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PERSPECTIVE

## Olympics: building a peaceful and better world, usually

By Jonathan Michaels

This week will mark an Olympic first on many levels: the first time Brazil has hosted the Olympics; the first time the summer Olympics have been held in a South American city; and the first time the games have been held in a Portuguese-speaking country. Now another first can be added to the list: the first Olympics to be embroiled in such a deep malaise of controversy and scandal.

Brazil, a country that is rich in beauty and natural resources, is suffering the worst recession in more than 100 years. While recessions are generally defined as a fall in GDP for two successive quarters, Brazil has had falling GDP in eight of its last 10 quarters, leaving its citizens with a jobless rate of 11.3 percent — a number that is undoubtedly underreported because it does not include those who are underemployed, or those who have given up looking for work altogether.

Amidst its economic tatters, the country is doubling down on its bet that spending big on a world stage will rescue it from financial disaster. In 2014, Brazil spent \$11 billion of taxpayer money to build soccer stadiums and infrastructure for the World Cup. The hope was that lasting tourism would develop, bringing riches to its local economy. But two years later, the stadiums have fallen into disuse — and worse — have become a financial liability to the cities that are required to maintain them. And for this, Brazil's tourism showed no significant increase from recent years.

Now Brazil is betting big again, this time spending \$12 billion on the 2016 Olympic games, a two-week event hosted in poverty-stricken Rio de Janeiro. Yet if the expenditure on the World Cup was imprudent, the outlay for the Olympics is proving to be downright dreadful.

Thus far, the attention Brazil has garnered has done more to highlight the country's failures than its successes. As but one example, the country's new light rail system, which was built to transport athletes and tourists to and from the Olympic venues, is eight months delayed, pitting the train's opening right up against the start date of the games. Brazil is hopeful that the train will work as planned, but has had no time to test any of its systems. What's more, the \$3 billion train system (which came in at twice the amount budgeted) unexplainably ends eight miles short of the Olympic venues, forcing travelers to take busses for the remainder of the trip. Not exactly the engineering



New York Times

Olympic sailing teams training outside Guanabara Bay in Rio de Janeiro, June 27, 2016.

marvel Brazil had hoped to showcase.

The financial pressure on the city is taking its toll. In June — just two months before the start of the games — the governor of Rio de Janeiro declared the host city to be in a “state of financial emergency.” With the world ready to descend onto the city, the governor's cry of financial calamity should be a concern for all.

If Brazil's financial affairs are concerning, the very real health crisis created by the Zika virus is downright frightening. The outbreak of the Zika virus, an infection generally transmitted by infected mosquitos, began in Brazil in 2015, and is as serious as they come. The disease has been shown to cause birth defects in pregnant women and debilitating neurological problems in adults. And these are not statements of puffery. A recent study conducted in Rio showed that of women infected with the Zika virus during pregnancy, a full 29 percent developed fetal abnormalities. Now consider that Rio currently has 26,000 cases of the Zika virus.

So serious is the problem that Harvard Public Health Review is demanding — indeed, insisting — that the summer games be immediately postponed, or moved to a different country altogether. The respected publication argues that the mass migration of 500,000 tourists into the epicenter of the crisis will result in an exponential advancement of the virus, as infected travelers unwittingly bring the disease back home from the games with them.

The health concern has also reached competing athletes, some of whom are refusing to travel to Brazil to participate in the summer games. Equally concerned are media personnel who are scheduled to travel to the country to cover the games. While covering the Olympics is ordinarily a career-defining moment, a contingency of NBC employees is nonetheless refusing to travel to Rio to work on the network's Olympic broadcast.

And if it seemed as though things could not possibly get worse, two weeks ago they managed to when Bernie Ecclestone's mother-in-law was kidnapped at her home in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Bernie Ecclestone, who will turn 86 in October, is the celebrated head of Formula One, and the fourth wealthiest person in the United Kingdom. Recall that it was Bernie Ecclestone's 22-year-old daughter, Petra Ecclestone, who bought Aaron Spelling's Los Angeles mansion in 2011 for \$85 million in cash.

Bernie Ecclestone recently married 38-year-old Fabiana Flosi, a Brazilian national. On July 22, Fabiana Flosi's 67-year-old mother, Aparecida Schunck, was abducted and held for \$37 million ransom. The kidnappers were arrested over the weekend, and the mother-in-law was freed from her capture, but not before news of the abduction sent shockwaves throughout the international community. Formula One is the world's most popular sport, with some 500 million television viewers annually (the NFL, by contrast, has 200 million), creating a wide avenue for mass dissemination of the Brazilian abduction.

The kidnapping of a family member of Formula One's elder statesman only served to underscore yet another problem Brazil faces: crime. With 51,000 murders in 2014 alone (the U.S., which is significantly larger, had 12,000), Brazil has the *highest* homicide count of any country in the world. Broken down on a population basis, Brazil logs 24 homicides for every 100,000 residents, cementing a very real security concern for the Olympic games.

Demands for postponement aside, it appears that the games will go forward as scheduled, yet with an assumption of risk that is far greater than ever bargained for. The games are truly treasures of society, bringing international unity and advancement of sport in a way that nothing else can. Yet when they serve to further impoverish an already hard-hit country, and subject tourists to infectious disease and alarming crime, rational thinking needs to settle in. Let us not forget that the stated goal of the Olympics “is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world.” This is one instance where the arrow is far off the mark.



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