

After Tokyo, we should bring the Olympic charade to an end

The travelling circus shows the ugly side of sport – displacing citizens, bullying athletes and endorsing cruel regimes

The empty seats in the stadiums of the Tokyo 2020 Olympics are a blessing in disguise, for the sporting spectacle, no matter how good, will not be able to dispel the fact that this super-spreader event is being held in the midst of an unprecedented public health crisis and against the wishes of the vast majority of the Japanese public. In so doing, the International Olympic Committee – which earnestly believes itself to be the leader of a global social movement – has been revealed as no more than the travelling circus of the global sports industry, ready to make sure the broadcasters get what they need come what may.

Not that these Games and the IOC's standing weren't deeply flawed prior to the pandemic. As at every Olympics, costs have spiralled and Japan will have to stump up more than \$30bn (£22bn), of which the IOC will not be paying a cent. Along the way there has been the usual combination of expensive white-elephant stadiums, allegations of corruption in the bid process and in allocating contracts, and the forced eviction of citizens from their homes.

Sold as the "Recovery Games" – celebrating the nation's revival after the 2011 tsunami and nuclear meltdown – Tokyo's softball competition began this week in Fukushima, a region in vertiginous demographic decline, still awash in nuclear waste.

Paris, Los Angeles and now Brisbane are signed up to host the next three summer Olympics, and the IOC continues to argue that its Games catalyse economic growth and leave positive urban and sporting legacies. Yet the research is unequivocal: with the exception of Barcelona 1992, no modern Games has raised a host city's rate of economic growth, levels of skills and employment, tourist income or productivity.

Similarly, the claim that the Olympics raise the level of sporting participation is a myth. After London 2012 – the only Games to actually take the proposition seriously – activity rates fell because the government's austerity programme led to the widespread closure of sporting facilities.

Olympians might inspire other Olympians – but as physical and psychological outliers they have absolutely no impact on the behaviour of the general public. Ask the Finns, who abandoned the state-sponsored pursuit of medals and spent the money instead on active transport and accessible facilities. They barely win anything any more, but

they have the most active and healthy old people in the world. In Britain we have a sack of gold and an obesity crisis.

The urban programmes that accompanied Seoul 1988 and Beijing 2008 saw almost 2 million people displaced. More recently, Rio was staged on the back of over 60,000 people who had to get out of their homes and businesses: they were often intimidated and moved to inferior and distant housing. The vast majority were barely compensated. And then there are the police sweeps that clear homeless and mentally ill people from previously public spaces.

Of course, where someone is suffering, someone else is probably benefiting, and the Olympics have proven fabulously profitable for construction companies, the corrupt officials and politicians who have handed out contracts to them, and property developers. The local police and national security agencies are also considerable beneficiaries given that security costs are now around \$2bn. Rio didn't build a single community sporting facility but its riot police got the very best in new Kevlar-plated armour and Tasers.

In a desperate search for legitimacy the IOC has championed clean sport and embraced environmentalism. But the former has been fatally undermined by the light-touch treatment meted out to Russia after its unprecedented programme of state-sponsored doping. And the environmental record of the Games has been dismal. Beijing was more polluted after its Olympics than before. Pyeongchang, Rio and Sochi all saw the destruction of protected natural habitats.

Covid has at least reduced the usual gigantic carbon footprint of the Games. However, it is hard to see how these and future emissions, however much offsetting the IOC is planning for, can be justified at a time when the speed of the climate crisis means most previous hosts of the Winter Games will soon have insufficient snow to hold them again. Tokyo, now regularly experiencing burning, humid summers, has had to shift the marathon 1,000km north to Sapporo.

The quixotic notion that the Olympics could be a champion of human rights – and that staging the Games would open up authoritarian hosts to international norms and scrutiny – was completely undermined by Beijing 2008, then rendered risible by the Sochi Winter Games in 2014. Next year's Beijing Winter Olympics, to be conducted alongside the genocidal repression of the Uyghurs, will be grotesque; and woe betide any athlete that wants to exercise the rights to free speech and protest while they are there.

This is all true to form for the IOC. On the eve of the 1968 games, the Mexican government slaughtered over 300 protesters in cold blood and launched a war of terror on the student movement that opposed it. When the then IOC president, Avery Brundage, was asked to comment on the matter, he replied: "I was at the ballet." He then reacted to the greatest ever display of athlete activism at the games – the black power salutes – by destroying the careers of Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The IOC's history is one of genuflecting before power and violence, and bullying the athletes it claims to revere.

An Olympic Covid spike could yet kill more people in Tokyo than the Mexican state managed with mere bullets, and the IOC's ruthless suppression of athlete protest is primed with new regulations. The committee won't get the irony though, because it does not learn from its mistakes and it does not engage with its critics.

Self-selected for the entirety of its history, the IOC appoints no independents, tolerates no critical voices and is completely opaque in its operations. The idea that such an organisation should have special status at the UN and claim sovereignty over the global governance of sport is untenable.

Sport does offer an extraordinary canvas for the celebration of human possibilities. It is a universal language in a perilously fragmented world. It deserves better than to be captured by the IOC, better than to be drowned in its pieties and bound to its pernicious business model.

A Covid emergency aside, it is too late to abandon the Tokyo Games, but it is not too late to bring this charade to an end. The Chinese Communist party can make all the artificial snow it likes in 2022, but we should simply refuse to watch. Paris 2024 can be the final fond farewell. The IOC should dissolve itself and its assets be passed to a new democratically constituted body for global sport. Los Angeles would lose the Games, but Hollywood can take out the first option on the story.

DAY 1 - ARTICLE WORDLIST

Charade (noun) – an act or event that is obviously false, although represented as true

- From the beginning we knew who would get the job – the interviews were just a charade.
- One of the charades that are notorious to lawyers and disliked by so many judges is the calling of formal medical evidence to prove the dangers to health.

Displace (verb) – to force someone to leave their home

- The building of a new dam will displace thousands of people who live in this area.
- thousands of people have been displaced by the civil war

Blessing in disguise (idiom) – something that seems bad or unlucky at first but causes something good to happen later

- Being laid off was a blessing in disguise – within a month I got a much better job.

Dispel (verb) – to remove fears, doubts, or false ideas, usually by proving them wrong or unnecessary

- We need to dispel the myths and establish real facts.

Super-spreader (noun) – someone who infects many more people with a disease than most other infected people do

- A few super-spreaders appear to have transmitted the virus to as many as 10 people each.
- The spread of the Sars virus was accelerated by a super-spreader patient in one of the city's hospitals.

In the midst of sth (idiom) – in the middle of an event, situation, or activity

- I'm sorry but I'm too busy - I'm in the midst of writing a report.
- The country is in the midst of an economic crisis.

Unprecedented (adj.) – never having happened or existed in the past.

- Such an event was unprecedented in the 20th century
- This century has witnessed environmental destruction on an unprecedented scale.

Earnestly (adv.) – in a serious and determined way, often without humour

- I earnestly hope that the problem will be dealt with immediately.
- He hopes school officials will continue to work earnestly to ensure the rights of their minority students.

Not that (idiom) – used to say you are not suggesting something

- She wouldn't tell me how much it cost - not that I was really interested.

Prior to – before a particular time or event

- she visited me on the day prior to her death

Stump up (sth) – to make a payment, especially unwillingly

- It can be cheaper to stump up for a new washing machine than to get your old one repaired.
- The company has agreed to stump up a further 1.62m shares.

White elephant (n) – something that costs a lot of money but has no useful purpose

- The stadium is likely to become a white elephant after the championships are over.

Eviction (n.) – the act of forcing someone to leave somewhere, especially their home

- After falling behind with his mortgage payments he now faces eviction from his home.
- They received an eviction notice telling them they had to leave in seven days.

Vertiginous (adj.) – causing or experiencing the feeling that everything is spinning around

- The two skyscrapers were connected by a vertiginous walkway.
- This review attempts to clarify the assessment and management of the elderly dizzy and/or vertiginous patient.

Unequivocal (adj.) – clear and firm

- The answer is an unequivocal “Yes.”
- Overall, the effects were weak but unequivocal and distinctive.

Austerity (n.) – a situation in which a government spends as little money as possible because of bad economic conditions

- The idea was to stabilise the economy through strict austerity.
- Military spending continues even in periods of austerity.

Quixotic (adj.) – having or showing ideas that are different and unusual but not practical or likely to succeed

- This is a vast, exciting and some say quixotic project

On the eve of sth – just before something

- She got cold feet on the eve of her wedding and got on a plane to Europe.