The spirit of the games

Impressions of interpreting at the Sydney Olympic Games.

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The Olympics have come and gone. Sydney is back to normal and interpreters from this part of the world who worked during the games now have a chance to evaluate the "Interpreting Spirit" of the games.

The role of the team of interpreters

"The important thing in the Olympic Games is not the winning but taking part"

More than 60 professional conference interpreters, some 70 consecutive interpreters and literally hundreds of volunteer language assistants made up the interpreting team taking the field in Sydney. The conference interpreters covered 27 languages at post medal-round press conferences, press conferences at the Main Press Centre, prearranged conferences and congresses of the International Olympic Committee, meetings of the IOC Medical Commission, the International Sports Federations and other official bodies, Chefs de Mission meetings at the Olympic Village and other ad hoc press conferences and meetings as necessary and possible.

The type of service provided at the different venues - simultaneous or consecutive - depended on both the languages required and the venue itself.

Preparing for the Games

"Interpreters must have a sea of knowledge one inch deep, or preferably one fathom deep"

The interpreters' work started well before boarding a plane to Sydney. They had to become familiar with the rules and regulations of the various Olympic sports to begin. And from there they had to gain close familiarity with all aspects of the sports - previous medal winners, this year's favourites, athletes' bio-data, etc. Much information was available on the websites of the international sports federations, but reading other publications and watching sporting events were also part of the "training". We had to master the ins and out of 28 different sports and over 400 different disciplines within those sports. From the rules of Olympic Basketball to the point scoring system of Synchronised Swimming, the interpreters had that "one-fathom-deep" knowledge of every sport stored in their passive memory and, when called upon to interpret, they transferred the information to their active memory for the duration of the specific assignment.

Working during the games

"If you want to know the mind of a man, listen to his words"

The team of professional conference interpreters was made up of colleagues who had previously
worked at Olympic Games (Los Angeles, Seoul, Barcelona, Atlanta) and those of us who were first time "Olympians".

Chief Interpreter Bill Weber pointed out from the very beginning: "Working at the Olympics can be very different from what interpreters are used to and will require flexibility of mind and body." We were indeed flexible. From a 7.30 AM Chefs de Mission meeting at the Olympic Village to an 11.00 PM press conference at the main stadium, with a lot of free time in between, we were always ready to "do our thing" whenever and wherever our services were required.

The work was fast, challenging, stimulating and intense. Our unlimited accreditation and access to press areas and transportation facilities (including a fleet of cars for interpreters) allowed us to see the matches and/or events before our interpreting assignments. Press conferences lasted from 30 to 60 minutes and one any given day we were rostered to several different assignments. This involved speedy changes of venues and sports over a long day, but we did have blocks of free time in between assignments. The work was demanding, but the skill, experience and flexibility of our fearless leader (thank you, Bill), made it fun and very enjoyable.

The most memorable impressions

"Amigos para siempre"

Before the games we were promised that we would take home "unforgettable impressions that would last a lifetime." And we did.

The most memorable impressions were not the world records set in swimming or track and field, nor the roar of the crowd when Cathy Freeman won the 400 meters. They were not the Spanish soccer team winning the final (well, had it not been for some questionable refereeing decisions, we would have won!). The most lasting memories are of colleagues and the team spirit that reigned among us from day one.

I would like to thank all of my colleagues from all around the world for those memorable moments. Thank you for the professional and moral support that helped us all through the difficult moments. Thank you for rebelling as a team against the arbitrary rules imposed by outsiders. Thank you for the endless cups of coffee that we had together while waiting for the next assignment. Thank you for the jokes, the laughter and the tears we shared. Thank you for being true professionals in every sense of the word.

Such experiences and memories are not exclusive to the Olympics, of course. As interpreters we are fortunate to encounter them often and they are what make our profession truly GREAT!

The Sydney Olympic Games were indeed a memorable experience. But perhaps my nationality makes me biased and I still think nothing will ever surpass the Barcelona Games. The lighting of the Olympic Torch and the chords of the theme song "Amigos Para Siempre" will continue to live on in our memory.

Adiós, amigos y hasta siempre!

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Recommended citation format:
