



Gay Games

by Jim Buzinski

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A promotional piece for the first Gay Games, then called the Gay Olympic Games, in 1982. Courtesy Federation of Gay Games.

The Gay Games is a quadrennial sporting and cultural event designed for the gay and lesbian community. The brainchild of former Olympic decathlete Tom Waddell, the Games were first held in San Francisco in 1982. Some 1,300 athletes participated in the first competition. Since then, the event has become a lucrative attraction that cities bid for the privilege of hosting. The Games pump millions of dollars into the host city's local economy.

Waddell had originally intended to call the competition the Gay Olympics, but nineteen days before the start of the first games the United States Olympic Committee obtained a restraining order, forbidding the use of that name.

The USOC asserted that it had sole rights to use the name *Olympics*. Waddell, noting that the USOC had raised no objections to other competitions using the name, told *Sports Illustrated*: "The bottom line is that if I'm a rat, a crab, a copying machine or an Armenian I can have my own Olympics. If I'm gay, I can't."

Waddell, who died from complications of AIDS in 1987, conceived the Games as a means of promoting the spirit of inclusion and healthy competition in athletics. As his biographer Dick Schaap explains, "Tom wanted to emphasize that gay men were men, not that they were gay, and that lesbian women were women, not that they were lesbians. He didn't want them to lose their homosexual identity, or hide it; he just didn't want them to be dominated by it, pigeonholed by it."

Since their inception there have been no barriers to entry for anyone wanting to compete. Although the traditional gold, silver, and bronze medals are awarded, no one must "qualify" in his or her sport in order to participate. Moreover, the Games has its share of heterosexual athletes competing, albeit their number is small and they usually participate as team members rather than as individuals.

The Games began a major period of growth when they were hosted in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1990, their first appearance outside of San Francisco. The number of registered athletes jumped almost threefold from 3,500 in 1986 to 9,500 in 1990, with participants coming from 39 countries.

Brian Pronger describes the Games in Vancouver movingly: "It was an almost magic time, during which intensely happy, healthy lesbians and gay men came together and delighted in their lives and being together The joyful spirit of the game overwhelmed much of the anxiety of the competition."

The 1994 Games in New York City coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, a turning point in the gay rights struggle. With nearly 11,000 athletes, the Games had more participants than would compete in the 1996 Summer Olympics. By now the event had become more mainstream, with politicians and celebrities on hand for the opening and closing ceremonies, and events scheduled for such major venues as Yankee Stadium.

The Games broke away from their North American roots in 1998, when they were hosted by Amsterdam.

The 30 official sports (22 determined by the Federation of Gay Games and eight selected to reflect local interest) had 14,700 athletes, 42% of them women.

The crowd at the track and field venue cheered wildly during the women's pole vault competition, when a Dutch athlete set a new national record in the event. In previous Games, recognized records had been posted in swimming events.

The 2002 Games were awarded by the Federation to Sydney, Australia, which used many of the venues from the 2000 Summer Olympics.

Gay Games VII, scheduled for 2006, were originally awarded to Montreal, but after some bitter disagreements between the Federation of Gay Games and the Montreal host committee, the 2006 Games were shifted to Chicago. Without the sanction of the Federation of Gay Games, the Montreal games proceeded as the first of the Outgames.

Cologne hosted the 2010 Gay Games. Future Gay Games are scheduled for Cleveland and Akron in 2014 and Paris in 2018.

Tom Waddell did not live long enough to see the Games become an international phenomenon that cities compete to host and that attract more participants than the Olympics. But he would undoubtedly have been pleased with the realization of his dream, especially of the pride that the Games engender in gay and lesbian athletes.

During the 1994 Games a *New York Times* editorial concluded: "Many participants found the experience profoundly liberating, a mass statement that their movement had arrived and could never be shoved back into the closet. As one organizer said, 'We will never turn back. We will never be invisible again.'"

Bibliography

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About the Author

Jim Buzinski is CEO and Publisher of www.outsports.com, a web site devoted to gay sports fans and athletes. Buzinski was the sports editor of the Long Beach *Press-Telegram*, and has served on the board of the Gay and Lesbian Sports Alliance of Greater Los Angeles since its inception in 1991.