

Could this be you?

In front of me ten thousand of the greatest athletes in the world had just marched into the stadium and were assembled in the centre of the running track. They were smiling and waving excitedly to their families, friends and supporters in the stands. In the block of seats behind, not far away, sat the President of the USA, Bill Clinton, the President of the Olympic Committee, Juan Antonio Samaranché and many heads of the great nations of the world. In the stands were eighty five thousand spectators who had paid top dollar for their tickets. At home over two billion people from all over the world would be watching the Opening Ceremony of the 1996 Centenary Olympic Games on their television sets. The Atlanta Olympic Stadium was packed to capacity and things were really buzzing. I could hardly believe it, I was actually there! Yes, these were the most exciting moments of my life.

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A relay of runners had carried the torch through most of the states of the USA to the base of the cauldron where the Olympic flame would burn during the Games. As the last runner climbed the ramp, the scoreboard revealed the answer to the closely guarded secret of the name of the person honoured to light the Olympic Flame. It was 'Muhammed Ali'. A mighty roar went up from everyone in the stadium. With a hand shaking from Parkinson's Disease he struggled to light the fuse to the flame. Grown men had tears in their eyes. Seconds later the Olympic flame lit the summer sky.

The Centenary Olympic Games were under-way.

Atlanta Olympic Games 1996.

Preliminaries

'Would you like to be an Olympic volunteer?

I saw this advertisement in the company magazine, and my immediate reaction was "yes , what do I have to do?" I submitted my details to the authorities, and shortly afterwards a multi-page application form arrived in the post. It wanted to know just about everything there was to know about me, including names of referees, details of employment, state of health and past addresses.

I had recently retired from IBM, and was still on the mailing list for the company magazine. IBM also happened to be one of the ten major companies sponsoring the Atlanta Olympics, so providing references and verifying personal information was

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easy for me. A few weeks later I received a card which said “Congratulations, you have been selected to be a volunteer”. My immediate reaction was that’s wonderful, but what exactly do they want me to do?

I phoned the volunteer management number in Atlanta, and was told that I had been selected for ‘stadium management’. It sounded a splendid title. I had visions of sitting in the command module surveying the stadium and master-minding all activities that went on below. Actually it wasn’t quite like that, because he went on to say that it meant I would be an usher in the main athletics stadium. Nevertheless my reaction to this news was sheer joy. I would be working in the location which would be the hub of activity, where the opening and closing ceremonies took place, and all the finals of the track and field events would be contested. He asked if I was still interested? Yes, I certainly was, in fact metaphorically I nearly bit his hand off.

A training package was to follow, and I was asked if I could be available for two major athletics events in Atlanta in the weeks before the games. One of these was to be the trials where the USA team would be selected. It would have been a great event to see, but it was a month or so before the games.

I pointed out that this would mean another expensive transatlantic flight, so he told me not to worry as a special training session would be provided for overseas volunteers on arrival in Atlanta.

Volunteers at the games did not get any expenses, and had to arrange their own accommodation and

travel. An Atlanta rental agent found me a bed and breakfast place in another town, Buckhead, which is about a one hour journey from Atlanta. The cost was around a hundred pounds per night. Most of the rooms in the city of Atlanta cost much more, but by this time not much was available. The Olympics is a time when prices start to sky-rocket.

A return flight from London to Atlanta was quoted at £600. At the time my son was living in San Francisco, on the west coast of America. I asked how much a ticket to San Francisco would be, with a few days stop-over, followed by a flight to Atlanta, and return to UK; answer £500. It was a no-brainer; that was the option I went for. Amazing how you can take a far longer journey, by a few thousand miles, and end up saving £100. Airline ticket costings are a complete mystery .

A short time later I received the training package. It consisted of a manual and video tape and was certainly very thorough and motivational. As I worked my way through the training material, I got a feeling of increasing excitement and anticipation. Yes, this was the Olympic Games and I was actually going to play a part in them.

The first modern Olympiad had taken place in Athens in 1896, a hundred years before. These Games were designated the Atlanta Centenary Olympic Games, or ACOG. The Atlanta committee pledged to:

- 1) Conduct the games with sensitivity, integrity, fiscal responsibility and commitment to the needs of athletes.

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2) Share with the world the spirit of America, the experience of the American South and the vision of Atlanta.

3) Leave a positive, physical and spiritual legacy and an indelible mark upon Olympic history by staging the most memorable games ever.

It was clear that as volunteers we had a big part to play in the success of the games. In Los Angeles in 1984 there were thirty thousand volunteers, in Barcelona in 1992 there were thirty-five thousand, and in Atlanta in 1996 they planned to have forty-five thousand. The book said "No other Olympic Games in history have depended on volunteers to this extent. It is our chance to show the world the power of volunteerism". Certainly a new word to add to the dictionary.

In 2012 the London Olympic Games will need more than seventy thousand, double the Barcelona number. In twenty years that is a big increase, although since the tragedy of 9/11 the need for people in a security role will have grown considerably.

Very detailed plans were given with all the major Olympic venues listed. An area defined as 'The Olympic Ring', an imaginary circle with a radius of 1.5 miles, contained half a dozen major venues. The largest were the Olympic Stadium which had 85,000 seats, and the Georgia Dome which had 72,000 seats. The dome could be divided, to provide two venues of 35,000 each, and was to be used mainly for gymnastics, basketball and handball.

In the past when other countries had hosted the Olympic Games, their governments had provided the greater part of the cost. It is said that it took thirty years for Montreal to finally pay back the debt for the Games held in 1976.

The total budget for the Atlanta Games was quoted in the training manual as \$1.7 billion. It was the proud boast of the organisers that sponsors provided, directly or indirectly, 70% of the costs of the Atlanta Centenary Olympic Games. To recognise their contribution, volunteers were directed to take special care to refrain from using or displaying any product or logo which belonged to a competitor of the sponsors.

The Coca Cola organisation has its corporate headquarters in Atlanta, and was clearly one of the biggest contributors to the Olympic Games. You would certainly have had great difficulty in finding a bottle of Pepsi Cola anywhere in town due to the dominance of Coca Cola, and to use anything but a Visa card also caused problems.

We were also provided with a mass of gee-whizz statistics, in order to satisfy the curiosity of visitors to The Games who might ask us questions. The Olympic village would provide housing for 14,000 athletes, coaches and team officials. There were more than 100 media outlets for TV, radio and press. Atlanta had invested more than \$500 million in venue construction.

There was a neat little Olympic Games pocket fact book provided as a ready reference for all staff. It told us that there were 10,600 athletes expected to

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compete, 6,700 male and 3,900 female. Twenty six sports events were competed for, with 271 medal events. It listed the 197 countries competing. The new sports to be included for the first time were beach volleyball, mountain bike racing and softball.

To put the location in perspective three million people live in metropolitan Atlanta. The state of Georgia is the fourth state of the USA, it was named after George II of England and is the 21st largest state.

There were guidelines to help volunteers to deal with security problems. Generally the message was, if there is a problem find a security man wearing a white shirt and green pants and tell him. If there are protestors and demonstrators don't try to handle it yourself, find the security man.

If you receive a request for political asylum from athletes or visitors find a security or law enforcement officer and he must contact Immigration. I was quite relieved that none of these things actually happened to me.

The overall message was "make every minute count". I certainly intended to.

Before travelling, I contacted the Bristol Evening Post, my local paper, to offer my services as a temporary reporter. They said that as they would not have any representation in Atlanta, they would like me to send back any news on the progress of the west-country competitors. I was provided with a list of all their names and events.

They sent a reporter and photographer to talk to me at home and printed an article and picture in the evening paper about my big adventure. Under my photograph the text read:

“Sporting Honour..... Bristol sports fan Mike Cooper is to represent Britain in this summer’s Olympic Games...as an usher”.

The BBC in Bristol also invited me in take part in a live interview. Things were getting exciting.

Atlanta Olympic Games

1996

Tuesday 16th July

The first thing that hit me when I got off the plane in Atlanta was the heat; it was absolutely sweltering. The airport looked very spruce and well prepared for the most important three weeks Atlanta will ever know. A clear message displayed was “the world is coming to Atlanta”. The whole place was buzzing with a party atmosphere, and a real Southern State welcome to all visitors was provided by the friendly, hospitable volunteer staff. This was where I met my first volunteers. They were instantly recognisable by their uniforms. The most impressive feature was the trilby style hat, with Atlanta 1996 embroidered on a blue band. There was however an air of strict security with many metal detectors being used, and staff

carrying out handbag searches and frisking new arrivals.

I introduced myself to one of the Olympic volunteer staff, and was informed that regardless of whether one was a competitor, coach, official or volunteer, everything started with accreditation. This lady volunteer took me to collect my baggage and directed me to the bus.

At the Accreditation Centre I lined up in a queue alongside the Hungarian national team, complete with a film crew photographing every movement of their team members. Whether they mistook me for a national athlete or not I don't know but the camera swung in my direction once or twice, so I might be better known in Hungary than I was at home!

After a short wait my photograph was taken, personal details filled in and an identity card complete with a chain was hung around my neck. Also attached to the chain was a special card allowing free transport within the city of Atlanta via the transport service known as MARTA, and a second card which could be used in any vending machine to get a free drink, for the period of the games. Oh boy! I could drink as much as I liked for three weeks and it wouldn't cost a dime. Mind you, it was so hot in Atlanta that we were reminded that it was important to drink large volumes of liquid. I think the recommendation was 2 litres of water each day.

The accreditation procedure was a very slick and efficient operation managed by friendly staff.

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Accreditation completed, it was time to find my lodgings for the duration of the games, which were in Buckhead. The travelling time was about one and a half hours from the main stadium. I phoned my hostess, Janice, which is pronounced Jan..eece, and arranged to meet her an hour later. This was the first opportunity to try out the free MARTA train card. It was very straight forward, simply putting the card into the turnstile and getting onto the next train.

I met Janice at the station she took me to her home. It was a very nice house, I just wished it could have been an hour nearer to the centre of activities. She was a delightful black American lady, with a splendid Southern accent. There were times when she used expressions, and said things that I found quite difficult to understand first time and had to ask her to repeat. I am sure she thought I was either deaf or daft or both, but after a short time I managed to get my ear tuned in and we had a bit of a joke about it. There was one place name, en route to the Stadium, that I could never pronounce properly even after a couple of weeks, it is called Wyucca.

My first call the next morning was to get my uniform from a depot at Dekatur. My attempt at pronunciation failed miserably, when asking Janice for directions. She said she had never heard of the place, until I showed her the name on my instruction letter. She recognised it immediately, and gave me a totally different pronunciation; as someone once said, 'two nations divided by a common language'.