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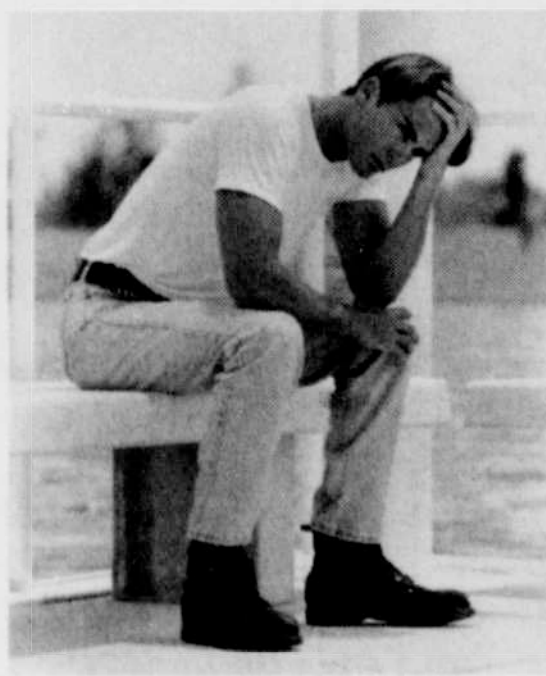
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national news

Action against Olympic torch run

Route through Cobb County rekindles Olympics Out of Cobb movement

by Richard Shumate

Activists who successfully fought to get the 1996 Olympic volleyball competition moved from Cobb County, Ga., because of its anti-sexual-minority resolution are now calling for nationwide protests against the Olympic torch run, which they fear is going through Cobb County in 1996.

Last July, after the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games moved the volleyball venue, the Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition agreed to disband. But co-chairs Jon-Ivan Weaver and Pat Hussain announced on July 28 that they were reviving the group after ACOG President Billy Payne, responding to an Atlanta television reporter's query about whether the torch run would go through Cobb County, responded, "I don't know why everybody thinks we wouldn't do that."

"His statement violates the spirit of the agreement we reached last year. We really feel like we've been kicked in the stomach," Weaver says. "The Olympic torch will not go through Cobb County if we can prevent it."

To that end, the coalition is vowing to organize protests at every stop along the three-month torch run, the longest and most ambitious in Olympic history.

Next April, the flame will arrive in Los Angeles—site of the last American Olympics—from Greece and then be carried across parts of 42 states before entering Atlanta's Olympic Stadium during opening ceremonies on July 19. Cities along the route where festivities are planned include Eugene, Salem and Portland, Ore., and Olympia and Seattle, Wash. It will also go through cities with major gay and lesbian populations including San Francisco; New York; Boston; Washington, D.C.; and Miami.

Weaver says the coalition plans to create a network of organizations in all of the major cities along the route to conduct direct action protests, which could range from infiltrating the ranks of volunteer torch carriers to dousing the flame with water from the sidelines. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's "Creating Change" conference next spring in Detroit will be used as a launching pad, as will pride celebrations next summer in the months before the Atlanta games. The Internet may also be used to organize protesters in smaller cities and towns along the way.

Two years ago, the Cobb County Commission passed a resolution officially denouncing the gay "lifestyle" and opposing any civil rights protections for gay men and lesbians. Since then, the suburban Atlanta county of 400,000 residents has been the target of numerous protests. The decision by ACOG to remove the volleyball venue was the most high-profile victory won by opponents of the resolution. Weaver and Hussain say that, as part of their agreement, ACOG promised not to put any

officially sanctioned Olympic event in Cobb County.

A preliminary map of the torch run's route, released July 21, shows that after entering Georgia at Savannah, and winding its way across the state for 1,800 miles, the Olympic flame will make a two-day circle through Atlanta's suburbs before entering the city. Suburban cities where the torch will travel were listed on that map, and Marietta, the county seat of Cobb—the largest county outside Atlanta's urban core—was suspiciously absent.

However, when asked by WXIA-TV reporter



Carmen Burns if the route would go through Cobb County, Payne's response was "Yeah, it's one of the major population bases." He then chided her for asking the question by terming it "not a very mature inquiry."

"[Payne's] statement violates the spirit of the agreement we reached last year.... The Olympic torch will not go through Cobb County if we can prevent it."

—Jon-Ivan Weaver

However, given Payne's comments, Weaver and Hussain are convinced that ACOG already plans to run the flame through Cobb and is simply delaying the announcement—a tactic similar to what happened during the volleyball fight when ACOG said for months that no decision had been made even though the event site had been announced on national television.

"We're simply not going to wait for ACOG to announce its decision," Weaver says. And unlike the last time around, the coalition won't negotiate with ACOG and attempt to educate Olympic Organizers on why the Cobb route is inappropriate. Unless Olympic organizers definitively announce that the torch won't go through Cobb, they say, organizing for the protests will proceed.

"I think the time for trying to educate ACOG is over," says Hussain.