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The Mormons, The Olympics, the Fans, and the Venues

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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(Third in a series of impressions
from the Winter Games)

The opportunity to attend the Winter Olympics was something I never really thought I would have, but due to a number of coincidental circumstances and the generosity of friends I was able to attend the first ten days of the games.

It had been a long time since I was in Salt Lake City other than to change planes to or from Calgary, Los Angeles, San Francisco or some other seat of high culture. We did miss a connection a few years ago and were forced to spend a night in a decaying Holiday Inn. Other than that my memories of Salt Lake City go back to about age ten and the only thing I remember from that visit is the heat and the cleanliness.

So it was with much anticipation that I headed back into the seat of Mormonism in America to have yet another cross-cultural experience. I even wondered if I would need my passport to enter this land apart, peopled by those who had once been attacked, killed and otherwise harassed by their fellow Americans.

I need not have been concerned. For all surface appearances Salt Lake City is pretty much like other American cities, albeit still marked by cleanliness. It has its street people, its crime, its topless bars, and air pollution that the locals describe as an inversion rather than pollution. This is similar to Florida residents who try to put the best face on cockroaches by calling them Palmetto Bugs.

There was some concern about these games becoming the Mormon Olympics but indeed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made a conscious decision a year ago not to use the games to spread its message. And they did not. Mormonism only surfaced as an issue once and that was when a Denver sportswriter wrote a scathing column about the Mormons and accused them of hijacking the games. He reported, among other things, that there was street corner proselytizing. Had he looked at the literature he would have found these efforts came from fringe evangelical groups who seemed to be everywhere. The Mormon Church issued an angry response and asked for and got a retraction from the Denver Post.

The Mormons were part of the "pin culture" at the games with one pin being a keg of 3.2 beer and another being a bowl of green Jell-O and an ice cream cone. The most valued pin was the one of a large bowl of green (lime) Jell-O. To locals this was a kind of in-joke, as it is said that every Mormon picnic and potluck dinner will find a large supply of lime Jell-O and ice cream. This pin was selling for \$150 by the end of the first week of the games. We saw another pin, which I can't believe I did not buy, showing two young men in white shirt, tie and dark pants riding bicycles, another obvious reference to Mormon missionaries.

Beyond that the Mormons were in low profile. The Temple was open for visitors, the Choir played at a number of venues, and Mormon converts from outside the U.S. served as greeters at the airport for international visitors. A number of Mormon young people who had been on mission abroad served as translators for sport and journalism delegations from around the world.

Other local cultural attractions were the beers. St. Provo Girl is a fine ale. Polygamy Porter is a good beer with an excellent marketing plan. "Why Have Just One," and "Take Some Home to the Wives" played nicely on the Mormon underground culture.

One of the big hits and great surprises of the games were the nightly medal ceremonies held in the Olympic Plaza. Tickets were free but distributed in advance of the games with about 20,000 seats available for each night. A free concert preceded and followed each of the ceremonies and the talent pool was deep. Big name groups from the pop and country world appeared each night and we drew "Bare Naked Ladies" on our night to attend. The enthusiasm of the crowd at these ceremonies, as well as the enthusiasm of the athletes, was contagious.

The biggest fad of the Olympics turned out to be the Roots Beret worn by the American athletes. It became "the must have" item as people lined up for from three to seven hours at the Roots outlets in the mall near downtown and at the Roots store. This Canadian company founded in 1973 in Toronto supplied the clothing to the U.S., British, and Canadian teams and secured the contract with the U.S. by default. They have cashed in big. The walk-in traffic in Roots stores across the U.S. has skyrocketed and the company was selling 20,000 of the berets each day. If you

buy them at the web site there is a limit of 50 per customer and there is a four to six week wait for delivery.

This Olympics, like most public events, attracted a large number of face painters and people in various costumes from across the world. I saw a Russian wearing all white, draped in a Russian Flag, carrying a Russian flag, and with Russian flags painted on his face. There were two American women at the cross-country venue wearing red, white and blue top hats with Mickey Mouse Ears who had flags painted on their faces. I saw a German fan wearing a hat with a German, American, and Olympic flag on it as well as a snowman on skis. There were two Elvis impersonators at the ski jumping venue, and people in all sorts of hats with spikes and ornaments in their country's colors. There were people in a variety of national costumes and there were Canadians wearing a red toque in the form of a Maple Leaf. There were people from all around the world draped in their national flags and indeed the flag concession must have been a lucrative business in Salt Lake City.

As to the team clothing the Canadians as always had the best overall wardrobe, the American blue beret was a hit, and the German jackets were very attractive, as were those of the Russians, Swedes, and Finns. However the award for most memorable item in my mind goes to the Swiss whose full length top coat of glittering silver with the red lining was the Eye Catcher of the Games. Everywhere they went the Swiss looked like they were in full sloop and threatening to take off into the night sky.

These games will also be remembered for the security that was everywhere. Surveillance cameras swept the streets and all the interior locations. There were long lines for security checks at every venue and at a number of other locations. This could be most irritating when it moved slowly and a cold wind was blowing, but for the most part it was accepted as part of the event.

Scalpers were everywhere and there seemed to be no problem getting tickets for events if you were willing to pay the price. In some cases that could be high, especially when face value would start the price at as much as \$800. On the other hand at some venues tickets could be had for half-price. The free market was at work.

It was also at work in some restaurants, hotels and resorts, where prices doubled and tripled for the games. The most interesting wrinkle we saw in this regard came at a downtown restaurant one evening when the owner approached the table and asked if we were from Salt Lake City. Our hosts were and the owner told them he would charge us pre-Olympic prices for our dinner.

Another excellent feature of the games was the Cultural Olympics, a series of public cultural events taking place before and throughout the fortnight of the games. We attended a few of these including a marvelous exhibit of the work of "glass sculpture" by Dale Chihuly. We went to a photographic exhibition on women's sport at the University of Utah that was of very high quality. Then there was the evening of song and poetry titled, "Why the Cowboy Sings." I was fearful of what this might be, but in fact it turned out to be a delightful evening of poetry and song by writers and singers from Texas, Montana, Nevada, Arizona and Arkansas. Among those featured was an Indian Cowboy, Henry Real Bird from the Crow Reservation in Montana. As an American cultural experience it must have been quite extraordinary for visitors from abroad.

For me one of the highlights of the cultural events was Discover Navajo. Here there were Navaho Code Takers, weavers, and other exhibits highlighting Navaho culture. The most stunning thing was a young woman who was working on a basket featuring an artistic set of patterns showing multiple Olympic and Navaho symbols and depicting a number of events which appeared inter-changeably depending on your angle of vision. Outside the exhibit hall there were a number of impressive pieces of Navaho sculpture by Allan Houser.

These are some of the many events, happenings, and atmosphere available at the Olympics which may not make it to television and which made the experience of these Winter Games a memorable one.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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