

The pursuit of EXCELLENCE



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The Olympic Games are always a time of great excitement, even if you're not a mad sports fan.

The founder of the modern Olympics, Pierre De Coubertin, said, "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part. Just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle."

This is a timely occasion to take a look at the difference between competition and the quest for excellence.

In our competitive culture it's easy to get trapped into a competitive mindset - that how good, effective, or successful we are is determined by how we measure up against other people's performances.

Most of us don't come first. Most of the time. We can't. No matter how good we are.

The opportunity for Olympic athletes to line up for their events is a culmination of years of training, display cases filled with trophies and

ribbons, qualifying races, heats, championships, and finally placing among the world's super elite. And only one can come first. It's simple mathematics.

Are the rest "losers"? Are they failures? Are they anything less than outstanding athletes?

Increasingly, teams are providing support for their athletes by counselling them about life after the big race or the grand final. And what they're telling them is that there's more to life and success than coming first.

Excellence

We can't all come first and we can't all be the best. But we can succeed. We can achieve. We can do our best. We can excel: academically, personally, athletically, morally, and spiritually.

Competition is focused on events, moments, circumstances. Excellence is enduring: it's a quality, a principle, a quest, a journey.

Competition focuses on our efforts in comparison with others at a moment

in time. Excellence invites us to challenge ourselves every day.

Olympic performances - like so many athletic endeavours - can motivate us to achievement and excellence. Indeed, the sporting arena attracts us not simply for the winning and losing (proven by the fact that we continue to go along to watch our teams even when they get beaten week after week!), but for the displays of excellence from both winners and losers.

It's important we not confuse achievement and excellence with gold medals and first places.

Life is not a contest. True, there are contests we have to (or choose to) take up in the course of life. But it's not about winners and losers, or first and second.

Families are not made strong by competing against each other. Smart work teams long ago rejected the notion of individuals competing against each other as a means of "bringing out the best".

Fear of failure

Competitive cultures naturally breed a fear of failure - and although that can be a motivator it's hardly a healthy one to live by.

As Anthony Robbins points out in his best selling book, *Awaken the Giant Within*, success and achievement often elude us because we focus on our fears of failure rather than on achieving our goals. And that's what so often happens when we pursue our goals on a competitive basis.

A culture that suggests, "my success requires your failure" is ultimately a

culture that will fail to bring out the best in people. It will encourage a self-confidence that depends on winning rather than achievement or improvement. It will encourage independence rather than interdependence. It will focus validation and recognition on a narrow rather than broad range of skills and qualities. The anthropologist Jules Henry said that "a competitive culture endures by tearing people down".

The view that competition is what makes us succeed and achieve is a myth. "It is widely assumed that

competition boosts achievement and brings out the best in us," wrote Alfie Kohn in his book, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*. "Many people who make such claims, however, have simply confused success with competition. This is easy to do in a society as wedded to winning as ours. But in fact the two concepts are quite different: I can succeed in knitting a scarf or writing a book without ever worrying whether it is better than yours. Or I can work with you - say, to write a report or build a house."

An Olympian Dilemma

The sporting arena is often used as a metaphor for the pursuit of excellence. And the Olympic Games are promoted as the zenith of that pursuit. The Fundamental Principles of the Olympic Charter state: "The ideals of the Games go far beyond mere athletic endeavour. Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.

"The goal of Olympism is to place everywhere sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity. To this effect, the Olympic Movement engages, alone or in cooperation with other organizations and within the limits of its means, in actions to promote peace.

"The goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practiced without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play."

Tarnished

But these admirable aspirations have been tarnished in the face of the demands of professionalism and sponsorship. The pressures on athletes and teams to perform in order to justify sponsorship have seen growing allegations and concern about drug-enhanced performances. Places on national teams are being decided in court cases. Organisation of the Games has been clouded by accusations of deceit, corruption and self-promotion.

This year, the journey of the Olympic torch towards China was seriously disrupted by anti-China demonstrations in a number of countries. And there were threats of a boycott to protest the Chinese human rights record.

"Despite the huge world-wide attraction to the [Olympic] Games and what they are perceived to represent, they have failed dismally in recent years to celebrate and reinforce the values which are embedded in their history," said Professor John Milton-Smith, Deputy-Chancellor of Australia's Curtin University, in 2000.

He argued: "The search for sponsorship and patronage by sports people themselves has led to a focus on commercialism which is inconsistent with the Olympic tradition. As a source of moral inspiration, the Games are in steady decline."

In the Games of 2008 and beyond, we can only hope the spirit of excellence the Olympics strives to represent will overwhelm the potential political sideshows. May our enjoyment of the Games focus on the examples of true excellence displayed and not only on the gold medals achieved.



Kohn cites numerous studies that expose the myth of competition, from 122 classroom studies across 60 years that showed in 65 cases cooperation promoted higher achievement than competition (eight found the reverse and 36 no significant difference) to Robert Helmreich's 1970s studies of professionals that showed in every case "a significant negative correlation between competition and achievement".

As Kohn observes, "trying to do well and trying to beat others are really two different things".

A political campaign is perhaps a most obvious example of this. But notice how inevitably upon "winning" - after months of attacking anyone with a different viewpoint or stance - the victor will immediately reject the competitive approach and say that "it's important that we now all work together ...". Right!

Win/Win

Competitive struggle can be entertaining and rewarding. But it can also be destructive. The

Shared triumph

A few years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-metre dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry.

They slowed down and looked over their shoulders. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better". Then, all nine linked arms and walked across the finish line together.

Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes. As someone said: "We should all be that disabled!" We know there's more to life than winning. But sometimes we let it get in the way of excellence.

"survival of the fittest" may be accepted in evolutionary theory, but it's no way to live. Besides, there's a big difference between survival and living.

Stephen Covey promoted the concept of "win-win" in his bestseller,

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

"Win/Win sees life as a cooperative, not a competitive arena. Most people tend to think in terms of dichotomies: strong or weak, hardball or softball, win or lose. But that kind of thinking is fundamentally flawed. It's based on power and position rather than on principle. Win/Win is based on the paradigm that there is plenty for everybody, that one's person's success is not achieved at the expense or exclusion of the success of others. Win/Win is a belief in the Third Alternative. It's not your way or my way; it's a better way, a higher way."

It's hardly a contemporary wisdom; through the ages people have understood that first place is not necessarily the best place.

Lao-Tse, the sixth century BC Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism, said this: "I have three precious things which I hold fast and prize. The first is gentleness; the second is frugality; the third is humility, which keeps me from putting myself before others. Be gentle and you can be bold; be frugal and you can be liberal; avoid putting yourself before others and you can become a leader among men."

The Golden Rule tells us: "Do unto others as you would have them do to



The Search for Excellence

“Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but we rather have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” – Aristotle

“Champions do not become champions when they win the event, but in the hours, weeks, months and years they spend preparing for it. The victorious performance itself is merely the demonstration of their championship character” – T. Alan Armstrong

“Excellence is not a skill. It is an attitude.” – Ralph Marston

“The noblest search is the search for excellence.” – Lyndon B. Johnson

“If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude.” – Colin Powell

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.” – King Solomon

you.” As someone said, “We’ve all learned the Golden Rule, now all we have to do is live it”.

Pursuit of excellence

An article in the *Australian Financial Review* noted the work of management researcher Jim Collins, who invested nearly a million dollars of his own money in a five-year research project examining the performance of America’s corporate leaders. The results of his research produced “a picture of the successful CEO,” Aaron Patrick wrote.

The picture?

“A person with an inherent belief in the pursuit of excellence.”

Winning is not the same as success. Being the highest paid is not the same as being the most valuable. Coming second does not mean you lost. Winning is neither everything nor the only thing.

Excellence is, essentially, about who we really are. It’s about how and why we do the things we do with our life.

As the long-term perspective of cooperation is preferable to the fleeting attitude of competition, so excellence is a lifetime journey that outweighs in value the temporary triumph of victory. Let’s focus on cooperation rather than competition, and strive for excellence rather than winning. Then we will really find the “gold”.

