

SYMBOLOLOGY OF SUCCESS
ABORIGINAL GAMES AND THE INSIGNIA OF OLYMPIC
VALIDATION

Michael K. Heine

University of Western Ontario

The Self-referential Symbolic Inventory of Olympic Sports

The fact that the Olympic Games constitute themselves as a “great symbol¹ has been noted by a variety of observers; MacAloon is not the only one but one of the more influential authors to note here. The wide-ranging symbolic significations produced by the Olympics derive their efficacy from a heterogeneous inventory of significations some, but surprisingly few of these, derived directly from the inherent logic of competitive sports. The immediate symbolic validation of competitive performance of sports centers around awarding of medals of differential symbolic value, as well as the symbolic segmentation of space along an hierarchical axis by means of the victory awards podium.² The awarding of medals and the winner's ascension to the highest position on the podium, constitute the moment where the competitive sports model self-referentially validates itself the medal imbuing with meaning instances of superordination (winning but not of its necessary counterpart, the loser's subordination), the medal in turn only taking on meaning, through its own act of designation, as symbolic reflection on the differential performances that function as the signifier enabling the medal's symbolic force. It is the stabilizing effect of

this self-referential circularity that serves to inscribe into the competitive moment the ostensible inevitability of its range of symbolic significations.

The self-referentiality of the medal and podium, as discursive events, identify them, in Jürgen Link's conceptualization, as belonging to the “specialist discourse” of sport, a mode of discourse that, in respect of the area of social production that locates it, is largely denotated in the understanding of those whose subject positions derive meaning from its efficacy. Link distinguishes such specialist discourses from the structure of the “interdiscourse”³ emergent at the interface of specialist discourses and the multitude of discourse strands of popular culture. It is the interplay of these discourse strands in the interdiscourse that enables the constitution of normalistic subject positions⁴ and habituates social agents towards the normalized acceptance of extant dominant discourses; Link argues that specialist discourses tendentially serve to validate the dominant discourse strands that emerge in the interdiscourse.⁵

Thus, the great variety of interdiscursive events emanating from the Olympic movement, articulate significations from a wide range of discourses. Some of these challenge the movement's underlying ideological claims (the *tropes* are sufficiently well known to require enumeration here), while others seek to mobilize them in the cause of social transformation. The attempts to sabotage the Olympic torch relay leading up to the Beijing Olympics, to protest the problematic state of human rights in the People's Republic of China and Tibet, can be understood as politically charged instances of such variegated interdiscursive events – interdiscursively valorizing a form of cultural and symbolic

capital whose germane site of production is the field of sport, in a number of other such fields: The water Parisian protesters successfully lobbed at the torch was intended to dampen, in the political field, the ardour of a political system engaged in systematic repression in the autonomous region of Tibet, but most certainly not to diminish the torch's symbolic force to project a positive message in the field of sport. In fact, the struggle over the torch's unobstructed right of passage implicitly served to enhance its symbolic force to project such a message about sports, inasmuch as it was the latter that rendered it a desirable object of symbolic contestation in the political field. In Link's scheme, in this sense, it was the fact that the torch's symbolic force could be multiply determined in the interdiscourse, that rendered it an object worthy simultaneously of symbolic and material transport and blockade, on a global scale.

Thus, of equal interest for my present argument is what these liquid interventions left unchallenged – in the main, the symbolic validation of the sports model's immanent structure itself, which, as noted above, in its present state is heavily inflected towards the habitual acceptance of competitive sports as the general signifier bounding its logic of practice. Authors such as Eichberg, Hoberman, and Guttmann have conceptualized this dominant discourse of sport as emanations of the “performance principle.”⁶

In this context, I wish to examine a challenge to competitive sports as a “discourse formation”⁷ and its Olympic logic of practice occurring at its remote northern margin. The challenge in this instance, emerges in the interdiscourse, but effects not a repositioning (or transformation) of elements of the interdiscourse: It poses a challenge to the self-

referentiality of the specialist discourse of sport itself, by giving that very discourse's symbolic inventory itself (the medal in particular), an oppositional significance. It appropriates the signifier to invest it with oppositional significations.

This occurs at a northern sports and traditional games-festival, the eponymously named *Dene Games*, a festival held yearly in different communities of the Canadian Northwest Territories. The *Dene Games* are a sports and cultural gathering, which although organized in the competitive Olympic format, produce symbolic validations for participation that often are at considerable variance with the performative dispositions engendered by the performance principle – even though the use of material signifiers is derived from the Olympic antecedent, and would not 'make sense' without it, even in its resulting oppositional determination. Frequently, the symbolic reinterpretations that occur serve to reposition the practice out of the organizational and signifying context of a sports competition more firmly into the relevant frame of culturally significant Indigenous physical activity practices.

The Dene Games Gathering

Two regional variants of *Dene Games* gatherings have been held since the mid 1970s. The Dene are the Aboriginal inhabitants of northern Canada, whose culture is in distinct contrast to that of their northern neighbours, the Inuit). In anthropological terminology, the Dene are also referred to as 'Athapaskans.'

The *Dene Games* organized by Dene sports organizers in response to the success of

the *Northern Games*, event organized by Inuit in the Mackenzie Delta town of Inuvik, NT. At the *Dene Game*, traditional Dene games exclusively are played. In the 1990s, two variants of this festival existed. One covers the area around Great Slave Lake and the upper reaches of the Mackenzie Valley, while communities from the region around Great Bear Lake (Sahtu De) and the Mackenzie Delta send teams to the other festival. At present, the future of the *Games* uncertain: Staging the event places considerable organizational and administrative strain on the organizers. Mustering the organizational energy to stage the event tends to fatigue the willingness to do so in the limited number of communities available to host the *Games*.

In staging the *Games*, the Dene organizers have to account for the fact that they are dependent on the organizational infrastructure and assistance of the Territorial government, in Yellowknife. Being itself thoroughly invested in the forms of validations offered by the dominant sports model,⁸ the government's Recreation Division expects, as required by its mandate, tangible and measurable 'results' in return. Performance scores are the expected proof of organizational substance: Statistics, tables, records and medals are thus transposed from the dominant sport system to the site of traditional games, where they constitute a measure of organizational success and failure. The point system which allows the participating communities to vie for a trophy given to the most successful team, is the most obvious case in point. For example, the statistical tabulations that were required to make this determination for the 1991 Rae-Edzo Regional Dene Games, take up no less than nineteen single-spaced pages of the final report. And it is to performances in the medal

ranks that the greatest point value is assigned.⁹ In other words, the basis for such evaluations are rationalized competitions and structured schedules, developed so as to ensure comparability of performance by individual participants, as a form of accountability, resulting in a specific statistical validation of superior performance. This clearly stands in marked contrast to the elements of co-operative participation that characterize the traditional games in their traditional setting determined, in a culture traditionally reliant for its survival on cooperative behaviour in all areas of social life, by an implicit avoidance of overt comparisons of competitive performances. One anthropologist has referred to this dominant cooperative aspect of the generalized habitus in Athapaskan society as “bush consciousness.”¹⁰

One might assume, then, that traditional cooperative meanings cannot be accessed in the context of contemporary games-festivals that are modelled after the competitive format of the Olympic Games. However, the participants succeed in a variety of ways in redirecting the proceedings toward traditional meaning systems by circumventing the organizational competitive format, thereby transposing those elements of the specialist discourse of sport that inherently validate the symbolic significance of competition and of winning, viz., the symbolic significance of the medals awarded to the victors in the competitions.

Team composition

Thus, in contrast to the rigid formal rules determining team composition in sports

competitions, the composition of teams at the Dene Games was characterized by a considerable degree of flexibility. In order to ensure adequate accountability for the expenditure of travel funds, the Sport & Recreation Division required prior registration of participants by the communities involved. Since many of the communities sending teams do not have road access, the chartering of bush planes became a necessity. The expenses incurred were often considerable, and to a large extent defrayed by government subsidies. Theoretically all participants were to have been selected and registered prior to arrival. In practice, however, it happened on a number of occasions that vacant positions had to be filled on the spot. Sometimes, passers-by would be 'pulled off the street' and invited to join the team that was boarding the plane. On another occasion, and much to everybody's amusement, the ring toss¹¹ competition at the 1991 *Sahtu Dene Games* was won by a non-Aboriginal tourist from New England who on a whim took the place of a Dene competitor who had failed to appear at the scheduled time.¹²

As trivial as this occurrence may appear, it points to another aspect of the expressive function of the games which locates them as firmly in the traditional domain as in the sphere of commercial Euro-Canadian sports, and perhaps more so. The flexibility of team composition was closely linked to the relative lack of competitiveness exhibited in many of the events. By the standards of modern sports, the level of athletic achievement exhibited during the two Dene Games was not very high. This was true of events such as the bow-and-arrow shoot, the spear throw, and the axe throw. For example, the participants in the bow-and-arrow competition at the 1991 Sahtu Dene Games fell into two groups, one

made up of a single competitor who had evidently handled a bow before, and a second consisting of all-comers. Needless to say, the experienced competitor won the event by a wide margin an outcome that caused him some visible embarrassment. In contradistinction from traditional procedures, the spear throw at the 1991 Rae/Edzo Games was organized as a target rather than as a distance competition. Competitors not only had to hit the target, they also had to firmly lodge the spear in it. This turned out to be beyond the participants' physical skills, and the medals were ultimately awarded to the participants with the greatest number of 'hits.'¹³

The flexibility of team composition, then, follows from the low level of differentiation relative to technical or athletic skill. There rarely are irreplaceable athletes on any given team. Athletic excellence being relatively unimportant, winning as the expression of superior skills thus cannot be a significant criterion of distinction or prestige. During the games, all athletes were applauded, the proficient as strongly as the mediocre. The ostensibly low level of athletic competence in these traditional events is an indicator of the fact that little importance was attached to the concept of competitive engagement, and to the symbolic significance of winning.

Medals and other awards

A similar point can be made with regard to the various kinds of awards that could be won. At the *Dene Games*, gold, silver and bronze medals are awarded the 'Olympic' derivation will be readily apparent. The competitors were clearly satisfied to have won the

medals, but the greatest applause during the medal presentations was reserved for the winners of the two *Most Valuable Participant* awards, one for a male winner, the other one for a female winner. These awards were not given for athletic achievement, that is to say, for the demonstration of skills germane to the field of sports. The awards were given to acknowledge the most significant 'cultural' contribution that occurred in the context of the Games gathering. The winner of the men's award, for example, had not performed particularly well in any of the competitions; in fact, he had not won a single medal in any of the events. He received the MVP award for having left his fish camp in the bush at the height of the summer fishing season in order to attend the Games. The significance of such an achievement in the context of an organized physical activity competition may not be immediately apparent. The elders who made the decision wanted to situate the Games firmly in the domain of the traditional subsistence life-style by linking them to one of the core elements of traditional life, here represented by the winner's demonstrated skill in an important subsistence activity.¹⁴

Similarly, an award was given to the best team overall, determined by means of the detailed statistical tabulations noted above. This award, a hand-made and hand-painted paddle, was greatly coveted by every competitor. It had been designed and manufactured by the popular Dene artist Archie Bailey, and as such was an object of great cultural significance in its own right; it was not merely desirable because of any inherent connection between the artifact as prize and symbol, and the notion of validating competitive success in athletic competitions.

As is common in southern communities, the paddle is displayed for public view in a prominent location in the winning team's home community. At the subsequent year's competitions, the teams again vie for its possession. At the Sahtu Dene Games, similar processes championing traditional culture occurred. Here, however, the signifier was not provided by a prominent 'trophy', but by the fact that the prizes for the three winning competitors mittens or boots made from caribou or moose skin, or decorative embroidery produced in the style were not only of traditional manufacture, but had also been manufactured by respected female community elders. The competent manufacture of such items was one of the most highly valued skills of women in the old days, and the extension of the proof of such mastery into the present served as an object of great cultural pride in its own right. Here again, while the object could constitute itself as signifier and could 'make sense' as a trophy only in the context of similar Olympic significations, the interdiscursive transposition of what was signified, into the context of the traditional culture, served to produce a symbolic validation of a traditionally cooperative culture, in distinction from to the intended symbolic, positive validation of competitive participation in physical activity practices.

The 'Good Woman Contest '

By contrast, and at first glance paradoxically, some of the events featuring traditional survival skills at both the Rae-Edzo and Sahtu Dene Games exhibit distinctly higher degrees of competitive involvement. These contests are a part of what has come to be

known as the *Good Woman Contest*. The Good Woman Contest was introduced as a kind of synthesis of traditional cultural skills and Euro-Canadian competitiveness, and as such it has entered the Dene Games. It has since come to include male competitors, but retains its original name. It features events such as muskrat skinning, tea-boiling, wood chopping, log splitting, bannock-baking,¹⁵ and tent setting, all set in a competitive format. Because they are routine elements of daily life, most people possess some, if not considerable, skill in completing these tasks. Excellence displayed in the mastery of mundane tasks may be little more than expected proof of common competency. This leaves little room for failure and increases the competitive pressures considerably. At both the Rae-Edzo Games and the Sahtu Dene Games, the various events of the Good Woman Contest were watched by a great number of spectators who followed the proceedings with great interest, encouraging and supporting the participants with shouting and applause.

Some of those present, young people in particular, would frequently comment openly and critically on what were thought to be inadequate performances. In terms of the traditional interpersonal forms of behavior circumscribed by bush consciousness, such open criticism of another person's skills in subsistence tasks would have been unthinkable in previous times. A collision of significations occurs here at a basic level. Those activities that are most closely connected to the traditional culture's material base subsistence production create, by virtue of the organizational, competitive context within which they are placed at the Games, tensions between traditional and new elements of signification. While the outcome of contests such as log-splitting or wood-chopping is determined

mechanically through the simple process of measuring the time it takes to complete the task, the outcome of contests such as bannock-baking and fish preparation, is decided by a judge, usually a respected female elder, who evaluates the product placed on display, by means of a point scale. None of those present will ever openly cast doubt on her impartiality. Being an elder, she possesses , after all, the authority of knowledge and experience – but so do those of the competitors who belong to her generation. This places the judge in a position where she openly has to pass judgement on the traditional skills of her peers, a position that caused her some visible discomfort on a number of occasions.¹⁶

Reframing the Event

But it was exactly the fact that the core skills of the land-based traditional way of life were forced into the competitive format of a sports competition that caused the most sustained critical reaction in a considerable number of those present, participants and spectators alike. Still, there were those who considered competitive comparisons in this particular domain to be altogether inappropriate. It was one thing to put traditional games into a contemporary competitive format. It was quite another to attempt and do the same with aspects of the culture which were not part of the traditional inventory of games, in the first place. The participants from Fort Franklin at the Sahtu Dene Games considered a good woman contest to be a rather inappropriate form of cultural expression, and they decided to stage their own games 'proper' – without the Good Woman Contest. And so they did, after their return from Tulit'a (Fort Norman).¹⁷ In this instance again, the forms of practice that

could be legitimately subsumed under the Olympic model of competitive engagement were overdetermined by elements of signification located in the domain of traditional, co-operative behaviour. The residual strength of co-operative forms of behaviour circumscribed by 'bush consciousness' at the Dene Games thus speak to the resilience of the traditional culture.

Endnotes

- 1 J.J. MacAloon, *This Great Symbol. Pierre de Coubertin and the Origins of the Modern Olympic Games* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- 2 See R.K. Barney's examination of the historical derivation of these symbols, in, "A Simple Souvenir. The Wienecke Commemoration Medal and Olympic Victory Celebration," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* xv (2006), 87-112.
- 3 see, J. , "Normalismus: Konturen eines Konzepts," *kultuRRvolution*27 (1992), 50-70.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See, J. Link "From the Power of the Norm to 'Flexible Normalism: Considerations after Foucault,'" *Cultural Critique* (2004), 14-32; idem, "Grenzen des flexiblen Normalismus," in E. Schulte-Holtey (ed.), *Grenzmarkierungen. Normalisierung und diskursive Ausgrenzung* (Muenster: Unrast-Verlag, 1995), 24-39; idem, *Das Normale im Diskursnetz soziologischer Grundbegriffe* (Frankfurt: Synchron Wissenschaftsverlag der Autoren, 2003); idem, *Versuch über den Normalismus. Wie Normalität produziert wird*, 3rd edition (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006). See also, F. Janusch & J. Link, *Grenzmarkierungen. Normalisierung und diskursive Ausgrenzung*, Duisburg: Institut fuer Sprach- und Sozialforschung, 1995).
- 6 See, programmatically, H. Eichberg, "Zur historisch-kulturellen Relativität des Leistens in Sport und Spiel," *Sportwissenschaft* (1984), 9-34.
- 7 Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus*.
- 8 See, V. Paraschak, "A Look at Government's Role in Northwest Territories Recreation," in *Collected Papers on the Human History of the Northwest Territories. Occasional Papers of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre*, 1 (1985), 11-27.
- 9 J. Summers, J. Weyallon & J. Zoe, Rae/Edzo Regional Dene Games, Final Report (Edzo, NT: Municipal & Community Affairs, NWT Government, 1991).
- 10 R. Scollon, *The Context of the Informant Narrative Performance: From Sociolinguistics to Ethnolinguistics at Fort Chipewyan, Alberta*. National Museums of Canada, Mercury Series, 52 (1979).
- 11 The ring toss is organized in a way similar to the more widely known game of horseshoes.
- 12 M. Heine, Fieldnotes 1991-2007. Notes in possession of the author.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 M. Yakabuski, Regional Development Officer Fort Simpson Region, Sport and Recreation Division, Government of the Northwest Territories, interview with the author, July 6, 1991.
- 15 Bannock is the ubiquitous bread of the Canadian North.
- 16 Heine, Field Notes. Cf., M. Heine & K. Young, "Colliding Identities in Arctic Canadian Sports and Games," *Sociological Focus* 30, no.4 (1997), 357-372.
- 17 J. McAra, Recreation Coordinator for the Hamlet of Fort Franklin, Personal Correspondence with the author, July 1992.