

# Chapter 13

## Hosting the Youth Olympic Games: The Pioneers from Singapore

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### ABSTRACT

*Athens 1896, Chamonix 1924, Singapore 2010, and Innsbruck 2012 represent the four major games innovations introduced by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Being seen as an efficient and gracious host of the inaugural Youth Olympic Games (YOG) signified a growing reputation that enhanced Singapore's global status. The interactions and interdependencies between state institutions, international associations, private bodies, and the people themselves served to reinforce existing sentiments that Singapore was not only successfully integrating sporting initiatives into the broader strategy for nation building but also sending out a resounding message to the rest of the world. This chapter examines the motivations, organisational processes, and linked issues that helped to establish Singapore as a country capable of creating an Olympic event and simultaneously marketing the Singapore brand. Negative financial and logistic issues could not overshadow the benefits that emerged to enhance the regional and global identity of the small island state.*

### INTRODUCTION

The development of the sporting culture in Singapore has followed a recognisable pattern since independence was gained in 1965. Government policies have always set the tone. The considerable influence of the government has driven initiatives in all areas of life, and sport has been no exception. The most significant initial advances for sport reflected the need for developing health

and fitness as a means to sustaining economic productivity and the need for providing recreational activities that served to cultivate social stability and community harmony. Sport for all retains its position as the foundation philosophy. The need for competitive sporting achievement nationally and regionally to inspire the collective identity of the people followed after sport for all. However, sports excellence has proved to be an elusive goal and in some ways has been superseded by the concept of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7527-8.ch013

sport as an industry. The most far-reaching attempts to integrate these three elements have occurred since the turn of the new millennium. Hosting the YOG was an opportunity well seized, yet at the same time it was just a further step along the way to securing and developing the nation's image.

As the representative of a small country in a sensitive geo-political location, the Singapore Government has demonstrated political agility and resolute determination in domestic and foreign policies, all of which have been characterised by a strong sense of pragmatism. All sporting initiatives have had to fit into the broader picture of national harmony, political stability and economic progress. Nation building is still a defining phrase that underpins the collective philosophy. Hosting the inaugural Summer YOG in 2010 was not an easily anticipated challenge, but it represented an ideal opportunity to propel Singapore further along a path towards first-world sporting status, while simultaneously engaging with the most wide-reaching global sporting body, the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The desire to enhance an international identity through sport was readily seized.

## **BACKGROUND: A SMALL NATION WITH A VOICE**

The task of generating community as well as state and commercial support for the YOG called for a close liaison between the IOC, the Ministry of Community Development and Sports (MCYS), the Singapore Sports Council (SSC), the Singapore National Olympic Council (SNOC), other ministerial bodies and officials, ISFs, corporate partners and a huge volunteer force drawn from the general public. The Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee (SYOGOC) was the body assigned the task of coordinating what would be a pioneering initiative and the latest of the IOC's innovations most closely associated with the tenure of IOC President Jacques Rogge.

Wong (2011) examined the struggles that confronted the IOC in conceptualising the YOG. Issues such as human rights, attempts to provide an antidote to obesity and limiting the scale of world sports events emerged. The objectives of this chapter are to investigate the ways in which Singapore aimed to capitalise on its role as host to support its own sporting aspirations, whilst simultaneously supporting the IOC's vision. A most deliberate and pragmatic motive was to focus world attention on a small country seeking to reinforce its identity as a first-world economy: one in which sport was playing an increasingly significant role. From the Singapore perspective, the YOG was a stepping stone on the path to enhanced global recognition. The idea to attract the attention of young people to the philosophies of the Olympic Movement was a short-term objective. Singapore attempted to accommodate sporting excellence within a context of cultural values education in a way that was to prove difficult to justify and sustain. The success or otherwise of the venture could only be achieved in a way that recognised the potential for conflict and resolution. This chapter identifies and examines a number of the sport-related, political, financial and logistic issues that emerged as Singapore strove to create a globally recognisable event: one which would inspire the nation and the sporting world with spectacle; one which would encourage young people to adopt more benevolent and universalistic values; and one which would establish a lasting legacy based on Olympism. The YOG in Singapore was not a stand-alone event, but one that took its place as a contributor to the blossoming sporting ecosystem. The ongoing discourse on Olympic-related issues and the evolution of the Singapore sporting culture provides the main set of reference points.

Wong (2012) provided a critical analysis of the inaugural YOG as a vehicle for introducing an extensive Culture and Education Programme (CEP). The benefits of such a programme were seen as having global implications as the vast majority of nations would be participating and

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