

## **OLYMPICS, A KHALIFA STORY AND GLOBALIZATION.**

H. D. Vinod, September 25, 2000

The Olympic games offer major entertainment and bring the world together for the goal of rewarding individual and team excellence in open competition. Although the Olympic spirit is obviously valuable, this time around there is a sense that we are overdoing it. The corruption and drug scandals underscore a need for greater common sense, caution and pruning. For one thing, nationalistic madness may not be healthy in the new reality of global world order with blurring national boundaries. Second, the games are too long and there are too many Olympic sports. Since the entertainment appeal has steadily diminished in recent years, some pruning of events is needed. After all, the entertainment appeal is often due to media hype, embellished by national anthems, rather than a reflection of true public interest. Thousands of young and old Americans are ignoring the Olympic broadcasts in record numbers. This time around, NBC is not expected to recover the costs, since Americans are not watching. The media hype is not working. Why?

Perhaps the following old story may present a valuable analogy. Haroun Al Rashid became Khalifa, a ruler, in the year A.D. 786. He ranks among the Khalifas who have been most distinguished by eloquence, learning, and generosity. A newcomer to his court planted a needle at 50 feet and threw a second needle in such a way that it passed through the eyehole of the first. Khalifa ordered that he should be rewarded with 100 Dinars and 100 lashes. He explained that the money was the reward for his extraordinary talent and the lashes were punishment for the extraordinary amount of time he must have wasted in learning this useless skill. Minus the media hype, a great many of Olympic sports are indeed useless skills, totally irrelevant in the modern world. Only a few of the winners make money beyond minimum wage for the hours spent on the dream. The earnings come from advertisers, because of their celebrity, not because they have learned useful skills. We can take the Khalifa's criterion and delete many events that teach no useful skills and have no entertainment value. A focus group can help decide which events to eliminate.

The Olympic spirit of "winner take all" is also unhealthy and creates harmful distortions. We should not forget the plight of the thousands of youngsters around the world, who do not make it into Olympic competition, entertain nobody and waste many years of their lives. Considerable sums of money are needed for training equipment, which are subsidized by taxpayers in the form of tax-deductible funding of numerous costs of events and facilities. The cost of sports injuries is routinely borne by all who pay health insurance premiums. Many of the injuries are self inflicted due to carelessness and unnecessary. Let the Olympic judges not give extra points for risky actions and let the athletic dreamers bear the full cost of their medical care. Some training regimens are clearly a form of legalized child abuse. It should not be praised and should be illegal. The television stories invariably mention how the athlete started training at age four or something and how he or she worked eighteen-hour days, missed normal childhood fun, missed school, stayed away from family and friends and so on. The media does not talk of lifelong inju-

ries and praises the athlete who competes despite injuries. In fact, the rules should punish the athlete for taking undue risks that lead to such injuries. Skipping normal amount of time in schools in pursuit of the elusive Olympic dream can and should be banned. The existing laws against not going to school seem to have unwritten exceptions if one is an Olympic dreamer.

Use of performance enhancing drugs is an extreme form of the same win-at-all-cost madness. The coaches, national Olympic committees, physicians and users of such drugs deserve disqualification from future events if not jail time. Since there is a ban on child labor, there should be a ban on all abusive Olympic training with ridiculously rigorous regimen on young athletes below the age of, say, thirteen. The Olympic games themselves do follow all rules of the game quite strictly in the Olympic stadium. However, the rules of the game should include restrictions on how the athlete is trained. The rules should include an important rule that all athletes who did not have normal childhood hours of unregimented fun and normal hours in a school before the age of thirteen, say, should not be allowed to compete. Any athlete who has medically provable long-term injuries attributable to repeated risky behavior could be easily disqualified. This will encourage a much-needed emphasis on good health. Such rules will make for a fair competition.

The choice of the dividing line at age thirteen also has global implications in defining a world standard for child abuse. The international bankers' meeting in Prague this week is concerned with global competition and free markets. In some poor countries there are destitute regions where thirteen-year-olds help their parents in doing menial labor to help bring food to the family table. The rich countries regard the labor of a thirteen-year-old as child labor and want to punish their destitute, poor, sick, or hard-working parents. The employers are considered child abusers. Compared to Olympic dreamers, these poor youngsters do not want handouts; they are doing something useful, learning skills and respecting the dignity of work. The children and employers deserve greater sympathy and concrete help. If we pick thirteen is the dividing line, we should ban products made by children under thirteen from world markets. However, we should also buy the goods made by older children and avoid automatic condemnation, simply because rich countries have a higher dividing line. If it is all right to let thirteen year olds suffer the regimentation of Olympic training, it should be all right to work appropriate number of hours to earn money for the family. The criterion for determining the dividing line for child labor should use the Olympic training camps as a reference point. The current child labor bans are simplistic and may hurt the very children they are trying to help.

Free markets and globalization helps these countries much better than traditional forms of foreign aid. Lasting wealth comes from greater commerce, not charity. Recent research on corruption data (available on my website) shows that many poor countries are also corrupt and that the gap between rich and poor countries is widening. The economic aid needs to be intelligent aid, which develops market institutions, better infrastructure, better judiciary, more judges, better equipped police, rule of law, cleaner and less corrupt governments, technical assistance in passing freedom of information acts, and so on. They need investigative journalists and free press, which will expose child abuse. To the extent

that child labor laws in rich countries do not apply to Olympic training, they should not be applied to poor children helping make a meager living. There should be a uniform medical standard for the age at which regimentation is permissible--no double standards. When these countries learn to compete in global markets and accumulate wealth, they will automatically raise the minimum working age up to the Western standard. The anti-globalization demonstrators in Prague will end up perpetuating poverty by mixing international trade issues with others. It is only fair that what is good enough for Olympic trainees is also good enough for poorest orphan children.

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