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The heavy door to Fortius Apartments clangs shut, accompanied by a gentle whoosh of warm air. Out in the cold and dark of a dreary Sunday morning in the English capital, I stretch, waiting for my GPS to find its satellites amid the high rise blocks. Finally it beeps and I'm running, past my building's sister developments—Citius and Altius—three apartment blocks erected under a wave of enthusiasm and private investment in the years immediately preceding the London Olympics and named after the Games' eternal motto: Faster, Higher, Stronger. Stiff from the previous day's threshold effort, my legs take a while to find their stride, only loosening up 10 minutes later when I reach the boundary of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, my approach watched over by the monolithic stadium, looming between sheets of heavy wet rain; silent, dark and inscrutable.

I wasn't in London to witness the Games: I didn't see the fireworks pop and fizzle overhead, nor hear the crowds scream and roar from the hushed venues I now race beside. I didn't even participate in sport back then but I was as transfixed by the spectacle as everyone else, glued to my TV, blown away by an epic celebration of world sport on my home turf. And yet, on this one run, I couldn't help but ponder the current state of the very sports that enabled the Games' success. What impact did that magnificent competition have on the running communities I frequent inside London's infamous East End, home of Jack the Ripper, Brick Lane curry houses, the Kray Twins and much more besides. The most important question, it seemed to me at that moment—as I passed beside the Olympic Rings, proudly on display on a hill overlooking the velodrome—was, had those Games shown us a future for a sustainable Olympics? Olympics that will continue to feed the fires of competitive athletics, wherever those Games may be held, long after the fuel of international media interest has burned off.





Four years on, this is what London's legacy looks like.





Whatever criteria you measure it by, London 2012 was a resounding success. Over 10,500 athletes from 204 National Olympic Committees took part in the Games, held in a newly built and bespoke Olympic Park—some 2.5 square kilometers in size—managed by a total workforce of 200,000 people, generating 8.8m ticket sales, plus an additional £600m (\$850m) for the UK tourism economy over the competition period, all watched on by an estimated global audience of four billion people (nearly 60 per cent of the world’s total population). Indeed government reports produced a year after the celebrations had ended predicted that a staggering £41bn (\$58bn) will have been added to the UK economy by 2020 on account of the Olympics and the Paralympics. “These ‘happy and glorious’ Games,” wrote Jacques Rogge, President of the International Olympic Committee, “are now on their way to leaving a fantastic legacy that will benefit the population of London and beyond.”

My personal best over the 10km distance was set on a race held along a loop of winding canals that forms part of the £292 million (\$415m), 18-month-long, development site that became the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park (QEOP). This area—once a picture of Britain’s bleak, underused and neglected post-industrial landscapes—has since been transformed into 560 acres of parkland, at the center of which sits the thriving Olympic Village. The futures of all five of the permanent venues that make up that venue have now been secured.

Between these venues weave a mix of trails and sculpted open space, through which 20 road races now take place each year, although that list is growing all the time, says QEOP Press Officer Victoria Wilson.

“In 2017, the stadium will host the IAAF World Athletics Championships and IPC Athletics World Championships”, she says. “It’s the first time these prestigious global events have been staged in the same venue in the same year.”

The stadium will also become a new national hub for athletics, the sport having priority from the last Friday in June to the end of July each year under a confirmed five-decade agreement. The governing body, UK Athletics, will also hold its annual London Diamond League meetings at the stadium, alongside a whole spectrum of national level and age group championships. In addition, a brand new community track is in the process of being built at the center, with support from the London Marathon Charitable Trust. This track will become the training venue of the Newham and Essex Beagles Athletic Club. Board Director of England Athletics and Newham Club patron Tony Shiret is upbeat about the development: “The opening of the community track at Stratford... will be an attractive facility with good transport links and will be heavily used by the club and we hope the residents and schools of Newham.”

“NEB athletes won four of the six athletics medals at the 2012 Olympics,” he continues, “We have some great youngsters coming up through the ranks and we hope the new facility inspires even more East London athletes to become the medalists of the future.”



Alf Vickers started coaching with another of London's long-established athletics clubs, Victoria Park Harriers and Tower Hamlets AC, when his daughter was nine.

She's now 43.

Unlike Tony, he's pessimistic about the suggestion that the Olympics has increased the fortunes for athletes, at least for those outside the locality of the Olympic Park. I tracked him down to his trackside office at the nearby Mile End Stadium, my home training venue, in between knocks on the office door from a stream of young athletes after his attention. He told me how, back in 2011, the USA Olympic Committee paid for the resurfacing of the stadium's 20-year-old track as well as investing in site security (high fences) and even undertaking a community engagement program.

However, the longevity of these Games-time investments are something that Alf seriously questions.

"That track has now been down four years and it's worn," he says. "It's terrible. It might not look it to the layman, but if you walk around it you can see it's worn out. It's poor."

Alf has never personally seen any grants or youth development programs implemented to help young athletes at Mile End. The Sprints and Hurdles Performance Coach has also never been contacted by any official body in connection with continuing the legacy of the London Games by helping the 11 to 18-year-old athletes he teaches. He even disputes the whole premise that the Games were a lasting inspiration for sports in the Borough.

"Immediately after the Olympics there was a huge surge of new members," he says. "Unfortunately people get enthusiastic but once they discover how much hard work it is, all the training, that enthusiasm quickly wanes. We were getting 40-year-olds that wanted to start sprinting. To be honest that's all very well but with all the greatest will in the world, they're not going to stay: it's too late, by a long way. And we got a lot of that—none of them stayed."

"Obviously the Olympics was a great event to have in London. But as far as legacy is concerned," he laughs. "What legacy?"

Former Mile End Stadium Manager Nick Clayden disagrees: "It does frustrate me when people say there's no legacy: you just have remember what this place was like years ago to see how far we've come today." For those who never saw the venue pre-Olympics, Nick's got the stats to back his claims up. "When I started working here in 2010, we had about 38 events on in the summer: last year we had 58 events. We've more or less demonstrated a 20 per cent growth in visitors every year since the Games and we continue to grow now, although some of this comes down to publicity, programming and services investment too."

"You train on Tuesday night, right?" he asks me, "Well then, you've seen what's it's been like at half seven lately—it's been absolutely full. It's almost at the point where it's becoming an issue; we're having to work with different groups to try and stagger the usage."



He's right, every Tuesday night is rammed, yet interestingly the majority of these new users originate outside the framework of the traditional athletics club. Right now, in London alone, you can join a different grassroots running or fitness collective for every day of the week: from the London Midnight Runners (4,111 Facebook fans), Project Awesome (5,581), WMN Run (475), Tribe Collective (5,805), GoodGym (4,331), Advent Running (2,266), Run Dem Crew (874), and of course parkrun, the international weekly (and free) 5k phenomenon that's taking the running world by storm. There are now over two million registered parkrunners from 12 countries (including the US), who have together done over 12.5 million runs, with one million instances of volunteering making it all possible. Big commercially-backed groups are also capitalizing on this new surge of enthusiasm for running faster, with brands like Nike and UK retail outlet Sweatshop also operating weekly training sessions in the Olympic Park and across the country, while others such as Intersport are now investing in established community groups like parkrun.

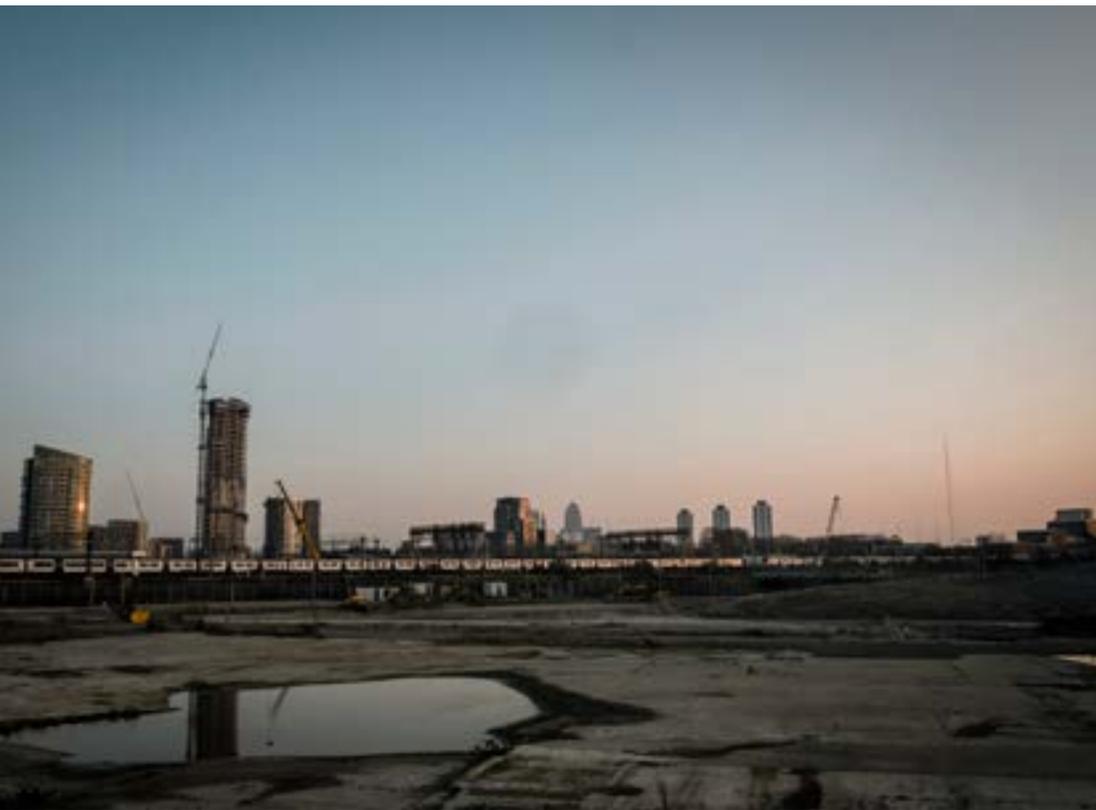
James Poole is the co-founder of one these collectives, Advent Running. He's certain London 2012 is in part responsible for the boom in interest: "There's little doubt in my mind that the Olympics inspire Londoners in particular, to be more active. I think running is fast moving (towards the mainstream) and, at a grassroots level at least, is approaching a golden age of participation."





“We studied the London situation and had been impressed at how it’d been a regeneration catalyst for London,” Steve Pagliuca, Chairman of the Boston 2024 Partnership, tells me over an absolutely dire Skype connection (despite infrastructure projects aplenty, fast broadband—it seems—is still hit and miss in some parts of East London), “Some of the ideas we had came directly from studying the situation in London.”

As a vibrant, sports-oriented town, he says, Boston would have been proud to host the Olympics and welcome the world—at least, it would have done, had it not been for January 2015’s mega-blizzard.



The snowstorm was so severe it stopped some unfortunate residents reaching work for nearly five weeks and led to probing public questioning as to whether the city’s transportation system was capable of handling the mass influx of travellers an Olympics would inevitably bring. Irony notwithstanding that funding for a summer Games could have been invested to address this predominantly winter-based issue, Boston’s withdrawn bid would have been a major catalyst for the regeneration of the Widett Circle, a location not dissimilar to London’s pre-QEOP site.

“The area generates less than a \$1m a year in taxes for the city,” explains Pagliuca, “but over the period (of the Games development) it would have generated in excess of \$30m in taxes per year. Over the long term this figure was projected to rise to over \$100m generated in taxes, as well as the building of 8,000 new housing units, and the creation of about 100,000 jobs.”

Boston’s bid reached its end after the U.S. Olympic Committee pulled the plug in July 2015, following low public support, claims over a lack of transparency and an entrenched opposition campaign. But the work done lives on, the Boston bidders having transferred all the intellectual property they’d conducted to the Los Angeles 2024 Olympic Bid. It’s a campaign “committed to providing the ultimate, personalized athlete experience during the Games” says LA 2024 Director of Athlete Relations Janet Evans, “and to delivering a meaningful legacy for the next generation of athletes after the Games.”

“If Los Angeles has the honor of hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2024,” she says, “it would build on the proven legacy of the Los Angeles 1984 Games which dramatically changed city-wide access to sport. It would be California’s first Games in 40 years and give LA and America a platform for inspiring healthy living and ever-greater social cohesion through sport and the principles of Olympism.”





Time races on. It may seem like it was only yesterday that London's opening ceremony got underway, and yet most of that Games' development began almost a decade ago. Now the world is looking to new competitions, to Rio on the imminent horizon, and then to Tokyo. From there, a possible return of the Olympic Flame back to American soil. It's at these Games where the lessons learned in London will be at their most valuable. This city has seen its sports venues stand the test of continued consumer interest, not abandoned and lain to rust like they have in Athens or Beijing. It's seen investment, infrastructure, regeneration and most of all inspiration: runners training and competing in numbers hitherto unimagined even a decade ago. Of course each installment of the Olympics comes with its own set of unique challenges, but every new location also carries with it fresh and fertile new possibilities for furthering the reach and appeal of competitive sport in our increasingly sedate, screen-filled world. No, we can only wait to see what legacies the next few Games will bring.



But I remain hopeful.

