

## **Legacy Impact and the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games: A Precursor of Changes in the Olympic Movement**

**RICHARD BAKA<sup>1</sup>, TRACY TAYLOR<sup>2</sup> and JADE HAYCRAFT<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Olympic and Paralympic Research Centre, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia, Richard.Baka@vu.edu.au

<sup>2</sup>Olympic and Paralympic Research Centre, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia, Tracy.Taylor@vu.edu.au

<sup>3</sup>Olympic and Paralympic Research Centre, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia, Jade.Haycraft@vu.edu.au

\*Contact: [Richard.Baka@vu.edu.au](mailto:Richard.Baka@vu.edu.au)

### **Abstract**

The topic of legacy has increasingly become an extremely important part of the Olympics. This study explores the legacy impact associated with the 1956 Olympics labelled the 'Friendly Games'. There were very tangible facility outcomes especially in the impressive Olympic Park precinct with the focal point being the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). These Games also saw an exceptional performance by the host nation with its third-place standing that ushered in an era of Australian Olympic excellence. A closing ceremony alteration with athletes mingling and apart from their national groupings began in Melbourne and is now entrenched. Undoubtedly, the success of Australia hosting the 1956 Games - and then developing world-wide recognition as a sporting mecca - was instrumental in Sydney and Brisbane winning bids for the 2000 and 2032 Olympics. Successfully hosting the 1956 Games and the achievements afterwards has definitely earned Melbourne the mantle of 'Australia's sporting capital'.

**Keywords:** 1956 Melbourne Olympics, Impact, Legacy, Olympics.

### **1. Introduction**

This paper is the first of a three-part study concerning legacy impact in the two Australian cities to have hosted an Olympic summer Games (Melbourne 1956, Sydney 2000) or about to host this event (Brisbane 2032). It draws on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) definition: "Olympic legacy is the result of a vision. It encompasses all the tangible and intangible long-term benefits initiated or accelerated by the hosting of the Olympic Games/sports events for people/cities/territories and the Olympic movement." [1]

Planning for and delivering a positive Games legacy has become an extremely important part of the Olympic movement. In 1949 when Australia submitted its bid to host the Games, the IOC had no guidelines for host cities to address legacy. Interestingly, the IOC gives credit to the official Melbourne bid document for being the first ever to make mention of legacy with its proposal for permanent top-class sports facilities that would be widely used afterwards [2]. However, it was not until 2003 when the Olympic Charter specifically addressed the topic of legacy plans, then followed with bidding requirements for host cities and legacy objectives including the *Olympic 2020 Agenda +5*, the *Legacy Strategic Approach: Moving Forward* and the *IOC Legacy Strategic Approach 2021-2024 Objectives* [1].

## **2. Olympic Legacy Associated with the Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games**

This paper delves into the impact of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics by outlining 10 areas in which the 1956 Games (22 November – 8 December) have contributed to a lasting Olympic legacy.

### **1. Challenges in Host Selection: Solving a Logistical Problem**

The Melbourne Olympics were the first to be hosted in the southern hemisphere and Oceania. The Games provided a unique challenge due to strict quarantine regulations regarding the entry of animals into Australia. As a result, the equestrian events were held in Stockholm, Sweden. The decision to move the equestrian events was also partially driven by concerns about the environmental impact of long-distance horse travel. This logistical hurdle highlighted the need for flexibility in hosting Olympic events and contributed to changes in the selection criteria for host cities in subsequent years.

### **2. Technological Advancements in Broadcasting**

The Melbourne Games embraced technological advancements, particularly in broadcasting. This was the first Olympics to be broadcast live on television to a home audience [3]. The Games provided the impetus for the then Prime Minister Robert Menzies to establish a national broadcaster. It was reported that:

. . . the influence of television around the world was something the Prime Minister could not ignore. The BBC's first television transmissions had taken place in 1936, programming had started in the United States in 1941, and Canada's CBC began broadcasting in 1952 ....The government decided that the network should be in place in time for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics [4].

This innovation set a precedent for future Olympics to leverage the latest technologies for a broader global audience. Of notable significance is that broadcast rights are now the major source of revenue for the Games, encompassing both television, radio and digital streaming.

### **3. Boycotts and Political Complexities**

The 1936 Berlin Games, often labelled the 'Nazi Olympics', faced contentious political issues which almost led to a boycott and/or outright cancellation. Twenty years later, the Melbourne Olympics were not immune to the political conflicts of the era. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had invaded Hungary, the Suez Crisis and the two-China problem also caused difficulties. All of this cast a shadow over the Melbourne Games [5]. During the Games a violent water polo match took place between Hungary and the USSR against the background of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution which led to the so-called 'Blood in the Water' game [6]. This complex intersection of geopolitics forced the Olympic movement to grapple with how to address political conflicts in future Games

### **4. Cultural Exchanges and International Cooperation: The Friendly Games.**

Despite political tensions, the 1956 Melbourne Olympics managed to foster cultural exchanges among athletes and nations. This spirit of international cooperation and understanding was a defining feature of the Games and exemplified the Olympic ideal of unity through sport [7].

Melbourne proved to be an excellent host and earned the title of ‘The Friendly Games’. This was best exemplified by a very special change in the closing ceremonies tradition. Prior to the 1956 Games, athletes paraded behind their nation’s flag in both the opening and closing ceremonies. A local resident, John Wing, made a suggestion to the Organising Committee that in the closing ceremonies the normal procedure be replaced with a far less nationalistic approach by having all the athletes intermingle, link arms and wave during their march into the stadium. The Organising Committee followed up on this recommendation and it was so well received that it has endured in the Games ever since [8].

Wing was given a special Olympic bronze medal and a street in the former Athlete’s Village at the Homebush site of the 2000 Sydney Games was named in his honour [5]. Renowned Australian Olympic historian Harry Gordon commented that this was “Perhaps the greatest single contribution the 1956 Games made to the Olympic movement . . .” [9].

#### 5. Environmental Sustainability: Eliminating White Elephants

The concern of the Melbourne Games for environmental sustainability laid the groundwork for the modern Olympic Games' efforts to minimize their environmental impact. After much debate, the 1956 Games Organising Committee did not build a new stadium and instead refurbished the existing Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). Canoeing and rowing took place at Lake Wendouree in the regional Victorian city of Ballarat as opposed to building a new venue in the host city [10]. Subsequently the Olympics have assumed a stronger sustainability agenda and now feature initiatives such as sustainable venue construction, carbon neutrality and waste reduction, all stemming from the early recognition in 1956 of the importance of responsible environmental stewardship.

#### 6. The Human Side of Legacy: Leadership in the Olympic Movement

From the time of Melbourne’s initial bid up to the present, there were a host of individuals who made significant contributions to Melbourne’s Olympic legacy. Frank Bureaupaire, an Olympian and also a Victorian Member of Parliament and Lord Mayor of Melbourne was instrumental in the successful bid and served on the 1956 Organising Committee. The many other renowned Olympic officials including Julius Patching [11], Kevan Gosper [12], Leon Wiegard [13] and Geoff Henke [14] who held prominent positions within the Victorian Olympic Council (VOC) and the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC), greatly contributed to sport management capacity-building in the country.

The Australian influence was also felt within the IOC where Kevan Gosper and John Coates served terms as IOC Vice-Presidents. In total, Australia has had 12 members within the IOC hierarchy, with others serving on special IOC Commissions; many had a Melbourne connection. With the success of the 1956 Games, Australia became well known for having a strong Australian Olympic network holding influential decision-making positions within the IOC [10].

#### 7. Athletic Legacy for the Host City and the Host Nation: A Reputational Bonanza

Australia finished third in the official medal tally in 1956 behind Olympic powerhouses the USA and the USSR. This was a huge improvement on its 9th placing in the 1952 Helsinki Games. Notable Australian athletes at the 1956 Games included Betty Cuthbert, Shirley Strickland, Murray Rose and Dawn Fraser. These national heroes, set the benchmark for future

successful Australian Olympians such as Ian Thorpe, Emma McKeon, Kieren Perkins, Cathy Freeman and many others [15].

The Melbourne Games thereby paved the way for a tremendous sporting record which has the nation currently ranked 10th overall among Olympic nations with 547 medals in the summer games. With enormous success at the 1956 Games, Australia produced its best ever medal tally which augured well for the future and brought meaning to the phrase ‘success breeds success’ [16].

#### 8. Strengthening the Olympic Movement in Australia

The Melbourne Olympics facilitated significant positive changes to the infrastructure of the Olympic movement in Australia. State bodies of the AOC such as the Victorian Olympic Council (VOC) and its state counterparts became decentralised structures which greatly assisted in fund-raising efforts for the Prime Minister’s Olympic Gala Dinner and coordinated community-based programs [17].

In 1965 the Olympians Club of Victoria was established under the VOC banner as an alumni-style model for Olympians in order to encourage former athletes to stay involved in Olympic-related events. It was the first of its kind in Australia and proved so popular that other states followed suit. In 2000, the AOC established its own Olympians Club of Australia and state chapters were moved into the national body in 2021 [17].

Another noteworthy development was the establishment in 1990 of the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS). Its goal of assisting high performance sport in the state led to many of its athletes making it onto Australian Olympic teams. The Olympic Winter Institute of Australia (OWIA) was also set up in 1998 – as a joint venture between the Australian Sports Commission and the AOC – to serve as the parent body for winter sports. As a result of this initiative, Australia has won 19 winter medals and is ranked 26<sup>th</sup> among Olympic nations. The OWIA is located in the O’Brien Group arena very close to the Melbourne city centre, with its two ice rinks named after Geoff Henke, a long-serving stalwart Australian Olympic official for the Winter Games, and after Steven Bradbury, Australia’s first winter Olympics gold medallist in 2002 [18], [19].

A recent significant Olympic link for Melbourne was the establishment in 2021 of the Olympic and Paralympic Research Centre at Victoria University, one of 67 Olympic Studies and Research Centres officially recognised by the IOC. It joins two other Australian centres set up in 1996 at the University of Queensland in Brisbane (Centre for Olympic and Paralympic Studies) and in 2005 at the University of Technology in Sydney (Australian Centre for Olympic and Sports Studies).

The AOC headquartered in Melbourne for many years after the 1956 Games and in 1991 it was located at 32 Jolimont Terrace next door to the MCG. During the 1990s, the AOC had dual offices in both Melbourne and Sydney but eventually moved its entire headquarters to Sydney. The VOC stayed in its location in Jolimont, naming it Julius Patching House, and it became the home of the Olympic movement in Victoria. When it was sold in 2007, the profits guaranteed that the VOC would have a sustainable, stable and financially viable future. Although the AOC has now centralised its structure with state bodies less active than in earlier years, there has been an outstanding contribution by the VOC to the Olympic movement in Australia [20].

#### 9. Facility Legacy: An Olympic Precinct like No Other!

The impressive Olympic Park precinct located very close to the Central Business District (CBD) of Melbourne was a key feature of the 1956 Games. This precinct comprised the MCG, the Olympic Park Stadium and the Olympic Swimming Pool – all world-class facilities at the time [21].

Since the 1956 Games, world-class standard sporting facilities in Melbourne have continued to be developed. While Olympic cities such as Athens and Rio de Janeiro suffered facility ‘meltdown’, with many of their grandiose facilities labelled as ‘white elephants’, the opposite seems to be true in Melbourne.

A series of major Victorian Government trusts have been set up to administer a well-developed and modern network of venues. The Melbourne and Olympic Parks Trust manages the original Olympic Park precinct, with many new facilities such as indoor arenas and stadiums added over the years making it a major sport hub [10].

The MCG Trust oversees this famous ground which boasts a large number of Olympic connections. Located within the stadium is the Australian Sports Museum which has a substantial collection of memorabilia, photographs and audio-visual displays devoted to Australia at the Olympics. Tours of the MCG include a detailed account of the Australian Olympic heritage, and, the MCG library has an impressive collection of Olympic resources including the archives of the VOC [22].

The MCG ground and its environs have a number of other significant Olympic connections. Life-size statues of 1956 Olympians Betty Cuthbert and Shirley Strickland are erected on large plinths outside the ground, and a marble tablet containing the official record of members of the Melbourne Organizing Committee and gold medallists is built into the exterior wall of the Olympics Stand. There are also related artworks, such as a tapestry and bronze doors, commemorating the 1956 Games. Special rooms inside the MCG are named after Olympians Betty Cuthbert and John Landy, and there is a corporate Olympic Room often used for Olympic-themed events. The MCG hosted several Olympic soccer matches as part of the Sydney 2000 Games [10]. Studham opined that “The MCG is one of the truly iconic Olympic institutions in the world. It has not only a rich historical legacy due to hosting the Games so successfully in 1956 but it is continuing to be an active proponent of Olympic activities and programs ...” [22].

The State Sport Centres Trust looks after the Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre, a multi-purpose facility with courts and an international calibre swimming pool, as well as Lakeside Stadium used for athletics and the State Netball and Hockey Centre. The Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre Trust governs a huge facility which was used for several sports in the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games. A domed indoor facility Marvel Stadium (55,000 capacity) was built in 2000 and is now under the control of the Australian Football League but it has hosted major international sporting events in rugby, soccer and basketball [10].

The legacy of Melbourne’s Olympic facilities is evidenced in Melbourne’s rich heritage of sports facilities and an exceptional record of hosting major international multi-sports events (i.e. 1956 Summer Olympics and the 2006 Commonwealth Games) as well as other prestigious international sporting events such as the Australian Open and the Formula 1 Grand Prix which both take place annually. Melbourne has also been judged as the ‘world’s sport city of the decade’ and also won a Sports Business Award for ‘best venues’ [23].

When assessing the sporting facility landscape in Melbourne (see Table 1), the cluster of venues within close proximity to the city centre which have been used to host major international sports events is noteworthy.

**Table 1: Current Olympic-Calibre Facilities in Melbourne and Environs**

<i>Name of Venue</i>	<i>Year Facility Built/Recent Renovation</i>	<i>Olympic Sports or Events the Facility Can Host</i>	<i>Used for 1956 Games</i>	<i>Special Comments/ Capacity</i>
Melbourne Olympic Park (venues in this Olympic Parks precinct have an asterisk*)	1956	Numerous venues within this area close to city centre	Yes	Except for the MCG it now has many newer venues built since 1956
MCG*	1853/2006	Athletics, soccer, equestrian, opening and closing ceremonies	Yes	100,000; has many Olympic connections
AAMI Park*	2010	Soccer, rugby 7s, field hockey	Yes	30,050
Rod Laver Arena*	1988	Basketball, gymnastics, volleyball, tennis	No	16,400
John Cain Arena*	2000	basketball, gymnastics, volleyball, tennis	No	10,500
Margaret Court Arena*	1988	Basketball, gymnastics, volleyball, tennis	No	7,500
Olympic Park Oval*	1956/2011	Soccer, rugby 7s, hockey	Yes	Site of former Olympic Park Stadium
Melbourne Sports and Aquatic Centre	1997	Swimming, diving, water polo, table tennis, wide array of indoor sports	No	Large pool can be converted to seat over 10,000
Marvel Stadium	2000	Soccer, rugby 7s, field hockey, equestrian, basketball	No	55,000
Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre	1996	Fencing, wrestling, judo, karate, weight lifting, taekwondo	No	Several halls with 1,000 to 2,000 person capacity
Werribee Park National Equestrian Centre	1984	Equestrian, modern pentathlon	No	
State Netball and Hockey Centre	2001	Hockey, basketball	No	8,000-hockey; 3,500 - basketball
Melbourne Ballpark	1990	Softball, baseball	No	3,900
Lakeside Stadium	1878, renovated 1995 and 2011	Soccer, rugby7s, hockey	No	12,000 (6,000 seated)
Melbourne Gun Club and Melbourne Shooting Club	1965 and 1976	Shooting, modern pentathlon	No	

Port Philip Bay, Including St Kilda Beach Area	n/a	Sailing, triathlon, beach volleyball, cycling	Yes	
Bell's Beach	n/a	Surfing	No	
Ikon Park (Princes Park), Victoria University Whitten Oval, Swinburne Centre (Punt Road Oval)	number of recent renovations at all three	Soccer, rugby7s, hockey	No	12,000 to 34,000
GMHBA Stadium (Kardinia Park) Geelong	19 <sup>th</sup> Century, redeveloped 2003 to present	Soccer, rugby 7s, basketball	No	44,000, also stadiums in Ballarat and Bendigo
Lake Wendouree, Ballarat	n/a	Canoeing, rowing	Yes	Require major redevelopment
Royal Melbourne Golf Club and Kingston Heath Golf Club	1891 1909	Golf	No	Both hosted international golf events
State Cycling Centre/Darebin International Sports Complex	2005	Cycling, soccer or a range of other sports	No	
O'Brien Group Arena	2010	Ice hockey, short track speed skating, curling, figure skating	No	6,500
Royal Exhibition Building	1880	Indoor sports	Yes	3,500, would need a refurbishment
Melbourne Showgrounds	1848, 2006	Variety of indoor or outdoor sports	No	Various sports; previously had a baseball stadium

[10] Revised and updated.

## 10. Melbourne: The Sporting Capital of Australia

Together with its sporting facility legacy, is Melbourne's widely-acknowledged expertise and capability to host international sporting events. Over several decades, there has been a very concerted political effort by the Victorian Government to fund, support and push sporting events to the forefront of the state's profile. The Victorian Major Events Company (VMEC), established in 1991, has built and developed an unrivalled calendar of major cultural, entertainment and sporting events for Victoria. In 2016, this body ceased to operate and its role was taken over by Visit Victoria; both of these organizations were responsible for attracting a large number of sporting events to the state over an extended period of time [10].

Melbourne's leading position as a major 'sport city' is captured in this pithy quotation:

The city of Melbourne is often referred to as the 'sporting capital of Australia'. The emphasis on sport within the city is notable in landscape, policy and culture. Indeed, the State Government of Victoria has, over the past three decades, strategically invested in the construction of urban sports infrastructure and events in an attempt to (re)position Melbourne as a 'sport city' [24].

Unfortunately, recent setbacks have seen the Victorian Government cancel the 2025 World Beach Volleyball Games as well as the 2026 Commonwealth Games due to cost factors but this does not preclude the continuance of a proud history of hosting numerous international sporting events over a lengthy timespan (See Table 2). The tally would have to place it amongst the leading cities around the world to host major sports events. In 2006, John Landy, an Olympian in 1952 and 1956, and at the time the Governor of Victoria, publicly declared that “Melbourne has rightful claims to be the nation’s sporting capital” [25].

**Table 2: Major International Sports Events Hosted in Melbourne and/or Victoria**

<b>Name of Event</b>	<b>Year(s)</b>
The Ashes Test Cricket (England versus Australia)	1882-83 - present
Australian Tennis Open	1905 - present
Boxing Day Test Cricket	1950 - present
Lifesaving World Championships (In Torquay and surrounds)	1956, 2006
Bells Beach Surf Classic (near Torquay)	1961- present
First Women’s World Softball Championships	1965
Modern Pentathlon World Championships	1966, 1985 (M)
World Lacrosse Men’s Championships	1974
Soccer World Cup Qualifiers	1982, 1994, 2002, 2010, 2014, 2017, 2022, 2023
Gliding World Championship (in Benalla)	1987, 2016
World Outdoor Bowls Championship: Men (M) and Women (W)	1980 (M), 1985 (W)
World Masters Athletics Championship	1987
ICC Cricket World Cup: Men (M) and Women (W)	1988 (W); 1992 & 2015 (M)
World Weightlifting Championships	1993
World Police and Fire Games	1995
Australian FI Grand Prix	1996 - present
Australian Motor Cycle Grand Prix (at Phillip Island)	1997 - present
Bledisloe Cup (Australia vs New Zealand in Rugby Union matches)	1997, 1998, 2007, 2010, 2022, 2023
Presidents Cup Golf, Men’s World Cup and World Cup of Golf	(1998, 2011, 2019, 2028); (1972, 1988); (2013, 2016)
2000 Olympic Games – soccer events at the MCG	2000
World Polo Championships	2001
Women’s World Open Squash Championship	2001
World Master’s Games	2002
Rugby Union World Cup (Melbourne hosted several games)	2003



UCI Track Cycling World Championships and UCI Road World Championships	2004, 2010
World Hot Air Balloon Championship (in Mildura)	2004
Summer Deaflympics	2005
World Artistic Gymnastics Championships	2005
2006 Commonwealth Games	2006
FINA World Swimming Championships	2007, 2022
Rugby League World Cup (some matches in Melbourne)	2008, 2017
ISAF Sailing World Cup	2015
USA Men's Olympic Basketball 'Dream Team' exhibition series versus Australian Olympic Basketball Boomers Team	2019
2025 World Beach Volleyball Championships in Torquay and 2026 Commonwealth Games scheduled for mainly Regional Victoria	Both cancelled by the Victorian Government

[10] Revised and updated. While this list is reasonably comprehensive it does not include all international sports events such as Test or One Day Cricket matches, regional FIFA Asian soccer matches, friendly or exhibition soccer and rugby matches, International Australian Rules Football matches involving Ireland, and some other sporting events.

### 3. Conclusion

The 1956 Olympic Games left an indelible mark on the Olympic movement and the world of sports. Melbourne's legacy is evident in the ongoing evolution of the Olympic movement within the host nation. That Sydney was selected to host the 2000 Games and Brisbane the upcoming 2032 Games occurred, in part, due to the very well received 'Friendly Games' and how they helped Melbourne earn a worldwide reputation as an iconic Olympic city. It is a shame that under the current IOC guidelines regarding the dates (July to August) when the Summer Games can be held virtually rules Melbourne out as a future host city.

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