

Fair Play Under Threat in AOC challenge! Why John Coates is Australia's Champion of the Olympic Flame

BY IMOGEN A. ROSE | 3 May 2017



It would be hard to have missed the ferocious and peculiarly personal siege that has erupted against Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) President, John Coates. Coates is one of the most respected and capable individuals in the world of sport yet this sudden onslaught seems to have little sense of the import of the international regard with which Coates is held writes *Imogen A. Rose*.

Remarkably, Coates has been significantly involved with the Olympic Games for over 40 years. He currently holds the valuable position of International Olympic Committee (IOC) Vice-President – quite a coup for Australia. He is President of the International Council of Arbitration for Sport and has been President of the AOC since 1990. He is also chairman of the co-ordination commission for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

It's not by luck or chance that an individual achieves so many significant Olympic, and associated, leadership positions. Rather, it reflects the sheer hard work, ability, commitment, passion and expertise, demonstrated by Coates in his various Olympic positions over the past four decades.

In a democratic society there is always the right of challenge. It's why the AOC President is elected and must be subsequently re-elected if seeking another term.

However, it's not really the challenge that is of most relevance in the current climate.

It is in fact, the manner and method – arguably unprofessional and unprecedented – of this challenge to Coates that is of most significance for the average Australian. It is this that is so terribly telling and should send alarm bells to the Australian public.

Consider the highly orchestrated, arguably Machiavellian, and surely conspiratorial (it could hardly be a series of coincidences) concatenation of actions designed to undermine John Coates. Consider the deliberate timing of media releases intended to destroy Coates's good name, rather than mount even the pretence of a serious contender for AOC President.

It's a ruthless, win-at-all costs campaign which is antithetical to the core values of Olympism.

This is a great irony since one of the primary functions of the AOC is to spread the "Olympic spirit and ideals throughout the wider community".

Yet this ambush highlights an ambitious group of individuals who appear notably out of touch with the values and principles intrinsic to the AOC as an institution.

There is a definite air of entitlement that is incongruous with the notion of fair play and achievement through hard work and effort.

Coates is an individual who has earned his stripes.

He is also something of a pioneer. It is rare for individuals of such high stature to take a meaningful stand on controversial issues. Not so for Coates. For he has shown strength and initiative by taking a pro-active stance regarding the issue of child abuse and child protection within sport. He has been similarly tough on issues of anti-doping and illegal betting.

Furthermore, Coates has successfully fought for the inclusion of more women's events at the Olympics as well as greater female representation within managerial, coaching and senior positions.

Most recently, Coates demonstrated his commitment to gender equality when he made clear to the Kasumigaseki Country Club in Saitama, Japan (the club scheduled to host the golf at the 2020 Tokyo Games) that unless it amended its prejudicial rules and granted women full membership, it would lose the right to host Olympic competition.

Coates was instrumental in securing the Sydney 2000 Olympics, famously celebrated as the "the best Olympics Games ever!" The Sydney Olympics showcased Australia to the world as a country of great strength, humanity and optimism. It was a defining moment in Australian history.

Sydney was an opportunity to use sport to promote the importance of reconciliation and the rights of Indigenous Australians. At no time was this more potent than when Cathy Freeman – silver and serene as if a mythological goddess – lit the Olympic flame.

Significantly, it was Coates who is said to have designed this symbolic and powerful moment.

John Coates understands the fundamental Principles of Olympism. The goal of Olympism "is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity". It is through the spirit of Olympism that the Olympic movement affects millions of individuals on a daily basis.

It is the spirit of the Olympic Games and its power to inspire and change lives that really strikes a chord with people all over the world.

Through John Coates, Australia has played a pivotal role in promoting the Olympic ideals. Importantly, this is much more than an academic philosophy. It is a reality. Its realization takes form through, for example, the various IOC projects designed to fight and alleviate poverty, in helping to prevent violence, in the battle against HIV and especially in restoring hope through sport within war affected, or disadvantaged, populations.

International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach has strongly emphasized the "important role" performed by Coates "on the international level for Australia" as well as "the entire Olympic Movement".

In terms of the AOC, its Mission states, "As proud custodians of the Olympic Movement in Australia the Australian Olympic Committee is committed to promoting the principles of Olympism, and the Olympic ideals and values to all, through sport".

In his capacity as AOC President and IOC Vice-President, Coates has upheld these principles and forged a path for Australia to stand as a pinnacle of Olympism.

It is precisely due to Coates exceptional experience, professional record and expertise that his duties have continually increased, and that his counsel has been utilized on the international stage.

During South Africa's exile from the Olympic Games – as a consequence of the injustice of apartheid – Coates provided support to his friend and colleague, Sam Ramsamy, the then Chairman of the South African Non-racial Olympic Committee. When South Africa was readmitted to the Olympic Movement following the abolition of Apartheid, and allowed to compete at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, Australia provided practical, medical and administrative support. Coates continues to provide assistance to the National Olympic Committee of South Africa in his capacity as Chairman of the IOC Coordination Commission for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

Furthermore, Coates is acutely aware of the symbolic power of Tokyo 2020, particularly for its host country. Indeed, it has become a beacon of hope for a nation still struggling to deal with the scars of Fukushima.



Japanese Olympic Gold Medallist, Koji Murofushi, inspiring Japanese children
Courtesy of Tokyo 2020

Certainly, one wonders at the striking imbalance extant in terms of qualifications, experience and expertise between former Hockeyroo, Danielle Roche who is challenging for the role of AOC President, and John Coates.

To be fair, there would be few, if any, who could seriously contend against Coates's experience in sports administration.

One also wonders what the international Olympic community is making of the startlingly relentless campaign that seems driven by anything but a sense of fair play.

What cannot be ignored is that the stakes have never been higher and Australia has a lot to lose.

We risk losing the honour of having an Australian as IOC Vice-President. Coates's role at the IOC is contingent upon his position at the AOC.

But more particularly, we risk losing our image as a nation that respects and promotes the true value of sportsmanship and fair play.

This is not just about John Coates. This is about Australia's national sporting identity.

It's time to stand up for fair play.

This has been an intensely personal attack. Those behind it proclaim the gift of King Midas, yet apparently lack any understanding of the real value of Olympic gold.

The concept of fair play is universal. At its most basic level, children are taught to play with everyone, regardless of personal feelings.

What does it say if those who want to head Australian sport are motivated by apparently personal vendettas rather than an objective analysis of the entire resume of arguably Australia's most experienced and successful sports administrator?

How could such individuals seriously hope to head the AOC and represent the spirit of Olympism on the world stage?

One thing is clear. No player deserves to walk onto the pitch if their modus operandi is to knock the cricket captain out with the bat!

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