

What if the U.S. won no Olympic medals?

As I prepare to go to the Beijing Olympics, I wonder what would happen if the U.S. came home with no medals. From the first Olympic Games in 1896 through 2006, the U.S. has always fared very well, leading the world with 973 gold medals and 2,405 total medals won. No other country on Earth, big or small, comes even close to America's athletic prowess.

But as I pack my bags, I wonder – what *would* happen? What if the U.S. won no gold, no silver and no bronze medals? Even worse, what if the U.S. team finished 25th in the medal competition – way behind both smaller and larger countries? Would we handle it with the same nonchalance we have about our children ranking 25th in the world in mathematics? Would it merit a Blue Ribbon panel whose recommendations are never implemented? Would it generate a brief mention in the news and then pass from our minds?

No way! Dropping to 25th in the world at the Olympics would be a national embarrassment. There would be an outcry of humiliation from Americans. The President, Congress, Governors, in fact every elected official worth their salt would demand “athletic reform.” Experts would be appointed to analyze our programmatic weaknesses compared to other countries, and every American would expect serious, measurable changes to take place within four years before the next Olympics. We would muster the will and exert every effort never to lose again in the global athletic contest of the Olympics.

So why are we so apathetic about the decline of our children's intellectual achievement – where 24 countries outperform U.S. students in math, arguably a more important contest than any sport. Each year our children's ability to compete academically in the world gets worse, and each year Americans seem to care less. Elected officials give the illusion of caring, but no truly hard choices are made, and no meaningful improvements are seen.

Fortunately, America has been relatively unchallenged economically for the past 50 years. During that time our country won the race to the moon, won the Cold War and became enormously wealthy – on the strength of science, engineering and industry that produced the biggest, the fastest, the best of everything. But times have changed.

Our accumulated wealth and a historically liberal immigration policy have allowed us to ignore how rapidly other nations are enhancing their intellectual capital. China, for example, has gone from the extreme poverty and illiteracy produced by the Cultural Revolution to become the fourth largest economy in the world – in a mere 30 years. That's right – only 30 years! Today, the U.S. has a trade deficit of \$1.5 trillion with China, and China holds \$150 billion in U.S. Treasury securities, second only to Japan. China has become both our supplier of goods *and* our banker. Does that worry anyone else out there but me?

China and India, the two most populous nations on Earth – each four times our size – are producing more and more well-educated young people, particularly in math and science. Their cultures revere, recognize and reward academic excellence, and so they are perfectly tuned to the global technology competition of the 21st century.

As Americans we believe in being number one – in sports, technology, innovation, creativity, the military and in the global economy. But all of that success is based on being number one in educating our children – something we are no longer achieving.

Isn't it time we admit to ourselves this is more serious than the Olympic Games. Americans traditionally rise to the challenge and prevail. It's time to rise to the challenge of educating our children to the highest level in the world and ensure they bring home economic gold medals.

Go U.S.A.!