The Evolution of the London Summer Olympics:

A Cultural Comparison on the Impact of the 1908, 1948, and 2012 Games

Kevin M. Baron

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**Introduction**

On July 6, 2005, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) selected London to host the 2012 Summer Olympic Games. London will become the first city to present the Summer Olympic Games three times, having previously hosted the Games in 1908 and 1948 respectively. Similar to the outcome of previous Olympic Games’ post-selection decisions, concerns arose over London’s financial potential as host. This created criticism and controversy from some of the United Kingdom’s journalists. However, optimism over London’s redevelopment and sustainability plans have triumphed anxieties. Most prominently, London has built the 500-acre Olympic Park – home to nine separate Olympic facilities – which includes the multi-purpose, 80,000 seat Olympic Stadium (Newham, 2012).

The following research paper analyzes the changes over time between London’s first Summer Olympics in 1908, through the city’s Games in 1948, to this summer’s upcoming Olympics and Paralympics. For the purposes of specificity and identifying contrasting and recurring themes amongst the three Summer London Olympic Games, the paper is divided into six subsections. The first section will describe London’s geography and changes in the city’s political makeup. Specifically, this section asks how London’s physical location and environment impact the Games. It also seeks to understand the most significant political transformations in London, England over the past century that have influenced the Summer Games. The second segment attempts to understand changes in London’s people: How have their cultures and traditions evolved from 1908 to 1948 to 2012? Third, this research paper compares and contrasts the most memorable highlights from each of the past Summer London Olympics, respectively.

The fourth section of this comparative paper researches the major revenue streams and the impact of sponsorships on the Summer Olympics in London. In addition, this segment discusses the changing role of the media, and how technology has altered the way in which London’s citizens communicate. Finally, this research paper identifies the differences in the drug-use of athletes, prominent scandals from Summer London Olympics, and how the perception of ethics has changed over time. It is important to note that while this research paper does in fact break up the aforementioned topics into specific sections, none of them are mutually exclusive, and there will certainly be some overlap throughout the paper. Additionally, technological innovations have been more influential in recent years than the advances between 1908 and 1948, which will be of serious interest during this research.

It has been just over a century since London first played host to the Olympic Games, and the ever-changing socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions will once again shape the Olympic landscape for the 2012 Summer Games in London. During the 1908 Games, Great Britain dominated the medal count, leading the way with 146 total medals including 56 gold medals. In 1948, fortunes changed for Great Britain. Unfortunately for the home country, Great Britain placed twelfth in total medals, earning a mere three gold medals. The 1948 games proved fortunate for the red, white, and blue, as the United States won 84 total medals, including 38 gold medal victories (Olympic Database, 2012). Athletes, coaches, citizens, fans, and entire countries are counting down the days until July 26 – the first day of the Summer 2012 London Olympics.

**Geography and Politics**

London is the capital of both England and the United Kingdom, boasting the largest metropolitan population in the United Kingdom. It is also one of the most populated cities in the European Union. The city is globally recognized as a financial center and is located on the River Thames. The vast greater London region covers over 607 square miles, while the London Metropolitan Region covers 3,236 square miles (Briney, 2010). Because of London’s close proximity to the ocean, climate is rather temperate. Average summer temperatures range between 71-75 degrees Fahrenheit (Briney, 2010). It should be noted, however, that average summer temperatures have consistently risen over the last two decades due to global warming, which could have an affect on Olympians.

*1908*

The most noteworthy geographic influence on the 1908 Summer Olympics did not occur in the city of London itself. Rather, the explosion of Vesuvius, a volcano near Naples, Italy, forced Rome to pull out as host and refocus Italy’s finances on rebuilding its devastated city. Despite only ten months to choose a site, build a stadium, and organize finances for the Olympics, the 1908 London Games were generally considered a success (Sully, 2008).

By the beginning of the 20th century, the economic rivalry between the United States and Great Britain had begun manifesting itself in the social realm (Matthews, 1980). Sport competition, and the Olympics in particular, were viewed as means of demonstrating overall superiority. British officials were responsible for refereeing and managing the games. Participants from various nations felt that many of the rulings and decisions were less than impartial. Is it a coincidence that the Summer 1908 London Olympic Games were the first and last time Great Britain won the medal count?

There were several political events that caused controversy at the 1908 Games. First, both Finland and Ireland were politically subjugated to Russia and Great Britain, respectively. The Finns refused to march under the Russian flag, and the Irish were furious that their victories counted towards the British. Additionally, “while the flags of the competing nations were flying as part of the colorful decorations around the stadium, two banners were conspicuously absent—the flag of the United States and that of Sweden” (Matthews, 1980). Although this issue was soon remedied, the damage was done. Even the final tallying of points created debate. While the Americans were adamant that the overall winner of the Olympic Games should be dependent only on track and field events, the English maintained that the scoring system would include all competitive events. The British scoring of Olympic victories essentially ensured English victory.

*1948*

London was actually elected to host the 1944 Games, but the Summer Olympics were canceled because of World War II. The 1948 Games were seen as an escape from politics, a spectacle for people to enjoy and mask the horrors of WWII. Because of WWII, the Summer 1948 Games were also the first games since Berlin in 1936. The 1948 London Olympics became known as the “Austerity Games,” because the city was still rationing out food and building infrastructure from the war. Germany and Japan were not invited to the Games because of the roles as aggressors during WWII, and Russia elected not to send any participants.

The Summer 2012 London Olympics initially raised widespread concern internally. British citizens were skeptical about financing the Games, worried that costs would spiral out of control. Moreover, “Prime Minister Tony Blair attracted controversy in late December 2003 when he was accused by the International Olympic Committee of violating a ban on engaging in promotional activities regarding the 2012 London bid” (London 2012 Olympics, 2012). However, support from celebrities such as David Beckham eventually trickled down to British citizens and now there is huge public backing for the Summer 2012 Olympic Games in London.

**People, Culture and Traditions**

Similar to Western Cultures across the world, London has become increasingly progressive and accepting of human rights and social issues between the first London Olympic Games in 1908 and the upcoming 2012 Summer Olympics. Women over the age of thirty in the United Kingdom gained the right to vote in 1918, and in 1928 women over twenty-one became enfranchised with the same rights as men. Social issues such as gay marriage and abortion rights have also become progressively prominent in the public sphere since the first London Olympics. In 2011, the UK’s government proposed the legality of gay marriage in upcoming political conventions (Geen, 2011). Moreover, abortion has been widely available in London since the 1967 Abortion Act was passed.

Regrettably, aside from general population data, reliable ethnic demographic breakdowns were unavailable for London in 1908 and 1948, respectively. However, statistics for 2012 indicate that London is much less diverse in comparison with other comparable American metropolises. The greater London area is currently 69.7.% White, 13.2% Asian, 10.1% Black, 3.5% Chinese, and 3.5% Mixed. The inner city of London is even less diverse, with 82.3% White (Office for National Statistics, 2009). Fortunately, total population data for London in 1908, 1948, and 2012 is available. Whereas most city’s populations have boomed over the last century, London has actually been relatively stagnant, even decreasing some since the 1940s. In 1908, London’s total population was just over 7 million, which rose to approximately 8.5 million inhabitants in by the mid-1940s (London Online, 2012). Contemporary London’s total population is around 7.5 million people.

London is objectively one of the economic and cultural centers of the world, evidenced by its third Olympic Games selection. Many of London’s traditions were around hundreds of years prior to the first London Games in 1908, and still survive today. For example, the “Changing of the Guard” is perhaps the epitome of London’s pageantry and has been a marvelous spectacle at Buckingham Palace since 1867. Several other cultural landmarks that have been in London throughout all three Olympic Games include, but are not limited to the Tower of London, St. James’ Palace, and Windsor Castle. In addition to London’s unprecedented architecture, the city boasts 85% of the fashion designers in the UK, twelve arts and culture Higher Education Institutes, 32,000 music performances yearly, 200 annual festivals, and over 17,000 theatrical performances each year (20 Facts, 2012). While it is arguable whether London is the premier cultural city in the world, it is undeniable that London has been – and remains – a cultural hub filled with century-long traditions.

**Olympic Highlights and Facts**

*1908*

While the 1908 Summer London Olympics will be remembered for the controversy surrounding the judges, its legacy was lasting. Rather than judges from the host nation, international judges were appointed and track and field rules were standardized (Winning Endeavors, 2012). The length of the marathon was also extended from twenty-five to twenty-six miles. The 1908 Games were represented by 110 events, spread from April to October, marking the longest running ever (Winning Endeavors, 2012). In addition, the 1908 Games introduced the first relay event. As previously mentioned, it was the most successful Olympic Games in Great Britain’s history, winning the medal count.

*1948*

The 1948 Games were the first post-WWII Olympics and a total of 59 nations were represented by 4,104 athletes. In the decathlon, “In the decathlon American Bob Mathias became the youngest ever Olympic gold medalist at the age of 17, and the most individual medals were won by Veikko Huhtanen of Finland who took three golds, a silver and a bronze in men's gymnastics” (Winning Endeavors, 2012). London’s 1948 Summer Games altered two sports forever: First, blocks were introduced in the 100m and 400m to initiate the start of races. Second, the Empire Pool was the first indoor pool in Olympic history. With the 2012 London Summer Olympics just weeks away, the Games are sure to provide a plethora of memories.

**Revenue and Sponsorships**

Before delving into specific revenue and sponsorship financials for the 1908, 1948, and 2012 Summer Olympic Games, it is important to note a few disclaimers. Specifically, this analysis ignores macroeconomic factors such as the time value of money, nominal and real values, inflation, accounting quirks, and time and opportunity costs. Moreover, several sources have differing revenue and expense values, so the given values are implicitly estimates and averages.

*1908*

Officials for the 1908 London Olympics claimed a profit of £6,377. The most prominent expense in a £15,000 budget was “Entertainment Expense” of £5,271, or 34% (Zarnowski, 1996). Only 28% of revenues came from gate receipts as the British relied heavily on donations to conduct the Games. In fact, without Lord Northcliffe’s sponsorship, proprietor of the Daily Mail, the 1908 London Olympics may not have been a reality (Sully, 2008). According to Zarnowski (1996), “the cost to the British government of building the main stadium was not included in the ‘official budget’ and would have added an additional £60,000 to the budget” (Zarnowski, 1996). In addition to personal sponsorships, Oxo, a beef organization, sponsored the 1908 marathon course.

*1948*

Similar to the 2012 Summer Olympics, the 1948 Games created apprehension amongst London’s citizens because of financial instability. However, rather than economic recession, WWII produced poverty across the European continent. According to David Wallechinsky, author of *The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics*, “There were no sponsors. There was no money. There were no drugs.” However, Coke had in fact been rationing its product to soldiers during the war for sugar, and the soft-drink conglomerate tried to leverage its brand loyalty with kiosks serving Coke products throughout London during the games (Independent, 2008). Financial reports showed an approximate profit of £29,000, with housing and meals as the major expense.

*2012*

In 2012, revenues from sports sponsorships, luxury suites, stadium signage, and hospitality purposes account for an unprecedented amount of money in comparison to London’s previous Summer Olympic Games. Sports sponsorship has proven to increase brand loyalty, and partnering with the most widely viewed sporting event on the planet is sure to heighten brand awareness. This summer, London is expected to exceed its sponsorship revenue expectations by raising £700 million. Sponsorship deals have become so intricate and lucrative that the 2012 London Olympics has four tiers: Worldwide partners, Official Partners, Official Supporters, and Official Providers and Suppliers. Some, but not all of the 2012 London Olympic sponsors include Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Proctor and Gamble, Visa, Samsung, BMW, British Airways, British Petroleum, Deloitte, Cisco, UPS, Nielson, John Lewis, amongst a multitude of others. Categorical exclusivity is paramount for sports sponsorships, but without a proper activation strategy, sports sponsorships will not succeed. Moreover, calculating ROI for sports sponsorships is nearly impossible.

**Media, Technology, and Communication**

*1908*

The biggest contrasts between the 1908, 1948, and 2012 Summer Olympic Games is unquestionably the technological innovations responsible for new communication outlets by means of the media. In 1908, the London Summer Games were only promoted through printed publications such as posters, newspapers, and magazines (Winning Endeavors, 2012). The *New York Times* and *Times of London* were the leading newspaper outlets to report on the 1908 Olympics. Telephone communication was the most timely and efficient way to transfer Olympic results amongst fans and journalists.

*1948*

While there had in fact been restricted television coverage in Berlin in 1936, the 1948 London Summer Olympics provided the first true television coverage at Wembley (Winning Endeavors, 2012). BBC paid a mere £1,050 for television rights, although programs were only available in 50,000 households, or areas with proper transmissions (Fisher, 2008). In addition, a daily “Olympic Sports-reel” was produced that allowed people to see highlights from Wembley Stadium and the Olympic Pool. For radio, the Palace of Arts was used for a broadcasting center on 32 channels. The Rank Organization also produced A Technicolor film called *The Glory of Sport* in the style of an extended newsreel or documentary (Fisher, 2008).

*2012*

In today’s ever-evolving media landscape, technology has created an environment in which the London Olympics will be broadcasted live on television around the world reaching hundreds of countries. YouTube will have highlights just minutes after events, and interactive web platforms such as ESPN.com, SI.com, and many other online news outlets will also create Olympic content within seconds of event outcomes. In short, the awareness, flexibility, and speed of communicating information through the Internet is unprecedented. With handheld devices such as iPhones, iPads, and Blackberrys, people can stream events live through Wifi and 4G networks. SmartPhones are also equipped with high definition photo and video cameras, so spectators are capable of compiling their own Olympic content. In 2012, social media is king. Through social media services like Facebook and Twitter, not only can people living thousands of miles apart share information on the Olympics, but the athletes themselves can also communicate to fans. Simply put, the technological advances that have taken place between the 1908, 1948, and 2012 require a research paper in its own right.

**Doping, Ethics, and Scandals**

*1908*

Was it ethical for all of the 1908 London Olympic judges to be from Great Britain? Evidence suggests that it was not. That is why all Summer Olympic Games thereafter included a mixed group of international judges, not just representatives from the host country. Aside from the 56 British Gold medals, a notable scandal was that of British officials helping an exhausted runner cross the finish line in the marathon. His gold medal was given to second place finisher, American Johnny Hayes (Sully, 2008).

*1948*

While athletes had used other stimulants to enhance performance, the 1948 Summer Games occurred just before the major introduction of anabolic steroids into sports. The London Olympic organizers made an ethical decision not to include Germany and Japan (WWII aggressors) in the Summer Olympic Games. But, more questionable was the decision to not invite nearly every third world nation. Surely these countries had worthy athletes. There were minor possible financial indignities from the 1948 Games: a reported loss of £405 on office furniture, and a bounced check of £280 from the Argentine Olympic Committee. It is fortunate that neither the 1908 nor 1948 London Olympic games have been scandalous. Hopefully the 2012 London Olympics will also avoid doping and other humiliations. Athletes considering the use of performance-enhancing drugs at London 2012 have been warned they will be confronted by the most advanced and comprehensive anti-doping procedures in Olympic history.

*1948*

There have, however, a few ethical issues have already arisen. For example, Dow Chemicals, responsible for a gas leak that killed thousands of people in India in the mid-1980s, is an Olympic sponsor. Additionally, “more than 100,000 continue to suffer from serious health problems as a result of the leak, while toxic waste at the plant site is yet to be fully cleaned” (Amnesty International, 2012). With extreme anti-doping measures, the London Olympic Committee hopes the 2012 games can circumvent the issue.

**Conclusion**

Each Summer Olympic Games stand out for one reason or another. Whether it was Berlin 1936 under a Nazi regime, Munich 1972 when the US men’s basketball team – rightfully so – refused to accept silver medals, or Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984 with widespread boycotts, some Summer Olympics have been painted in a dark light. In contrast, others like Sydney 2000, Beijing 2008, the “miracle on ice”, and Michael Phelps eight gold medals, will be remembered optimistically – at least from America’s perspective. It would take a boycott or terrorist attack to bring the 2012 London Games into infamy, and cooperation and cohesion amongst the participating nations to elevate the upcoming Summer Olympics into the latter category.

As Dr. Runciman, professor at the University of Cambridge stated:

The Olympic games often convey a dramatic economic, political, and cultural landscape behind them. In 1908, sport was seen as an extension of politics; in 1948 it was seen as an escape from politics; now it sometimes feels like politics is an extension of sport. Sport's massive popularity means it is now in the lead, and setting the agenda, and the politicians simply want to join the ride (Runciman, 2010).

Indeed, Dr. Runciman, the 2012 Olympic Games will be massively popular. In fact, London’s Summer spectacle is expected to be viewed by over four billion people worldwide. And the Tiffin University class of Organization and Theory of the Olympic Games will be there, live and in person.

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