



CHINA SHOP

Medal Industry

Before that lucky Spanish archer fired the arrow that set the Olympic Games ablaze a loose federation of local forecasting economists predicted that our athletes would come away with a bagful of medals including six gold. The economists based their forecasts on past evidence which showed our athletes always perform better in times of sluggish economic growth than when general affluence prevails. Their premise was that our dollar-driven athletes would pull out all the stops to land lucrative marketing contracts and media exposure to cushion their return to a recession-hit homeland.

Given that most of our medal-winners hail from Victoria, there seems some credibility to their hypothesis. This must be music to John Hewson's ears. He has often regaled the media with his spartan upbringing and how we can all emulate his 'can do' spirit. Even Deng

Xiaoping got in on the act and attributed the Chinese team's outstanding baptism at the Olympics to the Chinese Communist Party agenda of discipline, economic reform, and sticking to the socialist road. Nevertheless, one suspects that to Deng Xiaoping it did not matter whether his athletes wore red or blue so long as they captured the medals.

Similar sentiments prevailed in Australia. To our couch potatoes, winning medals was not simply a matter of life or death—it was much more important. Even our own Iron Maiden, Ros Kelly, on the mother of all junkets attending the Olympiad, made a none-too-veiled threat that if our athletes did not measure up the funding to the Australian Institute of Sport would be cut. Paul Keating, who has a quiet contempt for competitive sport, immediately vetoed the sports minister's threat. Last year this funding amounted to the princely sum of \$77 million. It has not, however, escaped the cudgels of the *Fightback!* razor gang. Mr 'Can-do', John Hewson, who once ran a marathon to prove to himself that anything was possible if you turn your energy to it, expects our athletes to compete on the smell of an oily rag (or sweaty T-shirt).

Yet funding our athletes has proved a remarkable example of strategic investment. Imagine in this most dire of times the new blow to our national psyche if our athletes had returned home empty-handed. Sure, our record haul of medals since 1956 won't lead to a medal-led economic recovery but we did, for a start, cream the Kiwis. Another plus is that Sydney's Olympic bid was given greater (metallic) weight. More seriously, the Olympics' world top performers on a per

capita/medal basis proved to be, yet again, those countries with heavy state funding of sport—namely the former and the few remaining socialist states. The much-maligned 'picking winners' approach to state interventionism does pay real gold, at least when it comes to sport. So much for level playing fields and leaving it to the lure of the lucre to bring metallic success.

In any case, the playing fields of Barcelona were not as level as they seemed. Allegations flew thick and fast concerning the use of performance-enhancing drugs by some athletes. The hard-to-prove drugs scam is analogous to the non-tariff barriers that infiltrate international trade. It is hard to prove they exist, but the repetitive trade surpluses give the offenders away. So, too, bulging biceps and powerful pectorals give away steroid users. Speaking of bulk, Ben Johnson, silly enough to have got caught in Seoul, looked a mere shadow of himself, both literally and physically. In the heats for the 100m. final he appeared to slip on a discarded syringe left by some inconsiderate on the track. Marathon runner Lisa Ondieki was, according to her, well and truly handed the poisoned chalice. Swimmer Lisa Curry-Kenny, drugged on self-worship and endless self-promotion, failed to make the grade. Bang goes that third book on *Bringing up Bozo!*

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, our own gruesome twosome could not resist metal metaphors. John Dawkins proclaimed our new inflation rate as "Gold, Gold, Gold for Australia!" One press scribe demurred, contending that it was actually a silver medal performance, since New Zealand's inflation rate was lower. In any case, the flagging Australian economy resembled De Castella after his marathon—on a saline drip and contemplating retirement. John Hewson, whose vision of the Olympic scoreboard resembles an array of economic indicators, stirred us up by claiming that New Zealand had won the gold medal in the economic reform decathlon. Possibly. But if New Zealand is having an economic boom at the moment it must be the worst one in history.

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