

SUNDAY EXPRESS OPINION

Fill fat-cats' empty Games seats with tomorrow's stars

IT IS probably fitting that the opening day of the Olympics did not go according to the Team GB script. We Britons have a long history of piling impossible pressure on our sporting heroes only to have our hopes of glory cruelly crushed.

Yesterday's thrilling cycle road race may not have had the outcome desired – Mark Cavendish storming to victory down The Mall – but it was somehow a very British result.

Learning to shrug off disappointment gives us Brits our self-deprecating humour and masks our secret yearning to just occasionally be great.

It is this curious combination of humour and heart that was celebrated in such jaw-dropping style by director Danny Boyle in his epic showcase of our nation on Friday night.

While our politicians struggle to explain just what it means to be British, our athletes and artists deliver a defining vision of our national psyche.

The Opening Ceremony was a dazzling dance through the nation's social upheaval, digital revolution and traditions, from the Queen to Mr Bean, from Shakespeare to Harry Potter, from Jerusalem to Hey Jude. In this incredible spectacle wit was toasted alongside wisdom. Yes, it may have baffled many viewers in other countries but this was an unapologetic glorification of Britain for Britons.

Ultimately, what Boyle achieved was to hand the Olympics back to its people by restoring their pride in being the host nation for the 30th Games, regardless of our eventual placing on the medals table.

Britons have always wanted to feel a part of the Olympics but have too often felt shut out.

Unfortunately, that sense of exclusion resurfaced yesterday as thousands of people who lost out in the ballot for tickets watched with mounting anger as cameras captured row upon row of empty corporate seats at all the first day events.

Organisers Locog have promised an investigation and Lord Coe wants to name and shame all the corporate big-wigs who snaffled tickets only to prove no-shows on the day.

It would be a gesture worthy of Boyle's innovative Opening Ceremony if the organisers found a way of redistributing those empty seats to Britons.

Perhaps any seats vacant after the first hour of an event should be swiftly allocated to families with children, and so help to forge a sporting legacy by leaving a lasting memory on a young fan's mind. And while we focus on families, the military should also be rewarded for giving up valuable holiday time with their own families to ensure the event is as safe as it is spectacular.

Britons deserve the "second chance" to witness first hand some of the 10,000 athletes from across the world competing at 34 venues over the next two weeks, to have the opportunity to look into the faces of sportsmen and women pitching their passion and power towards a single goal.

That sort of determination is every bit as beautiful as the 204 copper petals which rose from the Stratford ground to form a single blazing Olympic torch.

Full seats in every stadium would be a fitting answer to Boyle's broadcast to the world that we are an ingenious, funny, diverse and generous people.

It would show that, win or lose, we are proud to host the Olympics and cheer on astonishing skill and inspirational achievement from every nation.

The people who really deserve Olympic medals



By
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AFTER months of duff lines, angry stares and furrowed brows in front of Parliament and Lord Justice Leveson, David Cameron finally struck the right note last week. Basking in 80-degree heat, the PM addressed a pack of journalists at the heart of the £9.3-billion Olympic Park in east London.

Questions were for later, he said. "I just want to set out three things you're going to see over the coming weeks."

Over the next few minutes, he outlined how "Britain was delivering" and spoke of the "spirit of the Games" but he was at his most passionate when eulogising about the "real sense of community" in the Park.

With all the rows over security, the Army and corporate sponsors, the real likely saviours of the 2012 Games had been hitherto largely overlooked. It was left to the PM to pick them out: the volunteers.

"The success of these Games is about our people and the welcome they give the world," he said. "We want this to be the friendly Games and we are seeing that."

"When the call went out for Olympics volunteers, a quarter of a million people came forward; 70,000 of them were chosen. On top of that, 8,000 Londoners are acting as ambassadors for this city. Between them they are volunteering for eight million hours. So this is not a state-run Games, it is a people-run Games."

He was right. Without them, the event simply would not run.

They may look a bit silly in their purple, red and beige Adidas tracksuit bottoms and tops (their uniforms even come with a little red plastic watch and shoulder satchel) but they are what the Olympics is all about.

Like all good amateurs, they work for free (those eight million hours would cost at least £50million if paid) but they deliver everything with the pride of top professionals. Quite frankly, I do not know how they do it, especially when confronted by a moaning ticket-holder.

Last Wednesday evening, some 50,000 spectators poured into the Park to watch the opening ceremony's last rehearsal.

On the hottest day of the year, fans who had been ordered to discard water supplies at the security gates were getting a little thirsty. The Park's PA system was telling them to refill bottles at the water fountains but where were they? Ask a steward, the announcer said.

I sat on a bench near one of these stewards, an engineer who was taking two weeks off work to stand by a stadium telling people where to go.

More than once, he must have been tempted to tell some of them really where



TRUE STARS: The Queen meets volunteers at the Athletes' Village yesterday

to go: it wasn't his fault the nearest water point was a good five-minute walk away and at which hundreds of others were already queueing.

I tried asking him about the negative reactions he'd received but this volunteer was a good boy. He looked at my pass, saw the word "journalist" and said only: "Oh, they're just hot."

The volunteers have been told to be wary of the media. I know this because I was warned to look out for "sneaky reporters" during the first two minutes of my volunteer training session.

When the call went out for Games

'The thousands of patient volunteers are doing a fine job'

Makers volunteers last year, I was one of the 250,000 who applied. Having watched the Olympic Park take shape from my home, 800 metres from the main stadium in Bow, east London, I just wanted to be part of the Games themselves.

In my interview (conducted by a volunteer personnel manager), I was open about my day job, so I was a touch surprised when they offered me a role as a chauffeur for Olympic VIPs.

Bless them; such a trusting lot but that is the way it should be.

I attended only one training session (after that, Games organisers Locog realised I also had press accreditation) but

that itself was an uplifting experience. Many of those there were wealthy retired businessmen, who were all keen to work unpaid throughout the day and night as glorified minicab drivers.

About 150 of us, all eager pupils, were told to drive carefully, to be polite to our "clients" (sponsors), not to carry their luggage, not to accept tips (as if!) and never to leave our BMWs unattended.

Several were unfamiliar with London's roads, a few had not driven manual gear-box cars for decades, some were going to travel more than an hour to start their 10-hour shifts and all of us would have to work past midnight.

Some were worried about insurance issues and others were concerned how they would get home in the early hours. Yes, there were a few groans about some of the logistics but there was universal anticipation about the big task ahead.

In the Olympic Park press centre last week, thousands of journalists from all over the world arrived and were treated with perhaps undeserved respect.

A problem with the computer connection, sir? No problem, we'll sort it out.

How do I get to the Athletes' Village? This bus here takes you direct, sir.

All of them volunteers.

There should be signs across the Park to let fans know that so many people are working for free to ensure their enjoyment. Very few volunteers will get to see even a single event yet it is upon these people that the reputation of the Games, and their sponsors, now rests.

For that, they all deserve special medals.

Picture: JOHN STILLWELL/PA