

SPORTS

As the sun settled over the final day of the Gay Games VI Sport & Cultural Festival in Sydney, Australia, Team Oregon walked away with something more valuable than gold.

In addition to a rejuvenated spirit of competition and finding success at their respective sports, members left with a sensation of freedom and tolerance at having participated in perhaps the most accepting event for gay men and lesbians on the planet.

"The Games were an amazing experience for all of us," says Jon Palanuk of the men's swimming team. "Sydney outdid itself in making this an efficient, effective, exciting and thrilling experience."

Although some members did take first place in their events, for many the Oct. 25-Nov. 9 festival was less about setting records and racking up medals and more about personal bests.

This certainly held true for the women's basketball players. Despite being plagued with injuries, the team pulled together for a strong finish. Battling its way into the quarterfinals, it was eventually knocked out by the Dutch team Fatal Attraction, which went on to win the silver medal.

"It was a good game, and it could have been a lot worse," player Bec Williams says. "We did very well considering the injuries."



"Just amazing"

Team Oregon finds more than gold at this year's Gay Games

BY COURTNEY PERKINS

One of Williams' best experiences at the Games this year was

when Team Oregon played Chinese Taipei, the first-ever Asian team for women to attend a Gay Games. Even though Team Oregon won handily, Taipei became their biggest fans and came out to support them in other games.

Team Oregon decided to return the favor. "They were so happy to just be there and enjoyed playing so much that it reminded us that there was something bigger than winning," Williams remarks.

The newest member of Team Oregon, golfer Matt Fraser, also relished in the sportsmanship of the

Games. The Portlander placed fourth overall in the Men's A

individual competition and captained the gold medal team in the group event.

In group golfing, a person from each division is teamed up with three other people to form a four-person mixed team. Each is then handicapped based on golfing ability. Fraser partnered with guys from Grand Rapids, Mich., and San Diego along with a woman from Amsterdam to take the tournament.

"It was a wonderful, wonderful week," exclaims Fraser. "The best of my life, really." (Rumor has it this could be due in part to Fraser meeting a super-cute Aussie, but who believes these things?)

Aside from the sports events themselves, members of Team Oregon marveled at the all-encompassing atmosphere of the Games and Sydney.

"People don't realize that this has been a very American-centric event," asserts Fraser. "The gay

people in Australia seemed amazed at the size of this event. Everyone in the community was like, 'Wow, this has been kind of a well-kept secret.'"

Williams was also taken aback by the friendly environment. "I never knew how oppressed I was until I spent a week without being oppressed," she says. "Even all the mom-and-pop stores were selling Gay Games memorabilia like hats and pins. Sydney was just amazing."

Many who have experienced this relatively untapped, spectacular gala have decided they won't miss the next event for anything. "For sure I'm not going to miss another Gay Games," insists Williams. "Even if I'm not playing, I'm going. It was a life-changing experience."

In other notable Team Oregon finishes, powerlifter Sue Gill of Eugene, who battled breast cancer after the 1998 Games, struck gold for the third time, winning the Masters II division for women 50 and older in her respective weight class.

Sara Wiener of Bend decided her silver from the '98 Games in sprint triathlon wasn't good enough and upped it to gold in Sydney. Her partner, Joanne Richter, who won bronze in the Olympic distance triathlon in '98, won a silver this year in the classic triathlon and a gold in the 15-kilometer individual cycling time trials.

Additionally, tennis partners Tom Barreto and Brian Sinclair of Portland had a solid showing. In the Men's Open Singles division, Barreto made it to the round of 32, while Sinclair blasted his way into the sweet 16. The two also teamed up in Men's Open Doubles, making it to the round of 16.

In men's swimming, Palanuk noted that while he finished 12th out of more than 170 competitors in the 50-meter freestyle, teammate Chris Gaarder placed ninth out of more than 150 contestants in the 100-meter breaststroke. ■

GAY GAMES VII: MONTREAL RENDEZ-VOUS 2006 is July 29 to Aug. 5, 2006, in Montreal (a little closer than Australia!). For more information visit www.montreal2006.org or www.teamoregonusa.com.

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Many happy Team Oregon revelers settle in one place during Gay Games VI. Sue Gill (far right, seated) won her third gold medal in powerlifting.

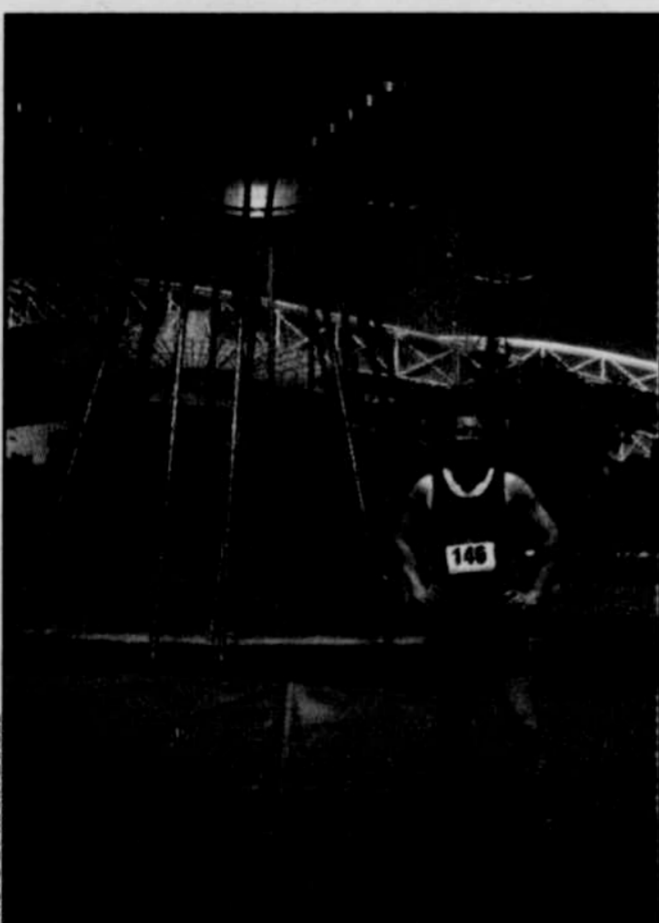
Sydney, Australia, brought the Gay Games "Under New Skies" as it treated 13,000 participants from more than 80 countries to a festival of sport, culture and celebration unprecedented in its size and energy.

Gay Games VI kicked off with an opening ceremony full of camp, laughter, tears and international unity. About 40,000 people cheered as athletes from all corners of the world paraded into Aussie Stadium to a megamix of the hottest club music flanked by leather-clad bad boys and dykes on bikes.

In the most gorgeous display of absurdity, a frenzy of pink and white pompoms billowing from every seat catapulted the spirit of the evening from fantastic to fabulous.

There were moments of gay pride that exploded into something so much bigger and more significant: the overwhelming ovation, for instance, that the crowd gave the sole Team Iraq athlete; Team USA shouting "U.K.! U.K.! U.K.!" as Team United Kingdom marched by (and vice versa); or when Teams India and Pakistan bucked tradition, political enmity and the alphabet to march together. Moments like these elevated the Games to a realm of pride, love and camaraderie beyond imagination.

An extravaganza of fireworks, glitter, drag queens and cheerleaders decorated the stadium floor throughout the evening, and a parade of dancers and musicians, including headliners Jimmy Somerville and k.d. lang, graced the stage and the microphone with melodies of "Struggle, Remembrance, Acceptance and Celebration"—the ceremony's themes.



These performances were only outdone by Justice Michael Kirby, an openly gay member of the Australian High Court, who gave a rousing speech on human dignity. His remarks summed up the significance of the Games: "Let the word go out from Sydney and the Gay Games of 2002 that the movement for equality is unstoppable. Its message will eventually reach the four corners of the world. The Games will be another

Under new skies

Team Oregon runner says there's no place like the Gay Games

BY MICHAEL BARRETT

catalyst to help make that happen. Be sure that, in the end, inclusion will replace exclusion."

A full week of athletic events celebrated the official Gay Games themes of "participation, inclusion and personal best." Events ranged from traditional Olympic sports such as track and field, wrestling and swimming to ballroom dancing, aerobics and physique.

Altogether, athletes participated in 31 sports at more than 40 venues in and around the city, with many taking place at Sydney Olympic Park, the heart of the 2000 Olympic Games. Team Oregon boasted more than 60 triathletes, swimmers, volleyballers and others who played hard and looked good doing it, had great fun and, in some cases, won a few medals.

It wasn't all about sports, however. A two-week cultural festival brought artists, musicians, activists and great minds from throughout the world to Sydney to show off their talents in diverse events like "Sing Out," "Writing for Performance," "Tournament of the Minds:

Bridge and Chess," "Mellow Drama" and "Draw Inspiration."

No medals were offered in the unofficial sport of partying, but had there been, yours truly would have been a contender for the gold. Five official Gay Games parties spanned the week, beginning with "Welcome!" followed the next day by "Sunset" on the harbor. The highlight for women was "Burch!," which revved up a crowd of 8,000 at a dykefest like no other, and 10,000 horny, sweaty men braved the famed "Black Party," where shirts were practically forbidden and pants were at times an anomaly.

More than 20,000 Gay Games revelers and their Sydney hosts had one last chance to shake their booties to the grooves of Kylie Minogue and other Aussie club hits at "Farewell!" after the closing ceremonies.

History will remember Gay Games VI as a brilliant success. It harnessed all the beauty that the worldwide sexual minorities community possesses and put it on display for one grand week in which the spirit of healthy competition flourished, milestones were achieved, and happiness reigned.

The Gay Games, which began in San Francisco 20 years ago, are open to people of all backgrounds, ability levels and sexual orientations—literally everyone is welcome to participate. 2002 veterans already have Montreal on their calendars for 2006, and you should, too! ■

MICHAEL BARRETT is vacationing in Queensland (how appropriate) before returning to Portland to begin training for Gay Games VII.