

The Athletes' Village

by Helmut Digel

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Against the background of personal experience the author describes the important function of the athletes' villages during major competitions.

He stresses that elite sporting events can be an important multicultural occasion which becomes more important with increasing globalisation. Athletes' villages offer a better justification for holding international sporting events than the competitions themselves.

With athletes' villages multicultural learning processes can get started and profound ideas for life can be discovered.

The author recommends to maintain athletes' villages, to uphold a link between elite sports orientating towards the free market and elite sports with a public legitimacy.

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Initially, I am faced with another Japanese pictograph which is too hard to decipher for a German who does not speak this demanding language. To my relief, two words in English on the same poster do help in this case as they say 'Athletes Village'.

Finally I have found the entrance to the athletes' village at the Universiade in Kobe. On both the left and the right hand side of this entrance, you see barbed wire and enormous fences. The entrance looks like a control station at the airport where unwanted foreigners, possible terrorists and assassins are prevented from entering. Everyone is subjected to a body check, an identity check, a check on documents and a check on luggage.

It would be called a high security station if it were the entrance to a prison. But here, young people from more than 100 nations are passing through, young men and women, coaches and administrators wearing colourful casual dress and carrying modern suitcases and sport bags with artistic decor. The national colours passing the gate could be readily identified, if only one knew them all.

Finally the checks are behind me, and ahead of me is a labyrinth of buildings. Passing by the nations' 'flag square', accompanied by a Japanese hostess who speaks hardly any German, the way leads past numerous high buildings until I reach the house where the German team will live for a few weeks. After the Universiade, the athletes' village will be transformed into a small residential area in Kobe with blocks of flats housing 3-5 families. Soon, they will be put up for sale.

During the next 21 days, however, the building where the German team is living will have a completely different function.

More than 100 young men and women will live closely together with their officials, coaches, physiotherapists and physicians from 6.30 in the morning, when they are briefed on the day, until midnight when the previous day will be analysed. Parts of the house smell of massage oil and medicine, just like in a hospital. Other areas smell like a bistro or a bar. Injury and party time are bed-fellows in this temporary home. Rooms are spartan, beds are improvised, there are no coat hooks, and hangers will be supplied only after several requests and in insufficient number. Tracksuits full of sweat can neither be washed nor dried. Any athlete, regardless of his or her status, is more or less camping in this environment.

I am an official and live in a 4-bedded room. Together with a colleague I share the nocturnal community with two judo athlete

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heavyweights who, being extraordinarily hungry, sleep well. These athletes are capable of relaxing practically anywhere and are always full of beans. It is hot and sultry, not only in the bedroom, but also everywhere in the building. It is a tropical climate here at the Universiade in Kobe. That is the reason why, in the evening, it is better to stay outdoors in front of the building where the national teams have parties which turn into multicultural fiestas during the course of the Universiade.

Some athletes even prefer to sleep outside the building on the lawn, especially if they get to know someone interesting, preferably someone coming from another national team. What is an opportunity for some, is a misfortune for others of course. Those athletes, who have competed during the first few days of the Universiade, now enjoy meeting other athletes, having parties and

visiting the country. Athletes who still have to compete during the last few days of the Universiade are less fortunate. After a series of sleepless nights it is much more difficult for them to get motivated to compete.

Such problems inevitably cause conflicts which are discussed by the team manage-

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ment. The good atmosphere in the team, however, has not been affected. Track and field athletes meet volleyball players, gymnasts are talking with judokas. Friendships which will last for a long time start here. Even love at first sight strikes here, leading to marriage later on. There are hilarious parties, where in particular, the heavyweights impress us by their thirst. As the days go by, the multicultural character of the athletes' village becomes more and more predominant. Its centre is the dining hall, the place where tons of foodstuffs are handled from early in the morning until late in the night. In this domain, too, the Japanese hosts show their special talent for organisation and their sense of beauty. More than 4000 athletes enjoy an appetising breakfast, a colourful lunch and a dinner whose variety is difficult to surpass.

The dining hall marquee is decorated with the flags of the nations, and works of art from all over the world are displayed. But above all, guests have the chance to have a look at Japanese culture which is strange to most of them. At meal times you can observe all the different table manners from around the world. The hosts have thought of Muslims as well as Hindus and nutrition experts have provided the diets top athletes need for excellent performances. There is almost no shy athlete as far as meals are concerned. Enormous amounts of pasta are consumed, the desserts, too, are in great demand and several hammer throwers can-

not resist returning to the buffet for a second time.

Every evening, the square in front of the dining hall turns into an international discotheque. American pop songs are very much adored and rock 'n' roll acts as a means of mutual understanding. Sometimes you can listen to less well known music, such as Japanese folk music. There are also theatrical or pantomime performances, or even ballets which all contribute to the cultural programme of the athletes' village. The athletes' village is also a market place offering a wide range of products, from sporting drinks, T-shirts, commemorative towels, pins and stamps to the whole variety of Japanese souvenirs. It is the elixir of life for all those living there, but also for those who are allowed to enter the village as visitors.

Admission to the athletes' village is very sought after. Only selected journalists get

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the special accreditation required. Officials living outside the athletes' village in the big hotels of the city, appear every now and again within the village. It seems as if they, too, enjoy the refreshing ambience. The president of the international organisation that is responsible for the Universiade visits the village for half a day. He has his lunch in the dining hall to demonstrate the bonds of friendship between the athletes and himself. Life in an athletes' village can neither be expressed in words, or in pictures. Only living there together with athletes can make you appreciate and understand what it means.

Since the Universiade in Kobe, I have had the good fortune to attend many international major events: the Universiades of Sheffield, Buffalo, and Catania, the World Championships in Athletics in Stuttgart, Gothenburg and Athens. But above all, it was during the Olympic Games in Atlanta,

that I witnessed the special importance of an athletes' village. Today, there are more and more international major events which have no athletes' village at all due to financial reasons. For athletics this was the case at the World Championships in Athens, the European Indoor Championships in Valencia, at the World Cup in London and this will also be the case at the 1999 World Championships in Seville.

Athletes' villages differ quite a lot from each other. At Stuttgart in 1993, the accommodation was very spartan. A combination of fine weather, top class cuisine, a sophisticated international cultural and entertaining programme and in particular the athletes themselves ensured the success of the village. In Gothenburg the athletes' village was much less comfortable, however, an ideal leisure centre, appropriate accommodation and sufficient provision of what was needed produced the same effect.

I think the athletes' village in Atlanta represented an improvement in many aspects. However, the rooms for the athletes were not very spacious. They were designed as single rooms for American College students, but German athletes had to share the room with a teammate. The athletes' village had its own transport system, and small electric cars made it easy to cover the distances involved in travelling around.

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Training facilities were nearby and the programme for leisure was more evidence of why, for a long time, Hollywood and Walt Disney have become synonymous with the United States. Every day there was another star visiting the village. Athletes could shake hands with Mohammed Ali or Arnold Schwarzenegger. Hillary Clinton was there too, and so was Al Gore. Every day there were hundreds of visitors queuing up for ay

day passes. Day by day, thousands of individuals had to subject themselves to a control system whose precision could hardly be surpassed. Even the handprint was stored on computer and a decoder opened closed doors without making any noise.

It was no surprise that McDonald's and Coca Cola were present in the dining halls. I imagine that never before had athletes drunk as many soft drinks free of charge as during their time in Atlanta. Hamburgers too, in any variety, were very popular. American ice-cream, any kind of fruit and last but not least, a great deal of beef, fish, pasta and potatoes were served around the clock. All this, in an environment of modern architecture, plazas full of art and music, a unique gambling centre, an internet café and a colourful American supermarket. Everything was twice as big as it was in Kobe; more modern, more comfortable, more

strident and more glamorous. However, these dimensions caused problems and perfection has its own price. Athletes were, on the whole, restricted by the fact that their own building was far away from that of their competitors. Meeting each other was a mere product of chance, influenced by the allocation of lodgings to the various nations.

The experiences I had in Atlanta belong to the standpoint of a visitor, whereas in Kobe I was an integral member of the village. My almost daily visits to the village in Atlanta allowed just limited looks at the reality of the Olympic Village. Athletes, coaches and team management ought to be interviewed as to what it was like to live there. For me personally, the Olympic Village in Atlanta was a fascinating world where I could be in touch with the multicultural youth in our world. In Atlanta, people of different colours and beliefs could meet each other in a way not possible anywhere else in the world.

It seems reasonable to ask what sense it makes to write a sociological article on the

importance of athletes' villages at major sporting events. In my opinion, quite often athletes' villages offer a better justification for holding international sporting events than the competitions themselves. The ideological discussion about elite sports is often marked either by euphoric support or radical refusal. In the history of major sporting events, sports politicians and officials in particular, have often exaggerated the international aspect, the peace making impact of such events and more than once, they have overdone these features under the cloak of legitimacy. However, the very frequency of such statements served to bring about a loss in credibility.

Critics are no less sweeping in their judgements. They hardly recognise the pluralism of elite sport. In general they think that elite sport has an affirmative function, which is partly threatening democracy. The

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professionalism and commercialisation of international sport during the last few years has been portrayed as a fatal curse with the consequence that today's sports gladiators will vanish like the Roman Empire. Neither the purely positive nor the purely negative judgement on elite sport, as witnessed today, matches up with the athletes concerned. It does not respect the multifold differences between the disciplines and sporting events.

My experiences bring me to the conclusion that elite sporting events can be, now, just as much as in the past, an important multicultural occasion and these opportunities become more and more frequent and important with increasing globalisation. International competition is not only an avenue for athletes to encounter unique experiences, but it also enables them to gain an insight into the personal and social identities of other people. Multicultural learning processes can get started and profound ideas for life can be discovered.

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WITH COMPLIMENTS

The question of whether sport will be able to succeed in providing this, depends closely on its framework. Intercultural learning is possible if there are places to do so, if there is enough time to do so, if organisations make it easier for young people to meet each other and if the system of elite sport grants offer a zone of protection where spontaneity and creativity can be fostered. It will be impossible at major sporting events where athletes are only present for a short time, in most cases two days before the competition, living in a five-star hotel, driven to the stadium by a VIP car and where they have to fulfil their promotional obligations immediately after their competition.

In Athens, where teams were accommodated in different hotels, athletes missed the many experiences and learning possibilities Stuttgart and Gothenburg had offered previously. Seville 1999 will be marked by similar deficiencies.

If my observations and judgements are accepted, this sociological argument leads to the recommendation for everyone involved in the organisation of elite sport that, in future, a great deal has to be done for providing the right framework for the benefit of athletes. Communication is also needed badly for sport's legitimacy. Elite sports orientating towards market forces,

elite sports with athletes who, as private entrepreneurs, enter into a purely commercial operation in selling their sporting performance will have a future without any doubt. However, from a socio-political point of view, such sport would have merely an economic justification. In this case, the traditional support by communities and government still common in Germany and elsewhere, could no longer be granted.

Anyone who knows how fragile the merchandise of elite sport is, who knows the risky quality of top performances on the international sports market, will be aware of the multi faceted support that is needed to bring athletes to the top.

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Elite sports working on a free market basis should never be accepted within the organisation of the Olympic Games. Such sport would be in many aspects a fatal caricature of the original idea of sport. This is the reason why it is so important to uphold a link between elite sports orientating towards the free market and elite sports with a public legitimacy. The provision of Olympic Villages and athletes' villages at other international sporting events will contribute to the stability of this link and it is vital they are not sacrificed on the altar of financial or political expediency

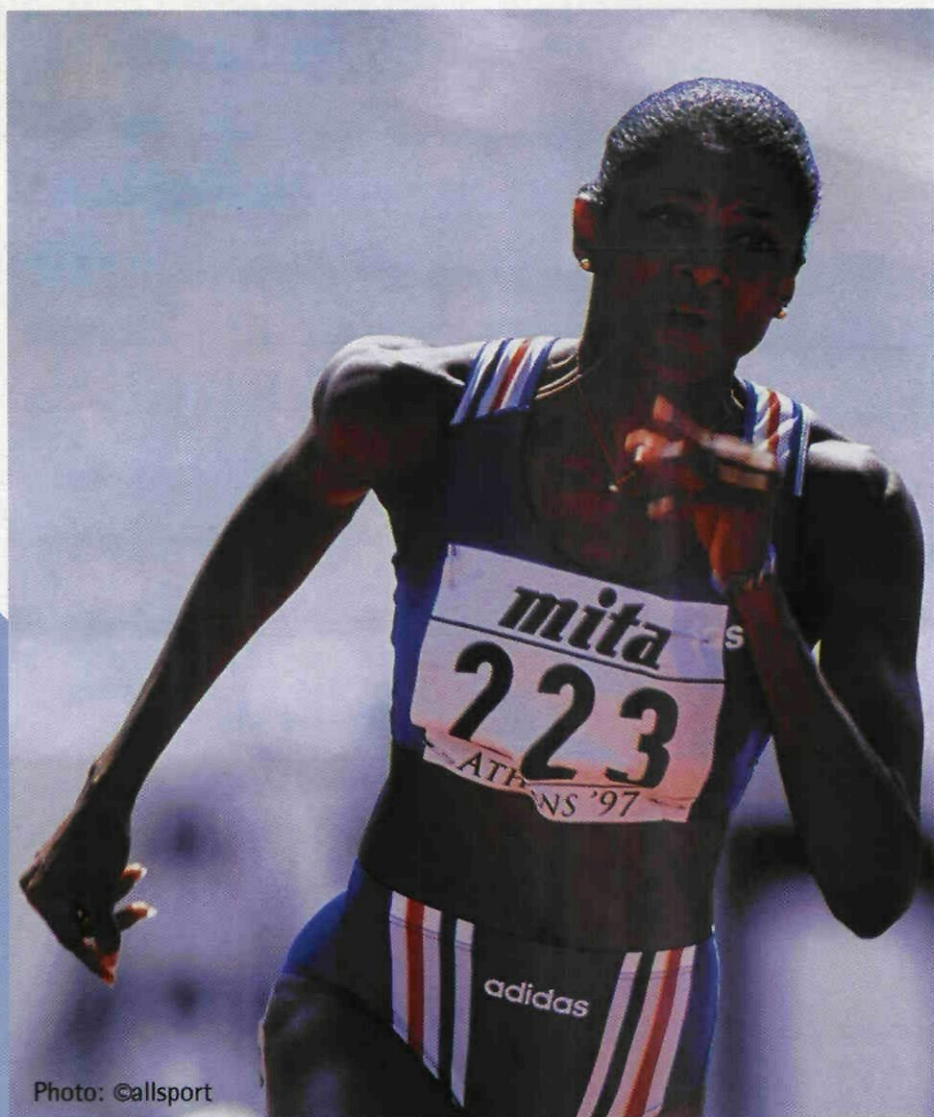


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