

Old world intertwined with new; 2004 Olympic Games

The Sun - Baltimore, Md.
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Date: Aug 13, 2004
Start Page: 13.A
Section: EDITORIAL
Text Word Count: 707

ATHENS, Greece -- The Olympic Games return today to the land of their ancient origin and to the city where they were revived in 1896.

The Greeks are already celebrating because Athens is ready to host the Games after the preparations were completed in the nick of time. Let's hope the Greeks and the rest of the world will celebrate a successful Olympics after the Games have ended Aug. 29.

Greece has a lot riding on these Games. It is very rare for this country to be in the international limelight for two weeks. This is much more than the 15 minutes of fame, or infamy, the international media grant medium-size countries. This is an opportunity for Greece to show the world that it is the heir of the ancient Greek civilization that spawned the Olympics in 776 B.C.

The modern Greeks have an umbilical connection to their millennia- old past. Greek schools cultivate the concept of continuity between modern and ancient Greece from very early grades. I went to school in Athens, and I remember the elation we all felt in the classroom when the teacher told us we had won the Trojan War. And as denizens of a city whose skyline was crowned by the Acropolis, we knew all about "our" architectural achievements of the 5th century B.C.

We also learned of the ancient Olympics and how the city-states agreed on a truce in order to enable athletes to travel to and from Olympia safely. This, we were told, was such an inspirational concept that a Frenchman, Pierre de Coubertin, had revived the Olympics in 1896 in an attempt to replace war with peaceful competition. Yes, there have been many wars since, but the modern Olympics remained a constant beacon inviting the peoples of the world to meet every four years and to compete peacefully.

Because of the diligent efforts of the Greek Archaeological Service and the Greek tourism authorities, Athens will showcase the Acropolis and its other ancient monuments during the Games. Pedestrian malls around the sights and special lighting will add to the effect. After all, the city was chosen as Greece's capital in the 19th century precisely because it was so full of impressive temples that evoked the glories of ancient Greece.

But Greece is also out to show its modern face at these Olympics. Ever since the modern Greek state was created in the 19th century, the Greeks have yearned for recognition as a fully fledged member of the countries of advanced, developed Europe. But the European Great Powers were never quite prepared to grant Greece that recognition. Ancient Greece was revered; modern Greece, very often, not so.

The right to host the 2004 Olympics offered Greece a wonderful opportunity to showcase its status as a sophisticated, technologically efficient country that would be able to shoulder the enormous responsibility of organizing the Games. It is the smallest country to host the Games in 50 years.

It almost didn't happen because the Greeks wasted three of the seven years they had to prepare Athens for the Games. By early this year, Greece was playing a desperate game of catch-up. To say Greece was getting bad press six months ago would be an understatement. But the Greeks responded by saying that they always did things at the last minute.

The bigger picture is the global meaning of these Olympics. These are the first post-9/11 Games and, aside from added security, they entail a coming together of a world bitterly divided by the effects of terrorist strikes and the responses to those acts, some of which brought more division.

The ancient Games brought with them a truce among all participants. The modern Games were designed to replace war by peaceful competition, and the Athens organizers have echoed that idealistic goal. A truce might be too much to hope for, but holding the Games in Athens

offers those involved an opportunity to use the occasion to come together in a spirit of friendship and fair play that the Olympics have always supported.

A divided world can use some of the inspiration that the ancient Greeks generated among Greek schoolchildren.

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