Australia’s disastrous showing at the Montreal Olympics ushered in a grim – and very expensive – culture of “excellence,” argues Richard Evans.

High hopes: Australian team uniforms for the Montreal Olympics, 1976. National Archives of Australia

AUSTRALIA’s athletes set off for the Olympic Games in Canada in July 1976 in what were, even for the 1970s, horrible uniforms, but with high hopes. We had done well in Munich four years earlier, winning eight gold and seventeen medals overall, placing us sixth on the medal tally.

“Optimistically,” wrote journalist Ron Carter, “our men and women could come home with 29 medals. Of course, if things go badly for us… only a handful will come Australia’s way.” The standard of international competition had risen, so Australians would “do well just to get to the finals in Montreal. But then, who wants to know a finalist? The only Olympians who get a pat on the back are those with a medal.”

This was not how things were supposed to be. “The important thing in the Olympic games is not to win, but to take part,” said the founder of the modern games, Pierre de Coubertin, adding: “The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well. To spread these precepts is to build up a stronger, a more valiant and above all a more scrupulous and more generous humanity.”

The International Olympic Committee pretends to embrace this ideal, posting medal tallies that are “for information only,” as it “does not recognise global ranking per country.” But Ron Carter was merely acknowledging the truth: for most competing nations, winning is everything. And in Montreal, we did not win. The team, almost 200-strong, brought back one silver medal. Even that felt like a loss because it was in the men's hockey, in which gold and silver are decided in a play-off. There were four bronze medals: two in yachting, one in an equestrian event, and one in swimming.

It was in the pool, where Australia had long been a power, that the disappointment rankled the most. As the tournament unfolded, continual failure led to bitter recriminations. One headline captured the catfight: “Lean day for our ‘fat’ girls.” The sole swimming medal was won by Stephen Holland in the 1500 metres freestyle. Holland swam a personal-best time, but this admirable achievement produced the headline “Gold-less Games?” and this summary of the swimming competition: “One bronze medal and a lot of disappointment.”

Australia finished in thirty-second place on the medal table. First, with forty-nine gold, was the Soviet Union. Third, with thirty-four gold, was the United States. And sandwiched between the two superpowers, with forty gold, twenty-five silver and twenty-five bronze medals, was the GDR. “The what?,” anyone under the age of thirty-five is likely to ask. To explain, it is helpful to look at some old postage stamps.
My daughter recently took up stamp collecting. Helping her sort her collection was like stepping through a time warp. If you don’t think the world has changed much since 1976, try explaining to a seven-year-old what the Soviet Union was. There are all these huge, colourful stamps from communist countries that no longer exist: satellites and cosmonauts, smiling peasants with their new tractors, and lots of Olympic athletes. These were idealised, modernist forms of men and women, with layered slabs of muscle: they hurled discs and hammers and javelins; rode bicycles, rowed, sprinted, swam – they were physically perfect incarnations of a socialist paradise. The Cold War was symbolically fought out in the stadiums of the Olympic Games. Successful athletes were somehow thought to validate the political systems that trained them. And the communists were – there was no denying it – good at sport. The Soviet Union always topped the Olympic medal tally. And right up there with the giants was the oddity “GDR” – the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany.

Of all the nations of the communist bloc, East Germany struggled most for legitimacy. The poor cousin of an artificially divided people, its survival dependent on Soviet tanks, it had to build walls to keep its own people in. It is not hard to see why a shabby little police state with image issues strove for sporting success. Gold medals were an assertion of excellence and efficiency, a claim to genuine nationhood.

The East German system for identifying and training talent in elite sports, the “medal factory,” was astonishing in its effectiveness. From Munich in 1972 to Seoul in 1988, this nation of only seventeen million people won 384 medals. It finished second in the medal tally three times.

They were, of course, cheating a lot of the time. Between 8000 and 9000 East German athletes were given performance-enhancing drugs in the period between 1972 and the collapse of the regime in 1989. The main drug administered was the “blue bean,” Oral-Turinabol, an anabolic steroid containing testosterone. The drug greatly improved an athlete’s recovery time and boosted muscle build-up, but it also had horrific side effects: female infertility, male testicular cancer, breast cancer and heart disease. About one in ten East German athletes was left with a serious illness.

However, the revelations of systematic doping obscured a deeper truth. Some of the coaches involved in the doping said: “We felt legitimised by state policy… our prime task was to achieve international success, notably by winning medals.” The blue bean was just one aspect of this poisonous system. The medal factory took sport and twisted it into a sickly obsession: a grim state religion, to which health and youth were sacrificed.

THE 1976 Montreal Olympic Games were a disaster, not because our athletes performed poorly, but because of how our society responded to the poor performances. There was an unmistakable sense of national shame. The media agonised: “Where did we go wrong?” Montreal caused a “crisis for the government,” and debate raged over how Australia could “regain its lost athletic potency.”

The success of East Germany was particularly galling because its population was similar in size to that of Australia. One journalist declared: “We have hit rock bottom as a swimming nation … and it could take us sixteen years to get back up against the East Germans.” This prediction was remarkably accurate. By the time the 1992 Barcelona Olympics took place, Australia was again emerging as a swimming power, while East Germany no longer existed.

Until the late 1970s, Australia had managed to combine a tradition of amateur sport with an obsessive desire to win. But Montreal forced a choice. Do we continue to treasure our liberal traditions, our laid-back and democratic temper? Or do we want to win? The answer was consciously to imitate the East German medal factory.

The awkward fact that East Germany was a communist dictatorship caused defensiveness. “If we are to learn from the East Germans,” declared the Sydney Morning Herald, “we need to look at their sports system rather than their political system.” There was a slight hitch in this argument. If poor Australian performances reflected badly on us as a nation, East German sporting success to some extent must have vindicated the culture and political system that produced it. Despite this contradiction and the initial coolness of Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, support for an elite sports training program along East German lines gradually grew.
The 1980 Olympics, held in Moscow, were another debacle for Australia. The government unsuccessfully “encouraged” a boycott over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which led to a reduced team that was not allowed to carry the Australian flag at the opening ceremony. We performed better than at Montreal but even so, the row over participation was politically embarrassing. Something was needed to bring the sports establishment back on side. On 26 January 1981 – Australia Day – the once-sceptical Fraser officially opened the Australian Institute of Sport, or AIS, in Canberra.

In the decades since, the AIS has expanded massively, supported by successive federal governments. It now has a national network of sports institutes and academies. These centres provide training programs for thousands of athletes in twenty-five sports. The AIS is seen as a tremendous national success. Kevan Gosper, a senior International Olympic Committee official, described it as “a shrine of excellence… one of Australia’s more successful ventures in education and research. You have to have an icon for excellence in sport, and that is the AIS.”

There is a lot of talk of excellence surrounding elite sport. To excel means to be superior to another, to surpass them – to win. And it is presented as an unquestioned virtue. The AIS was soon dubbed the “gold medal factory.” Australia won four gold medals in Los Angeles in 1984; five in Seoul, 1988; seven in Barcelona, 1992; nine in Atlanta, 1996; and sixteen in Sydney, 2000. In its home Olympics, Australia rose to fourth on the medal tally, behind China, Russia and the United States. And in Athens, in 2004, Australia backed up: seventeen gold and again fourth on the medal table.

Australia had become the new East Germany, the great over-performer. We punched above our weight. However, the culture that produced this success had an unpleasant underside.

At an athletics meet at the AIS, a female athlete performed poorly in a heat. A little later, she began training on an outside track. “She’s a very professional athlete,” a coach told ABC Radio, which was covering the event. “She’ll be punishing herself for that performance.” This chilling aside was a small reflection of a wider malaise: a culture of endless striving, the obsessive pursuit of success.

Natalie Cook, who won gold in the beach volleyball in 2000, used Palmolive Gold soap and gold toothpaste, and drove a gold car. She had a gold toaster and a gold-rimmed fish tank, in which goldfish swam among gold trinkets. She sought power from crystals, went firewalking and employed a “success coach” who rejected any mention of failure: “That’s something average people say.”

In the final of the women’s rowing eights in Athens, a member of the Australian team, Sally Robbins, stopped rowing. She later said she had seized up. Other members of the crew accused her of “mental weakness,” and her captain publicly described her as “this niggle.” In Australia’s most successful Olympic Games, the vilification of Sally Robbins was ugly.

Behaviour that in any other field would be seen as a minor personality disorder is actively cultivated in elite sport in order to bring success. As one commentator said of the Robbins affair: “We teach people how to win, but not necessarily how to lose.”

The AIS does have policies in place to help its athletes become well-rounded individuals, but the theme of winning is so dominant that it is hard to take these seriously. “The race for excellence,” the institute’s website declares, “has no finish line.” It does have a bottom line, however, and it is a big number.

The Australian Sports Commission is the federal body that oversees sports funding. In 2007–08, $80 million was spent on “Outcome 1”: community participation in sport. “Outcome 2” is “excellence in sports performances by Australians,” of which the AIS programs are the most important part. It received more than $171 million. In spite of the rhetorical commitment to support sport as part of a healthy lifestyle in the wider community, it is elite sporting programs that consume more than two-thirds of the public money directed to the area.

If there is any self-consciousness among the elite sports about their voracious appetite for funding, it does not show.
To the contrary, there is an aggressive culture of entitlement. In 2008 in Beijing, Australia won fourteen gold medals. This meant that we “fell behind” Great Britain on the medal table. The “threat” that in 2012, Australia “may not make its target of a top-five medal tally,” brought fresh demands. “We have to decide up-front whether as a nation we want to be successful,” said the chief executive of Rowing Australia. “If you want to be successful you can’t… spread the funding too thinly. We need a quantum leap forward.”

A presumption underlies the rhetoric. We “have to have” excellence; the elite sports “need” more money. But why?

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY has been influenced by three main political traditions: conservatism, socialism and liberalism. None lends support to the large-scale use of public funds to nurture elite athletes. To liberals, anyone who wants to compete as an athlete is free to do so, but they will have to find the money themselves. Conservatives agree but honour the values that sport is seen to promote: this might justify a modest subsidy. Socialists are more hostile. Public money is there to meet social needs. One of these needs is community participation in sport, but not expensive elite sports training.

The only justification for programs like those run by the AIS is patriotism, the belief that superiority in sport equates with superiority as a nation.

Before the Montreal Games, one article about Australia’s medal prospects was headlined: “What price gold?” We now know the answer: more than its weight. A study published in 2000 calculated that the twenty-five gold medals won by Australian athletes from the opening of the AIS to 1996 represented about $37 million in public funding each. And, unlike in other factories, the unit cost does not decline with greater production: the fourteen gold medals won in Beijing in 2008 cost roughly $48 million each.

Australian sporting success brings pleasure to many people and generates enthusiasm and national pride. But is this really worth such a large amount of money? And is it ultimately more about shoring up a national ego that is more fragile than we want to admit?

IN 1948, the Olympic Games were held in London. It was a modest event by comparison with most other Olympics – the scars of second world war bombing were still visible, and Britain was still a place of ration cards and shortages. But nonetheless the games were a celebration of the return to normality after the desolation of war. The Australian team performed modestly, winning three gold medals and finishing fourteenth on the medal table, but it made an excellent impression. “We have had many very good teams in England over the years, but we’ve never had a more likeable set of athletes than the ‘Aussies’,” reported the Times. “Their enthusiasm, their willingness to ‘have a go’ at any event and their willingness to advise less finished athletes brought them many friends.”

In the same year, the Australian cricket team, the so-called “Invincibles” captained by Don Bradman, also toured England. The team went undefeated in twenty-three matches and won the Ashes. A few voices were raised, however, about the team’s determination, personified by Bradman, to crush every opponent – even weak county sides. John Arlott, the legendary cricket commentator, dubbed this streak “Australianism,” meaning a “single-minded determination to win – to win within the laws but, if necessary, to the last limit within them.”

Australia’s response to the disappointment of Montreal in 1976 was to forsake the amateur tradition of sportsmanship and take “Australianism” to new heights. The contrast between the attitude of the 1948 Australian Olympic team and this grim culture of “excellence” is a sad one.