


London 2012 – “Everyone’s Games”

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by Helmut Digel

(Translated from the original German by Jürgen Schiffer)

AUTHOR

Helmut Digel is a Professor for Sport Science and Sport Sociology. He is an IAAF Council member, Chairman of the IAAF Marketing and Promotion Commission, a member of the IAAF Development Commission and a Consultant Editor for New Studies in Athletics. He also holds various leadership positions in both sport and sport science in Germany.

London twenty-twelve – under this now iconic phrase, a summer-long festival of sport and more has become something special in the history of mankind. First, there were the extraordinary achievements of the athletes at the Olympic and Paralympic Games. From the view of the performance density in the various competitions, this edition of the Games was probably of the highest quality the world has ever seen. Then there was the setting. Nearly all the sport venues satisfied the highest demands. The work of the referees and judges was equal to the importance of the event itself. The infrastructure and transport system of the city functioned almost flawlessly.

However, what was probably the most special thing of all was the British public, the real hosts. Almost all the competitions were sold out and the enthusiastic audiences were not

only interested and knowledgeable, they were also tolerant, disciplined and fair. Day after day, they celebrated the achievements of the athletes, but more and more, not least during the Paralympic Games, they just celebrated. A city and, thanks to the media, a whole country, were reborn in red, white and blue. The Union Jack became the flag, clothing, neon sign and tattoo of a whole nation.

From the point of view of the mass media, the 19 days of the Olympic Games and the 12 days of the Paralympic Games were the biggest sporting event of all time. Never before have people stayed such a long period in a single large city on the occasion of a sports event. This statement draws attention to the extraordinary achievements of the Games organising committee, LOCOG, an aspect that started long before the competitions began and will continue far beyond, but might only be understood by a few experts.

The international community learned next to nothing of this, and it would be good for politicians and the general public to now take note. The pre-history of the Games was characterised by negative mass media coverage. As always, disaster scenarios were conceived and disseminated. People complained about inadequate security conditions, transport chaos was predicted, a cost explosion was reported, and it was assumed that the organisers had overreached themselves. Perhaps one can be surprised that the same media agencies and journalists later did not want to know anything about their previous reporting and that during

the Games they quite naturally focused to the chorus of applause. This is not only deplorable but against the interests of the media because there would have been so much to report about in the time before, in the accompanying events and in the time after the Games.

For example, one of the highlights of the efforts to bring the Games to the people was the Olympic torch relay. Almost 57 million Britons were present when 8,000 torchbearers carried the Olympic flame across the UK for 70 days, but this and all the associated stories were woefully under-reported.

Then there was the London 2012 Festival, the finale of an unprecedented cultural Olympiad, which took place with almost no international attention. Over a period of twelve weeks, music, art, literature and theatre presentations were given and celebrated throughout the UK. More than 25,000 internationally recognised artists from all the 204 nations participating in the Games appeared. Almost all the events at which entrance fees were required were sold out and 10 million people attended other presentations free of charge.

These included the children's week of the “Society Of London’s Theatres”, the Kurt Hentschläger exhibition, which attracted more than 10,000 visitors, and the “Pleasure Garden” at Wilton’s Music Hall. The exhibition of David Hockney at the Royal Academy of Arts was one of the best-attended events in the history of the Academy and 240,000 visitors attended the National Portrait Gallery’s exhibition of Lucian Freud. Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre sold over 85,000 tickets and the “Pina Bausch Retrospective” at “Sadler’s Wells” also sold out. In addition, there were 8,000 Cultural Olympiad workshops in which more than 155,000 people participated.

Finally, there was what the people themselves did. Under the “Inspired By” mark, 2,713 projects conceived by members of the public and attracting a huge turnout of participants were carried out to promote the dissemination

of Olympic ideals. This idea was not the least of the decisive reasons for the IOC awarding the Games to London. There were projects focused on education, sustainability and volunteering as well as the projects related to sport, which numbered 1,172. In one of these, about 100,000 children from 12,000 schools took part in what was known as the “School Games”.

Turning back to the Olympics themselves and using some selected data, the special sporting quality of London 2012 can also be described: in 19 days, practically 46 World Championships were held, competitions in the 26 Olympic summer sports were organised at 34 different venues, 302 gold medals were won at the Olympics and 503 at the Paralympics.

The 10,490 Olympic athletes, 5,770 officials from 204 Olympic committees, and 4,200 Paralympic athletes with their 2,700 officials from 174 different Paralympic Committees were, of course, the real players in these Games. However, the 4,100 technical officials, especially those who carried out the 5,000 anti-doping tests, also deserve special recognition.

In addition, 21,000 journalists from newspapers, radio and television, including their technical staff, brought these Olympics to the entire world while 6,500 journalists, radio and television representatives did the same for the Paralympic Games.

Also of note were the more than 70,000 volunteers who contributed to the success of the Games. Not least, they were the ones who ensured the transport of spectators, athletes, officials, journalists and sponsors. Overall, nearly 200,000 people worked full-time during these Games in favour of this extraordinary sporting event. Six thousand of these were employed with the Organising Committee, and 100,000 were contracted on a short-term basis.

46,000 workers created the Olympic village and the park, and more than 10,000 local officials organised additional events like

the “Big Night,” hosted the “Super Saturday,” and “The Last Night of The Games”. Not least, 2,000 British companies benefitted from these Games by making contracts with the organising committee that resulted in a turnover of 7.8 billion pounds.

From the point of view of athletics, our sport could hardly have imagined a better showcase. In the IAAF centenary year, our competitions and athletes provided the highest of the sporting high points. Throughout the week that athletics held centre stage, the energy in the air was remarkable. Every day the 80,000-seat Olympic Stadium was completely full – for both the evening’s finals and the morning sessions. This unique achievement and the worldwide television viewing numbers underline the position of athletics with the public and its central importance to the Olympic movement.

The facts and figures about London 2012 could be continued. Making a complete record would be a never-ending task. However, the essence of the story is the sense of the unique achievement that was provided by a host nation.

Against the backdrop of the previous Olympic Games in China, this achievement is even more impressive. London did not try to live up to or be guided by the exceptional Beijing Games. It is completely justifiable that a nation of 55 million should not wish to be compared with a nation of 1.4 billion. Instead, the organisers chose their own unique and creative way, with the emphasis being on the representation of Britain’s identity and international hospitality, as well as its particular sporting expertise, which the country of origin of modern sport unmistakably has. The opening and closing ceremonies demonstrated this impressively as did the excellent management of all at contests and the performances of the British team, which surpassed all expectations.

In the end, the organisers’ aim was achieved. From the very beginning, London 2012 was supposed to be Everyone’s Games and, without any doubt, it was. The sports world, and particularly athletics, should be forever thankful.

Please send all correspondence to:

Helmut Digel

helmut.digel@uni-tuebingen.de