

Updates 2008-Sports

Beijing Olympics: A golden fifty for host China

China proved an acquisitive first time Olympic host, topping the gold-medal chart with one of the most dominating performances ever. Abhinav Bindra did India proud by winning the country's first ever individual gold and ended a 28-year gold medal drought

China's show all the way

China spent seven years planning for this event. It must be relieved that these Olympics are being hailed as both a sporting and an operational success. Worries about air pollution, protesters and media freedom were eventually overshadowed by what went on in the sporting arenas. At the closing ceremony the International Olympic Committee President, Jacques Rogge, said they had been "truly exceptional games".

The show went on without a blemish. The future hosts, notably London, have a task in hand to match China's exemplary organisation. The world's oldest civilisation has set a new benchmark. From a swanky airport to futuristic stadiums, China had everything ready in time for the big party.

China's haul of 51 gold medals was the largest since the Soviet Union won 55 in Seoul in 1988.

Fielding athletes groomed since child hood in sports academies, it won medals in 25 different sports, including its first ever in sailing, beach volleyball and field hockey.

China's rich collection of 51 gold medals came in 17 disciplines. The bulk of the share was from artistic gymnastics (9), weightlifting (8), diving (7), shooting (5), table tennis (4), badminton (3) and judo (3). The Chinese found heroes and heroines from every quarter and every discipline.

Debatable

Not since 1936, when Nazi Germany prevailed at the Berlin Olympics, had a country other than the US or the Soviet Union/Russia led the gold medal list.

The United States trailed well behind the Chinese in golds with 36, the first time since 1992 it didn't lead the category. But the Americans did break their own mark for total medals in a non-boycotted Olympics; they won 110 in all, two more than their previous high set in 1992 and 10 ahead of China's overall tally this year. Britain, getting an early jump on its host role for the 2012 Summer Games, had its best Olympics in a century with 19 gold medals — good for fourth place behind the Russians.

The U.S. won gold medals in 15 disciplines, and the lion's share of 12 came from the pool. Apart from the seven athletics gold medals, the U.S. did not win more than two gold medals in any sport. The men won 20 gold and the women 15, while one medal came in a mixed event.

India's distinction

India also earned the distinction of winning more than two medals from a single edition of the Games for the first time in history and its first ever individual gold, for a total of three. India finished 50th among the 87 countries which won at least one medal. From two medals in 1952, India has indeed come a long way!

Winners and achievers

A debate is bound to ensue whether eight-gold winning American swimmer Michael Phelps was the 'athlete of the Games' or was it the sprint double winner from Jamaica, Usain Bolt, who set two individual world records and was part of the shorter relay team of his country which bettered another world record. Phelps now has 14 Olympic gold medals.

Sports analysts say Michael Phelps was the unrivalled star of the Beijing Games. The Baltimore Bullet, raised by a single mother, had to overcome attention deficiency syndrome as a young boy. He drew everyone's attention at Beijing with his superlative achievement. Phelps has proved that 'Impossible is nothing' is not just a catch phrase of Adidas.

If Phelps was the master of the pool Usain Bolt was the sultan of the track. The Jamaican ran an almost casual last 20 metres yet broke the 100 meter world record and won the gold medal in the most fiercely competitive track and field event. We will argue forever about how fast he might have gone had he not felt the incontinent need to celebrate his victory in the 100 metres with 20 metres still to run. He followed this up a world record and gold medal in 200 metres and another one in 4X100 metre relay race.

India at Beijing

After Bindra's gold, it was almost curtains down on Indian performance. The country had never won two individual medals in any Olympics and most of the promising group events were over. Participants in athletics had failed to progress beyond the primary stage. But then came the wrestling and boxing medals and India broke its 56-year-old jinx of not winning more than one medal in an Olympics.

Sushil Kumar's unexpected bronze in the 66kg freestyle category was India's second wrestling medal after K.D. Jadhav's bronze in Helsinki 1952-India won the hockey gold, too, that year. Sushil was mostly written off after his initial loss to Ukraine's Andriy Stadnik, the silver medallist. The Delhi wrestler's medal came in the repêchage rounds. In Olympic wrestling, the repêchage rounds are given only to participants who lost to the finalists in the initial rounds. Hence, two bronzes were awarded. In a span of 65 minutes, Sushil won three matches. The second bronze went to a Georgian wrestler and the gold to Turkey's Ramazan Sahin.

The same day, middleweight boxer Vijender Kumar punched his way through Ecuador's Carlos Gongora and became the first Indian boxer to enter Olympic semifinals, and thus win a medal. In the semifinals lost to Emilio Correa Bayeaux from Cuba.

IPL Players' Auction: Money matters

The availability of players had a crucial role in determining the bid price. Also important were factors like marketability of the player and his individual cricketing capability

Cricket's richest body BCCI has carried out its first-ever auction of players among the eight teams, which will play in the newly launched Indian Premier League (IPL). The Board for Control of Cricket in India (BCCI) had put 77 players under the hammer for IPL teams owned by businessmen, film stars and other celebrities to bid and build their teams for the season that will begin in April.

The frenzied buying of players in competitive bidding opened up a path to riches that only a few individual cricketers have ever seen in their careers. The auction got off to a rousing start when Chennai Super Kings, owned by India Cements promoter N Srinivasan offered an eye-popping \$1.5 million for Dhoni. The Hyderabad team owned by Deccan Chronicle picked Australian all-rounder Andrew Symonds for \$1.35 million, the second highest tag in the auction.

Sachin Tendulkar of Mumbai, Rahul Dravid of Bangalore, Sourav Ganguly of Kolkata, Virender Sehwag of Delhi and Yuvraj Singh of Mohali, who had been given "iconic status" and kept out of the auction, will be paid 15 percent more than the highest paid cricketer in their respective home teams. Even then, Dhoni walked away with a higher price tag than any of them. While some players went for prices much higher than their base value, some failed to garner a premium. Ricky Ponting was bought by Kolkata, co-owned by Shah Rukh Khan, for \$400,000. Brett Lee (Mohali) did better at \$900,000.

Availability of the players was an important determinant for the final payouts. The franchisees had been informed about the availability of the various players before the auction. Andrew Symonds was not playing the Pakistan tour that was clashing with IPL tournament matches. This prompted the franchisees to increase the amount they were willing to pay for signing him up.

In all, 14 matches are to be played by each of the players in the team. The team that reaches the semi-finals and finals would play an extra two. Ponting is to miss four matches because of the Pakistan tour and, because of the England tour, another two matches. So he would be available for eight out of 14 matches. Most Indian and Sri Lankan players are available for the entire tournament and, hence, their bid amounts were justified.

Notable absentees from the huge platform of foreign players auctioned were the Englishmen. It is their contention that playing for the country is paramount and that no amount of money is going to lure them. It will be interesting to see how long the English can resist the lure of the lucre. The English may be staying away now because the April-May schedule interferes with county cricket.

The franchisees will get the highest share of TV sponsorship fees (80 percent for the first five years, 60 percent for the next five) and the title sponsorship fee (60 percent) which is to be paid by DLF. Thus, each franchisee stands to get a guaranteed share of between \$80 million and \$100 million over 10 years. The team owners also get access to all on-ground and local revenues as well as the obvious branding opportunities, all of which taken together should be high enough to cover the cost of players' fees.

Attracting large TV audiences could be a big challenge for Sony Entertainment Television (SET) and Singapore-based World Sports Group who have paid a whopping \$ 918 million for telecast rights in a 10-year deal.

If ratings are high then the next round of bidding could see even higher prices. Players can be bought and sold after February 2009.

Cricket is yet to command fan following beyond the national teams. The scenario is different in case of soccer where clubs like Real Madrid and Manchester United command global fan followings. Soccer is a sport controlled by inter-club league priorities throughout the planet. Cricket's structure is different, heavily dependent as it is on international games in the form of Tests and ODIs.

India triumph down under

India's tour of Australia, repeatedly in media glare with controversies on and off the field, ended on a happy note when Mahendra Dhoni's youthful side got the better of their experienced hosts in the second final at Brisbane, Gabba in a spectacular fashion to win the Commonwealth Bank Series. India had last won an important limited-overs series in Australia 23 years ago. India's win of the CB series was nothing short of astounding. Fans had little hope when India lost two of their first three games in the series, including one against Sri Lanka. But the team battled back to pip Sri Lanka for a place in the best-of-three finals series.

The nine-run margin does not reflect the full story as Australia were on the back foot right from the start after India had posted 258, riding on Sachin Tendulkar's 91. Pace bowler Praveen Kumar swung the ball both ways to remove the top three batsmen—Adam Gilchrist, Ricky Ponting and Michael Clarke—with the score reading 32. It was always going to be an uphill task to recover from there onwards. Indian batsman Gautam Gambhir had the highest aggregate of 440 runs from 10 innings with an average of 55 runs while Nathan Bracken with 21 wickets at an average of 16.72 was the highest wicket-taker in the CB Series.

A race row and umpiring controversy had earlier threatened to disrupt the cricket tour. The controversial Sydney Test was blighted by contentious catches, a series of poor umpiring decisions and over-zealous appealing. Indian spinner Harbhajan Singh was banned for three matches for an alleged racist remark against Andrew Symonds. The charge of racially abusing Symonds was later downgraded to abusive language by the International Cricket Council (ICC). The ICC also accepted India's demand that West Indian umpire Steve Bucknor be removed for the rest of the series after the umpiring fiasco in Sydney.