

WHAT'S UP

Sports builds bonds across boundaries



Derartu Tulu and Elana Meyer the Barcelona Olympics.
[Photo: Barcelona Olympics Foundation]

The Olympic Games have had many uplifting moments, reports OMAR CHAUDHURI.

We remember the Olympic Games for the champions it produces. We recall the winners on the podium, with their national anthem playing loud and clear. However, many of the most inspiring stories from the Olympics come from the friendships it creates. The mixture of various nationalities and cultures has resulted in many significant moments throughout past Olympics.

Berlin 1936

The 1936 Berlin Olympics were a chance for German dictator Adolf Hitler to prove that his Aryan race was better than any other race. He hoped that those of African descent and Jewish athletes would prove his point by not doing well at the Olympics. Black American Jesse Owens, however, won four gold medals and made history.

What is less well-known is the connection that Owens had with one of his competitors, a white German named Luz Long. In the long jump competition, the

biased German judges kept crying “foul” when Owen jumped. They claimed he was taking off too late. Luz Long saw what was happening and knew the judges were not being fair to Owen. He advised Owens to jump a few inches before the take-off spot so that even the biased German judges could not foul him. Owen took Long’s advice and went on to win the competition.

Owen later said, “You can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn't be a plating on the **24-carat friendship** I felt for Luz Long at that moment.”

Munich 1972

Unfortunately, there have been examples where different cultures have clashed at the Olympics, leading to terrible tragedies.

In Munich 1972, the Palestinian terrorist group Black September took members of the Israeli Olympic team hostage. The terrorists demanded that certain jailed Palestinians be released from Israeli prison. The hostage crisis ended in tragedy, with 11 Israeli athletes and coaches and one German police officer being killed. Incidents like these remind us that the Olympic spirit is always under threat. We need more people to display friendship across boundaries to make sure that this spirit is protected at all times during, before, and after the Games.

Seoul 1988

Singapore athletes do not have a great history at the Olympics, but they have been at the receiving end of an outstanding piece of sportsmanship, at Seoul 1988. Canadian Lawrence Lemieux was on course to win a medal in the sailing competition when he saw that two Singaporean sailors had been injured and thrown overboard because of the rough weather. He decided to stop racing and save the two sailors, pulling Joseph Chan and Shaw Her Siew onto his boat.

Having spotted that they were in trouble, Lemieux did not care that they were from another team. Saving the two men took a lot of time, and the Canadian could only finish in 22nd place. He had been in second place when he reached the accident. After the race, Lemieux was given second place and the Pierre de Coubertin Medal for Sportsmanship because of his heroics. "By your sportsmanship, self-sacrifice and courage, you embody all that is right with the Olympic ideal," said International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch.

There was a more unusual act in the water in 1928. Australian rower Henry Pearce was midway through his quarterfinal race when he saw a family of ducks swimming single file across his path. He stopped to let them pass! Pearce went on to win the gold.

Barcelona 1992

One of the most inspiring moments of any Olympic Games came in Barcelona 1992, in the women’s 10,000m race.

White South African Elana Meyer and black Ethiopian Derartu Tulu broke away from the rest of the runners around the 6,100m mark. After a tight struggle, Tulu managed to break clear of Meyer just before the final lap and won the race by 30 metres. Tulu’s victory made her the first black woman to win an Olympic gold for an African country.

She waited at the finish line for Meyer and the two set off hand in hand for a victory lap. At the time, South Africa was ruled by a white government that had treated black people badly for decades. There had been much violence and bloodshed as a result. The country was changing for the better, but the people of South Africa needed hope that white people and black people could live together peacefully. The two runners showed the world that their friendship could overcome politics and racial tensions.

Atlanta 1996

There has perhaps never been a single Olympic team with more people from different cultures working together than the “Magnificent Seven” United States women’s gymnastics team at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.

The team featured Shannon Miller, Dominique Moceanu, Dominique Dawes, Kerri Strug, Amy Chow, Amanda Borden, and Jaycie Phelps. What was remarkable about this team was where they originally came from; there were four Caucasians, one European American, one Asian American, and one African American. All these women from various cultures could still work together. They won the first ever gold medal for the United States in the Women’s Team Competition when they were not even considered as a favourite to win.

Sydney 2000

Indigenous Australians, known as Aborigines, have had a difficult history with **colonists**. The colonists treated the Aborigines as inferior. As time passed, Australians realised that Aborigines should be treated as equals.

When the Olympics came to the country’s biggest city, Sydney, it was a chance to show off the new Australia in a grand way. Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman was given the honour to light the Olympic flame inside the stadium. This important tradition signalled the end of the torch relay and the start of the Games. It was an emotional moment for her, and for the whole country. Freeman would go on to win gold in the 400m during the Games.

Athens 2004

Britain’s Olympic team for the 2004 Games in Athens was incredibly diverse. Whilst some Britons do not entirely like seeing athletes of other races represent their country, all of them love a winner.

In 2004, they had many winners from all sorts of backgrounds. Boxer Amir Khan, whose family came from Pakistan, won Britain a silver medal in the lightweight class. Middle-distance runner Kelly Holmes, whose father was born in Jamaica and whose mother is English, went on to win gold in both the 800m and the 1,500m. Darren Campbell, Marlon Devonish, Jason Gardener, and Mark Lewis-Francis were the four members of the winning men’s 4 x 100m team — and all came from immigrant families.

In celebrating all these successes, Britain showed the world that it is a multicultural nation that understands the Olympic spirit. This may have helped its capital city, London, win the right to host the 2012 Olympics.



Shawn Crawford (middle) showed great sportsmanship at the 2008 Games.
[Photo: André Zehetbauer]

Beijing 2008

The men's 200m final in the Beijing Olympics is mostly remembered for Usain Bolt's astonishing world record time win, the second of what would be eight gold medals for the Jamaican. He originally won by over half a second ahead of Churandy Martina and Wallace Spearmon, but both were disqualified for running slightly outside their lanes. American Shawn Crawford, who came fourth, was given the silver medal instead.

Crawford, however, felt that the punishment to the other athletes was unfair, and sent a package to Martina. When Martina opened it, he found Crawford's silver medal, with a note: "I know this won't replace the moment, but I want you to have this, because I believe it's rightfully yours!"

Medals mean a lot to Olympians; Crawford showed sportsmanship to accept that he may not have deserved his.

Rio 2016

Although fighting in the Korean War ended in 1953, no peace treaty was ever signed, meaning North and South Korea are still technically at war. A famous photo at the 2016 Olympics, however, showed that friendship could exist between the two countries, with athletes connecting in one of the most modern ways possible.

In training before the start of the gymnastics competition, Lee Eun-ju of South Korea and Hong Un-jong of North Korea took a selfie together. Both athletes were getting ready to compete in the biggest competition of their lives but came together to capture a smiling memory of their time in Rio. While the politics between the two countries was tense, the universal joy of taking a selfie was too hard for the gymnasts to resist.

VOCAB BUILDER

24-carat (say “**twen**-ti for **ka**-ret”; noun) = a measure of pure gold.

indigenous (say “in-de-**ge**-nus”; adjective) = the first people living there.

colonists (say “**ko**-lo-nists”; noun) = people who colonise or settle in a new country.

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Thank you. — News For Kids, 5 April 022