

Georgia on My Mind

Racism, Homophobia and the Olympic Spirit

by Ian Granick

ATLANTA—Let there be no doubt—the South has risen again. Out of the ashes of W. T. Sherman's 1864 "hair-razing" march through the Southern corridor, a glorious new monument to southern pride has emerged; this time in the form of Atlanta. One of the top 15 largest cities in the US and certainly one of the largest in the Southern United States, Atlanta competes only with Miami/Dade County in terms of population density, growth and economic prowess; but, as anyone in this part of the world will tell you, "Miami is not really in the South anyway." So that leaves Atlanta to reign supreme as the Queen of the South.

Few would argue then that the final jewel in the Southern Crown was placed today as the Olympic torch arrived after its 84-day, 15,000-mile trek across the United States. An estimated 7,000 athletes from 197 nations joined with the 83,100 spectators, President Clinton and the First Family among them, to watch as former heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, himself a gold

medalist at the 1960 Rome Olympics, used the torch to light the Olympic Flame.

Great pains were taken to avoid any direct reference to Southland's legacy of racism and slavery. Gladys Knight sang an inspirational version of "Georgia on My Mind," and a giant screen broadcast Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech.

However, not every dream has yet to come true in the United States, and many members of Atlanta's black population have a mind to see certain things change.

Today, hours before the ceremonial lighting of the Olympic torch, a group of about 50 protestors, led by the Rev. Hosea L. Williams, gathered at the steps of the Georgia State Capitol and had their own ceremonial torching, this time of the Georgia state flag. The flag, which displays the stars and bars of the Confederacy, has long been considered an offensive but legally sanctioned reminder of the South's racist past.

"For 12 years, we have asked the Georgia State Legislature to remove that symbol because it represents slavery," said Williams. "I can't

believe the Olympic officials accepted the Georgia flag."

Cobb Serves, Gays Volley

However, racism is not the only issue being brought to light this year. Anti-gay sentiments and policies have also played a major role in the Centennial Olympiad. "Georgia is the setting of many controversial anti-gay legislative initiatives such as the so-called Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA); the home of anti-gay Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich;" and it set the stage for the 1986 *Bowers v Hardwick* case where the US Supreme Court upheld the constitutional right of states to outlaw sodomy even when it occurred between consenting adults, explained Cathy Renna, a spokesperson for the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).

The fight between "family values" and "alternative lifestyles" came to a head last year when the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG) announced that the volleyball finals for the 1996 Games would be held in Cobb County. In 1993, possibly in reaction to Atlanta's passing of a law recognizing domestic partners, the 3-

member commission that runs Cobb County passed a resolution condemning the "gay lifestyle as incompatible with the community's standards." Gay rights activists were incensed and a huge effort was undertaken to pull the Olympics out of Cobb County.

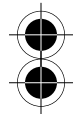
Eventually the activists, organized under the banner Olympics Out of Cobb Coalition (OCC), applied enough pressure that the ACOG was finally forced to relocate the volleyball finals.

Oddly, this did not stop the ACOG from then scheduling Cobb County as a mid-point destination for the Olympic Torch Relay.

Once again, the OCC went to work and in May of this year, the ACOG released the following statement:

"ACOG has decided not to run the Torch Relay through Cobb County. The decision is based on the fact that the Cobb County Commission has not changed its non-binding resolution since July 1994 when ACOG relocated the preliminary volleyball venue from Cobb County to Athens, Georgia. It is our goal to make the torch relay an exciting and memorable experience. We want to focus on the excitement of the event and not be distracted by other issues."

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