

The Glory of Philanthropy Stands Next to the Glory of the Gold

Philanthropy and the Olympics

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The Rio de Janeiro 2016 Olympic Games are upon us and the world will turn its viewing screens – of all types and sizes and mobility – to watching the competition. Indeed the 2012 London Olympics were the most watched event in TV history. For Americans, however, it is more than watching the performance of Team USA. It is about being part of that performance in a unique way. Because that performance by Team USA - win, lose or draw - (oh, right, the USA has more gold medals than any other nation – just sayin’) is actually a performance by ALL Americans. Team USA exists because, and only because, of the philanthropy of the people and its private institutions.

Modern Olympic Origin and America’s Involvement

The first modern Olympic Games were held on April 6, 1896 in Athens, Greece, reincarnated by a Frenchman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who believed that international athleticism would do more for world peace than politics as usual. In January of 1896, news of an international athletic competition that was to take place in April reached the United States and, in particular, the Boston Athletic Association (BAA) and Arthur Burnham, a stockbroker with particular interest in the event. While there was no official U.S. Olympic team, the BAA sent the majority of the American representatives to Athens, funded by a combination of the BAA’s network (which included major gifts from influential leaders) and Burnham.¹ That first American team was funded by philanthropists and sparked an American philanthropic tradition that holds true today.

¹ Hanc, John. "The Men Behind the First Olympic Team." Smithsonian. Smithsonian.com, 25 June 2012. Web. 25 July 2016.

Since that time, the entire U.S. Olympics structure has been designed to enable and empower the support of private citizens for Team USA. That support flows both to the United States Olympic Committee at the national level and to the 47 National Governing Bodies which are responsible for the individual sport teams and athletes. The United States Olympic Committee on average provides roughly half the funding for the 47 National Governing Bodies. The other half of the National Governing Bodies' funding comes from partnerships, individual donations and membership fees.²



This image represents the hierarchical structure of the Olympics as it relates to governance and funding of the U.S. Olympic team.

Philanthropy, the Olympics, and Civil Society

Team USA, then, embodies what is beautiful about philanthropy in a civil society. Individual voluntary contributions power the process of teamwork. Together team members and the American public stand together at the starting line, push for every ounce of energy, and cross the finish line together. It is not the tax dollar, it is the voluntary contribution of the people – individuals, corporate sponsorship and giving and foundations – that powers American competition at each Olympic Games. Team USA truly is “we the people” through the power of philanthropy. It is civil society at its best. We stand behind our people. By voluntarily stepping forward with our dollars to support our athletes, we are not only supporting our athletic teams but also contributing to a civil society that is premised on teamwork.

It is quite beautiful when you think about it. With our collective support, we are running the 100 meter dash, swimming the 300 meter butterfly (heaven help us all), and sticking the landing with our athletes because we empowered our athletes and, in turn, emboldened a nation.

We do not celebrate that enough as a nation. In a healthy civil society, it is the teamwork of the people that enables success, that grows economies, that cares for community. Team USA is the people – the product of individual hard work and the private contributions of community. So, Citius, Altius, Fortius³, for philanthropy too.

For more information on Changing Our World and how we can advance your mission, please contact:

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² LaBianco, Christopher, Sr., Former Chief Development Officer at USA Swimming Foundation. Telephone interview. 25 July 2016.

³ Olympic motto – Swifter, Higher, Stronger