

Preface

*The important thing in life is not the victory but the contest;
the essential thing is not to have won but to have fought well.*

BARON PIERRE DE COURBERTIN (1863–1937),
FOUNDER OF THE MODERN OLYMPICS

My own Olympic adventure — oddly enough begun in the original spirit of Pierre de Coubertin — began with a long car ride home to Vancouver from Calgary. My fellow street medics and I had gone to provide medical support for anti-globalization protesters at the June 2002 G8 Summit in Kananaskis, Alberta. The event itself had been relatively calm. Neither the police nor the demonstrators wanted a repeat of the street battles of Quebec City two years earlier. As medics, we hung out on the outskirts of the various demonstrations, watching our fellow activists and hoping all the while that nothing would go sideways that would require us to pull out the first aid kits.

While we waited, we spent our time chatting up the locals, always hopeful that somehow we'd be able to reach out to average people and explain what we thought wrong with the G8's agenda. Calgarians are generally friendly folks; some of them noticing our medic vests had come over to talk, mainly to ask what the demonstrations were all about. At one demonstration in a downtown mall, a protest group composed of naked people covered with mud (I forget why) was targeting a Gap clothing store. A pretty woman in her twenties approached us and asked my fellow medic Crimson and me what was happening. "I don't get it," she said, pointing at the mud people congregating outside the store. "What have they got against the Gap? They made nice clothes." We agreed that maybe the clothes were fine, but that to make them, the company exploited factory workers in the developing world, a practice condoned if not encouraged by the World Trade Organization and the G8. "But they make nice clothes," she reiterated, the look on her face segueing from innocent confusion to insipient panic. Could we possibly be some of the dangerous "radicals" the Calgary press had been warning everyone about? She must have concluded that indeed we were because after her pained third "But they make nice clothes," she scurried away from us toward a knot of Calgary police who

were keeping a wary eye on the demonstration. We watched as she spoke to them while gesturing animatedly in our direction. The police nodded at her, turned in our direction and smiled; one constable even nodded a vague greeting. That was that, no harm done, but also no knowledge about globalization transferred to someone from outside the circle of those already amongst the converted.

This encounter, like so many others, drove home a point that many of us had been struggling with: How do you reach out to ordinary people who have been bombarded by media and government pronouncements on the “benefits and inevitability” of globalization? Years before, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky had coined the term “manufacturing consent”¹ to describe the process by which a corporation-controlled government and media endlessly hammer home their messages, selling, in this case, “free market reforms” in just the same way as they might pitch any other product. To create “balance,” the media might let in the odd opposing view, but it was always careful to make sure that such heresies were surrounded by still further pro-globalization pronouncements. What is the average citizen to think? Well, if all the mainstream political parties agree, if all the mainstream media agree as well, the pro-globalization worldview must be correct, right? The end result for much of the 1980s and 1990s had been a largely compliant citizenry composed of people who — if they thought about it at all — concluded that they had examined the evidence critically and made up their own minds that globalization was for the economic good of everyone, that the “rising tide lifts all boats,” that free trade formed the bedrock of democracy. Everyone says so, so it must be true. Confronted by globalization’s opponents, the notion that economic or social realities are not as they seem sounds a frankly discordant note to the background pronouncements of politicians and news anchors. The possibility that a corporation-controlled and globalized world economy is far more likely to generate poverty than universal wealth goes against a firmly implanted and well-nourished worldview. For many like the woman in Calgary, the very fact that anyone might question the received wisdom is profoundly unsettling and definitely something to be avoided if at all possible. Economics can be confusing and boring enough at the best of times; getting past years of psychological conditioning to try to displace preprogrammed views is pretty difficult. Certainly the chance of doing so in a thirty-second encounter is unlikely in the extreme.

Now on the long drive home, Jill, Crimson, Bella and I found ourselves contemplating an article in a newspaper that had found its way into Opal, our van and part-time home. The paper had been used as a placemat for the food bowl of our accompanying furry friend, a three-legged dog named Indy. Indy

didn't seem to mind if we borrowed the paper for a while. Other than that the news was days old, one article caught our attention. The report noted that Vancouver was hoping to be shortlisted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. Eight cities were in the running with four finalists soon to be chosen for the *honor* of submitting formal bids. The article listed some of the key players in Vancouver's bid, including real estate baron Jack Poole. It also reported that the Vancouver Bid Committee had the support of all levels of government. Opinion in the van was mixed: Someone said, "Cool"; someone else said "Corporate scam." As we thought about it further, we realized that we didn't really understand the Olympic Games or what they meant very well at all. What kind of beast was the IOC? Was it a benevolent organization that promoted elite sports for the stated goals of peaceful competition amongst the nations, or was it a big multinational business? Could it be both? Then there was the question of what to make of the fact that all levels of government were all onside with the likes of a developer like Poole. Maybe we'd all had too much tear gas in our diet over the previous years, but our skepticism was rapidly rising. After all, if the governing BC Liberal party (not really very "liberal") and the developer-ridden Vancouver city government were onside, then there had to be a rat in there somewhere. Maybe the Olympics overall, as well as the particular Games at the local level, were the same globalization phenomenon we had been fighting in Kananaskis and elsewhere? If so, maybe exposing it could be our "wedge" issue, one that we could use to broach the flaws of globalization to an apathetic or uninformed audience: Very few people seemed to be anti-Olympics. The rest, conditioned all their lives to love the Games, might just be curious why anyone wouldn't be completely onside. It would be like hating Santa Claus, for some a notion so weird that they'd just want to know why.

Taking an anti-Olympics stand was only a vague notion, but one that germinated on the long drive home. Opal kept breaking down, and when we arrived home some 20 hours later, the idea of looking in more detail at the Olympics and Vancouver's bid was firmly rooted. We had no idea where it would take us. Perhaps had we known, we would have given the paper back to Indy and forgotten the whole thing.

What I didn't realize then was that Vancouver's bid would come to dominate my life and that, for good or ill, exploring worldwide Olympic myths and realities was going to be a path I'd be on for years to come. This book is the culmination of that journey...so far.

Readers will quickly notice that the focus of *Five Ring Circus* is on Vancouver's Olympics and the way it has impacted the citizens of this city and

region. I've tried to make it clear that Vancouver's "geocentric" bid, both in its origin and evolution, was not unique. In fact, as I began to look into the IOC and Olympic cities in more detail, startling similarities became apparent. The pattern that finally emerged clearly showed that bids are all "imagineered" and controlled in the same way. Moreover, all "successful" bids produce comparable crops of lies, broken promises, debt, social displacement and environmental destruction. Vancouver's bid history is thus like that of Sydney, Salt Lake City, Athens and Torino in the past and is utterly predictive of London and Sochi in the future.

The first caveat to the material that follows is that getting a firm grip on Olympic numbers — for example, the costs of the Games, including security, the environmental impacts and the like — is subject to numerous assumptions and a host of variables not available to those outside Olympic inner planning circles. In all cases, I have tried to make a minimal number of assumptions, using primary source material as often as possible. This procedure led me to come up with figures that are likely in the low-end range, hence an underestimate of the true costs and impacts. The real numbers, if they are known at all, are available only to those in government and the Olympic organizing committees. For reasons that will become clear, neither is telling.

The second caveat is that I have gone far beyond the "official" Olympic industry sources for information, focusing on primary news sources and the dissident publications of authors such as Professor Helen Lenskyj and the investigative reporter Andrew Jennings. While traditional Olympic writers and scholars have produced an impressive body of articles and books, they also tend to "toe the party line," and few offer anything that can be considered critical of any aspect of the Olympic enterprise. There are, however, some unexpected gems to be found in this literature when one reads between the lines.

There is an old adage that to know history is to predict the future. Nowhere is this truer than with the Olympics. To citizens of the cities now competing for 2016 and beyond, take note: The events that I describe here are in your future if you listen to the siren songs of the IOC and your local bid boosters. It may be too late to prevent the worst of the outrages from occurring in Vancouver, but you can still save your own cities from a similar fate.

Whether you do so or not is, remarkably, really up to you.