Olympic riposte - marriage to a corpse

1 Sep 2012 by James Cornish

Behold, the last entry to our Olympic writing competition, the entry deadline for which has now passed. To see details - and the other entries - click on the tag at the bottom of this article, and stay tuned for the forthcoming announcement of the winner.

‘Gentlemen, your proposal is as disgraceful as it is impossible,’ Olympics chief Jacques Rogge told the Anglo-French delegation in Singapore. ‘Our rules make quite clear that the Games must be hosted by one nation alone: joint bids are not permitted. I suggest you allow the IOC members to decide and they can hardly be expected to vote for Paris or London now.’

Crestfallen, President Chirac and Prime Minister Blair returned to their rooms to lick their wounds, agreeing to meet an hour later to consider a response. Over a glass of Pol Roger, their thoughts turned to its most famous advocate, Winston Churchill, and their two countries’ darkest hours in 1940.

Mr Blair recalled that, with the Wehrmacht bearing down on Paris, Britain had made the extraordinary offer to France of full political union in an attempt to keep its ally in the war. ‘Could we not go down that road again?’ enthused the PM, smelling a Nobel prize. ‘Are we not at our best when we are at our boldest? Besides, we can promise that our union will be dissolved at the end of the Games.’

Mr Chirac felt tempted to reply with Pétain’s contemptuous dismissal of the original proposal in 1940 – ‘It would be like a marriage to a corpse’. But, ever the opportunist, he sensed that the idea was not without merit. What legacy would he have, except for these tedious corruption allegations? ‘To unite two eternal enemies!’ he mused. ‘What better expression of the Olympic ideal. We could lay to rest the ghosts of Crécy, Sluys and Poitiers. Blenheim (Churchill again!) and Mers-el-Kébir (and again!!). What a vision.’

The two leaders returned to Mr Rogge’s suite, bearing the news that their joint bid was now that of one nation: a united France and Britain. The IOC president was unconvinced – but the promise of emergency legislation to effect the merger was sufficient to convince the delegates; they were thrilled to play a part in such a historic moment. London and Paris had won the 2012 Games.

The easiest decision in the days ahead was the appointment of Queen Elizabeth II as head of the new state. Not only was she judged the most able candidate but her accession fulfilled the French longing for monarchy that had been barely disguised by the institution of the presidency. For her part, the Queen was delighted by her new official residence at Versailles, as was the Dauphin, Charles, who noted that Buck House could be fitted inside just one wing. And Elizabeth was even more pleased by the return of historic French territories once held by her Plantagenet ancestors, notably those exemplars of the wine trade, Calais and Bordeaux.

British pride suffered the first of two blows though, with news that French was to become the official language on the grounds that it was the source of so many English words and had some sort of grammar. The second concession by London was a switch to driving on the right. As roads and signs were adapted to the Napoleonic system, this delivered an enormous construction boom… and the introduction of the péage to pay for it.

In deference to the power of the City of London, the single currency of the new state was the pound instead of the euro – a decision that paid off handsomely when the financial crisis and debt storm swept in three years later. Producers of English sparkling wine were also toasting their good luck. Just as they were starting to feel their wine was a match for champagne, it actually became Champagne thanks to a designation that recognised the affinity of its soil.

The Games themselves were a triumph of Gallic flair and British organisation. In his opening ceremony speech, Mr Rogge noted that modern sport was essentially a British invention, while it was a Frenchman, Pierre de Coubertin, who had founded the Olympics. Team France-GB followed this tradition by delivering an unprecedented medal haul that ended the habitual domination of China and the United States.

Similarly successful was the regeneration of two desolate districts (renamed in honour of Chirac and Blair) at either end of

the Eurostar line. And, as the glamour and glory of the Games faded, the mooted Olympic divorce that would have once again separated the two nations was quietly forgotten. People from the Highlands to the Pyrenees, from Swansea to Strasbourg, had finally discovered how little it mattered who was in charge.