the actors reaches the IOC and the Olympic Movement” (p. 5). With the existing gap between university researchers, on the one hand, and the IOC and other “key decision makers,” on the other, presented as a major problem, the report implied that all Olympic-related intellectual property generated by the various actors automatically belonged to the IOC and its subsidiaries.

Lamenting the lack of cooperation between these groups, the UAB report made the assertion that university-based “teaching and training programs can be used by Olympic Movement organizations as tools to

educate professionals and leaders” (p. 11). Even in the context of contemporary market-driven postsecondary education, it would be difficult to imagine any single multinational corporation coopting a program in a public university in order to groom and recruit the next generation of compliant employees. Furthermore, the report took as a given the IOC’s right to use university research to enhance its international sport monopoly. “Olympic studies” was defined in terms of “knowledge and information” on virtually every page of the 15-page summary report, with an occasional reference to “products and services,” especially those that capitalized on the Internet. There were few if any references to evaluation, analysis, or critique—concepts that one might reasonably expect in a university program.

### Conclusion

Having set the stage by explaining key aspects of my theoretical approach and method, as well as elaborating on the general context of university-based Olympic studies, I now turn to the two major themes of this book: part I, Olympic Impacts and Community Resistance, and part II, Olympic Education. In conclusion, I evaluate the IOC’s document, *Agenda 21: Sport for Sustainable Development*, and propose that social responsibility should constitute the fourth pillar of the “Olympic Movement.” Finally, I present strategies for challenging Olympic industry hegemony, protecting human rights, and promoting social justice.