



The 2008 Olympics, With a Little Help from My Friends

2008 will certainly be marked by several milestones, one of which is the Games of the 29th Olympiad (August 8th-24th). Without a doubt China, the host nation, put on a great show for the whole world. It was China's first ever opportunity to host the games. An opportunity to host the Olympic Games is one that many countries dream of, but very few can successfully plan, execute, and support. While there have been twenty six summer Olympic Games, there have been fewer than twenty host nations. The rewards for being a host nation are very significant — global attention and marketing, global branding, positive reputation, economic gain, and much more. For these reasons, the games are highly politicized and heavily commercialized.

The Big Picture - Background

The Modern Olympic Games date back to 1896 when Athens, Greece hosted the first games. In 1914 the Olympic flag was adopted with the five interlaced rings (on the flag) representing the union of the five continents and the meeting of athletes from all nations around the world.

There are currently 205 nations and recognized territories (represented by National Olympic Committees) that participate in the Olympics.

Source: International Olympic Committee (www.olympic.org)

However, the very essence of the Olympic Games is embodied in the fundamental principles of the Olympic Charter. One of these key principles is the use of sports to promote a peaceful society and to preserve human dignity—the cornerstone and foundation of self-respect and respect for someone else. I placed these forms of respect in a category called Human Respect in my book, *Respect: Gaining It and Sustaining It*.

The use of sports has served as an effective way to bring people together and to unite nations, and this year's Olympics was no different. When you have top athletes from over 200 countries converge in one place to compete, it can only generate excitement, camaraderie, patriotism, pride, and of course a tremendous amount of respect—for the athletes. But why do these world class athletes command so much respect? For one primary reason — performance. When you are presented with a level playing field—as best as possible—and you have emerged as one of the best in your country, and you have an opportunity to compete with the best from other countries, then you arrive at a place and a time where your performance before the eyes of millions is appreciated and can make a difference in many ways.



The Bird's Nest (L) and Water Cube Stadium, China
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Once you cut through the spectacle, the grandeur, the posturing, and the commercialism, then you start to see the big picture, as embodied by the essence of the games. We saw athletes from different nations, different ethnic groups and culture; male and female athletes of varying ages, including youth; and athletes from a broad range of socio-economic background in their respective countries. Some athletes were highly recognized from their past experiences, prior achievements, and existing fame, while others came as emerging stars hoping to establish lasting reputations. Over 15,000 athletes came to compete in one of about 28 different sports—including sports that are not necessarily popular in some countries.

But beneath the big picture lay smaller pictures—lots of them. These smaller, but brighter, pictures capture many stories that inspire and hold tremendous lessons. One of the most inspirational stories of this year's Olympics, without a doubt, was the record breaking performance by American swimmer Michael Phelps. He participated in eight swimming events and won a gold medal in each one, surpassing the prior record of seven gold medals in an Olympic year set by American Mark Spitz. Also inspirational were the performances by American gymnasts Nastia Liukin and Shawn Johnson who won nine medals collectively, including a gold medal each. Under extreme competitive pressures they both put on their best individual performances to fend off fierce competition from their Chinese counterparts and hometown favorites.



American Michael Phelps

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Inspiration was also exhibited in other forms. The record for the world's fastest runner was shattered by 21 year old Jamaican, Usain "Lightening" Bolt. He broke his own previous men's 100 meter world record in stunning (albeit arrogant) fashion by leading the pack by an impressive margin and winning in 9.69 seconds—a lot less time than it takes to dial and connect a cellular telephone call. His efforts were mirrored by his compatriots as Jamaica, led by Shelly-Ann Fraser, swept all three medals in the women's 100 meter sprint. Bolt would go on to shatter the men's 200 meter record in an equally stunning fashion—19.3 seconds—becoming the first man to win gold in both the 100 meter and 200 meter races in the same Olympic games since American Carl Lewis did it in 1984.

Sweeping performances also came for the American men's 400 meter hurdles led by Angelo Taylor, as well as the American men's 400 meter led by LaShawn Merritt. A country sweeping all medals in one event is quite rare and is a testament to the advance preparatory program and hard work that the winning athletes endured.

Author of RESPECT: Gaining It and Sustaining It

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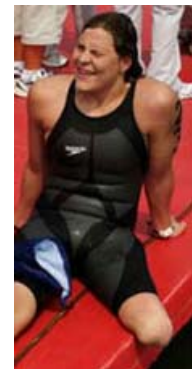
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Although the east African nation of Kenya, known for legendary distance runners, left the games with an impressive fourteen medals (5 gold, 5 silver, and 4 bronze), a truly inspiring event occurred when 18 year old Pamela Jelimo accomplished a feat that she promised her mother, who failed to fulfill her own athletic aspirations decades earlier, by winning gold in the women's 800 meter race, becoming the first ever Kenyan woman to win an Olympic gold medal—what a great gift for Mom and women all across Kenya! Jelimo's compatriot, Nancy Langat, would later go on to win gold in the women's 1500 meter race making her the second Kenyan women to win an Olympic gold.

Equally inspiring, but much less publicized globally, were the lone medals won by numerous developing countries all over the world — the West African nation of Togo (bronze), the African island nation of Mauritius (bronze), the war-torn nation of Afghanistan (bronze), the South American nation of Ecuador (silver), as well as the Central American nation of Panama (gold), and the West African nation of Cameroon (gold). While these single medal achievements by these countries pale in comparison to the mega medal awards achieved by China and the United States, the significance for natives of these developing nations matches the significance for the citizens of China and the United States, for their respective medal achievements.

Despite these wonderful and inspirational stories the most inspiring, without a doubt, revolved around the valiant effort by South Africa's Natalie du Toit in the open water 10 kilometer race, the most grueling swimming competition. The 24 year old swimmer came in 16th in a field of 25! So why was this the most inspiring story, you may wonder? While many people in life make excuses for failing to pursue their dreams, and other people simply give up after encountering an obstacle, Du Toit—an amputee—fulfilled her dream of competing in the Olympic Games with the best of the best in the world. The loss of her left leg in a motorcycle accident in 2001 marked a low point in her life; but it also marked the starting point of her quest to turn her tragedy into an inspiration for the gain of others around the world. She certainly accomplished that historic mission on a hot August day in China.



South African Natalie Du Toit
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These Olympic athletes command our respect, as I stated earlier, for one primary reason—performance. These competitors are not just athletes, they are performance athletes. Their ability (athletic talent) to transform the human potential—physical, mental, and pure will—into performance at the highest level sets them apart, thus elevating them to a higher relative status (in society). We recognize this elevated and appraised status, or position, and respond in a show of (positional) respect. Furthermore, when these athletes ultimately compete and demonstrate their abilities through their actions and deeds—win or lose—before the whole world, we appropriately appraise these actions and deeds and further respond in a show of (earned) respect. We thus see one kind of respect (our appraisal) manifested in two different ways.

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How And Why We Respect Olympic Athletes

By virtue of their achieved status position – we appraise this elevated position and respond in a show of (positional) respect.

By virtue of their actions and deeds through performance – we appraise these actions and deeds and respond in a show of (earned) respect.

Reference: *RESPECT: Gaining It and Sustaining It* (N. Taiwo, 2007)

Other than various forms of inspiration, the 2008 Olympic Games were filled with many life lessons. The obvious ones, to the perceptive eye, are passion for one’s trade, focus on one’s goal, discipline in one’s actions, attitude in tough times and in the face of adversity, performance at one’s best, and conduct in victory or defeat (sportsmanship). But there is one additional and critical lesson that is subtle to the untrained eye, yet evident to the perceptive eye; this is the lesson of teamwork—the heart of this editorial.

The role and importance of teamwork in the 2008 Olympic Games was very significant in my view. Why? Because teamwork was a key underlying factor in the realization of many of the most memorable and inspirational stories, as well as some of the very personal and redeeming stories of the games. Here are three solid examples.

The record setting perfect performances by American swimmer Michael Phelps were indeed inspirational, and much of his accomplishment can be attributed to his outstanding performance and the many qualities and lessons that he exuded. However, the history-setting achievement by Phelps would not have been fulfilled without the superb performance of his team mates in the three relay events that earned Phelps 3 of his 8 gold medals.

The record breaking perfect performances by Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt were equally impressive as they were stunning. Setting new world records in the men’s 100 meter and 200 meter sprints is one thing, setting a new world record in the men’s 4 by 100 meter relay as well is truly inspiring, and Bolt’s relay team mates certainly had a role in that. Never have world records been set in these three races by the same athlete in the same Olympic Games—indeed the ultimate triple play.



Usain Bolt and rest of Jamaican 4x100m Relay Team
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The unprecedented performance by Americans Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh in the women's beach volleyball competition will certainly stand the test of time and will inspire many young women across the world. The duo won their second straight gold medals by repeating their 2004 Olympics performance in style—a first time-ever feat by any beach volleyball team, men or women. They fought through their seven matches without dropping a single set, while winning 108 consecutive matches. The ultimate teamwork exhibited by these two top athletes, in a large measure, accounts for their tremendous achievement.

In the first two examples two star athletes—Phelps and Bolt—exhibited exceptional and inspirational individual performances, sweeping every one of their solo competition. However, they had to rely on others (team mates) to accomplish even more and make history. In the latter example two team mates—May-Treanor and Walsh— exhibited record-setting success in a display of near-flawless teamwork. So, what is it about teamwork that proved so critical and strategic in these games?

There are five key attributes of teamwork that were clearly demonstrated by those who benefited from it, and that we can all learn from.

1. **Common Goal** – each team member understood and shared a clearly defined goal. The goal established the end game and a point of focus.
2. **Passion for the Cause** – each team member exhibited passion for the team's common cause. This passion was reflected by the show of strong commitment from each member.
3. **Game Plan** – the team shared a well thought-out game plan that identified each member's role and function at all times. The plan amplified each member's strengths while minimizing each member's weaknesses. The plan also established the standard of performance expected of the team.
4. **Execution** – each team member consistently carried out the game plan to the best of their ability resulting in team performance.
5. **Attitude** – at least one team member maintained a positive attitude at all times, offering encouragement and support to the others.

For Michael Phelps and his American swimming relay team mates, Usain Bolt and his Jamaican track relay team mates, as well as the Treanor-Walsh beach volleyball duo, they brilliantly exhibited each one of these teamwork attributes; and the payoff was tremendous. Failure to "execute", on the other hand, was the cause of the disaster that struck both the American men's and women's 4 by 100 meter relay teams as well as the Jamaican women's 4 by 100 meter relay team. These three teams, favored to medal, were instantly disqualified after they failed to exchange their relay baton during key races.



But teamwork also played a strategic role in a personal and redeeming way in the games. Here are two more cases in the realm of Olympic tennis.

Tennis superstar, and then number 1 ranked player in the world, Roger Federer of Switzerland, was also favored to medal in the men's tennis singles competition. His recent string of losses—at the French Open singles final in June and at the Wimbledon Open singles final in July—was a clear incentive for him to regain some momentum ahead of the defense of his U.S. Open tennis title scheduled to begin upon conclusion of the Olympic Games. Surprisingly, Federer's hopes were dashed in the quarter final round (of the Olympics) when he lost for the first time in nine match-ups to his American rival, James Blake. Nevertheless, Federer would find redemption when he and his countryman, Stanislas Wawrinka, a top ten player, won gold in the men's doubles final against Sweden. Earlier, Federer and Wawrinka had pulled off a stunning semi-final victory over the top seeded American pair—Bryan brothers. The gold medal was Federer's first ever medal in any Olympics!

American tennis superstars, Venus and Serena Williams, both top ten ranked players, also failed to medal in the women's tennis singles competition. After their surprising losses in the quarter final round, the sisters, much like Federer, also found redemption when they won gold in the women's doubles final over Spain. It was the sisters' second Olympic doubles gold.



American Williams Sisters (Serena (L), Venus)
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Source: Beijing 2008

In both of these examples, Federer and the two Williams sisters were strong favorites to medal in individual competitions by virtue of their high ranking, world class tennis status, and preceding performances. However, fortunes are sometimes found in unexpected places. Through teamwork Federer finally added an Olympic gold medal to his arsenal of tennis trophies while the Williams sisters added another doubles accolade to their growing arsenal of singles and doubles trophies.

In a world where individual performance is often perceived as the primary way to achieve greatness we sometimes lose sight of the value of teamwork. But then comes a time when the opportunity to make history leads some to seek partnership with like-minded individuals. Then, teamwork becomes a prized tool and a means to achieve greatness or secure redemption.



The lesson is very simple — in life never underestimate the strategic importance of teamwork in transforming an individual achievement into a historic event.

2008 Olympic Games - Summary

A total of about 205 NOCs participated in the Games

55 NOCs won gold, representing 26% of all NOCs

78 NOCs won gold or silver, representing 38% of all NOCs

87 NOCs won at least a medal, representing 42% of all NOCs

90% of all (958) event medals were awarded to 43 NOCs, 21% of all NOCs

Derived from the Beijing 2008 Website (Aug 24, 2008, 1:00PM U.S. EST).
Every nation or territory is represented by its NOC (National Olympic Committee).

(Reader views welcome: ektimis@ntaiwo.com)

Cheers and thank you - N. Taiwo