

The Youth of the World

Despite its challenges, the Olympic Games in Rio delivered when it came to those who matter most



BOB LATHAM

Just like the stages of grief, an Olympiad seems to go through four phases before, during and after the Games: anxiousness, pessimism, exhilaration and nostalgia. With regard to the Olympic Games in Rio, the cynical commentary of the press and the angst and nail-biting of international federations and national Olympic committees prior to the event were at an all-time high. There was certainly cause for concern

and Rio 2016, as it turned out, was not without frustration.

I could easily write a column that would play into all the notions that persisted before the Olympics, and that Ryan Lochte furthered toward the end. The training of the volunteers, for instance—and particularly the official drivers—led to some interesting situations. A very high-placed Rio organizing committee official was himself two hours late getting to a venue because his driver was lost. An IOC member who was scheduled to present medals at the track and field stadium ended up in a van I was riding in because her driver did not show up. New Zealand rugby star Sonny Bill Williams tore his Achilles tendon on the first day of play, and the ambulance taking him to a nearby hospital took an hour and 20 minutes because it also became lost. And my personal favorite: As a member of an international federation, I jumped into a Rio 2016 car to go from the track stadium to Copacabana Beach, only for the driver to ask the Portuguese-speaking people with me, “Where’s that?” Uh, it’s kind of the most famous spot in the city.

At times, you had the feeling that you were in a Wal-Mart and it was the first day of work for every employee. In a way, that’s what the first several days of an Olympics are. The important things to keep in mind, however, are that 1) the Olympics are not about me and my First World problems, and 2) any travails that I or other officials or tourists had were unrelated to the competition. Whatever issues may have surfaced before the Olympics, or that even carried over into the Olympics, they did not compromise Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, Katie Ledecky, Usain Bolt or even Gwen Jorgensen, who had to swim in open water. The athletes were well treated and well celebrated. The beach volleyball venue could not have provided more spectacular competition, with the Walsh Jennings/Ross matches being must-see events, and the Dalhausser/Lucena versus Alison/Bruno match being perhaps the most intense contest I saw during my time in Rio.

The Rafael Nadal/Thomaz Bellucci men’s quarterfinal tennis match had the feel and the energy of a prize fight, with the crowd fervently supporting Brazil’s Bellucci.

At the closing ceremonies of every Olympics, the IOC president states: “I call upon the youth of the world to assemble four years from now in (the next Olympic city).” When assessing Rio, these words are important to keep in mind. It is not the people in suits, journalists, sponsors or celebrities who are called upon to assemble—it is the youth of the world. And the youth of the world gave us all some performances for the ages. The youth of Brazil also provided tremendous energy and cultural flavor in and around the competition. The Opening Ceremony dancers were constantly moving, not only for the hour of their performance but also for the two

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hours after that during the parade of nations. The dancers at the beach volleyball venue would come from underneath the stands after most points, perform for 10 seconds and run back under the stands while the point was being played. Try doing that for two hours straight.

Would I have had a more hassle-free experience had the Olympics been somewhere other than Rio? Probably. But the fact is that an Olympics was organized on South American soil for the first time, thereby adding a new continent of people to have played host to the global Olympic family. Indeed it is only the third time that the Olympics have been held in the Southern Hemisphere. There are physical legacies and cultural/emotional/spiritual legacies, and the full legacy of Rio 2016 will not be known for some time. Will the venues become inspirational and iconic or will they become white elephants? (Sadly the beach volleyball stadium was only temporary.) Will the youth of Brazil and all of South America be more inspired by the fact that the Olympics were staged on their soil? What is clear right now is that the youth of the world—the ones who matter most—sembled peacefully, competed admirably and had a very good time. That is enough to offset all pre-Olympics cynicism and angst. ■

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