

Olympic Memories not to be Forgotten!

By Olympic Champion Ben Peterson

#71

The final days and hours leading up to the Olympic Games can have elements of intensity and relaxation. Details of team representation, training, friendships and foreign travel all overlap with each other.

For many decades the US Olympic Committee has made things special for our athletes. By the 1972 Munich XXth Olympic Games they knew how to outfit a team. It took most of 3 days in Washington D.C. to fit 600+ athletes and coaches. Sears, Roebuck & Co was the supplier and they did a great job. We were all given multi-sets of warm-ups, workout gear, parade uniforms and a suit to look our best whatever the occasion. A camera from Kodak and several other items were supplied to each team member. We were ready to be competitors with a little sight-seeing. We literally needed little, if any, of our own items. I believe they had us send most of our own things back home.

Arriving in Munich by charter flights, coaches gave us time to settle into a 10th floor apartment of the completely new Olympic Village. It was a designer's dream in some ways, but my architectural background would have to wait. Coach Bill Farrell was calling us to practice.

Since we were competing the first 5 days of the Games, we arrived a full week ahead to get acclimated. Daily we took a bus to a wrestling training facility. It was sharp, new, very adequate and foreign-looking. The Olympic Village has a façade look in many ways. All buildings are either brand new or they are given a complete facelift to take on the Olympic theme.

It was my first time out of the US. The many languages and people were so diverse and yet so alike. I think the strangeness of everything worked to our advantage. Being the youngster of our team, I let others try to communicate. It was interesting. They used signs, repetitions, guessing and a lot of laughing to communicate in the new languages and culture.

Coaches were calling us to focus, so I avoided tourism and peaked my training one more time. John, Gable and I worked hard right up to opening day. Assistant Coach Jim Peckham told me later he felt we were over working the last few days. He was probably right, but being 22 my recovery time was quite short. In future years, I would fight the need to rest more before an event. In Munich my greatest asset would be to outwork and out scramble the older more experienced foreign wrestlers.

The village provided short moments of diversion. The dining hall had the best food of every kind all day and much of the night. They were serving hard working young athletes from every culture and they were ready. It was hard for some not to over indulge.

Wherever we went Dan Gable brought respect and even fear from foreign athletes. Our entire team was well known in American wrestling circles. But at the Olympics, Gable was mostly the one others knew as our superstar. He drew the press on numerous occasions. In America he would be cornered and interviewed more than he thought best for his training. But as always he paused to answer the questions as he headed to finalize his preparation.

Our 400# super heavyweight Chris Taylor brought out the cameras. He was by far the biggest athlete in the Games. Everyone was in awe and wondered if he could move and adjust on the mat. Chris was a jovial, fun-loving, energetic man who loved being the comedian with our team and the fans. So the attention was fine at first but did begin to exhaust him.

The size of Chris Taylor had almost become commonplace to me. I had spent 18 months training with him. I had learned how to fatigue him, take him down and even turn him for the fall. Chris was my teammate at Iowa State University and my good friend. A day or two before we were to begin

competition we were kidding around in our Olympic Village apartment. I kidded him about his size as I punched him in the stomach. He told me “Don’t do that, Ben.” He tightened up his stomach muscles and I felt the bands of “steel” that made it possible for him to move all that weight so smoothly. Well, I guess I was feeling rather confident and kept punching him from the side. As I got to his shoulder he repeated again, “Ben, don’t do that!” With competition coming soon I must have been ready to compete, so I didn’t listen. The next thing I knew, Chris took a little hop, leaned and put a right foot karate kick to my face. I was amazed, startled and in awe as I blinked expecting to be kicked in the face. As my eyes opened, his foot was back bouncing on the floor. With a stern grin he said again, “Don’t do that, Ben.” I apologized profusely and assured him I would not punch him in jest again. I was in awe. If he had not been a controlled, disciplined athlete he would have killed me. Instead, his agility and pace was like play. I have never been able to do a kick like that in my life. Such events deepen and can even define a friendship. Chris’s control took my untimely mocking and deflected it. We respected each other in new ways from that experience.

Various newspaper writers set up interviews. John and I spoke of speaking of our faith in Jesus Christ, but both of us were shy and wondered how it could be appropriately stated. God met our shy desire by having them quote a previous article written in a New York paper. They asked, “What is this all about, that you are in Munich to win gold medals for America and tell people about God?” With that question, it was easy to tell of our trusting Christ as Savior several years earlier. As a result, our faith was written in several major U.S. papers.

The Opening Ceremony is more for the fans than the athletes, especially if you start competition the next day. Gable didn’t want to go, John wanted to rest and I was divided in my thoughts. My memories are that it was long and mostly in other languages. We couldn’t see very much of what was happening. Afterwards I realized we were the site. It was not just about us. I am sad to say that my thoughts of the day were negative enough that 4 years later in Montreal I didn’t go to the Opening Ceremony. I have regretted it ever since, especially since we had several days before wrestling was to begin. What I didn’t realize at the time was the motivational factor that is built into that day. The pageantry can be motivational, patriotic and just plain impressive if you go with a good attitude. I always tell the present team members to relax, enjoy it and soak in the impressive elements for a few hours. Then they can put their mind back to the intensity of the key purpose for being at the Olympic Games - competing at our best and doing all we can to win. Seeing that mass of athletes from around the world reminds me to this day that all men have been made by God, all have physical and social needs and desires that are met by the world God made for us. Also I am reminded that even Olympic Champions are in need of the salvation Jesus Christ has provided.

I have several other memories of course, but these are some key highlights. Another group of athletes are now preparing for the next Olympics and we fans are anticipating the results. There will be many new Olympic memories of facilities, attire, the food, friendships, Opening Ceremonies and more. I wish our next Team the best in winning medals and building good memories on the way! And thank you for reading mine!

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