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## Olympic visions in flying colours

**No strangers to the combination of bikes and boards, the editorial team of *The Leisure Review* headed off to Stratford via a little piece of France for the first night of competition at the London velodrome and found the first star of the 2012 Olympic Games. Let's not call it the Pringle: it's a hyperbolic paraboloid.**

As we climbed the steps towards the spectator entrances of the Olympic velodrome it seemed that the roof was coming down to meet us, settling a few feet above our heads before sweeping up and away in an exaggerated replica of the track it is designed to cover. Coming down from the roof line, the curve of the wood-clad walls offer their own homage to the boards below, upon which the world's best were preparing to compete. Passing through the doors, we entered the building high above the banking and responded in chorus: "Wow." The velodrome had passed its first test with flying colours.

For us the day had begun a little while earlier some way to the west. By design or happy coincidence the Institut Français in South Kensington had chosen the opening day of the velodrome's inaugural competition to launch a cultural season of sports debates, a series titled *Are You Game?* that will run through the summer. The Leisure Review had accepted the invitation to join the audience for the first event in the series, *Olympic Games: What Are We Talking About?*, and we took our seats at the rear of a packed mediatheque as hands were kissed and enchantés were exchanged among the speakers at the front of the Institut's library.

Jean Durry, writer, sports historian and member of the IOC's culture and education commission, introduced Antoine de Navacelle, who was billed as a member of the International Pierre de Coubertin Committee and representative of the Coubertin family in Great Britain. Navacelle spoke of Baron de Coubertin's visit to the UK in search of solutions to educational problems in France. A strong admirer of the English education system, Coubertin visited England in 1883 as a young man, keen to see how the balance between mind and body could be achieved. Sport was one method but he was equally keen on all aspects of cultural education. Navacelle generously suggested that, while the cultural Olympiad has never quite matched Coubertin's vision, London 2012's version is very much in the spirit of what Coubertin had sought to achieve.

Picking up Navacelle's theme of the Olympic spirit, Tanni Grey-Thompson, baroness and Paralympian supreme, spoke of the huge impact that the Paralympics had had on her life and the lives of so many disabled people around the world. Having spent much of her time as a child asking her father, an architect, why every building seemed to have steps and be surrounded by cobblestones, she explained that sport had offered her the opportunity to be strong and healthy, and also to vent her competitive spirit. Having begun the Paralympic movement in Stoke Mandeville, Britain hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games offered a chance for legacy and an opportunity to change attitudes to disability. China had demonstrated what changes could be achieved. Only a few years ago the official party line was that there were no disabled people in China; now they send a team that tops the medal tables. This, Grey-Thompson argued, is part of the legacy of the Paralympic movement on which London is seeking to build and why the moment at which Jaques Rogge had said "Lon-don" had been one of the most emotional moments of her life, a point she reinforced by getting all teary just mentioning it.

Mindful of the time and distance between west and east London, The Leisure Review slipped out quietly but not before Denis Masegla, president of the Comité National Olympique et Sportif Français, had defined Olympism as a balance of excellence, friendship and respect. Speaking the day after Rome had announced it was withdrawing from the bidding process to host the Olympics, Masegla acknowledged that the challenge for host cities was on a grand scale but he was confident that the Olympic spirit and the aim of progressing society through sport would prevail. Having bid for the Olympic

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Games four times unsuccessfully, France now knew what it takes to win and would, Masegla thought, be bidding again, perhaps for the winter Games.

Buoyed by the Olympic spirit, we headed east, flashing our Oyster cards and starting the stopwatch as we went. Some 45 minutes later we stepped into the late afternoon sun at Stratford and, having done the apparently obligatory tour of the Westfield shopping centre, joined the queue to get through the gate. And then a queue to get through security. And then a queue to get on a bus which would take us across the site to the velodrome. All this queuing, together with oddly circuitous route taken by the bus, reminded everyone that this was a test event and that for those lucky enough to have tickets for the Games proper it will be a pleasure as well as a damned site easier to be able to walk across the Olympic park when the time comes.

As we travelled sedately but carefully across what was still, all too obviously, a building site, talk among those on the crowded bus was of how much work appeared still to be on the LOCOG 'to do' list and how quickly the Olympic clock (no doubt sponsored by someone) appeared to be ticking. While all the major venues could be pointed to and admired from afar (all apart from the aquatics centre, whose temporary seating pods ruin any architectural impact of Zaha Hadid's design and look to be nothing more than what they are: an ugly and unsatisfactory compromise) they seemed to be floating in a sea of ground works and fencing. That no one is panicking is a measure of how much the Olympic Delivery Authority has achieved and, as one visitor noted dryly, with five months to go London is where Athens was five minutes before the torch was lit.

All this commentary and assumed expertise in project management was forgotten as the bus neared the velodrome. In February's late afternoon sunset the building looked magnificent with the dramatically sweeping, delicate curves of its roof supported by the warm tones of its wooden walls, all perched precisely on a green mound that lifts the whole out of the still-muddy earth and into the darkening sky. All eyes were turned to look through the windows of the bus and there was an almost reverential quiet as we drew to a halt and the doors of the bus opened. We had arrived.

If the exterior had done a fine job of capturing the visitors' attention the interior quickly reminded everyone of the business in hand: the dramatic spectacle of high-speed bike racing. Entrance to the building comes at the concourse level and is made at various points through the glass wall that runs all the way round. Once inside, the spectator stands above the track with the competitive arena stretching away below them. The curve of the roof leads the eye to the track, the focal point of the building and the business in hand, but the roof's dramatic span creates a feeling of openness as well as intimacy. While a huge space has been enclosed, you also have the feeling that you can see into almost every crevice of the building. Everything seems to be on display: the riders sweeping round the track in warm-up sessions, the pens of riders and equipment crowded into the track centre, bikes and wheels being carried to and fro, all surrounded by the banks of seats that follow the curves of the track in one dimension and the curves of the roof in another. The message of this building is unambiguous: this is all about speed and you won't miss a thing.

The minutiae of the track and the building need not concern us here (there will be plenty of time for that) but as an insight to a competitive and spectating environment a few things were worthy of note. On the track there was a general feeling that this was a fast track, perhaps the fastest in the world, as each new track tends to be. The finish line is a few metres further down the home straight than is usual, giving more opportunity for riders to come off the final bend in second place and reach the line in first, a point Chris Hoy demonstrated a few days after our visit in the final of the keirin. The trackside temperature was generally felt by the riders to be ideal – in the low eighties fahrenheit – but there were a few problems with the ventilation system, which resulted in some cold drafts that were traced to some automatic windows being open at the wrong time. And the atmosphere created by a full house of spectators in race conditions were generally held to be excellent, although this view may have been that of the British team whose every pedal stroke was roared to rafters.

From a spectator's point of view there is much to compare favourably with the much-loved and much-used Manchester velodrome. There are almost three times as many seats in this Olympic venue and one can walk right round the track to survey the action from all sides, although some of the passage ways behind the seats are a little tight for the movement of a large number of people. The sight lines are generally excellent, although there were apparently some issues for people sat in the front row at either end of the track. However, wherever you may be sat you will not be far from the action. Being able to move

freely about a venue to get a different angle of view, a beer or meet a friend sat elsewhere, all while the action is taking place, is also a refreshing contrast with most sports venues.

The criticisms that came were those that will be common to many Olympic venues and will already be familiar to anyone who attends sports events: the high price of tickets; the ridiculous restrictions on what one may bring into the venue, particularly the ban on bringing water into a venue that will almost certainly be very hot, a disgraceful tactic that should be outlawed immediately at all public venues; and the exorbitant pricing of food and drinks, which, combined with the water restrictions, owes more to extortion than marketing rights. This may well be the price of doing business with the IOC but it will be viewed by many ordinary visitors as too high a price to pay when their taxes paid for the show in the first place.

But these gripes are not the fault of the building's designers, Hopkins Architects, and will be forgotten soon enough if the Olympic track cycling programme delivers the expected excitement and if the London velodrome proves anywhere near as popular with cyclists as that of Manchester after the Games. There are few grounds for doubt on either count and London 2012 may well have found its first star in the shape of its velodrome.

### ***The Leisure Review, March 2012***

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