

THE SPORTING LEGACY OF THE 1984 LOS ANGELES GAMES: ARE THERE LESSONS FOR LONDON?

By Dan Lee

Entering the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, it was unclear whether the Olympic movement could survive.

As the U.S. publication Sports Illustrated noted, the previous four Summer Olympiads suffered from tragedy, political controversies and financial problems:

- the 1968 Games in Mexico City were marred by controversy over U.S. athletes giving the “Black Power” salute on the medal stand and by a massacre of demonstrating Mexican students;
- the 1972 Games in Munich will forever be remembered for the murder of Israeli athletes by Palestinian terrorists;
- Montreal took years to pay off \$1 billion in debt from the 1976 Games and experienced troubles when 30 African nations boycotted the Games over South Africa’s apartheid policy;
- The Soviet Union spent \$9 billion on the 1980 Games in Moscow, only to face a 62-nation boycott led by the United States over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Peter Ueberroth, the head of the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, was determined to make the Games a success. And they were. Despite a boycott led by the Soviet Union, the 1984 Games were the largest Olympics to date in terms of participating nations and athletes, and it was financially successful. Ueberroth succeeded in gaining millions of dollars in corporate sponsorships for the Games. He also was able to hold down expenses, because Los Angeles had many existing public and private facilities that could be used as competitive venues.

As The Los Angeles Times reported in 2009:

The very things that made the Los Angeles Games financially sound – among them the refusal by organizers to build enormously expensive sites – allowed a startling \$232 million surplus. Of that, \$93 million was promised to youth sports in Southern California, with the expectation that the money would run out within 20 years.¹

Five years past that date, the money is still coming.

So far, \$185 million – proceeds of the investment of the original sum – has been handed out to about 1,000 groups. At least 2 million kids have been helped. Fifty thousand coaches have been taught skills, to be passed on to additional thousands. A generation of volunteerism has been fed.

¹ The remainder was donated to the U.S. Olympic Committee for athlete development programs]

And still the money comes, at a clip of about \$8 million a year. Officials at the LA84 Foundation now believe the giving can be sustained forever.

“It’s the legacy that keeps on giving,” said the foundation’s president, Anita DeFrantz.

The premise of the donations to local sports groups is simple: Skills taught in athletics – teamwork, discipline, focus – will spread into the rest of a child’s life, even if interest in basketball or soccer or volleyball wanes.²

Since 1985, the LA84 Foundation (<http://www.la84foundation.org/>, originally known as the Amateur Athletic Foundation) has funded organizations that teach kids how to swim and how to run the L.A. Marathon, and that sponsor youth football, basketball and soccer leagues. LA84 also boasts an extensive library of information on sports and the Olympics in particular.

Southern California youth sports organizations can fill out an online form at LA84’s website to apply for grants. Eligible organisations must be in an eight-county area that covers more than 22.5 million residents.

Grants are awarded on the basis of whether the applicants and their project meet the foundation’s priorities and interests, which include communities underserved by traditional sports programs, programs for minorities and girls and those who are physically or developmentally disabled.

Today, **DeFrantz**, a former Olympian and International Olympic Committee member, serves as LA84’s president and as a board member. Also serving on the board of directors are **Ueberroth**; Olympic champion decathlete **Rafer Johnson**, who lit the Olympic flame in Los Angeles; and award-winning film and TV director **David Wolper**, who directed the opening ceremonies at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.

DeFrantz notes on the LA84 website that youth sports need funding more than ever, especially during the current recession. School districts – such as Los Angeles Unified, the nation’s second-largest public school district – are cutting funding for many programs including team sports. LA84 has provided funding to restore coaching stipends.

Will the London Games end with surplus funds? If so, how will they be used and who will make those decisions? The responsibility for sport legacy is split among local, national and six regional governmental bodies. It’s not clear who will make the decisions, especially after the London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (LOCOG) closes in 2013.

The question deserves consideration, thought and discussion. Eastern London boroughs that will host the Olympics are among the neighbourhoods in the United

² Decker, Cathleen. “The Week; L.A.’s gold medal event is still a winner 25 years later; There’s still gold for L.A. children.” Los Angeles Times. 2 August 2009. A31.

Kingdom that have the highest levels of inactivity and obesity and the highest potential for future health problems.³ One possible legacy is for the Olympics to help change the lives of those residents and lead them into healthier lifestyles.

³ “Storing up problems for the future.” CACI. 4 January 2008. <http://www.caci.co.uk/141.aspx>