

Olympic dream: education nightmare

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Sports writer Jeff Wells has referred to Australia as the “biggest little sporting nation in the world”. In the hysteria that is part of the 2000 Olympics the Australian love affair with sport has obscured other important issues. The jingoistic hype associated with Australia’s hosting and participation in the Olympics has displaced crucial questions about Australia’s future. An endless stream of media trivia about athlete’s injuries and the predicted Gold medal “avalanches” have relegated issues like the shrinkage of funds to education and research to the margins of public debate.

The hype about sport has a hypnotic effect that justifies the price tag of \$40m for an Olympic gold medal as a sign of national achievement when the spending on education in Australia is at the lower end of the international league table. Australia’s investment in research and development is 1.68% of GDP well below Asian neighbours like Japan (2.83), Korea (2.79) and the US (2.62). Total expenditure in the past decade has dropped from 1.1 % of GDP to 0.8%. In reality Australia’s spending in education wouldn’t get it into the qualifying rounds of OECD performance.

Government largesse for sport has hit record breaking levels with the last government handout to rescue the debt ridden Games totalling \$144m. This stands in stark contrast with the mood of rigid budget restraint applied to funding education by the NSW government. As the sports Czars go into the home straight and put the final touches to the Games venues, the NSW TAFE system is being subject to yet another restructuring which threatens to systematically dilute its effectiveness as the major public provider of adult training.

This sports madness has infected schools where principals who are aware of the powerful marketing potential of the images of sport are shifting resources out of areas like vocational education into glamour sports ‘excellence’ programs.

While the image makers urge us to share the Olympic dream there is an amnesia about the

social and political sacrifices that are made in the race for Olympic glory

The Olympics with its fascist, euro-centric, racist, sexist and homophobic tradition is a strange organisation to select to showcase Australia’s future. The Olympics have been accompanied by an anti-democratic political culture of secrecy and subservience to the corporate greed of a remote and unaccountable Olympic clique. The self interest exhibited by some members of the organising committees give the Australian notion ‘mateship’ a whole new meaning.

The sporting contest has a media coverage which thrives on demonisation and racialisation. The media unnecessarily refers to sprinter Matt Shirvington as the ‘best white sprinter in the world’! Why would the race for gold need to be reduced to an issue of colour ? Stories repackage racist stereotypes which present Greek-Italian/Australian Mark Phillippoussis as unreliable and disloyal and Cathy Freeman’s business dealings as proof of racist myths about the business acumen of Aborigines. The Australian sporting press feels that the thrill contest allows them to resort to the ‘race card’ unrestrained.

These toxic effects of the sporting culture are running into top form in the lead up to the Sydney 2000 Games and challenge many of the social norms around the fair go about educational opportunity, democratic principles and racial equality.