

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE OLYMPIC SPIRIT?

by
Tony Webb



In a number of communities across New Zealand there are tales and fond memories of people who came to Sydney to work for the Games — and how they helped save the day.

Shortly before the 2000 Olympics, 500 Maoris arrived at Sydney Airport. The product of some ‘rogue recruiting’ on behalf of Australian security companies, they came on hope of Games security work rather than a definite job offer. Some were returned immediately when they were found to be in breach of NZ parole conditions. The rest — all of them were found jobs by the network of SOCOG staff, Games contractors and the NSW trade unions, either at the Games or in various temporary jobs across the city. The security companies and the CFMEU collaborated to build accommodation in a ‘Maori village’ at the old Arnott’s factory and all who helped them were repaid with traditional *Hangi* feast and traditional ceremony.

The dress rehearsal for the Games Opening Ceremony was about to be called off. The stadium floor had become an occupational health and safety hazard. Boards laid under a green ground cloth to protect the running track and oval had been saturated by rain in early September and then buckled as they dried in hot windy weather. Performers were tripping and falling all over the place and a 12-year-old girl had broken an ankle. The boards had to be removed, but the task was enormous — far too big for the available ground crew and the small number of forklift trucks. In the middle of the crisis meeting a bus load of Maoris arrived got stuck into the job and worked through the night with the rehearsal going on around them.

There are many similar stories — of people stepping outside of what was normal practice, taking on tasks far beyond what was expected of them, finding and being given the opportunity to put into effect creative ways of solving problems. Like training workers and the public in reducing and recycling of the huge volumes of waste — over seventy percent of which was composted or recycled and the waste paper converted into cardboard furniture. Or the company that recruited cleaning staff from all over Australia and the world, using an innovative rostering system that allowed people to chose where and when they wanted to work and who they would work with. So whole families and groups of friends came to work and earn money, see some of the Games and have fun together in the process of doing the menial tasks that made possible the spectacle of the Games. They set new standards in customer service that contributed to public appreciation of the Games. A cleaner, faced with a child who had spilled an ice cream on her T-shirt, saw the job as not just cleaning up the mess, but getting the child a new ice-cream in minutes and a cleaned and dried T-shirt within half an hour!

Tony Webb is the author of *The Collaborative Games – the story behind the spectacle*: published by Pluto Press Australia (October 2001). Visit www.plutoaustralia.com for more information.

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In all, a workforce of some 200,000 people — one third volunteers — was assembled to underpin the staging of the event. This was a workforce that SOCOG planning had indicated was simply not available in the Sydney area twelve months out from the Games. A workforce that had to be recruited, trained, given uniforms and security passes, accommodated, and transported to work and rewarded both materially and emotionally to come and do it, and keep doing it for just 16 days, then go away — and, for many, come and do it all over again two weeks later for the Paralympics. Add to that a construction workforce that completed a massive \$3.2 billion project constructing the venues and infrastructure on time, within budget, with significant technological and environmentally sustainable innovation, with an enviable safety record (only one death in 4 years) through training that delivered the numbers of workers with the skills required as they were needed over the life of the project. The result is that New South Wales has a multi-skilled workforce trained in both the trade skills and the collaborative innovative learning culture needed for modern construction projects — and has largely turned around the negative image of the industry.

Olympic goodwill? No, much more than that. Sydney succeeded where Atlanta and, indeed, many previous Olympic cities had failed. Part of the Aussie culture? More than that, though it certainly helped. Think about the Opening Ceremony. Seen by over 3.5 billion people worldwide, some 16,000 people staged a spectacle that, with cultural respect, humour, a tinge of self-mockery and legitimate pride reflected a history of Australia, its people and culture back to us and out to the watching world. But this culture needed harnessing, just like the wild brumby that became the Australian mounted stockhorse featured in the Ceremony. This required both strategy and skill and, as we found in the Collaborative Games studyⁱ, a carefully constructed industrial and human relations architecture to drive and sustain the culture change. The Games organisers brought together the public and private sectors and the trade unions to create a unique set of industrial agreements that, over time, built mutual respect, trust, honesty and openness in the personal relationships between many of the key players. The human relations strategy delivered not just industrial harmony, but a unique shift in the culture from the normally entrenched positions of power and competition to one of quite uncharacteristic collaboration. This change was sorely tested at times — like with the issues of paid and volunteer performers for the Ceremonies, the abuse of nationally and internationally agreed labour standards in the overseas production of some of the uniforms, when the wheels nearly fell off the bus transport system being provided by the private bus and coach industry a week before the Games opened, or the deluge of problems that resulted from a hopelessly inadequate system for recording hours worked as the basis for paying the Games workers.

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There are enough examples of near disaster to suggest that goodwill alone does not explain the spirit we created at that time. Rather, what we saw was a nation aware that it was under the spotlight of world attention. ‘The eyes of the world were on us and we couldn’t afford to stuff up.’ This awareness that we were being seen and would be judged (and found wanting if we played the game by the old rules of power and competition) led to an emotional response that can be universally recognised in humans from the earliest childhood to old age and across

all cultures. Psychologists call it the affect of shame — spanning a spectrum of responses from humility through embarrassment to humiliation. Shame, or the fear of being found wanting in the eyes of another, is one of the most potent forces for reflection and change — provided it isn't deflected into blame (of self or others). In the Games we can see how this prompted change in both the individuals and the culture. But then, just as occurs in the individual who is able to acknowledge this shame-embarrassment, somewhere along the way a second culture shift occurred — to a genuine authentic pride in our achievements. As one young project manager put it: 'Our worst fear was that we'd be mediocre — just good enough. We wanted to be the best!' And in the end we were — the best Games ever!

There is no single event that marks either of these points of transition. Jim Sloman, the second in command at SOCOG, who is credited with holding the process together through its many crises, describes the Games as 'like a giant jigsaw puzzle — and no-one gets to find all the pieces!' But looked at in terms of a shifting culture it is in the areas where people could admit mistakes that we see a clearing process and people getting on with fixing the problem: like Michael Knight saying sorry (17 times in 45 seconds in one public statement) for the ticketing debacle that was, in fact, none of his making. Contrast this with other areas where people denied the problem or deflected the blame, as in the Ceremonies, uniforms or bus transport disputes, and we find the near disasters.

So what? The Games were a one-off event unlikely to ever be repeated in Australia. What if, however, we could take the legacy of the Games, the lessons of **how** to build such a culture of pride through mutual respect, honesty, trust, openness and willingness to admit mistakes — and see them as learning opportunities and work together to find new and creative solutions to other more pressing problems than a sixteen-day sports spectacle? What could we do with such a legacy in tackling what is arguably the largest environmental project in Australia? — one that has to be tackled if a large part of regional Australia is to have a future. The Murray-Darling basin spans four states and contains a large part of the agricultural production on which our national economy depends. It is in dire need of a national program to achieve restoration and sustainable development — sustainable in terms of ecology, the social infrastructure and its economic viability. What lessons at election time can we glean from a model for collaborative tripartite industrial relations working together in the national interest? Clearly the 'Dubai' model of union busting we saw in the waterfront dispute and its latest manifestation in the divisive Building Industry Royal Commission is unlikely to encourage development of the cooperative attitudes that emerged within the CFMEU and the other unions involved in the Games process.

What if we could, irrespective of who is to blame, say sorry for the mistakes of the past that have damaged relations between different cultures in Australia — or the world? Shame can be felt for the actions of others — and has very little to do with guilt — and the result is a desire to heal, to compensate for and make amends, rather than punish. Indeed, as we teeter even closer to the spectre of World War IV in our reactions to the events in the USA it is perhaps useful to see these events through two eyes, rather than the single lens of 'terrorism'. The other eye might see that injustice and, particularly, humiliation felt by both sides have contributed to the rage that blots out the finer sensitivities for human life in New York and Kabul. Bin Laden speaks to many more than he speaks for when he talks of the humiliation of his people. Less spoken of is the humiliation of the 'most powerful' nation on earth — its defences rendered impotent by use of civilian technologies of air-travel and letter post in attacks on its symbols of power.

How might we apply the true spirit of the Olympic Games — the balance of our human responses to winning and losing — to shame and pride — to the task of re-establishing human relationships, whether between members of families or cultures in the human family? If the spirit of Olympism is to transcend that of a mega sports, entertainment, media and, increasingly, a money-making spectacle then it needs to address these issues — and the story behind the spectacle of Sydney 2000 gives us some starting points for asking some of the questions. I wish the answers were easy. They are not. But our future might just depend on our ability to ask these kinds of questions.

ⁱ Tony Webb is the author of *The Collaborative Games – the story behind the spectacle*: published by Pluto Press Australia (October 2001). Visit www.plutoaustralia.com for more information.