

16 life lessons from our Olympic Bid

Mary Schmich Chicago Tribune October 4, 2009

This is the Olympic creed:

"The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."

What a lovely thought.

But the Olympic approach to competition was a hard ideal for a lot of people in Chicago to swallow Friday.

Stunned. Grim. Devastated. Dispirited. Humiliated.

The adjectives started working overtime the minute the news arrived that Chicago -- as the pugilistic pundits relished saying -- was a first-round KO in the contest to host the 2016 Olympic Games.

Even some Olympics naysayers suffered the dejection of rejection, proving that you sometimes don't know what you want till it's gone.

"I wasn't sure I wanted the Olympics until we didn't get them," I heard several people say.

"Out on the first round?" added one of the previously uncommitted. "That's just rude."

The Olympics were never a united ambition of the people of Chicago, but for months, they've been our unifying argument. We couldn't agree on whether they'd be good or bad for Chicago, but they were a way to discuss what was right and wrong with our great, messy city.

In their polarizing way, they brought us together.

Now we go back to our ordinary lives. But first, 16 life lessons from the sporting event that was our 2016 Olympics bid:

1. You can't win if you don't play. And when you play, you can't assume you'll win. Chicago gets points for trying.

2. Star power isn't the highest power.

Two Obamas and Oprah weren't enough to seal Chicago's deal. But you can bet all the members of the Olympic committee went home and talked about their triple-O brush with fame.

3. Blame always follows loss.

Should we blame Chicago's loss on its presentation to the Olympic committee? Or on the city's violence? The bid team's arrogance? The local naysayers? I say blame it on the bossa nova. Rio put on a better dance.

4. Gloating is bad sportsmanship. That means you, Olympics naysayers.

5. Winning always involves timing, which means losing does too.

The Olympics are an international event. They've never been held in South America. This was Rio's time.

6. A picture really is worth a thousand words.

At least when people are in shock. Check out Friday's photos from the Daley Plaza.

7. Losing graciously is the next best thing to winning. So, let's admit that Rio is a spectacular city that needs the Olympics more than we do.

8. Sometimes you're wrong if you do, wrong if you don't.

Call it the Obama-goes-to-Copenhagen principle.

9. It's easy to underestimate your rivals. Who in Chicago expected Chicago to be bested by Madrid?

10. No matter how informed you are, your world view is narrow.

When a journalist in Rio told me last week that people in Rio thought their strongest adversary was Madrid, I mentioned that to several people in Chicago. They all laughed. The oddsmakers agreed: It was Chicago versus Rio.

11. Odds are exactly that: odds. And predictions are often just narrow thinking.

12. Strong contestants sometimes lose.

13. Just because you got knocked down doesn't mean you can't get up. So, Mayor Daley and

President Obama suffered irreparable blows to their power? Could be. But see "predictions" above.

14. Liking one thing doesn't mean you hate the other thing.

An Olympic committee vote for a city outside the United States isn't necessarily an anti-American vote.

Not everything is about us.

15. Loss is its own opportunity. The Olympics gave Chicago an urgent reason to envision our city differently and better. It may be harder now, but we still have a chance to apply that fresh vision.

16. As the Olympic creed says: The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.

And then move on.

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