

# The Olympic Gold Medal Obsession

## An Australian Condition

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*Obsessions of any sort, notably of a consuming nature, are never healthy matters. The drive to win gold, laced with a desperation often reflected in steroid consumption and psychological battering, has made the Olympic Games the least of savoury spectacles.*

Even worse than the physical reduction of the athlete to mechanism and medal winning machine is the complicity towards it from the coaching establishment and hungry spectators. Nothing is quite as terrifying as triumph – or failure – by association, the vicarious delight, or woe, the groupies feel when their chosen champion falls. “We,” they claim, were also in the pool that day.

Australia is particularly bad on this score. Its failure to net a monstrous swag of medals at the Montreal Olympics in 1976 was seen as a catastrophe to morale, a national disgrace. Only one silver and four bronze medals were brought home.

The characteristic approach to gold madness was typified by the near hysterical antics of Australian swimming coach, Laurie Lawrence, at the Seoul Olympics in 1988. After Duncan Armstrong won gold in the 200m freestyle event in record time, Lawrence exclaimed effusively how, “He did it again. Lucky lane six.”

The interviewer proceeded to ask him whether Lawrence was ready to respond to a question about how he felt. “Mate, we just beat three record-holders. How do *you* feel?” In conclusion, Lawrence lands the fundamental blow to those who believe that the competition, not the victory, is what counts. “Why do you think we come here? For the silver? Stuff the silver!”[1]

The Lawrence philosophy was much evident during the London 2012 Olympics. Australian swimmer Emily Seebohm had won silver in her 100m backstroke final. Instead of congratulatory embraces, there was commiseration and grief. She had *only* won silver. Apologies to parents, the coach and the Australian public followed. To be second was to be humiliated.

With such conditions at play, it was little wonder that a 2010 survey of ethical and integrity issues in Australian sport conducted by the Australian Sports Commission and Colmar Brunton Social Research found a host of concerns: “Athletes being pushed too hard by coaches or parents”; “Negative coaching behaviours and practices” and negative administration.[2]

A quick glance at Australia’s performance at the London Games should have punctured the gloom of the medal cravers. The country’s athletes won eight gold, 15 silver, and 12

bronze, a highly credible 35 medals leading to an eighth placing on the table.

Broadcaster, television presenter and author Waleed Aly, writing in *The Monthly*, encouraged a celebration of the achievement, while regarding any gold lust as a “puerile” fascination. Those treating the performance as below par were to be treated with derision.[3]

In the wake of that performance, deemed poor by the lucre-craving establishment, veteran Fairfax journalist Paul Sheehan would express concern at that voracious hunger for the medal count:

“Hundreds of millions of tax dollars and thousands of hours of grinding, invisible sacrifice by athletes have been compromised by an obsession with gold. This obsession has clouded the reality that Australia has just had a brilliant Olympics. An unambiguous success” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Aug 13, 2012).

The other fallacy in boosting medal counts is the notion that high rankings actually lead to increased sports participation and a tongue wagging interest in following Olympic heroes. The statistics regarding sport participation in England showed a decline of interest in sport leading up to the 2012 games. Nor has a figure like Michael Phelps, who dominated his swimming meets in 2008, inspired a generation of enthused swimmers.[4]

As the Games commence at Rio, Australian journalists and the sporting establishment, led by the steely Kitty Chiller, is running the pre-emptive remarks about gold again. Predictions are being made, the loot being divvied out. In July, Chiller suggested that the 410-strong team would bag “15 maybe even 16” gold medals of a projected medal tally of 45, a feat that would land Australia in the top five.[5]

Medals are being awarded even before the first events have taken place. Even Chiller admits that, “For any country to double the number of gold in [four-year period] is a huge ask. I genuinely believe we can do it.”

The erroneous assumption made is that record holders will perform on the day and win gold. On swimmer Cate Campbell, the ABC observed that breaking a world record a mere month before Rio made her “the favourite to win the gold in the 100 metres freestyle.”

The same network ran with the jarring headline that Australia’s swimming team were “aiming to erase memories of London.” Readers were introduced to “the stars of the Australian swimming team hoping to rebound from the poor showing at the 2012 Olympics in London.”[6]

Again, the grand hope will be in the pool, where Australians are always expected to excel with automatic superhuman achievement. In Chiller’s cool words, “Yes, we’re going to rely on swimming, we always do.” Again, they will not be prepared for the disappointment should those medals not eventuate. The gold disease tends to be a particularly aggressive one.

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Notes

- [1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oATltjGciw>
- [2] [https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/\\_\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/-417115/ASC\\_Ethics\\_summary.pdf](https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/___data/assets/pdf_file/0019/-417115/ASC_Ethics_summary.pdf)
- [3] <https://www.themonthly.com.au/gold-good-waleed-aly-6167>
- [4] <https://www.sfia.org/reports/participation/>
- [5] <http://www.smh.com.au/sport/olympics/rio-2016/rio-olympics-2016-australia--aiming-for-16-gold-medals-says-kitty-chiller-20160714-gq5n88.html>
- [6] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-28/australian-olympic-swimming-team-aiming-to--bounce-back-in-rio/7663254>

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