

3rd September 1989
Margaret Thatcher
Speech at International Skill Olympics

Your excellencies, my Lord Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to be here with you today at this award ceremony of the first ever International Youth Skills Olympics to be held in England.

It is a great honour for Britain and for Birmingham to host the largest ever Skill Olympics—with over four hundred competitors from twenty-one nations around the world.

[Marginal notes by MT:] Skills—Excellence—Travel—int. standards. Half-way to the future.

What's it all for.

Build a better life by effort. Kennedy.
Not only for self but for others.

Be ready for the fresh challenges of our time.

Research. Voyager. Environment. New Products.

These Olympics bring home to everyone involved the benefits of reaching for the very highest standards in our increasingly competitive and fast-changing world.

The medalists here may not enjoy quite the same tumultuous reception or financial reward as the athletes of those other Olympics.

But the standards you set have the potential to secure enormous rewards for your countries.

Standards you achieve by your work set the standards for your country and the esteem in which your country is held. [end p2]

I would like to congratulate everyone who has made this competition possible: the hundreds of volunteers from all over the world who for two years now have been working hard; the companies who have demonstrated their commitment to training by their sponsorship;

and last but far from least, the competitors.

We have a saying in Britain: "It's not the winning but the taking part that counts."
I've always thought that winning does count—a very great deal!

No doubt all the competitors here hope to receive a medal when the winners are announced in a few minutes time.

But let's not forget that every young person here has succeeded against great competition in their own countries to win the right to represent their country today.

I congratulate every one of you on that tremendous achievement. [end p4] You are all helping to keep the Olympic ideal alive.

You may not know that the first ever recorded Olympic Champion, back in 776 BC, was a cook— Coroebus of Elis.

He may not have won the sprint race because of his culinary skills.

But the ancient Greeks thought them important enough to record the fact for posterity.

[end p5] Of course it's easier to judge a sprint race than it is to judge a good cook.

You can see straight away who is first past the post. But it may not be as much fun.

The spectators here not only watched the cooks prepare forty dishes against the clock.

They got to taste the dishes as well! [end p6]

This is the 30th Skill Olympics.

Since these Olympics were founded in Spain in 1950, an ever-widening range of trade skills have been tested—and many of the skills themselves have changed.

Some—such as cooking and hairdressing—are ancient crafts. Some—such as Computerised Numerical Control Machinery—are brand new.

They have replaced old crafts—such as mechanical watch-making—which are so rare that they are no longer covered in the competition! [end p7]

And there are other skills for jobs which were certainly known in the 1950s—such as television repairs—but changes in technology have changed the nature of the skills needed for them almost out of recognition.

Increasingly the new jobs demand higher and ever changing skills.

Many of the new jobs being created in Britain—and more than three million have been created since March 1983—will be open only to [end p8] people with skills and qualifications, especially at technician level and above. In many sectors of our economy there will be far less demand for unskilled and semi-skilled workers.

We cannot predict the course of technological change.

But we can be absolutely sure that technology will change the jobs we do as it enriches our lives. New products and services will be generated. [end p9]

And new ways and more efficient ways of producing familiar goods.

We shall all have to become young at heart.

Ready and able throughout our working lives to train and retrain in new skills.

Against this background, the aims of the Skill Olympics are particularly relevant. These are: [end p10]

to promote standards of excellence;

to encourage an international spirit;

to provide a competitive arena in in which to compare techniques and training.

STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

These Olympics set international standards of excellence. [end p11] Nationally and internationally recognised standards stimulate achievement. They set goals for individuals and companies to achieve.

Not everyone can win a medal at the International Youth Skill Olympics. But everyone benefits by examples of excellence.

The setting of standards at various levels of achievement can be of tremendous value to employers and to individuals. [end p12]

[In this country our National Council for Vocational Qualifications—which is one of the major sponsors for this event—is working to define the standards people need for particular jobs.

It is a massive exercise and we are urging the European Community to speed up its work to provide mutual recognised and comparable vocational qualifications within Europe.

A young carpenter from Spain should [end p13] have qualifications which allow him to seek a job in the Netherlands and a hairdresser from Ireland in Portugal.]

Of course, standards cannot be achieved without commitment and investment in training by individuals, companies and—where help is needed by Government.

Investment in people is just as important as in plant and machinery.

That commitment is very clearly illustrated here today—not just by competitors. [end p14] I know how important the sponsorship of companies has been to this event.

Sir John Egan—the President of the '89 Skill Olympics—will forgive me for mentioning the support of Jaguar to the Olympics.

His leadership and the commitment Jaguar has made to quality and training has helped to win his company world-wide renown in its field. [end p15]

It is no coincidence that the most successful industrialised countries and companies invest so much in training their young people.

In Britain, the Government guarantee all young people under eighteen who have left full-time education and are not in employment a place on our Youth Training Scheme.

This gives every YTS trainee the chance to gain a vocational qualification through off-the-job training and planned work experience. [end p16]

We have already given well over two million young people this excellent start to their working lives.

This represents about £1 billion of Government investment in our young people each year. Fifteen of the UK team in these Olympics are or have been YTS trainees. At the last Olympics in Australia, our YTS trainees won five medals.

Other countries also recognise the benefit of investing in training. [end p17]

In West Germany for example nearly all school leavers enter the “dual system” of vocational training which gives young people a mixture of training on and off the job.

COMPETITION IS INCREASINGLY INTERNATIONAL

International competitions such as these recognised that we live in an internationally competitive world.

[Here in Europe, we are building a European market place—including a market place for skills. [end p18]

By 1992 we hope to have a Single European Market—where the barriers to trade and the movement of labour will have been removed.

The increased competition the new European market will bring is a spur for everyone to sharpen their skills to help conquer the new markets opening up.]

But there is now a global market in most of the goods and services we produce. [end p19]

These Olympics have brought together on one stage young people who in their working lives may well be competing against each other for world markets in an ever more competitive world.

Orders, profits and investment go to those countries whose workforce has the ability to use the technology to produce the quality and quantity of goods and services the market demand. [end p20]

And at prices they can afford.

The skills and productivity of a country's workforce are crucial.

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION SHARPENS SKILLS AND KEEPS THEM UP-TO- DATE

Competition is a vital force in raising and maintaining standards.

Without it, we would not enjoy the standard of living we have in the West. [end p21]

Occasions such as this provide a wonderful opportunity for individuals to measure up their skills against the best in world.

To learn about the latest technological advances—and how other countries are meeting them.

To find out how techniques are changing in time to meet the demands of competition world- wide.

But above all, to compete. [end p22]

CONCLUSION

We have another saying in Britain:

“Good, better, best, Never let it rest,
Until your good becomes better, And your better best.”

I am sure the 30th International Youth Skill Olympic competition will have inspired everyone who has taken part to do so.