

The Worth of the International Olympic Academy

By

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Besides having watched the Olympic Games as a child, my first encounter with the Olympic movement was through my university education at De Montfort University, which led me to the British Olympic Foundation's National Olympic Academy. However, my formative experience was at the International Olympic Academy International Postgraduate Seminar in 2000. Having since returned to the Academy numerous times, I have often wondered how the movement would be different, if only everybody involved had the chance to experience it through the Academy first.

The IOA is a place that changes peoples' lives and mine was no exception. I met my wife Dr Beatriz Garcia during the postgraduate seminar who has been my constant companion in all Olympic matters. Our first child Ethan was born 10 years later, almost to the day we met.



Wedding rings, made in Olympia

Since then, I have been fortunate enough to return to Olympia on numerous occasions, as coordinator of the Postgraduate Seminar, lecturer at the HEI session, spectator at the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, supporter of Scholars for Olympia, and twice Professor of the Postgraduate Seminar.

It is my honour to have the chance to write for its 50th Anniversary book and this task is unlike any other writing opportunity I have had. As a philosopher, I am inclined to think about my contribution in philosophical terms and I would like to consider how we should value the worth of the IOA, while enriching these ideas with my own experiences.

My memories of the Academy are replete with extraordinary experiences. For instance, in 2000, my fellow postgraduate students and I attended the lighting ceremony for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and shared the Academy with some of its performers. Further, watching an actual Olympic competition in the ancient stadium during the Athens 2004 Games was profound, as it was the first time an Olympic competition had taken place there since ancient times. Indeed, the intimate geographical connection between the stadium and the Academy reinforces the worth of each.

Yet it is often in the most familiar, every day experiences that the value of the Academy is most persuasively articulated. This is largely because what makes it special is the *people*. First, there is the Academy's staff, from the President to the cleaners, all of whom create a sense of family that is felt by all visitors. Second, there are the supervising lecturers whose generous interventions exceed expectations. Finally, the interactions between students define life at the IOA. From debates about the ethics of doping, to ideas about what it must have been like to run naked in the ancient stadium - some more vivid than others - the every day interactions at the IOA is where the life-changing experience begins.

These elements create the unique *programme* that the IOA delivers. Beyond the formal lecture schedule, the space allocated to free time is an essential part of its worth. Most of the people who attend are of an age where they are highly motivated, capable people and the Academy's recognition that they can be given freedom to create experiences for themselves, represents the best pedagogic principles that any educational institution would be proud to implement. In each session, student committees are formed to develop social and sports programmes, which neatly complement the formal learning that takes place through lectures and seminars. The additional tours through Greece to ancient sites make the IOA experience unlike any other. I was lucky enough to take part as an athlete in the Nemean Games of 2000, overseen by archaeologist Professor Stephen Miller and the experience united the theory and practice of learning in a way that is beyond compare.

The *location* of the Academy in Olympia adds further worth and, apart from being a beautiful, inspiring setting. This secluded and remote location creates a distinct learning experience and a commonly shared willingness to retreat to serving just fundamental human needs. This insulation from the outside world also promotes opportunities for rich international encounters among

the Academy's uniquely diverse community. The importance of this was brought into sharp focus in recent years, when the rise of the Internet meant that the Academy could become part of a global community. When I was a student at the Academy, this period was just beginning. I recall that there was one computer with internet access, where now there is an entire room and wifi across the campus. Opinions vary about whether this has enriched the IOA experience, or whether it has risked endangering the value of the Academy's remoteness. In any case, the realization that having Internet access provides a valuable insight into the world for students coming from countries with limited internet access, seems to be a further contribution that the Academy now makes to education.

In addition to the digital revolution, the IOA has lived through many eras and its *history* is also what gives it legitimacy as the ultimate authority of Olympic education. When the fires of 2007 struck Greece, I joined the *Scholars for Olympia* initiative, which gathered academics from around the world to visit the Academy and demonstrate our ongoing appreciation and support for its contribution to Olympism. During this visit, we spent time with the local villagers to acknowledge their brave acts, thanks to whom the Academy was saved from certain ruin. The fires devastated Olympia, but the buildings of the Academy remained largely unscathed, as if to suggest that the historical significance of the IOA could not be extinguished by even the greatest natural threat. As well, the fact that the memorials dedicated to Pierre de Coubertin, John Ketseas and Carl Diem remained standing, conveyed an opportunity to remember the past and consider the possibility of renewal, as indeed forest fires often are.



Photo of Scholars for Olympia, 2007

Each of these elements lead me towards concluding that the Academy's primary value is found in the way that it *inspires* people towards participating in the Olympic movement. Since my first visit in 2000, I have also been fortunate enough to attend 6 Olympic Games – Winter and Summer – at which I always am surrounded by people within the extended Olympic family. The International Olympic Academy Participants' Association always manages to reunite us during Games time, providing a welcome respite from the chaos of the Olympic city and a reminder of Academy life.

While the tangible impacts of the Academy are salient, its intrinsic value should not be overlooked. In the most beautiful way, the Academy is a small part of Ancient Greece and a reminder of the origin of Olympic values that is inextricable from Pierre de Coubertin's vision. The fact that his heart lays here within the Academy walls is the ultimate testament to this fact.

The generosity of the Hellenic Olympic Committee, the Presidents and Deans of the Academy who have developed such an enduring commitment to the programme over 50 years is second to none. I began my experience under the Deanship of Dr Kostas Georgiadis and his support over the years has been unwavering and I would like to add a note of personal thanks to him for bringing me – and now my students – through the Academy.

During the IOA's postgraduate seminar, all students make a presentation about their research and, as I was the last, I invited everyone out of the classroom to gather by the swimming pool, a crucial agora of the Academy. This singular experience captures the entirety of what the Olympic experience should entail – the fusion of sport, culture and education and it remains one of my fondest memories of time there making life-long friends.