

That's the Olympic spirit

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Few sports are as simple as they look, finds Iain Hollingshead, as he tries out lesser known events

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For much of the year, the sporting calendar is about football, with a little bit of rugby and cricket thrown in. But every four years, as the Olympics rolls round, a host of other sports swim into our consciousness. Some are easy to mock, not least because of the selection process - why are canoeing and beach volleyball Olympic sports, but not golf or lacrosse?



Iain Hollingshead attempts to get in Olympic condition

But every time we start to dismiss these minor sports, our prejudices are challenged by an unexpected gem - niche sports such as curling or synchronised diving that suddenly grab the nation's attention. And the more obscure they are, the more they foster the feeling that we, too, could make our way into the Olympic side - after all, how difficult can it be to rub a broom across some ice?

So, as Beijing approached, I set out to discover what would get everyone talking this year - and whether I could indeed get myself in Olympic condition in time for 2012. The sports I chose - wrestling, BMX racing, handball and race walking - mixed, stamina, strength and skill. One was the oldest Olympic sport; another the newest; the third was one of the least known; and the last, one of the most ridiculous.

Poor old race walking. I went to an event in Woodford, Essex, with as open a mind as possible, but it wasn't easy given all the nasty things that have been said about the sport. There is something undeniably ridiculous about trying to walk as fast as possible without breaking into a run - indeed, in a recent advert for Snickers, withdrawn for its alleged homophobic content, Mr T of the A-Team lambasted a speed walker as "a disgrace to the man race".

My overwhelming feeling during my relatively short race - 3km, rather than the 20km or 50km of the Olympics - was embarrassment. Carl Lawton, a former British top ten walker, had kindly given me a lesson beforehand. So I knew about pumping your arms across your body "as if holding a handkerchief between them". I'd learned that technique came first, followed by speed.

I'd even mastered the controversial "lifting" rule. But I still looked like someone with piles trying to get to a doctor's appointment on time.

advertisement I waddled seven and a half times round the track, trying to ignore the sniggers of the proper athletes awaiting their own events. At one point, I was so bored that I took out my mobile and made a call. I came 21st out of 21, lapped by everyone except the man who came 20th. He was 71.

As I finally lumbered up to the finishing line, my calves cramping from the strange walking style, the other contestants burst into polite applause and asked me to join them for tea and cake in the car park. I couldn't have burned off more than 10 calories, but they were all so nice - in that slightly nerdy manner you find with trainspotters - that it was impossible to say no.

A couple of younger competitors put up a spirited defence of their sport. "It does look a bit strange," admitted Chelsea O'Rawe-Hobbs, an engaging 17-year-old from Essex who has a decent chance of competing in 2012. "My mates give me a bit of stick, but I give it back. What do they do? Sit at home and watch television."

While race walking will, I think, eventually sink beneath a tide of indifference, I bet the male BMX riders get their pick of the beach-volleyball girls in the Olympic village. BMX racing, which originated in California, lasts less than a minute and involves a lot of "whoops" (jumps) and wipe-outs. It is undoubtedly a cool sport - and the British women's number one, a 19-year-old from Crewe called Shanaze Reade, is favourite to win gold at its inaugural Games in Beijing.

Having tried BMX out in the rather less glamorous location of Dagenham, East London, I have a feeling that its time has come. It's fast, visually entertaining and ridiculously scary. Every kid I spoke to was keen to tell me about their collection of broken arms and legs. Crashes are common; the rules are pretty much 'Every man for himself'.

I had missed the races themselves, in which 168 riders aged from four to 47 had taken part. However, a local 14-year-old called Jodie Bowden offered to teach me. "Give us your mum's number before you start," she quipped, handing me a helmet. "We'll let her know which hospital you're in when you fall."

Deciding that this was not the right moment to mention that the last bike I'd ridden had a wicker basket, I broke hard on all the jumps and took whatever the opposite of a racing line is on the high, banked corners. However, by the second lap I was hooked, crouching low as I flew off the jumps, and only occasionally being overtaken by someone under the age of six.

In retrospect, I wish I had pushed myself harder on the BMX track, as a broken leg would have meant getting out of wrestling - my next event. It wasn't so much that I was regularly sat on by a large Iranian who appeared to have forgotten his deodorant, or that I cracked my rib while trying to throw someone twice my size, or that everyone else in the class could carry three gym mats at once and I could only manage one.

It was just that even though the members of the Kensington Olympic Wrestling Club were very friendly - and I'm not just saying that because they're big and know where I live - I didn't take to wrestling. It reminded me of childhood scraps with my elder brother, only with boring rules. In this, I'm not alone - Britain has no wrestlers at this year's Olympics. Perhaps we're just better at fighting with our fists and broken pint glasses.

My final sport - handball - is hugely popular, but only in places like Scandinavia, Croatia and Germany (where it is the second biggest sport after football). Having joined the Olympia Handball Club, an east London team, for a training session, I'm not sure we're missing out on all that much. The game is fast and fairly skilful, but it's essentially a combination of basketball and seven-a-side football - you pass or dribble the ball with your hands and then attempt to throw it in the goal - and less interesting than either. It's the kind of thing you play in PE at school as a warm-up.

Admittedly, my opinion might be skewed by the fact that I was rubbish. Maybe it was the broken rib. Or perhaps I'd put too much wax on my hands - a standard technique to make catching the ball easier - so that it stuck to my palm whenever I tried to throw it. Or maybe I just wasn't any good: I was picked last, and fully justified the captain's decision.

But as I sat with the young eastern European players in the pub afterwards, I reflected that my inability to play handball, walk faster than a septuagenarian, overpower a large Iranian or beat a toddler around a BMX track had actually taught me a valuable lesson: namely, that few of these sports are as simple as they look.

And in the tea and cakes of the race walkers, the gruff friendliness of the hairy wrestlers and the regeneration of a rough part of town by BMX enthusiasts I had seen something else: a hint of the fabled Olympic spirit. I'm looking forward to seeing it in Beijing, too, however dimly it might appear through the smog.

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