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Let the games begin

MATE
 Mark Wilson



THE Winter Olympics just melted into history, the Commonwealth Games loom tentatively on the Indian horizon – providing Osama Bin Laden doesn't try incinerate years of training and hard work by athletes who have no connection at all to United States foreign policy – Sevens has just been included in the Olympics and to my dismay Individual Pursuit has been axed from London 2012.

It's action stations for the International Olympic Committee.

Constant security fears and the ongoing last minuteness of stadium and venue construction seem to take centre stage with the issue of which sports should be there providing a small distraction to the logistical nightmare of overseeing these immense sporting showpieces.

Every Olympics features intriguing couch banter around what actually constitutes sport and which sports merit inclusion.

We have all heard the well worn dialogue around equestrian and synchronised swimming not being sports, but in reality the prerequisites for inclusion are extremely rigid and, as unconvinced as some in the heart of Texas may be at their inclusion, they have met the criteria of having a strong history and tradition, universal appeal, popularity, positive image, athletes' health at heart, development of an international federation to govern the sport and non-prohibitive costs of staging the event.

Recent additions have all had to pass this test. My personal highlight was the inclusion of women's volleyball at the Sydney games, remember the Italian and Swedish teams? They were epic and provided ample reasoning to skip many an Otago University lecture.

BMX made the cut in 2008 and should have seen gold for New Zealand but like so many Kiwi medal hopes over there the pressure got to our stunning Sarah Walker and she was forced off the podium.

We should be lining up another gold if the rugby sevens team can avoid the World Cup woes that have plagued the ABs and stand atop the dais in 2016.

Squash, karate, roller sports all just missed the cut in the last selection round, but what about tug of war. It was a staple of the Olympics from 1900-1920, but has since disappeared. I can't think of a better sport to bring back. Men with massive engines, powerful, brutish characters going head-to-head the ultimate tough test for any country.

Small countries like Tonga and Samoa with no real budget could grab a few taro-fuelled tanks and make a big impact, the Japanese and Koreans will battle to buy medals in this sport. Massive spectator potential. It meets most of the criteria, it's been around since the 12th century in India, has an international body with 53-member nations and I would hazard a guess that most countries on Earth participate in some capacity.

There is the slight problem of high injury risk, but like the dislocated elbows in the weight-lifting this makes for great YouTube videos.

Apparently, once in Taipei two men had their arms severed in an event involving 1600 people while two young Germans were killed and 102 injured in 1995 at an event involving 650 Scouts. No pain no gain though, right?

Great event for half-time entertainment at the rugby as well – let's get that started!

On tour: Irish singer Glen Hansard is heading to New Zealand for two concerts.

Once in a lifetime

Busking on Dublin's streets as a teen helped Glen Hansard gain Hollywood fame two decades later. He talks to **Jule Scherer** about how winning an Oscar changed his life and his band The Swell Season's new album.

THE last time Glen Hansard visited New Zealand one of his dreams came true. Music legend Bob Dylan asked Hansard's band The Frames to open his 2007 Australian and New Zealand concerts.

But what happened after that was the stuff of

dreams for the Irish musician. Initially, Hansard just wanted to help out a friend by writing the music for a movie project but he ended up playing the lead in John Carney's surprise hit *Once*.

The low-budget film won the audience award at the Sundance Movie Festival, scored at the

Independent Spirit Award for best foreign film, the sound-track was nominated for a Grammy and most importantly Hansard won the Academy Award for Best Original Song at the 2008 Oscars (together with co-star Marketa Irglova).

"Personally, playing with Bob Dylan was the more important thing," he said.

"But professionally, winning the Oscar did more for me. Opening for Dylan does nothing for your career, it's more something you enjoy doing, but winning an Oscar does a lot for you," he says.

The huge success of *Once* opened a lot of doors for the 39-year-old musician from Dublin.

"It changed everything. It was almost like somebody came and said you've been on a long and

tough road and now we take all of that away and give you a fresh start and this time you are going to start at the top.

"It's a fascinating thing; it basically was a complete levelling of everything I had known.

"Suddenly, we were given an audience on a platter and then, what we did with our audience was where the work really comes into it," he says.

After the success of the movie, he formed the Swell Season with co-star, Czech multi-instrumentalist Irglova.

They have just released the follow-up album to *Once*, called *Strict Joy*.

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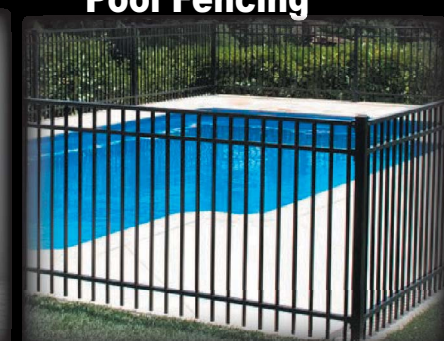
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