

*Personalities like the 48-year old Grandma Luge provides small nations with a share of the global fascination that they are usually deprived of*



## *From Eddy the Eagle to Grandma Luge*

EXTRACT

Like a drama of Shakespeare, sport has its anti-heroes. Sports historian Jørn Møller analyses why they become so popular and whose interest they may serve

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**We** probably all remember "Eddy the Eagle", who, risking his life, flapped to a distance half as long as the last but one at the ski-jumping competitions in Calgary.

And from the Sydney Games very few of us can remember who were second in the swimming contests.

We are more likely to remember the representatives of Equatorial Guinea, "Eric the Eel" and "Paula the Pool", about whom the journalists claimed that a life guard was needed in order they should not drown during the competition.

These characters are of course interesting as singular stories of human interest, but although the myth has to do with individual braveness and eccentricity, do not believe that this is the important part of the story.

The story about a winner is quite often a stereotype one. A dedicated sport hero

spends most of his time in quite ascetic surroundings. This person is not necessarily an interesting one in respect to other aspects of life and culture than to that of extraordinary physical capabilities. He is a problem for the reporter and for the public, who wants somebody in three dimensions.

So although sports events have lots of qualities that make them ideal media subjects, there are also limits. The story about victory tends to be exhausted from lack of new words, and reporters are yearning for interesting human aspects and approaches to their winner hero stories. They need unpredictable, touching or eccentric behaviour among the top athletes.

A Lance Armstrong, for instance, with his miraculous healing from cancer forms a rescuing journalistic raft in a desert of well-bred, unremarkable normality.

Reversed, losers in their deviance from perfection sometimes become more specta-

cular and better topics for the press than the winning heroes, who tend to become uniform in their perfection of style and attitude and to yield no friction for reflection and second thoughts whatsoever. Not to speak of number two, who is just a bad copy of number one and forgotten on the next day.

If it is one of the laws of fascination that perfection leaves no hold for interest, imperfection on the other hand might offer a road to public attention, and give way for new media strategies.

[...] Like the clowns and the anti-heroes in the Shakespearean drama, who yield us a temporary relief from the fatal weight of destiny, sport also requires its anti-heroes.

### **Agents' Interests**

The fact, that our attention is caught by such characters is not only important to journalists, or rather: when it is important to journalists, of course it is important to a

whole range of public agents: Sponsors, organizers, countries, federations each have their particular benefits or disadvantages of the participation of such anti-heroes [...]

International federations without almost any reservation are interested in growth and worldwide representation.

Their possibility to maintain Olympic support and recognition is thereby strengthened, and arguments for media coverage and sponsor support are sustained.

Expansion is part of the Pavlovian behaviour of an international federation representing a certain discipline and it will be prepared often to consider as a member the smallest national federation, maybe consisting of one club with only few individuals as members.

This logic was clearly expressed in the policy of the International Luge Federation, which prior to Salt Lake City ran a campaign aiming to create more national federations and to have them represented.

They were very successful in doing so, and in Luge you find representatives from countries like Bermuda, Brazil, India, Tai Wan and Virgin Islands. Bermuda and India represented by their only participant in the winter OG and Virgin Island with their to only representatives. Although being among the last ones in the competitions the Virgin Islanders both set new records. Dinah Browne for being the first black athlete to compete in Luge, and 48 year old Ann Abernathy with the nickname "Grandma Luge" for being the oldest athlete ever in the sport.'

**Reversibly there are many** encouragements for a local group to get access to the support and international recognition they will find as a member of an international federation.

One team that got famous through this method was the Jamaican bobsled. They practised in a sled with wheels, and a movie: "Cool Runnings" was made about their persistence.

In Denmark, with a rainy winter climate and no bobsled tracks, a bobsled project for several years has tried to qualify for the Olympics, but the Danish OC is not prepared to let them go.

Further the greatest Danish talent in hammer throwing, Jan Bielecki, eleven times Danish Champion with fifteen Danish records, has quit this discipline in order to perform in bobsled. What are the motives? Probably there is more recognition and money in being the only Danish bob team, fighting heroically to be represented at the

OG, than being no. 33 in the hammer world ranking [...]

**From a national point of view** representation at the OG is a bit more ambiguous. The Olympic Games are by no means universal in terms of access.

Aggressive, competitive superpowers as you find them in the industrial world, possessing highly specialized top sports facilities, ready to accept or neglect chemical manipulation of athletes, systematic, professional training of kids and appliance of scientific methods have the preference.

Such nations with many potential medal holders have no interest in participating in "exotic disciplines" risking that their athletes make fools of them selves.

Although for climatic reasons not too well represented at the Winter Games, the English were not particularly happy for Eddy-the-Eagle. The risk that the Eagle might hurt himself, not to speak about the risk of national ridicule in this very steep field was not attractive.

**For a small country**, however, it is important to be put on the world map almost regardless of the reason why.

In this context the Olympic Games, forms a growing necessity for small nations without financial resources and statistic probability to raise an Olympic winner to find ways to get their share of the important publicity larger nations would always score. Similarly also societies, regions or minorities being part of other states realize the importance of events being reflected by the international media.

**One method to catch attention** be the organization of e.g. "Arctic Games", "Games of the Small Countries of Europe", "Inter-Island Games", "Eurolympics for Small Peoples and Minorities", "Olympics for Old Folk-Sports".

These are all international event that have taken place among small peoples and nations with their own traditional sports and without many chances to be represented (not to speak of winning) at the Olympic Games.

The publicity value of this method, however, is completely inferior to the fame the real OG, thanks to the world press, will endow you.

Consequently many small countries are ready to engage sports strategies that are totally inferior to the body cultures originally practiced in that particular area.

Likewise, small nations being minorities in other states are tempted to give up their

own sports in order to hit the international ranking lists.

In the Basque Country are found at least 11 different kinds of pelote, which are regional racket-ball or hand-ball games.

Several times pelote has been close to acceptance at the Olympic programme, but if that happens, it will be the case for only one form, and the other 10 are at high risk to fall into oblivion.

**A third strategy** in the efforts to catch the eyes of a whole world congregated in front of the TV-screens would be to join in without any consideration of the skills needed in the actual disciplines, which would in fact be the only option for many countries in relation to the winter games.

In this case our fascination of a grandiose loser combined with the old motto about participation's priority to the act of winning is most likely to make almost any participant everybody's darling, thus securing his or her country valuable public reputation.

But, of course, the big nations would not like it. They would prefer the pseudo-sacrosanct atmosphere of the hero-worshipping that suits them so well in their national strategies, and they would fear this aspect of sport be discredited.

**Finally let's have a look** at the interests of the IOC and the NOC's. The NOC's definitely are in a dilemma.

The committees set the criteria for selection and reflect both national and sportive interests. The national point of view tends to be identical with that of the actual state as analysed above, but what are the sportive interests?

Is it most important to participate, or should a high level for achievements be observed in order to match the rank of other delegations?

To judge from the reactions of the IOC, they hate these losing darlings presumably because they are a threat to the tumid pathos of the games, their high-flown rituals, their bombastic manifestations, their impudent hypocrisy ...

Like the Shakespearean jesters they bring things to the ground and make proportions relative. But that is exactly what the IOC fear.

Without a sacral ground for the festivities, – without the apparent control from sacred forces that seem above human influence – events are at risk to get out of the organisers' hands and to be taken over by the profane and vulgar forces of the masses.