

## Why the Olympics Drive Us Crazy

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Unitarian Church of Vancouver

It's hard being an Olympics Scrooge when Steve Nash runs by just outside my office bearing the Olympic torch to the cheers of hundreds of people lining the road. Hard being an Olympics Scrooge when my own brother is a participant in the Cultural Olympiad. And with Maelle Ricker of North Vancouver, Alexandre Bilodeau, Christine Nesbitt, and Jon Montgomery winning gold medals, with K.D. Lang singing Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" in the Opening Ceremony, and when you consider the argyle pants of the Norwegian curling team, and the comedian Stephen Colbert traveling up to the land of "syrup suckers" and Canadian "iceholes" to cover the Games without, he announced, the aid of marijuana, and when you walk my neighbourhood—full of curry, turbans, and Chinese restaurants and butchers with nary a sight or sound of the 2010 Games, let me tell you, it's hard being an Olympics Scrooge.

And chauvinism aside, and the treacly hype and the corporate branding notwithstanding, *a* truth remains out there, and I'm glad someone said it, even if it was Michael Ignatieff. Earlier this month, he wrote in the *New York Times*, that "the real drama" is "each individual competitor's battle with himself or herself," how they confront the pressure and "their limitations and finding their own unique and mysterious way to win" *and* to handle loss. "That is finally what makes the Games uniquely compelling." (Michael Ignatieff, "Winter Wonder Brand," *NYT Magazine*, Feb. 7, 2010)

It's true and sometimes it's hard to imagine, especially for someone like me who isn't an athlete, that excellence in sports can be pursued for its own sake, along with the characteristics that go with that: reckless disregard for cost, intense social togetherness experienced in teams, the near ecstatic physio-psychological states attained at moments of peak exertion; hard not to be moved by displays of near unearthly prowess, and the possession, in those rare individuals, of

“archaic traits of character and temperament.” (Thorsten Veblen) I think the world would be poorer, grayer, flatter without sporting events like those taking place this month in and around our city. The ancient Greek poet Pindar noted the quasi-religious and festive character of the Olympic Games, and others have observed since then that our feelings for sports may be residues of deep-seated needs derived from our past as hunter-gatherers: the intense physicality, the drama of the chase, the active respite from work through play from which sports is derived. (see Roger Scruton, ‘Sport,’ in *A Dictionary of Political Thought*, 2007, p.660)

I think I share with you what Douglas Todd of the *Vancouver Sun* noted in a recent article—and that is: “Metro Vancouver residents are all at sea about the Games. Sixty percent believe the Olympics are a waste of money that could be used for more important things. But 73% say that Canadian athletes make them proud.” According to polls, he writes: “British Columbians are among the most independent, individualistic and free-thinking people on the continent.” No wonder then that our responses, our authentically, dramatically different responses have ranged from just wanting to get out of town, to demonstrating against the Games as an “ill-conceived use of public funds, benefiting the social elite” and multinational corporations, to a full-throttle flag waving, Vancouver boosting love of the Games as a genuinely feel-good, once-in-a lifetime experience. (Douglas Todd, ‘Different ways to respond ‘authentically’ to Olympics,’ *Vancouver Sun*, February 17, 2010)

I don’t have tickets or cable, so I won’t be seeing much of the Olympics; but I turn avidly to newspaper coverage of the Games every day to see what’s happened. I was horrified along with everyone else at the death of the Georgian luge athlete; I feel an uplift every time a Canadian wins a medal, and I have this irrational, intense hope that Shani Davis—the Black American speed skater—wins the gold in every race he’s skating. *And* I’ve been bombarded with e-mails left, right and center for weeks now about the Olympics.

The whole thing's crazy making. Pride, disdain, glory, disgust, a sports fan's avid interest; guilt that I'm not camping out in a red tent downtown to protest against homelessness; outrage at how we're going to get stuck paying the bills for something that most of us don't want and can't afford; awe at the sheer heights and acrobatic prowess of Shaun White on his way to winning the snowboard half-pipe gold medal; disbelief in learning that the city is so cash strapped by the Olympics that road crews won't be able to do any major curb and sidewalk work for two years; anger at the secrecy, brought to my attention by UCV member and journalist Stanley Tromp, the secrecy of the Province's Olympic Games Secretariat that manages the Games—and now refuses to keep minutes of their meetings and multi-million dollar funding decisions; embarrassment at how easily I got choked up watching Marianne St. Gelais skating around the track with a Canadian flag after winning the silver medal on her birthday—do you see what I mean? The Games have rendered me rather raw; I feel like a shuttlecock batted back and forth from one mental and emotional state to the next in a matter of moments. No wonder a crabby friend of mine decided to flee Vancouver altogether for the duration of the Games; it's not easy being a hard-bitten Olympics Scrooge—a one-note, one dimensional misanthrope, because at any moment one's icy disdain and fury is liable to melt into a puddle of confused thoughts, feelings, and, god forbid—pleasure, respect and pride in what's taking place!

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I remember very clearly attending my first interfaith meeting of Vancouver's religious leaders. It occurred in the first month of my ministry here in September 2002. A delegation from the city led by then-mayor Larry Campbell, and representatives from the Provincial government and Vanoc, made a presentation about Vancouver's bid for the 2010 Olympics, with a call to our interfaith group to throw our support behind the effort to secure the Games. I had just moved here from Salt Lake City which had hosted the 2002 Winter Olympics; as I listened

with a sinking feeling, I felt like that character in the *Li'l Abner* cartoon strip who walks around everywhere with a dark rain cloud over his head; you know the one, the jinx who brought bad luck to anyone unfortunate enough to be in his vicinity?

I had heard and experienced it all before: the civic boosterism, the extravagant claims about being a world-class city, the economic uplift, job training for the unemployed, assurances of loads of social housing, and why this was our near moral duty to fall in line. What I remembered was years of traffic jams, construction, out of reach ticket prices, heavy military and security presence, a string of broken promises about social justice benefit, a two week downtown extravaganza that enriched corporate sponsors and, once the hoopla was over, a city left a little punch drunk and pretty much as it was before. I said as much to the group assembled there more than eight years ago, and why I didn't feel compelled *at all* to fall in line and get with the program.

A river of ink has and is flowing from and over these Games; just about everything imaginable has and will be said. At this point, I just want to get one thing off my chest and then pass on to something that I think is beautiful and remarkable; something that does and doesn't have anything to do with the 2010 Winter Olympics.

So here goes. First, I agree with Pete McMartin of the *Vancouver Sun* when he wrote a couple of weeks ago, that the Olympics "are a colossal waste of money. They generate no measureable economic impact." Public policy in this Province, backed by policies and monies from all levels of government, has led to eight years of distraction from real need, and billions of dollars of public funds spent on a convention centre in a world already overcrowded and unused by them, "a new highway to a posh ski resort that is flirting with bankruptcy, and a rapid-transit line to the airport that was built at the expense of the Evergreen Line which Translink and Metro

Vancouver have argued for years should be the metropolitan area's transit priority... Let's not kid ourselves why those billions were spent [and at whose behest], or ignore what other infrastructure [or social needs were] sacrificed so they could be built." (McMartin, "Why I loathe the Olympics and why I hope they succeed," *VS*, February, 6, 2010)

For the now estimated \$6 billion it's really costing us to host the Winter Olympics, we could:

- build 20,000 units of social and supportive housing—virtually taking care of the entire existing social housing needs in this city
- build an Evergreen Line with billions left over to eradicate Translink's budget shortfalls for decades to come and buy hundreds of buses
- pay the tuition for 110,000 medical students
- fund all of the several hundred social welfare institutions in the DTES receiving federal, provincial and municipal funds for more than sixteen years—services that include social housing, food banks, charities, drug and addiction services and welfare payments
- We could build not just one new hospital to replace the gain St. Paul's downtown, but six of them
- We could fund the entire budget of the seismic upgrading program for BC's schools four times over. This program has been criticized repeatedly for its slow pace to re-fit at risk schools. To date, of the hundreds of schools in need of upgrading across the Province, only 32 have been completed. (see McMartin, "What \$6 billion Could Buy," *VS*, February 25, 2009)

Social housing, social services, mass transit, health care, public security, public education...you get my drift. Clearly, just as federal and provincial governments are forecasting up-coming "austerity budgets" this Spring, the problem isn't *really* money, it's *priorities*; the money exists, it's just not for the purposes of most people. We cannot recover what we have lost to the past-eight years where public policy discourse and action were held captive by a seventeen day sporting and multi-national corporate extravaganza. This, I believe, is a public tragedy, a

deflection of our will and dreams; our energy and resources away from achieving the common good, away from what is really important.

But as I said in the beginning of these remarks, it's hard being an Olympics Scrooge. Though I have this haunting, tragic image of a nation only half-built etched in my mind, I don't want to continue tapping out one plaintive, tragic note in the time remaining. I have something else I want to share with you, something very much related with the *ideals* of the Olympic Games. That word: *game*, is derived ultimately from *gaman*; an Old High German word that means "joy" and "mirth." And I want to talk about a game, or sport, which, I believe embodies that ancient meaning; it's called "Ultimate" or Ultimate Frisbee.

The Frisbee disc that many of us enjoy hucking around on a beach or a park was the brain child of Walter Morrison who died last week in his home in Monroe, Utah. It started in the forties when he and his wife Lu began tossing a cake pan on a beach in California. Morrison thought about ways to make the pans fly better, and in 1948 he began manufacturing a disc from plastic, sold them at local fairs, and eventually signed over production rights to Wham-O Manufacturing that then renamed the discs "Frisbees" because that's what college students in New England dubbed the discs for the pie tins produced by the Frisbie Pie Company in Boston that *they* had been tossing around. ("Utahn launched wildly popular Frisbee saucer," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, February 12, 2010)

The sport of Ultimate began in 1968 when some high school nerds and stoners in New Jersey developed the rules for what they called "Frisbee Football;" they created inter-school teams, scheduled competitive games, and thus the sport of "Ultimate" was launched. Today, Ultimate is played in more than forty-two countries by hundreds of thousands of women and men, girls and boys in university and organized clubs and associations; and, I will add, Canadian teams are consistently among the best in the world.

Ultimate is a “player defined and controlled non-contact team sport.” Ultimate teams, frequently co-ed, are comprised of seven members and allow numerous substitutions because it is extremely physical with players constantly running, sprinting, leaping and diving as the disc is being passed the width and length of the field. Ultimate is typically played on a field about the size of a football or soccer field: 110 meters long and 37 wide; the playing field proper is 64 meters long, with end zones at either end that are about 23 meters deep. The disc may be passed in any direction and is advanced down the field by passing it to other players. Points are scored when a player catches a pass in the end zone, and a standard game is played until a team scores fifteen points. If a disc is dropped, possession passes immediately to the other team and play resumes. Players don’t run while holding the disc, but a lot of running is taking place as players position themselves to receive or defend against a pass; and tactics are constantly played out during the game with lateral movement back and forth and runners streaking down the field.

It’s an exciting, exhilarating game to play and to watch. It’s a near ideal sport for spectators because, usually, you can stand right along the side lines; the game is playing out right in front of you, and you can jog up and down the field if you want to stay close to the action.

Above all though, what makes this sport unique and eminently satisfying to play and watch is due to its ethos, a guiding principle that’s called “The Spirit of the Game.” “The Spirit of the Game” is defined as follows:

“Ultimate relies upon a spirit of sportsmanship that places the *responsibility for fair play* on the player. Highly competitive play is encouraged, but never at the expense of *mutual respect* among competitors, adherence to the agreed rules, or the *basic joy of play* (the joy of play!). Protection of these vital elements serves to eliminate unsportsmanlike conduct from the Ultimate field. Such actions as taunting opposing players, dangerous aggression, belligerent intimidation, intentional infractions, or other “win-at-all-costs” behavior are contrary to the spirit of the game and must be avoided at all costs.” (*Official Rules of Ultimate*, 11<sup>th</sup> edition, Ultimate Players Association, 2007)

*Sportsmanship. Responsibility. Fair play. The basic joy of the game.* And let me tell you, are they ever joyfully serious about it! There are no referees in Ultimate. On the field and the sidelines, players govern themselves according to “The Spirit of the Game.” They call themselves on their own infractions of the rules. And if there is a disagreement, the play stops and mutual agreement about how to proceed is arrived at by respectful discussion; and this, by highly competitive, incredibly talented athletes. It is glorious to watch in action, and unlike just about any sport I have ever seen. Extraordinary athleticism, no referees, a sport self-governed by competitors who play to win, but play for joy and according to an ethos of mutual respect— Ultimate seems to me like the most Unitarian sport I know. And it’s not uncommon for members of opposing teams to play social icebreaking, goofy games together following a highly competitive tournament.

I’m not sure why Ultimate doesn’t garner the kind of media coverage lavished on other competitive sports. In fact, in a nation obsessed with identifying *any* Canadian, *anywhere* in the world who excels in *anything*—from pop culture to sports to high finance to fashion design—even if they haven’t lived in Canada for years, it’s more than a little mystifying to me that Canadian athletes playing Ultimate on Canadian teams that regularly win North American and international tournaments, mystifying that these accomplished athletes and their sport is so little known, get so little media attention, and so little support from schools, colleges, and sponsors. UBC lavishes millions on mediocre men’s basketball and football teams, while their women’s Ultimate team, that recently beat high powered American teams to win the North American college championship, receives no funding or no support at all.

Two years ago, Vancouver hosted the International Ultimate Championships—men’s and women’s teams from 42 countries, and it went completely unnoticed by the local media. It’s not

for want of athletic prowess, beauty, and highly competitive play. Perhaps, it took place under the radar precisely because it is a sport started by nerds and stoners, because it is a game wholly governed and refereed by the players themselves, a game whose ethos is mutual respect, fair play, and joy of the game. In order to love someone or something, it helps if it's not state-of-the-art and super cool. It helps that it's fallible, unhyped, unsponsored, unadored by the crowds; something and someone you root for and raise to the apex of the winner's podium in your mind and heart.

Like I said, this has absolutely nothing and everything, I believe, with the Winter Olympics. Perhaps, for me, the contrast between Ultimate's "Spirit of the Game" fed by the very root of sports *which is joy* and the International Olympic Committee, the BC Olympic Games Secretariat, and Olympics corporate sponsors who seem to employ the Games as a device for marketing and nationalism, perhaps it's *that* contrast that's been driving me a little crazy these days.

In closing, I return to the *Vancouver Sun's* Pete McMartin; he said it for me—I loathe the Olympics and what it's done to us these past eight years; and I also hope that they succeed—I don't want to be an Olympics Scrooge. I do hope though, after the punch drunk revelry ends, and when the bills comes due, and we've sobered up a bit and reckoned the time and money we've lost that should have been dedicated to making Canada a more decent place with its residents well-housed, secure, and gainfully employed, that we will rededicate ourselves to labouring for a nation still only half-built. To achieve *that*—maybe we can turn to Ultimate's "Spirit of the Game" to guide us: Sportsmanship. Responsibility. Fair play. The basic joy of the game. May it be so.