



Putting on a show

Olympic lessons from across the pond

North America has hosted 11 Olympic Games, and Vancouver will host the next Winter Games in 2010. **Alex Hampton** looks back at the highs – and lows – of the North American Olympic story so far, and identifies some lessons for organisers of future Games throughout the world.

North America's long involvement in the Olympics began in 1904 with the Games of the third Olympiad, held in Saint Louis, Missouri. The Games were held concurrently with the World's Fair, as they had been in Paris four years earlier, reducing the sporting events to a side-show. By the time the Games came to Los Angeles in 1932, the world was in the grip of the Great Depression. Just six months before the games were due to commence, organisers feared the worst. Not a single nation had accepted their invitation, and hardly any spectator tickets had been sold. The city turned to one of its major assets to generate interest – Hollywood.



Star appeal

A number of stars, including Charlie Chaplin, Marlene Dietrich, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford (above), lent their names to the promotional push. Despite the severe economic conditions, 37 countries sent over 1,300 athletes to sun-kissed southern California, where they were accommodated in the first Olympic Village. Competition was fierce (16 world and Olympic records fell in men's track and field alone) and the Games were a huge success. The promotional tactics employed by Los Angeles had paid off, and a precedent had been set for the presentation of sport as entertainment.

The next time the Games were held in California – the 1960 Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley – Walt Disney was given the task of ceremonial orchestration. Though the thought of a Disney Olympics may cause a collective rolling of eyes, it should not be overlooked that it was a Disney artist who designed the Olympic torch, which became a model for all future Games. The Games also marked the first time a television network bought broadcast rights for the Olympics, now one of the event's most important revenue streams.

Profit ... and loss

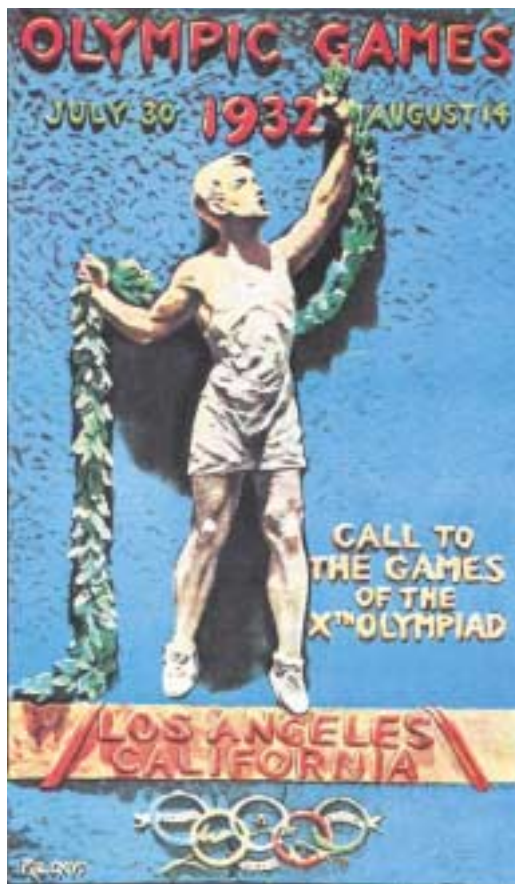
Los Angeles repeated its success in 1984, introducing corporate sponsorship for the first time ever. Around 40 companies were licensed to sell official Olympic products, allowing the 1984 Games to be the first to turn a profit since the celebrity-endorsed 1932 event.

Overall, few found fault with the commercial success of the 1984 Olympics, but the next Games staged on American soil were perceived by many as unsuccessful because of over-commercialisation. The Atlanta Games of 1996 were the first organised without government financial support. Despite this, and even without permitting advertising at competition venues, the Games made a profit. This remarkable achievement was only possible, however, through the heavy marketing presence of many large corporations. Problematic traffic congestion and the Centennial Park bombing also contributed to the overall negative perception of the Games.

While the overly commercial nature of the Atlanta Games had diluted the Olympic spirit in the eyes of many, the Montreal Games of 1976 attracted public criticism of a very different sort. The three levels of Canadian government collectively spent over \$2 billion on the Games.

(By contrast, it is estimated that the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics will cost approximately \$C1.4 billion.) The centrepiece of the massive public works projects that were undertaken was the architecturally daring, but ill-designed, Olympic Stadium, which was not completed in time for the Games. It featured a retractable roof that never worked, and created a debt so massive that it will only be cleared this year, 30 years after the event took place.

Far from increasing the city's prestige, the massive debt hamstrung Montreal and any future public works development for decades. In the years following the Games, the city experienced an economic downturn, brought on by a number of factors, which only served to sour the legacy. At the core of Montreal's failure was a wholly unrealistic big government approach to the Games. The city's Mayor, Jean Drapeau, summed up this ill-conceived attitude with his comment that 'The Olympics can no more have a deficit than a man can have a baby'.



Public consultation

The twelfth Olympic Winter Games were awarded to the Rocky Mountain city of Denver, Colorado in 1970. However, two years later the citizens of that city effectively blocked public funding for the Olympiad in a referendum that prevented a \$5 million bond issue to finance the Games. Fears about spiralling costs, such as those experienced by Montreal, and worries over the environmental impact of the Games, were the voter's primary motivations for rejecting them. The IOC was forced to turn to Innsbruck, which had hosted the Games just 12 years earlier. The Denver Olympics, the North American Games that never were, taught civic organisers important lessons about public involvement and ownership in any future Olympic undertakings.

Learning from Denver, the 1988 Calgary Winter Games served as a model for thoughtful public investment and consultation. One of the paramount aims of the organising committee was to give the public a sense of ownership and a lasting legacy. The profits from the Games were used to establish an athletic agency that runs training facilities and programmes for national sports, as well as Canada's first high school specifically designed

for future Olympic athletes.

North America has played an unparalleled role in transforming the Olympic Games from the world's oldest sporting contest into the greatest show on earth. Along the way, many lessons have been learnt. Of these, two in particular stand out. While the Games have now become televised entertainment for billions world-wide, and proceedings have become more and more commercialised, it is up to the organisers to deliver the event in a way that does not compromise the Olympic spirit. Furthermore, organisers must always engage the population of the host city, and take their views into account as far as possible when planning the infrastructure – and legacy – of the Games.

“The Los Angeles 1984 Games were the first to turn a profit since the celebrity-endorsed 1932 event.”

Table: North American Games

Summer Olympics	
1904	Saint Louis
1932	Los Angeles
1960	Mexico City
1976	Montréal
1984	Los Angeles
1996	Atlanta

Winter Olympics	
1932	Lake Placid
1960	Squaw Valley
1976	Denver (Innsbruck)
1984	Los Angeles
1988	Calgary
2002	Salt Lake City
2010	Vancouver

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Alex Hampton, Consultant