

# Olympic Fraud

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

[To hear the audio version of this post, click [here](#).]

No, I'm not talking about [under-the-legal-age Chinese gymnasts](#), bribed judges, or even a cute Chinese girl lip syncing [because she's prettier than the real voice](#). I'm talking about the myth of the Olympic Games, that they represent some sort of sporting ideal in contrast to the dirty, politicized, cheating, dishonest material world we live in. We so desperately want dreams, ideals without any self-discipline or self-denial, we grasp at any chimera.

[In ancient Greece there was a myth](#), too, that all wars stopped for the games. But we know better. We know that the rewards of prestige and money were so great that competitors cheated, maimed, and killed to win, and winners were allowed to get away with murder because of their prestige. The Olympic Games were a fusion of the authority of pagan religion and the worship of human physique. These are not ideals we should try to emulate. The sheer battle for national prestige reminds me of the idea that sport is war by other means.

[The Olympic Games were restarted in Greece in 1859](#). But it was towards the end of the nineteenth century, that [Baron Coubertin](#) created the International Olympic Committee with its rules, conventions, and all the faux nostalgia that only those who need to avoid looking at themselves in the present are capable of. This was, after all, the era of white, aristocratic, Christian supremacy. [The first myth was amateurism](#) as the pursuit of a goal out of sheer love of competition, regardless of outcome (something only the wealthy (or subsidized), who have no need to scramble to earn a living, are privileged enough to indulge in).

As in ancient Greece, local states, companies, and individuals funded their outstanding athletes (indirectly, of course, to get round the rules) and ensured they were well taken care of. The Olympics dropped [shamateurism](#) in [the 1970's](#). Then countries like East Germany took children, and trained, even deformed and drugged them, to the point where soon after winning glory their bodies began to collapse. In China infants are selected and taken away from home to be trained, their bodies molded the way they use to bind feet to keep them small, their puberty retarded in pursuit of glory, and, it appears, they are psychologically damaged for life. We focus on successes—but think of all the abandoned, crushed little kids discarded on the way. Rich countries can pour so many resources into their teams, doctors, psychiatrists, physiotherapists, technology, equipment and training centers. And many countries offer inducements to poach athletes. Britain conveniently made the Afrikaner [Zola Budd](#) a citizen in order to compete in 1984.

Then came the scandals of drugs and the questions of where one draws a line between legitimate and illegitimate drugs. Is a cup of coffee or a cold suppressant a drug? Where the rewards are so great abuse is inevitable. As with drugs in general, huge resources are thrown into the mainly ineffective

fight against them and as a result they are pushed underground and nasty people make a lot more money out of them. People want them; they'll find a way of getting them and hiding them.

The myth that politics do not enter the Olympics is rubbish too. I do not just refer to the Nazis, or to various boycotts, or even the inhuman incursion of Palestinian terror into the Munich games. The Olympic movement, contrary to its own ideals, bows to pressure and allows athletes to refuse to compete against those they do not want to, as happened this time when an Iranian athlete withdrew rather than face an Israeli, without penalty or rebuke. The games must go on because there is too much at stake financially to allow principle to get in the way.

Almost all sport now generates so much wealth through telecommunications and marketing. Richer teams buy good players and inevitably do better than those who rely solely on home grown talent. But if we live in a world where wealth can buy anything, where do you draw lines? Is it even possible to draw lines that cannot be easily bypassed?

From a Jewish religious point of view, of course, anything that damages or degrades the human body, physically or mentally, is morally unacceptable. Yet I notice that, despite agreeing in principle, few religions have succeeded effectively in banning, say, tobacco, or different forms of surgical or chemical bodily enhancement. In the pursuit of artificial beauty, humans undergo all sorts of pain and medical modifications. And one hears of new legal drug-enhanced memory and brainpower. Is that right or wrong? If moral authority fiddles to suit its tastes and turns blind eyes, how can we object to sport doing it?

So let us non-Olympians enjoy the thrills and the competitions, regardless of how unequal or unfair they may be, but realize it is morally, politically, and every other way you can think of, still a fraud.