

Handout Mentality – Carrying A Torch or Waving A Flag?

Olympic torches are all the rage right now - it seems everyone's trying to get or keep their hands on them - so I have to say a personal big thank you to Jack Trickey, '56 Olympian and avid collector of all things Olympic who let me fondle – if that's the appropriate word – his very own torch. That's the one he carried in the 2000 torch relay.

My memory of the 2000 affair was all excitement and joy as it went around Australia. What we have seen of the 2008 relay on the news recently has been repeatedly described as farce. Tibetans protesting the occupation of their country by China have focused first on the Beijing Olympics and then on its most vulnerable lead-up event, the torch relay, in order to draw attention to their plight.

As an equal opportunity blamer, I have to say that the Chinese were naïve to think that, given their questionable reputation on human rights, the first Olympic torch relay to travel the whole world would be warmly welcomed. On the other hand, the protesters, battling with the police escorting the torch, are not exactly hitting the right target. My suggestion is it's unlikely that a protest against the torch relay or even the Olympic Games itself will, if history is any guide, result in any change of policy by this year's host country. So while we have all had some amusement at the torch fighting its way through London and Paris, disappearing into a warehouse in San Francisco or pointlessly lapping a stadium in Istanbul, the whole affair is odds on to sink into obscurity.

Am I out on a limb? I don't think so. The Olympic Games has always suffered from political overtones and they've caused scarcely a ripple in the tide of world affairs. Let's go back to '56, a time that Jack Trickey and his fellow Australian team members would probably remember at their regular get-togethers as a watershed Olympics before doping, murder and boycotts spoiled the party. Not quite. 1956 in fact saw the first Olympic boycotts – Holland, Spain and Switzerland over the Soviet put down of the Hungarian uprising and Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq over the armed incursion of England and France into Suez.

The '56 Olympic torch relay was not entirely free from incident either. The Mayor of Sydney, Pat Hills, was waiting at the Town Hall for Harry Dillon to run up and present him with the torch which he would then pass on to Bert Button after a short speech. Sure enough an athlete emerged from the cheering crowd and handed Pat a torch whereupon his worship the mayor launched into his spiel. After about a minute it dawned on him that what he was holding was not the genuine article. It was in fact a chair leg, topped with a pudding can containing a fortunately unseen kerosene soaked pair of underpants that had been worn on national service.

The athlete had not been Harry Dillon, but the aptly named Barry Larkin, a Sydney Uni student, who had pulled off the deception aided by a mate in uniform on a motor bike who had passed for a police escort. The event went down in history as a funny and well executed stunt but the students from Sydney Uni were making a deeper protest. They knew that the torch relay had entered the Olympic circus just 20 years before at the invitation of the Nazi party. Carl Diem, with the enthusiastic backing of Josef Goebels, had cooked up a typical bit of quasi-religious ceremony around "sacred" flames originating from the ancient home of the Olympics in Greece. The first flame was in fact miraculously ignited by the sun concentrated by Zeiss lenses and the first torches were crafted by Krupp. As the torch carrier entered the stadium in Berlin he was a picture of Aryan manhood and it was all beautifully captured on film by Adolf Hitler's favourite film director Leni Riefenstahl. The torch route managed to take in most of the countries Hitler would soon conquer. I don't know if the locals had the foresight to raise a protest as it passed.

Did Barry Larkin's protest make any difference? No. Like all the other things that have happened around the Olympics there was some tut-tutting and finger pointing then the world "moved on" as they say. The recent Australian Olympic torch relay, a mini dash through Canberra, was followed by ANZAC Day. As one old digger sadly observed, the last world war didn't mark the end of mass slaughter. If the lessons of war itself are so hard to digest, there's not much an Olympic Games, never mind its torch relay, is going to contribute to world peace.

I suppose the torch relay gives us a chance to celebrate successful Olympic athletes. Take the final torch bearer of the 20th century, the one who ran up the stairs in '96 at Atlanta to light the stadium flame. He was named the athlete of the century or simply "The Greatest" and everybody admires him. He'd been a gold medalist himself back in Rome in 1960 but when he went back home with his medal and found it didn't get him into some white-only restaurants he says he threw his precious medal in the Ohio River. Then he won the world championship as a professional athlete. When he refused to do military service because it would most likely involve participating in the occupation of a small Asian country, the governing body of his sport took his title away and stopped him competing. Since he had also joined the Nation of Islam, he was probably fortunate his nation's leaders didn't find him indefinite accommodation in a jail cell in some hidden part of the world. But by 1996 this was forgiven and apparently forgotten. How and why might make a better and more instructive story than the 2008 Olympic Torch Relay.