

Big Ben's ticking on 2012 Games

With the 2008 Summer Olympics ending Sunday in Beijing, Steven Beard checks on preparations for the Summer Games set for London in 2012. He gets an earful from Brits who aren't confident their country has the necessary organizational skills.

TEXT OF STORY

KAI RYSSDAL: British cyclist Chris Hoy's not getting the same kind of press as Michael Phelps or Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt, but he is right up there in the gold medal count along with them. Hoyt is the UK's first Olympic triple gold medalist in more than 100 years.

Overall the Brits have been having a pretty good time in Beijing. They're third in the total medal count. Now that the fun's almost over, the next Summer Games -- London 2012 -- are starting to loom large. And Marketplace's Stephen Beard reports that when it comes to organizing and funding big events, the UK's track record isn't great.



The Royal Guard in London.
(iStockPhoto.com)

STEVEN BEARD: Since London won the right to stage the next Olympics, the estimated cost has quadrupled -- to \$28 billion. The taxpayer will pick up most of the tab. Financial author David Craig is urging his fellow Brits to bail out now.

DAVID CRAIG: We've probably got about six months to a year where we could stop the whole disaster, hand the games back to the International Olympic Committee and maybe pay a few billion dollars in compensation, but we would still save \$15-\$20 billion.

It isn't going to happen, of course. London is committed. Work on the huge new Olympic stadium is already well underway. But many Londoners are still fretting, and not only about the cost. Economist Andrew Hilton:

ANDREW HILTON: My heart sank when we won the right to stage the Olympics. I thought and it was a disaster for Britain. It will be immensely disruptive. No fun at all and we'd screw it up.

A survey published just before the Beijing Games was equally negative. Only 15 percent of Brits thought the London Olympics would be good for the UK's international reputation. Out on the streets, I found plenty of doubts: Will the facilities be ready on time? Will the events go smoothly?

WOMAN: I can't see it. We try 'n organize anything in this country, I'm sorry. You've just got to look round to see how organized we are! I'm not saying no more!

FIRST MAN: I tell you what, there's absolutely no chance on this earth. If they get that together, it'll be all in the last six months. And they'll be scrimping and scraping at it. Because that's the only way the English know how to do things.

SECOND MAN: I pass the Olympic site every day and I say to my wife: "They're just moving mounds of earth about." And my wife says, "Why are you always so negative?" So, I'll just say: "I'm going by past experience."

RECORDING FROM A MILLENNIUM CELEBRATION COUNTDOWN: Altogether now, 10, nine, eight ...

Past experience of big British projects is not encouraging. Take the Millenium Celebration.

RECORDING: Three, two, one. [A balloon bursts.]

A series of mishaps marred the event. Dignitaries stranded for hours at a remote railway station. The River of Fire, which sputtered and fizzled out in three seconds flat. And the Millenium Dome, a fibre glass tent which cost the British taxpayer a billion dollars. And just this year, there's been the extraordinary debacle of Heathrow Airport's Terminal 5. London fund manager Justin Urquart-Stewart says there's a simple explanation for Britain's long list of failures

JUSTIN URQUART-STEWART We're not very good at organizing things.

RECORDING: Monty Python theme

Monty Python figured that out 40 years ago, portraying a country that struggled even to run a cheese shop.

RECORDING: Monty Python clip about a cheese shop that doesn't have cheese

But Danish planning expert Professor Bent Flybjerg says this is unfair. The Brits are no worse at running major projects than anyone else, They just revel in it when things go wrong.

BENT FLYBJERG: The British are generally not afraid of studying what they're doing. I mean digging up the problems, digging up the disasters. And, of course, this means that there's more talk about this in the UK than in other countries.

Nevertheless, if bungling were an Olympic sport, Britain would probably take the gold.

In London, this is Stephen Beard for Marketplace.

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