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national news

Torched

Gingrich calls the decision to move the Olympic torch relay out of Cobb County, Ga., giving in to "blackmail"

by Richard Shumate

Alarmed by the potential for nationwide protests, organizers of the Atlanta Olympics announced on April 19 that their torch run will not go through Cobb County, the suburban Atlanta county where commissioners have officially condemned the "gay lifestyle."

And while the response of most Cobb County leaders to the news could be described as defiant but low key, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who represents the county in Congress, assailed the decision by the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games.

"I think it is caving in to the blackmail of a handful of extremists," said Gingrich to a phalanx of reporters covering his appearance at a weekend event in his district.

"There is no question about it—we won," says Jon-Ivan Weaver, co-chair of the Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition, which was coordinating the protests. "Cobb County will always be remembered for this. They gave up an Olympic event and now the torch run, all because of this resolution."

In July 1994, ACOG pulled preliminary volleyball competition from Cobb County after five months of protests initiated by the coalition. At issue was an August 1993 resolution passed by the County Commission which states that the "gay lifestyle" is incompatible with community standards.

At the time the volleyball venue was moved, Weaver and Pat Hussain, the other coalition co-chair, thought they had an agreement with ACOG that no other Olympic events would be staged in Cobb County, and they disbanded their group. But ACOG President Billy Payne, asked last summer in a television interview whether the torch would go through Cobb County as it made a planned circle through Atlanta's suburbs, said, "I don't know why everybody thinks we wouldn't do that."

For months afterward ACOG raised suspicions by refusing to release a final route for the torch run in the metro area. So the coalition, revived by Weaver and Hussain, began encouraging groups around the country to target the torch run with "creative" protest. The decision to bypass Cobb County was announced just eight days before the torch was to land in Los Angeles from Greece to begin its 84-day, 15,000-mile journey across 40 states, ending July 19 at the opening ceremonies in Atlanta. Protests were being organized in Los Angeles and other points along the route, with one of the biggest planned for San Francisco in May. ACT UP groups from around the country had also been invited to come to Atlanta for street protests in July.

In the days before ACOG announced that the torch wouldn't go through Cobb County, Weaver said he received calls from officials at both ACOG and Coca-Cola Co., sponsor of the torch run, who wanted to know about protest plans. By the end of

that week, ACOG announced the pullout in a brief, unattributed statement faxed to news organizations—a missive in which the words "gay" or "lesbian" were never mentioned.

"The decision is based on the fact that the Cobb County Commission has not changed its nonbinding resolution since July 1994, when ACOG relocated the preliminary volleyball competition from Cobb County," the statement read. "It is our goal to make the torch run an exciting and memorable experience. We want to focus on the excitement of the event and not be distracted by other issues."

ACOG also timed the press release for a Friday when news outlets were awash in news about a huge, controversial spring break street party in Atlanta called Freaknik and commemorations of the Oklahoma City bombing. But it still made front page news and the top of television newscasts.

While claiming victory, Weaver says he remains frustrated that ACOG still refuses to address the issue of the unfairness of the resolution itself. And he believes there was no need for ACOG to put gay men and lesbians through this controversy a second time.

"They only did this because of the threat of force," says Weaver. "I wish I could be happier about this. But to go through this a second time when it wasn't necessary was very rough."

In their public statements following ACOG's decision, the author of the resolution, Commissioner Gordon Wysong, and Commission Chairman Bill Byrne, who voted for it, said loss of the torch run would not change their positions. The resolution passed by a 4-1 vote, and all four of those commissioners remain in office. But three, including Byrne, are up for election in November.

Ironically, ACOG's capitulation came as the debate was getting louder within Atlanta's gay and lesbian community about the wisdom of protesting the torch run. Rumors swirled that ACOG, with the assistance of some community leaders, was planning to have gay men and lesbians run the torch through Cobb County (a scenario an ACOG spokesman flatly denies). And openly gay Olympic gold medalist Greg Louganis was quoted in a local gay magazine, *Et Cetera*, as saying he wanted to personally run the torch through Cobb County in protest of the resolution.

Weaver and Hussain refused to budge. "When we started this, what we said we wanted was for the Olympics to be out of Cobb. We have never compromised on what we said we wanted. And we won again," Weaver says.

This time, though, despite apparent victory, the Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition won't disband.

"ACOG has given us no reason to trust them," says Weaver. "We are going to keep our eyes on them to make sure nothing else goes into Cobb."



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