“Olympic Glory”: An Analysis of Australia’s Success at the Olympics:

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Australia has had quite a remarkable history with respect to the Olympics. Along with Greece, it is one of only two nations to have participated in every Summer Olympics. As a relatively new country (1901) with a small population, it had moderate success in its early involvement in the Games. But it was during the 1950s and 1960s, that Australia experienced a golden era in sports. In the early 1960’s, the renowned US publication Sports Illustrated even published a series of articles on the sport-loving Australian nation, pointing to evidence of its success in the Olympic Games as well as in other top level international sports. The nation’s athletic prowess was further acknowledged by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) when Melbourne (1956), and then Sydney (2000), won bids to host the Olympic Games. Although Australia’s Olympic participation has been one of consistent involvement, there have been a series of troughs and peaks with respect to Olympic success with the last fifteen years showing outstanding results.

Much of the Australian Olympic research to date has been descriptive and gives positive accounts of Australian participation and success. Texts written by Harry Gordon (a) and Max and Reet Howell (b) tend to fall in this category along with a large number of books by successful Australian Olympic athletes and officials. More critical types of scholarly work have been undertaken by Helen Lenskyj (c) and Richard Cashman (d), with much of their focus being on the Sydney Olympics. There has also been scholarly work by Alex Baumann (e) Frank Pyke and Ken Norris (f) and by Richard Baka (g) all of whom attempted to focus on the reasons for Australian success in the Olympics.

For this investigation the methodology consisted of a content analysis and a triangulation of all primary and secondary sources related to the topic. An extensive literature review was undertaken covering annual reports of the Australian Olympic Committee and Australian Sports Commission as well as key government reports and sport policy documents. There were also interviews with Australian sports administrators and academics. A further source of information included conference proceedings and presentations, journal publications, thesis and dissertations, special research forums, texts and newspaper editorial.

Five major reasons were identified and analysed as the main reasons behind the success attained by Australia at the Olympic Games. These included: (a) A Proactive Australian Olympic Committee and Australian Commonwealth Government: “Money Can Buy Medals;” (b) Improved Coaching, Competition and Infrastructure: “Getting the Right Mix”; (c) Historical, Geographical and Cultural Factors: “The Importance of Sport Down Under”; (d) Improved Cooperative Relationships and Partnerships: “The Team Approach”; and (e) An Excellent High Performance Sports Model and the Development of International Standard Facilities: “Going First Class”.

It is clear that Australia has had outstanding Olympic success evidenced in its medal tally with a total of 449 Summer Games medals and nine Winter Games medals as well as a record of consistent participation in every Summer Olympics. Another important conclusion could be summarized with the phrase that “Olympism is alive and well in Australia.” The Olympic movement is thriving with high levels of funding, excellent sporting facilities, a well-run sports system, committed athletes, coaches and sport administrators, a public keen on celebrating Olympic success and getting involved in grass roots promotion of the Games, government interest, corporate support and a media constantly covering Olympic news. The Australian Government has also recently released its most recent sport policy statement entitled Australian Sport: The New Pathway to Success (May, 2010) (8) with a huge increase in funding to high performance sport.

Australia is definitely one of the world’s most active proponents of the Olympic movement. The AOC has done an excellent job of embracing the Olympics and not only setting up a traditional approach of taking its lead from the IOC, but has gone beyond this and become a trendsetter with its own distinctive style. It would be extremely difficult to find another nation that can surpass Australia in terms of its overall Olympic experience. Australia’s relatively small population and geographic isolation has not been a deterrent in pushing it to the forefront of the Olympic movement. There is a strong likelihood that there will be another Australian city, most likely Melbourne, put up a bid soon to host a Summer Olympics.