

No money - no sport

Developing nations should forget Olympic glory and focus on a broad sports programme instead



By Per Vinther

In his speech to the Play the Game conference, Wladimir Andreff outlined the link between the prosperity of a nation's economy and the existence of sports facilities and opportunities. Andreff, who is Professor of Economics at the University of Sorbonne, pointed out that the number of Olympic and World Championship medals won by each country is directly linked to the nation's wealth. With very few exceptions, the rich, western countries win the medals. For developing countries, the chances of joining the world's sporting elite are limited to disciplines that require little equipment or facilities such as football, running and boxing.

According to Andreff, lack of economic development means the world's poorer nations are still finding it difficult to provide sporting opportunities to their citizens. »Any analysis of the relationship between sport and economic development cannot avoid the fact that the less developed a country is, the less it spends on sports facilities,« he said. He quoted a piece of graffiti painted on the wall of a stadium during the 1986 World Cup in Mexico that read:

"No queremos goles - queremos frijoles" - We don't want goals, we want beans.

»It is very difficult for developing nations to set aside money for sport when the citizens often do not have enough money to feed themselves,« he continued. »How can people afford new sports shoes when they cost more than a month's wages? This is a real problem in many developing nations.«

Lack of medals

Wladimir Andreff provided some startling statistics illustrating the uphill struggle facing third world sportsmen and women. Both the time spent practising sport in schools, and the ratio of coaches to athletes are much lower in developing nations, and public sports facilities rarely compare with those in the industrialised world. A 1995 UNESCO report into sporting opportunities in 16 developing nations revealed that what facilities do exist are rarely maintained, and little if any money is set aside for renewal. These countries' athletes therefore find it much harder to achieve optimal training conditions, and this is reflected in the number of Olympic and world championship medals being won by such nations.

If the Olympics are granted to Africa or Latin America, it could provide the opportunity they need to develop their facilities and infrastructure, says Professor Wladimir Andreff

In Los Angeles in 1984, developing countries won 13 percent of the medals. In Seoul in 1988 the figure was just 6 percent. In Barcelona 1992 it was 11 percent, and in both Atlanta and Sydney the total was 22 percent. Out of the 199 nations taking part in last year's Sydney Olympics, 139 were classified as "developing" nations. While "developed" nations won an average of 7.85 medals each, their counterparts in the third world only averaged 1.5 medals per nation.

Since the start of the modern Olympics in 1896, those medals won by developing countries have generally been concentrated in very few sports. In fact, 80 percent of all medals won by African nations have been in the disciplines of running or boxing.

The rich hold all the aces

The fact that the 2006 soccer World Cup was awarded to Germany ahead of South Africa came as no surprise to Wladimir Andreff. He pointed out that that historically, the right to host major sporting events is almost always awarded to the richer nations. »Around 30 countries host 95 percent of the major sporting events each year,« he said. »The rest of the world - including all developing nations - have to share the remaining five percent. We are seeing it happen again with the applications to stage the 2008 Olympics. Both Cuba and South Africa were among those countries hoping to host the games, but both countries have been told by the IOC that they do not possess adequate sporting, transport and telecommunication facilities.«

Andreff put forward a number of suggestions to break the cycle in which the process of staging top sports events is controlled by money and commercial interests. "Why shouldn't they approach the decision-making process from another angle?" he asked. "If the Olympics are granted to an Africa or Latin American nation, it would provide the opportunity they need to develop their facilities and infrastructure."

»First and foremost, governments must have the political and economic will to follow the motto 'sport for all' instead of concentrating exclusively on the elite and the fleeting glory of Olympic success,« he continued. »I also feel that we should do more to stop the drain of talent from the poorer nations to the developed countries. However, to alter the current position, we need to achieve a consensus among developing nations.« ♦

