

A fresh perspective

London 2012 prompted an enormous outpouring of comment about legacy and the impact of the London Olympics and Paralympics on the attitudes, aspirations and outlooks of young people. Keen as ever to provide some insight and perspective on the debate, *The Leisure Review* asked a young person what they and their peers have made of the whole show. Adam Higgins took up the pen.

Youngsters have a divided perspective when asked about their opinions regarding sport and a month or so on from the conclusion of a successful Olympic Games in London it is interesting to see whether their views on the athletes, their involvement in the events and their interest in sporting legacy have changed.

Few people would have envisaged the Olympic torch ending its near 13,000-mile journey in the hands of the seven youngsters who together took the flame from the Olympic legend Sir Steve Redgrave to light the cauldron in front of 80,000 spectators in the Olympic Stadium. In this most memorable of opening ceremonies director Danny Boyle ended years of anticipation by placing faith in young people from varying backgrounds, giving them an unforgettable and unsurpassable experience. The Queen, David Beckham, Sir Chris Hoy and Sir Roger Bannister were among the stellar names mentioned as possibles to light the Olympic flame but the selection of teenage athletes to play an integral part in the official start of the Games spoke volumes for the importance of including the next generation in such a prestigious and historic event, a genuine once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The 2012 Games galvanised and inspired young people to get more involved in sport and physical activities, and some may well be competing themselves at future Olympic Games. The overwhelming successes of GB athletes such as Ben Ainslie, Jessica Ennis and Mo Farah have helped to engage the interest of youngsters in a wide range of different sporting events. Coupled with the spirit and determination that participants have shown, teenagers have been able to witness their achievements, take a certain feel-good factor from the spirit of the games and aspire to replicate their triumphs. Seeing all of the heart-warming stories of athletes from all walks of life and different cultures compete over the two-week period has been overwhelming.

However, not everyone can compete in the Games and, if raised participation in sport is to be sustained, most young people will also need accessible local sporting facilities. A lack of funding in the UK is seen as one of the predominant issues when providing youngsters with the opportunity to fulfil their potential and thrive in sport.

Sport has a monumental role in local communities and in the lives of youngsters. Nowadays it is being introduced at an even younger age in primary schools, which can only benefit health and wellbeing. With the growing concerns of obesity in children, just an hour a day can have a knock-on effect and make an ultimate difference; whether it be signing up to a football team, going for a light run or taking part in an after-school session of gymnastics, physical activity can have massive repercussions. Schools, parents and local councils have responsibilities to encourage children to take an active interest in sport by promoting its positives and providing adequate facilities.

As a teenager myself, I view the Olympic Games as the ultimate global event, bringing nations across the world together in unification of sportsmanship. I have become very attached to the Olympic spirit and will be an ardent viewer for years to come. Ever since 6 July 2005 when the president of the International Olympic Committee announced that the capital of the UK would be hosting the Games, many youngsters have been counting down the years and jumping at the chance of being part of a lasting legacy. They have since grown up and understood how the Olympics are tailor-made for all age brackets to participate. However, in contrast when speaking with other youngsters it seems that the

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Olympics are also seen as a money-making scheme to attract tourism and pump revenue into the economy.

The various schemes created by London 2012 organisers since the end of the Games have placed an affirmative spin on the young lives of our generation. Adolescents need to feel valued and responsible, key attributes of initiatives in which disadvantaged teenagers have profited from arranging projects and challenges of their own. This has significantly increased their involvement and gives them a real sense of pride and satisfaction.

Similarly, education programmes have been in place for several years with an estimated 80% of UK schools now a member of the Olympic Get Set scheme. More privileged students have had the opportunity to tour the Olympic Park, meet the London 2012 athletes and mascots, as well as being present at venues to watch the events unfold. Over one thousand youngsters had the opportunity to perform at the opening and closing ceremonies, supporting my belief that the London Olympic Games could not have been the success it was without the participation of young people.

Cycling has particularly caught the eye. A number of well-known and previously unrecognisable cyclists at the Games have invigorated youngsters. Teenagers would not necessarily have known who they were before the Olympics, but London 2012 has positioned them firmly on the sporting map. Watching live from the velodrome and observing the athletes' feats of speed and endurance after years of training was truly inspiring. The likes of Victoria Pendleton and Laura Trott have genuinely touched youngsters and they have encouraged many to take up the simple but effective exercise of getting on a bike and riding, whether it be for competition, fitness or fun.

Gold medals certainly help. Away from the velodrome, someone like Mo Farah is very popular around these parts because he carries such a high level of enthusiasm and has a moving story. But the fact that he is so grounded and thankful of where he has come from is really motivational. That is the attitude that society attempts to instill in young people, and the Olympics have made that so much easier.

A year ago the streets of London were inundated with rioters. Twelve months on there are scenes of jubilation. The Olympics has helped with infrastructure, investment and resources, and has also sent a concise and open message to our youngsters that sport can make a difference to your lives and athletes can inspire you to take part in something productive.

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