

On your marks ... Get set ...



James Drife

The Beijing Olympics are only a few months away and it looks as if I won't be going. August is always a difficult month for the on-call rota. As most of my fellow consultants have young families, the school holidays are one of the few times when we of the granddad generation feel really useful. Besides, China is a long way away and I dislike visiting cities whose names I can't spell. (What was wrong with 'Peking', for goodness sake? If it's good enough for my old school atlas and our local Chinese restaurant, why change it?)

They say that 206 countries will be represented in Beijing, including South Africa and the UK. I don't know about you, but our nation isn't holding its breath. Britain is still recovering from the euphoria of 2005 when London beat Paris in the final vote for the 2012 Olympic venue. After the short-lived pleasure of besting the French, though, came the cold realisation that we actually have to host the games. The eyes of the world are on us and suddenly we feel self-conscious.

We British like to see ourselves as amateurs who muddle through, leave things to the last minute and win out in the end. Something tells us that this won't do for an Olympiad. So the bulldozers have moved into east London and already a large railway station has been constructed. (We're going for gold in synchronised train-spotting.) Normally any major construction project in the UK is held up for a year or two when someone discovers a unique species of amphibian on site. This time the biologists have been silenced. It's every newt for himself.

The whole thing is going to cost billions of pounds, but what grabs your imagination about these occasions isn't the money or the national posturing. It's the moments of individual effort, when viewers all over the world strain together with competitors and will them on. Running, jumping and throwing things are universal concepts we all understand. We know about the fickleness of fate. We want to see myths created.

Athletes can achieve iconic status. To this day the most famous runner in Wales, land of my birth, is Guto Nyth-bran, born in 1700. He brought home a hare he had chased on his dad's farm and he ran a seven-mile errand for his mother in the time it took her to boil a kettle. (*The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* adds waspishly: 'Only a cynic would query the capacity

of the kettle.') After many years of competition he died after winning a 12-mile challenge race against an Englishman. The immediate cause of death was being slapped too heartily on the back by one of the many people who had wagered their life savings on him. How's that for a national hero, boyo?

Natural talent was the theme of 'Geordie', a film I still remember from the 1950s. The fictional hero was a small Scots boy who spent his pocket-money on a mail-order bodybuilding course and eventually became a strapping estate worker. His skill with a sledgehammer was noticed by the laird, who got the local minister to turn him into a champion hammer-thrower. Wearing a kilt, Geordie went to the Olympics and won a gold medal, inspired by a vision of his childhood sweetheart on a Scottish hillside.

I cried when I saw it as a child, and again last year when we watched it on DVD. The story seems ridiculous now but it wasn't implausible then. In the Scottish village where I grew up, one family, the McLatchies, were known as gifted runners. Jim, the oldest boy, became a coalminer at 15 and Scottish cross-country champion in his spare time. He migrated to America and, still an amateur, coached world champion runners. He does not speak highly of today's commercial sports culture.

In the flesh, Olympians are awesome. As a teenager I met Bobby McGregor, the first British man to win an individual Olympic swimming medal (a silver in 1964). He seemed immense, filling the doorway, and didn't talk much. Later in an interview he said 'All I ever really wanted to do in the sport was win an Olympic gold. That was my target because that's what people remember. I'm disappointed I didn't do it.'

He had lost by 0.1 of a second. Later at Buckingham Palace the Queen told him 'If you'd had a longer finger you would have won.' I don't suppose it made him feel any better. It's the winning, not the taking part, that counts. So roll on Beijing. The South African swimming relay team, gold medallists in 2004, will be there and so will a 13-year-old boy in the British diving team. And I'll be in Leeds, glued to the television in the labour ward coffee room.

James Drife is Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at St James Hospital, Leeds, UK.