

ACT UPers invited to descend on Olympics

Torch run protests gear up nationwide, as street activists threaten to take the stage in Atlanta

by Richard Shumate

As the world and the media shift their attention to Atlanta this summer during the 1996 Olympics, the battle for gay and lesbian equality is poised to take a piece of the spotlight.

Organizing efforts are underway for two major gay-related protests. In early February, ACT UP-Atlanta called on its compatriots from around the country to descend on the city during the Olympics for two weeks of "creative" demonstrations. And the Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition is vowing to go through with its threat of nationwide protests of the Olympic torch run if the flame is routed through Cobb County.

"This would be a perfect time to remind the world that the AIDS crisis is not over," says ACT UP-Atlanta's Mona Bennett, who says she is hearing "favorable noises" from groups in other cities. In addition to the AIDS crisis, Bennett says ACT UP members and other street activists may also protest Georgia's sodomy law, the anti-gay-rights resolution passed by commissioners in suburban Cobb County, and even a state law outlawing the sale of sex toys which led to the arrests of 15 people last year.

"The entire world will be looking at Atlanta. And the world needs to see what is going on in the gay and lesbian community in the United States—that we're under attack," says Jon-Ivan Weaver of the Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition.

After months of protest led by the coalition, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games decided in February 1994 to move preliminary Olympic volleyball competition from Cobb County, where county commissioners have passed a resolution saying the "gay lifestyle" was incompatible with Cobb's community standards. Coalition officials say they had an agreement with ACOG not to place any other Olympic-related events in Cobb County.

But last fall, ACOG president Billy Payne indicated in a television interview that the Olympic flame might go through Cobb County, prompting the coalition to call for protests along the entire 42-state, 84-day torch run. ACOG subsequently said that a final torch route through the metropolitan Atlanta area has not been finalized, a position ACOG officials continued to maintain when names of Olympic torch bearers were released on Valentine's Day.

Coalition leaders, however, are operating under the assumption that the torch will go through Cobb.

"I firmly believe that's what they are planning to do. ACOG is just trying to be quiet about it," says Weaver.

The leaders of the coalition have been organizing their protests at national gay and lesbian conferences, including the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change conference last year in Detroit. Weaver and co-chair Pat Hussein have been in touch with groups not only in major gay centers such as San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York, but also with activists in

disparate places such as Phoenix; Rockford, Ill.; Durham, N.C.; and Cheyenne, Wyo.

Special protests are planned in Athens, Ga., home of the University of Georgia, where Payne, an alumnus and former football player, is scheduled to carry the flame.

The torch run begins April 27 in Los Angeles and ends at the opening ceremonies on July 19 in Atlanta. It will go through every state except New Mexico, Montana, the Dakotas, West Virginia, Maine, Alaska and Hawaii.

The torch is scheduled to pass through Eugene and Portland on May 5, and Seattle on May 7.

"There will be a movement [to protest the torch], I'm sure, but right now I don't know how



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large that movement might be," says Mickey Schloss of the Progressive Voters Network in San Francisco, one of the groups that has been in touch with Weaver. "I think it is going to depend on whether someone steps out to lead and how passionate that leadership is."

The coalition is setting no parameters or limits for groups that want to protest and will not attempt to coordinate those protests itself.

"We're telling them to be peaceful and to be creative. We're also suggesting that they attach their own local issues to their protests," Weaver says.

Both Weaver and Bennett reject the argument—coming not only from Olympic boosters but also from within the gay and lesbian community—that injecting political issues into the Games is inappropriate and could backfire with the general public.

"Look at what the Cobb commissioners did. What do we have to lose?" says Weaver. "I don't think people get it as much as they did with the volleyball protest. Some people have said to me, 'John, what do you want?' I want them to stay out of Cobb County."

"Don't say to me that the Olympics aren't political. The Olympics have been political as long as there have been an Olympics," says Bennett, citing the decades-long ban against competition by South Africa and the political rivalries entwined in the games of ancient Greece.

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