What Olympic Ideal?

August 8, 2004
By DANIEL MENDELSOHN

The official mascots for the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens are a pair of fanciful, brightly colored cartoon humanoids, and they're very, very cute; you'd never guess, just by looking at them, who they're supposed to be. Each figure has the shape of an inverted triangle, with a vestigial face and a couple of winsome, vaguely marsupial four-toed feet. One figure is an orangey red, and the other is a vivid blue, and if you didn't know anything else, you'd be right in suspecting that one's a boy and the other's a girl.

The shock comes when you learn their names: Athena and Phevos. The first you probably know; the second is typically rendered in English as Phoebus, one of the names of the ancient Greek god Apollo. Athena and Apollo? Even allowing for the cuteness of mascots, it's impossible to see what relationship these hand-holding blobs have with the mythic originals: Athena, an armor-wearing virgin with cold gray eyes, avid for battle; Apollo, who presided over the great oracle at Delphi, patron of the most brilliant expressions of civilized culture: music, medicine, philosophy, law.

Those responsible for these darling divinities would have us believe that they "represent the link between Greek history and the modern Olympic Games." This appeal to the ancients and their culture is a standard trope -- one that, for obvious reasons, is being invoked more relentlessly than usual in the current Olympiad. But however much we love to cite the Greeks as a pristine standard, as models for contemporary culture, we do so at no little risk; we may like to think of ourselves as Greek, but the fact is that much of classical thought and culture is extremely foreign to us. Indeed, although this Olympiad's mascots were inspired (so the official Olympics Web site informs you) by an ancient Greek doll, the tradition they really belong to is the fairly recent one of infantile Olympic mascots: Misha the Russian Bear (Moscow, 1980), Sam the Eagle (Los Angeles, 1984), Hodori the Tiger (Seoul, 1988). Hodori, as the International Olympic Memorabilia Foundation's Web site tells you, "portrays the friendly side of a tiger," and when you read this, you realize what the mascots have in common: the aggressive, predatory and rapacious traits of the creatures they represent have been eliminated.

So too, all too obviously, with Athena and Phevos, whose demotion from august divinities to harmless cartoons is, if anything, emblematic of the way in which our Games differ from those of the ancient Greeks. This is nowhere more true than in the very engine of the Games: the idea of competition itself. Strangers to Biblical notions of selflessness and neighbor-loving, the Greeks experienced their quadrennial festivals of raw and often vicious competitiveness utterly free of the vague sense of guilt that we feel today when it comes to expressing the primitive desire to utterly crush an opponent -- a guilt that expresses itself in precisely the kind of kitsch sentimentality that is, perhaps, the only thing Athena and Phevos really represent.

Everything about the ancient Olympics was darker, rougher, more brutal than its modern counterpart -- no matter how much more competitive the modern Games have become since their inception, in 1896, as a tribute to the spirit of gentlemanly amateurism. Ancient Games had their origins as somber celebrations of death. The earliest reference in Western literature to funeral games is Homer's description, in the 23rd book of the "Iliad," of the games that Achilles ordered to commemorate the death of his companion, Patroclus; all four of the great Greek athletic competitions that constituted what was called the "circuit" -- the Olympian, Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian Games, some held every four years, some every two – had their cultic origins either in commemorations of the deaths of mythic mortals or monsters. One anthropological explanation for the close association of ancient Games with funerals is a primitive practice according to which, when someone was killed, a fight to the death would be held between the suspected killer and another man; with the irrefutable logic of superstition, the loser was then judged to have been the guilty party.

Death was, indeed, by no means a stranger at the Greek Games, particularly in the "heavy" events like boxing or pankration, a kind of all-out boxing cum wrestling that was considered the acme of combat sports. But what strikes us now is not even how often athletes died, but how willing to die they were. During a pankration match in the Olympics of 564 B.C., as a competitor lurched around the ring half-dead, his trainer suggested that "full dead" was the hero's option: "What a noble epitaph," he is said to have shouted, "not to have conceded at Olympia!"

This seems extreme but is entirely in keeping with the Greek ethos. Part of the reason the ancient Games were so uncompromising and often violent has to do with what was at stake. The Greeks, for the most part, had no heaven; with some notable exceptions, good and bad all went to the same gray, characterless, drizzly underworld after death, and that was that. In the absence of a post-mortem reward for moral goodness, the one thing you could strive for was immortal fame -- doing something so glorious that men would talk of you in years, centuries, millenniums to come. As anyone who suffered through "Troy" knows, this was the all-powerful motivation for the heroes of Homer's "Iliad," but it was also often the motivation for ordinary, real-life inhabitants of the Greek city-states, for whom there was no conceivable earthly achievement higher than an Olympic victory. (Athenian families, at the birth of a baby boy, would place an olive wreath on the front door, signaling their hope that the infant might one day be a victor at the Olympics.)

And so, whereas today's Olympic committee prefers to "celebrate humanity" (an official slogan of contemporary Olympiads), the Greek athlete wanted only to be celebrated himself; it was his one ticket to immortality. It is difficult for us today to conceive of the extent to which a ferocious competitiveness fueled so much of Greek culture, virtually no aspect of which was not somehow organized into a competition; for the inhabitants of a city-state like Athens, civic life was an endless stream of athletic contests, poetry contests, drama contests, beauty contests. For the Greeks, whatever was worth doing was worth competing for -- and winning at. It's no accident that three out of the four Games on the ancient circuit were established early in the sixth century B.C. – precisely the historical moment that a new kind of warfare, which required an extraordinary degree of

cooperation among infantrymen, was beginning to predominate in Greece, replacing old-style battle with its displays of individual heroism. It's as if, lacking a military outlet for their competitive energies, the Greeks inevitably poured them into these new athletic events. But the desperate rawness of the battlefield -- and its stark, all-or-nothing logic -- was never very far beneath the surface.

This all-consuming egotism at the heart of the Greek motivation sits ill at ease with the notion that you must love your neighbor as yourself. But then, the attempt to graft the modern Olympics onto the ancient ones was awkward from the start. The founder of the modern Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin -- a man primarily interested, it's worth remembering, in the pedagogical, moralizing effects of sport -- was influenced as much by his reading of "Tom Brown's Schooldays" and a romantic notion of British amateur sportsmanship as by the realities of Greek athletic contests. Coubertin thought of what he called Olympism as, indeed, a "religion" of sorts: its commandments were the "spirit of friendship" that the Games would encourage and the idea that gentlemanly cooperation in sporting events would create (as he put it) "chivalry," all expressed in the athletes' creed "of honor and disinterest."

The problem, of course, is that such notions are wholly foreign to the Greek way of thinking, which actually has more in common with the relentless egotism, nationalism, promotion and self-promotion of athletes we associate with professional sports than with any fantasy of the noble Greek spirit. A lot of the sentimentality of the modern Olympics -- the relentless emphasis on human-interest drama, the uncomfortable efforts to maintain the thin pretense that politics are absent, the ceaseless rhetoric of pure athleticism, even after the all-amateur rules were abandoned -- looks, if anything, like the uncomfortable byproduct of our compensatory desire to graft Judeo-Christian values onto the irreducible, very ancient and very ugly business of competitiveness.

It is a fierce awareness of implacable absolutes that, in the end, really distinguishes the ancient from modern athletic competitions. In 1982, a 23-year-old lightweight boxer named Duk Koo Kim, from South Korea -- the country that would give us Hodori the friendly tiger -- died after 14 vicious rounds in a Las Vegas boxing match, an event that occasioned a good deal of anguished soul-searching both inside and outside the world of sports. Leigh Montville, a sportswriter for The Boston Globe, bitterly composed an imaginary epitaph for Kim ("He gave his life to provide some entertainment on a dull Saturday afternoon in November"); the columnist George Will made Montville's implicit critique of the larger culture explicit: "A society," he wrote, "is judged by the kind of citizens it produces, and some entertainments are coarsening. Good government and the good life depend on good values and passions, and some entertainments are inimical to these." And yet however classical this rhetorical appeal to an ennobling relationship between the quality of the citizenry and the forms of the entertainment it enjoys – attending the tragic plays, let's remember, was a state-subsidized activity in Athens -- the authentically Greek take on Kim's death was best summed up by Kim himself. Before the bout, on a lampshade in his Las Vegas hotel room, he apparently wrote the words "Kill or Be Killed." It's rather unlikely that he knew it, but he was quoting, almost verbatim, another boxer, one who'd fought and died two millenniums

earlier. There's a funerary inscription at Olympia that reports, of an Alexandrian fighter nicknamed the Camel, that "he died here, boxing in the stadium, having prayed to Zeus for victory or death."

Victory or death. This, in the end, is the grimly pure ethos of the contest, where there is (however much we like to pretend otherwise) only one winner; you wonder whether this is why the poet Pindar referred to Olympia as the "mistress of truth." Death was the origin of the ancient athletic contests, and the all-or-nothing logic of death hovered over the ancient Games, where there were no illusions about what victory meant, or could often cost. But the kinds of truth about which the pagan Greeks – who lived in intimate, unsentimental and regular contact with death, violence and warfare -- had no illusions are precisely those that we like to play down or bury under sentimental and infantilizing trappings: adorable bears, cutesy eagles, rag-doll gods and goddesses. Every four years we all like to indulge in the sentimental fantasy that we're communing with the pure and noble spirit of the classical Greek past. But purity comes at a price, and that price is the truth: what is victory, and what is defeat? There is, you suspect, no friendly side of a tiger; nor, really, of an athlete engaged in a test of physical prowess. That's the truth of competition, at least as far as the Greeks saw it; but then, who wants Death as a mascot?

Daniel Mendelsohn is the author of a scholarly study of Euripides and has been a lecturer in classics at Princeton University since 1994.

http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/08/magazine/WLN130551.html?ex=1092967840&ei=1&en=939c3a57b7d76b00