
John P. Wilson

Introduction

This year not only are the XXVII Olympics celebrated in Sydney but also it is the fiftieth anniversary of the first Skill Olympics which were held in Portugal. Twelve young people from Portugal and a similar number from Spain with similar ages and trades took part in a competition which was designed to dignify and to raise the standards of the vocational training systems and to prize the various trades. The main purpose was to create a youth festival in which competitors would recognise their role in helping to construct the future.

Individual excellence is recognised in sports and the arts, and for this reason it was felt that achievements in vocational education and training were deserving of the same. The Skill Olympics have mirrored the Olympic Games and have resulted in a series of local, regional and national competitions. The similarities between the two competitions will be explored, together with a consideration of how skills competitions impact on individuals, their employers, and the nation as a whole. Thus, to the Olympic motto, “Citius. Altius. Fortius” (Faster. Higher. Stronger) can be added, Peritus. – More Skilful.

The Olympic tradition

The Olympic Games began in Olympia in the region of Elis, Greece, and originated from war games, e.g. boxing, wrestling, chariot racing, which were core elements of Greek military training. The games were of such importance that tens of thousands of people spectated and even when wars were occurring in the region there was a form of Pax Olympica which allowed competitors to travel safely and without hindrance to attend the Games. The Games were held every four years from 776 BC to at least 261 AD and then continued occasionally until 393 AD when they were banned, with other pagan festivals, by the Christian Emperor Theodosius I (Finley and Pleket, 1976).

Since the early years of the first millennium there have been a number of Olympic games. In seventeenth century England Robert Dover staged annual “Olympick” Games at Whitsun which comprised of wrestling, cudgelling and dancing, in public opposition to the Puritan ethic which considered play as

The author

John P. Wilson is Lecturer in HRM at the University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.

Keywords

Skills, Skilled workers, United Kingdom, Europe, Games, Vocational training

Abstract

The growth of vocational skills competitions demonstrates an increased interest and popularity in companies, schools, colleges, and at regional, national and international levels. There are a number of significant benefits and also challenges associated with the competitions for individuals, their organisations, and for the nation as a whole, and this article draws parallels with the Olympic Games. This article combines research from a variety of sources to give a comprehensive overview of the history and purpose of the competitions and also to describe the various organisations supporting them. This is the first article to map the terrain of skills competitions and, having done so, it calls for further research to be conducted into their impact.

Electronic access

The research register for this journal is available at http://www.mcbup.com/research_registers/tdev.asp

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at http://www.emerald-library.com
sinful. In 1796 the French held Jeux Olympiques for male all-comers to illustrate “égalité” as part of the new republic and during the nineteenth century numerous countries held events which they titled “Olympics”.

The modern Olympic Games were reintroduced by Baron Pierre de Coubertin in 1896 in Athens. In 1894 he stated:

Why did I restore the Olympic Games? To ennoble and strengthen sports, to ensure their independence and duration, and thus to enable them better to fulfil the educational role incumbent upon them in the modern world. For the glorification of the individual athlete, whose muscular activity is necessary for the community, and whose prowess is necessary for the maintenance of the general spirit of competition (International Olympic Committee, 1987, p. 14).

The Olympic Movement, which consists of the IOC, the International Sports Federations, the National Olympic Committees and the Organising Committees of the Olympic Games, has a number of fundamental aims:

- to promote the development of those physical and moral qualities which are the basis of sport;
- to educate young people through sport in a spirit of better understanding between each other, and of friendship, thereby helping to build a better more peaceful world;
- to spread the Olympic principles throughout the world, thereby creating international goodwill;
- to bring together the athletes of the world in the great four-yearly sports festival, the Olympic Games (International Olympic Committee, 1987, p. 13).

Although the Games represent the pinnacle of sporting competition it was also recognised that they encouraged the development of other competitions. Avery Brundage, President of the IOC 1952-72, (International Olympic Committee, 1987, p. 86) maintained that:

The Olympic Games must not be an end in itself, they must be a means of creating a vast programme of physical education and sports competitions for all young people.

Brundage (International Olympic Committee, 1987, p. 107) went on to state that in order of importance sport followed other endeavours such as schooling and a person’s work career:

The sportsman knows that sport is a recreation, a game, an amusement and a pastime, but his eyes are fixed on a higher goal, on the most important things in his life, which is his education or his vocation.

The link between sport and work was not always viewed positively and sport was sometimes considered an escape and a release from the more harsh realities of the working environment. The predecessor of Brundage was J. Sigfrid Edström (International Olympic Committee, 1987, p. 9), President of IOC 1946-1952, who explained:

The “raison d’être” of the Olympic Movement is to improve the human race, not only physically, but to give it a greater nobility of spirit, and to strengthen understanding and friendship amongst peoples. It is also necessary, especially for young people, to counteract the bad influence of industrialisation. The Movement uses the revival of the Olympic Games of Antiquity and their adaption to modern times as the means to achieve its elevated status.

Another consequence of the Games is that they receive a significant amount of publicity which results in increased international awareness and sporting activity. The athletes often act as role models and encourage other young people to emulate them:

Not only did the Games combine pageantry and excitement with powerful romantic images of the human quest for excellence, they also had political overtones that helped guarantee a large and interested audience for Olympic coverage (Gruneau, 1984, p. 7).

The Games also provide a showcase for nations to demonstrate national pride. “The Olympic Games . . . have always provided an arena for the establishment of national prestige. Television heightens this by making the Olympics a global event” (Whannel, 1984, p. 38). In the UK concern about failure to achieve higher levels of success has led to plans for the establishment of a series of regional and national sporting academies to encourage excellence.

The Olympic Games have also attracted a significant amount of criticism which includes issues of elitism, alleged bribery, and drug enhanced performances; however, they have also resulted in a significant impact on sport in general and have:

- led to higher levels of excellence;
- encouraged the development of other competitions;
• increased international public interest;
• given prestige to competitors and medal winners;
• promoted personal skills and qualities, e.g. motivation and dedication;
• increased internationalism.

The Workers’ Olympics

The Skill Olympics were not the first competitions organised for working people. The Workers’ Olympics were designed as a socialist response to the IOC games. They stressed internationalism, worker solidarity and peace. In particular, “The Workers’ Olympics were explicitly opposed to all chauvinism, racism and social exclusiveness” (Riordan, 1984, p. 103). The first Workers’ Olympics were held in Prague in 1921 and hosted by the Czechoslovak Workers Gymnastics Association. Thirteen countries took part and emphasis was on involvement rather than achievement.

The Workers’ Olympics never gained the public’s attention in a major way; however, the Skill Olympics appears to be gathering momentum and its impact significantly increasing. We will consider it next.

The Skill Olympics

The forerunner of the International Youth Skill Olympics was the International Apprentice Competitions. The first Skill Olympics were held in 1950 in Portugal when two teams, one from the host country and the other from Spain, competed with the purpose of raising the status and standards of their vocational areas, developing international understanding and rewarding participants for those key skills. The events are now held every two years and the thirty-fifth and most recent meeting was held in the Olympic Stadium, Montreal in 1999. The next is to be hosted by Seoul in 2001.

As with the Olympic Games, it is the host which is responsible for the organisation and financial viability for the Skill Olympics. Specific criteria are detailed which the host must follow although they are not as onerous as those for the Olympics (International Olympic Committee, 1995, 1996). Skills Canada was mandated by the International Vocational Training Organisation (IVTO) to host the Skill Olympics and these were organised in Montreal by Corporation du 35e Mondial des Métiers, a non-profit organisation. The Corporation worked closely with the IVTO, which promoted the contest internationally.

In Montreal there were 600 contestants from more than 30 countries and the Olympic stadium resembled a huge multi-disciplinary workshop containing equipment valued at $35 million. Competitions were held in 40 occupational areas and were open to contestants up to the age of 22. The competitors were allowed eight hours in which to make themselves familiar with the equipment and the tasks took 22 hours spread over four days. The participants were assessed by technical expert judges from the participating countries and gold, silver and bronze medals were awarded for achievement. In addition, diplomas of excellence were awarded for contestants achieving at least 500 points out of a maximum 600, which indicates international performance standard.

To develop team spirit the UK Squad attended a briefing session at the Construction Industry Training Board’s National Construction College at Bricham Newton, Norfolk and took part in an outdoor team-building weekend in Cumbria. Attending the Skill Olympics has influenced issues of strategy and training. The Chairman of UK Skills, Sir John Cassels (1996), noted that techniques of work process management skills had enhanced the performance of other teams. As a result the UK team was trained in work process management which he believed led to success in medals and other awards.

The UK team won three medals in Montreal: a silver by Mark Charlton in information technology, a student at the University of Sunderland; and two bronze medals in Electronic Applications and Restaurant Service by Matthew Wills, employed by BEV of Lincoln, and waiter Stuart Bennett, who works at Brown’s Hotel in London. The UK team was also awarded nine diplomas of excellence in Beauty Care, Bricklaying, Cabinet Making, Car Painting, Carpentry, Commercial Wiring, Joinery, Ladies’ Hairdressing, and Pattern Making.

Previous medal winners have benefited from competing in terms of enhanced CVs, personal achievement and status, and employer recognition. Julie Lark stated:
I’ve had so much publicity because of taking part in the competition. All of a sudden, the work has been flooding in. Basically it’s done me a lot of favours and helped me grow up a bit. I’ve really enjoyed competing and it’s given me a big boost of confidence (Phillips, 1999, p. 4).

The benefits of the Skill Olympics are also recognised at a national level. Baroness Blackstone, the Education and Employment Minister, stated that: “The World Skills Competition has a vital role to play in supporting the development of vocational skills” (Crace, 1999, p. 4). She continued: “For each of the competing countries it represents a valuable opportunity to compete on an international platform and to benchmark against the very best in the world” (Crace 1999, p. 4).

**World Skills/International Vocational Training Organisation**

The body with overall responsibility for the Skill Olympics is the International Vocational Training Organisation, now renamed World Skills. It is a not-for-profit membership organisation which works with the national bodies and encourages training.

The IVTO's mission is to challenge young people, their teachers, trainers and employers to achieve world class standards of competence in commerce, services and industry, and to promote the status of vocational training (International Vocational Training Organisation, 2000, p. 1).

The aims of World Skills/IVTO[1] are to:

- run the World Skills Competition (Skill Olympics);
- promote the exchange of ideas, experience and contact between vocational training organisations through seminars, meetings and competitions;
- disseminate information on world-class standards of competence;
- encourage the exchange of trainers and trainees between member countries (UK Skills, 1999a, p. 8).

In addition to promoting the Skill Olympics, other objectives of World Skills/IVTO include: advancing the exchange of vocational training ideas and experience through seminars and meetings; disseminating information on world class standards of competence; encouraging young people in further education and training; supporting international communication and contacts between vocational training organisations; and the exchange of young professionals among the members.

**SkillsEUROPE**

In addition to the Skills Olympics there are also other international meetings. A pilot EuroSkills was held at Groningen in the Netherlands in 1998. About 10,000 children visited and learned about possible careers, and unemployed people also attended. SkillsEUROPE is investigating the role of competitions which will meet European needs as well as those of World Skills/IVTO. Only 40 skills can be held at the Skill Olympics and therefore it can be a case of waiting to fill dead-men's shoes, e.g. watchmaking was replaced by information technology. In order to avoid some of these difficulties European competitions may be used to provide an alternative international environment for competitors.

**UK Skills**

In 1989 the Skills Olympics were held in Birmingham, with the awards being presented by Margaret Thatcher; however, to her dismay the UK only won one gold medal – in hairdressing. To improve this performance she asked the Department of Education to set up UK Skills to encourage and co-ordinate the UK effort. UK Skills[2] was founded in 1990 as an independent charitable organisation, and it aims to help industry by promoting world-class standards of vocational skills through competitions. Its objectives are to:

- encourage and promote the development of skills competitions as an effective means of raising and maintaining standards of vocational skills and contributing to the achievement of national education and training targets;
- set standards for national skills competitions;
- act as the official UK representatives on the International Vocational Training Organisation (IVTO);
- select and co-ordinate the entry of UK teams to the biennial World Skills Competition (Skill Olympics) (UK Skills, 1999b, p. 2).
A National Framework of Skills Competitions has been developed. It incorporates a government endorsed code of practice and UK Skills will award a national seal of approval to those competitions which achieve specified standards. The overall structure of the skill competitions can be seen in Figure 1. UK Skills states that:

The purpose of skills competitions is to test the relative abilities of competitors to undertake the full range of tasks currently undertaken by skilled workers in those occupations and their ability to complete those tasks to a high standard within a commercially realistic time-scale.

Skills competitions should therefore:
• reflect current commercial practice;
• include problem solving, design and innovation, as may be appropriate;
• include fault finding and rectification, if practised;

be judged and assessed according to commercially realistic criteria;
• test key skills, as appropriate (UK Skills, 1999c, p. 2).

The level of investment into competitions is quite significant. Research indicated that £4 million was spent by companies on national competitions and preparing for the Skill Olympics in Lyon in 1995 (Cassels 1996, p. 3). More recently support for the national competitions and competitors was provided by more than 420 organisations.

There are a large range of skill competitions in the UK and the list is still growing: agricultural mechanics; autobody repair; automotive glazing; automotive technology; beauty therapy; blown film, pipe and profile extrusion; bricklaying; bus driving; cabinet making; call handling; car painting; childcare; CNC turning/milling; commercial wiring;

Figure 1 The environment of UK Skills and skills competitions

Reproduced with kind permission of UK Skills
computer programming; construction steelwork; cookery; electronic applications; fast food; fish frying; floristry; graphic design; heavy automotive mechanics; horticulture; hotel reception; housekeeping; industrial electronics; industrial wiring; injection and blow moulding; IT system support; IT user; jewellery; key skills; ladies’ hairdressing; machine woodworking; mechanical engineering, drawing and design CADD; mechatronics; media; men’s hairdressing; painting and decorating; pastry chef; pattern making; plastering; plumbing; printing process; pub service; refrigeration technology; restaurant service; retail; roof slating and tiling; stonemasonry; wall and floor tiling; Web-site design; and welding (UK Skills, 1999d).

In order to provide a coherent structure and organisation for the competitions a Handbook for Organisers of Skill Competitions has been published (UK Skills/Further Education Skills Competitions Council, 1999).

The Skills Festival and skills competitions

The first national Skills Festival will be held at the National Exhibition Centre in July 2000. UK Skills and the Prince’s Trust jointly set up “The Skills Festival Company” to run the festival which was the culmination of a series of regional heats. Not only are competitions being held regionally but larger organisations are being encouraged to introduce their own internal competitions to encourage the development of skills. These can then feed into the regional events.

There has been significant support for the competitions. In late 1999 business leaders were encouraged by the Prince of Wales during a speech at St James’ Palace to support the skills competitions which are designed to improve and recognise the skills of the UK’s workforce.

Further Education Skills Competitions Council

The Further Education Skills Competitions Council[3] was formally established in 1997 and has approximately 80 colleges in membership. It “...aims to encourage further education colleges to participate in, and organise, skills competitions to help students achieve excellence in vocational skills” (Further Education Skills Competitions Council, 1999, p. 5).

A number of benefits for students and colleges involved with skills competitions have been identified. These include increasing public awareness of vocational skills, and raising the awareness of young people and their parents about further education opportunities. Moreover, in taking part in the skill competitions there is the possibility that an entrant’s performance can contribute to their assessment for S/NVQs (UK Skills, 1997).

Schools skill competitions

There is a plan for the development of competitions in the schools sector with financial support from the Clothworkers Foundation. One of the future objectives is to increase the participation of schools (UK Skills, 1999b).

National benefits

The Chairman of UK Skills, Sir John Cassels (1996, p. 3), a former Director General of the National Economic Development Office, emphasised the role of “high-quality skills as key to economic prosperity through competitiveness.” He continued:

The importance of UK Skills is far more concerned with improving skills training throughout the UK. We are totally convinced that a structure of local, regional, and national skills competitions is an effective way of promoting excellence, getting young people interested and involved and, just as important, getting parents involved as well. Our programmes also include encouraging the establishment of individual company competitions.

The advantages to the individuals, companies, training organisations and the country as a whole have been emphasised by UK Skills (1999c, pp. 2-4). This promotional material summarises the main points and acts as a lever to encourage involvement and support:

• benefits to UK plc;
• help in developing/reviving a national competitive culture;
• demanding the highest level of skills linked to world standards;
• stimulating interest in vocational skills;
• raising profile of vocational training with decision makers;
• encouraging comparison of methods and techniques nationally and internationally; and
• establishing national and international benchmarks against which to measure performance.

Benefits for employers:
• improved motivation of employees;
• attracting good quality employees to the company;
• using employee successes helps to promote the company; and
• benchmarking training programmes against those of competitors.

Benefits for individual competitors:
• experience of working under pressure, to achieve acceptable results in a limited time;
• experience of analysing and criticising own results in a constructive way;
• developing verbal skills to explain what they are doing;
• establishing personal pride in competing beside the best in the region, the UK and the world; and
• recognising success in terms of credits towards S/NVQ (so that even the so-called competition “loser” gains).

Conclusion
The growth of skills competitions in schools, colleges, companies, and at local, regional, national, and international levels strongly indicates that there is increasing interest. This enthusiasm would appear to have substance and detailed research would perhaps provide further insights into their impact.

To this buoyant atmosphere should be added a few words of caution:
• The promotional materials describing the benefits of skills competitions (see above) come from not disinterested parties. Similar positive rhetoric was heard in the early days of the competence movement (Collin, 1989) and, while this rhetoric is to be expected, further independent investigation to substantiate the reality of these claims is necessary.
• The majority of events involve individuals not teams. Given that team working is so important for organisations there is a danger that the single mindedness required of competitors might not translate back into the workplace. In partial recognition of this there are a small number of competitions which involve teams, these include languages, key skills, child care and in-company competitions.
• Not all vocational skills have skills competitions. It is possible that because they do not receive attention fewer young people may enter that occupation with the consequent risk of skills shortages.
• Only 40 skills are represented at the Skill Olympics and lack of recognition at this highest level may hinder development in some occupational areas.
• Failure to win medals at international levels may result in less interest and support from various bodies, including government. Any investment and support should be independent of medal and diploma successes.
• Taking part in the competitions can also have negative consequences for the individuals who may freeze before or during events and who may be demotivated by perceived failure. Competitions with winners also implies that there will be losers. Support is necessary for those who do not achieve glory.

It has been the purpose of this paper to chart the terrain of skills development and map out its boundaries and topographical distinctions. Further research is now required into the impact of these competitions in order to add credence to the many benefits attributed to them.


Notes
1 World Skills/International Vocational Training Organization, Im Zentrum 11, CH-8604 Volketswil, Switzerland. Tel: 41-1-908-4082; Fax: 41-1-908-4088; E-mail: info@ivto.com Internet: www.ivto.com www.worldskills.com
2 UK Skills, 18 Park Square East, London, NW1 4LH, Tel. 020-7543-7488; Fax. 020-7543-7489;
References

Crace, J. (1999), "Leg-waxing for Britain", The Guardian (Higher), Tuesday 23 November, p. 4.
Further Education Skills Competitions Council (1999), Further Education Skills Competitions Council, leaflet, FESCC, Harbury.
UK Skills (1999), Promoting World Class Standards, folder insert 1, UK Skills, London.
UK Skills (1999d), Skills Competitions in the UK, leaflet, UK Skills, London.