

Global Superpowers dominate Olympic medal count

After sixteen days of frenzied sport and blanket media coverage, the Olympic results are in. USA, China and Britain took the most medals – but is that really what the Olympics are about?



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They have run, they have jumped, they have punched and pirouetted. They have performed triple somersaults in mid air, heaved 450 kg weights and guided horses through balletic routines. Now, after sixteen days, the London Olympics are over, and the results are in.

So who came out top in this festival of power, endurance and control? As with the last Olympics, two nations dominated the medal table from the very first day: China and the USA, who between them received almost a third of all golds. Hosts Great Britain outstripped also performed spectacularly, gathering an unprecedented 29 golds and running away with third place.

This was hardly a fair fight. China and the USA have enormous populations from which to pick their representatives. And with the most powerful economies in the world, these athletes have access to the finest training and equipment in the world.

But if countries are ranked by medals



USA first, China second and Great Britain third: just as they rank in the overall medal count © Getty Images

per population, the medals table looks very different indeed. Despite just one podium finish, the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada becomes the top Olympic nation. Jamaica, with its total dominance in sprinting, follows close behind. Other overachievers include New Zealand and Denmark.

When nations are ranked by GDP, the results are similar: Grenada and Jamaica are top again, closely followed by the poor and remote nation of Mongolia.

But wealth and population are not the only keys to Olympic success. India, for instance, is the world's second most populous country, with the ninth largest economy. Gold medals won: zero.

Part of this can be explained by the state's investment in sport. Host countries always boost their spending, and countries with large, powerful states – such as China and North Korea – perform particularly well.

But victory comes at a price – and it is

not just financial. In China, talented teenagers are torn away from their families and placed in state-run institutions where everything is sacrificed to an unforgiving training regime. Those who fail to break through often end up in poverty and depression, and even former medalists have been found begging on the streets.

WINNER TAKES IT ALL

This obsession with victory at all costs is against everything the Olympics should stand for, many protest. The competitive aspect of the Games should take bronze at best. Far more important, they say, are the peaceful coming together of nations and the courage and athleticism of winners and losers alike.

Nonsense, reply less romantic types; of course the Olympics are about winning. We rank athletes uncompromisingly, reward the very best and let the rest go home empty-handed. And quite right too, they say: fierce competition brings out the best in everybody.

Q & A

Q Why do we even care how many medals our athletes get?

A It's partly a matter of national pride. When people see athletes from their own country achieving victory, it makes them feel better about themselves as well – whether or not that is rational. But the

governments that fund sports have other motives as well.

Q Like what?

A In the postwar period, rival superpowers have often treated sporting events as a way to compete against each other in a less deadly arena than the battlefield. In the past, the USA and the USSR faced off in this way; now, America is developing a similar rivalry with China. Studies have

shown, too, that overseeing sporting success boosts the approval ratings of a government by several percentage points – another strong incentive for funding sport.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Learning to lose is as important as learning to win.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Global Superpowers dominate Olympic medal count

WORD WATCH

Third place – Except, that is, in America, where countries are ranked by total medals scored rather than by prioritising golds. In this table, Britain was pipped to the post by Russia.

Podium finish – When 400 metre runner Kirani James won gold in his event, it was the first medal Grenada had ever won. The triumph was celebrated with a spontaneous national holiday. Podiums have been used in Olympic medal ceremonies since 1930.

Dominance in sprinting – Jamaican Usain Bolt confirmed his status as best sprinter in the world (and probably in history) at this year's Games, with victory in both 100 and 200 metre events. In the 200 metres, all three podium places went to Jamaican sprinters. Yet Jamaica has fewer than 3 million inhabitants; its closest rival, the USA, has a population more than 100 times as high.

GDP – Gross Domestic Product is the main way a country's economic wealth is measured.

It is a sum of all the economic transactions that take place in the nation each year.

Keys to Olympic success – Predicting the results of major sporting events is serious business, because it determines the odds that bookmakers set. A fairly accurate prediction can be made without any specialist sports knowledge, using a formula that includes wealth, population and investment. Bonus points are also awarded for hosting a tournament and being part of the former Soviet Union.

YOU DECIDE

1. How important is victory in sporting events like the Olympics?
2. Is it unfair to rank countries by overall medal count when their wealth and population varies so much?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design an alternative medal for the Olympics that rewards achievements other than victory. What would the medal be made of, what would it look like and who would it be awarded to?
2. Imagine you are an Olympian who has trained for years and finally placed fourth in your event – just missing out on a medal. Write an article for a newspaper describing how you feel.

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 **NOTES**

