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‘Lympic Fever? I’ve had it

Wow! What a summer of sport its been, and it is not finished yet. Can we take much more? Seven years of build-up and the answer to ‘Was it worth it?’ has been a resounding “Yes!” Hasn’t it?

We have “Oooo’d” and “Ahhh’d”. We have cried along with Sir Chris (but hopefully not as much as Felix Sanchez of the Dominican Republic) and we have shouted at the TV or perhaps, for the lucky ones, at the action itself in the venues of London 2012. The Games have undoubtedly made many of us feel good and that feeling has lasted even if the sunny weather hasn’t.

I was one of the luckiest ones as I was there throughout and, before saying anything else, I would like to put on record that I am pleased that I was.

Those of you who read this missive regularly will know that I was one of the ‘lucky’ 70,000 people chosen to be a volunteer and a ‘Games maker’ alongside the staff and sub-contracting team. It is true that I was, and still am, proud that I made it through the process, which I am told saw 250,000 people apply, but it wasn’t all plain sailing – or bike riding in my case – and here are a few thoughts on my experience.

I had planned to be in London a day before my first shift but work at a certain football club in north-east Derbyshire had other things in mind so instead of a relaxed drive down on a sunny Wednesday morning 10 days before the start of the Games, Minty (our ever faithful motor home) and I were up and away at 4.30am on Thursday 18 July 2012, screaming down the M1 in order to be there in time for my first day of work. Nonetheless, as I left my home village to head to the bright lights, I was excited and a little emotional that after all of this time the Olympics were finally here for me after over 20 years of working and volunteering in sport.

I arrived at my home for the next two and half weeks, a campsite near Walton on Thames, just in time to throw my trusty bike off the back of Minty and head to Hampton Court Palace, my work base for the duration of the event. I mention the campsite because I would just like to point out that I was staying here at my own expense as well as paying for the fuel to get me there. Mind you, the bike was for my own health and convenience as LOCOG had thought to provide me with a fully paid-up Oyster card for the duration, so I can’t complain about that.

The Olympics had started for me. Cars began to arrive (I was on the vehicle support team for the cycling road races and time trials), the team was assembled and, boy, was it hot! The cycling event staff were great and all was well with the world.

Or was it? As already mentioned, I was in place well before the events started and as a result our base was not yet held to be a live event venue. No big deal other than the fact we were told that no food would be available until it was fully functional so we should bring or buy our own. Hmm. Let’s see then. I am paying to get here, I am paying for accommodation, I am losing money from not being available for work and now I am paying for my food on shift, something I was promised as part of the deal. Even a cup of coffee was a challenge as the only outlet was the cafe at Hampton Court Palace.

Luckily my faith in human nature was soon restored as the staff team decided this was not on and made sure we had lunch paid for but I suspect that they were paying for at least some of this from their own pockets or under ‘cover up headings’ in the cycling budget. Oh dear LOCOG, so much for the volunteers

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We moved forward to our first event and the excitement grew. All the teams had been into our compound to have their cars fitted with radios, the relevant stickers and passes attached and it was time for our team to move, with our vehicles, to the Mall ready for our first event, the road race. New challenges were waiting for us there, including the very thorough security systems to get in. I, for one, was pleased to have the security in place considering that for three days I was going to be surrounded by some of the people who most of the world's terrorists most want to kill.

In fact it wasn't long before number one on lots of people's hit list, David Cameron, strolled by me on his way from his gaff on the edge of our event venue to Buck House which was just outside the perimeter. He didn't speak (how rude!) but I got my own back the following day when I virtually knocked him out of the way (not on purpose, I promise) as I went in search of one of our team who was taking a sneaky couple of minutes watching the race on the big screen, as was Mr C.

The day of the men's road race dawned and I was lucky enough to see it (the dawn, that is) as I had to be up at 4.30am. I was on my bike by 5.30am heading to the nearest station, on the train for 5.50am and in the venue by 6.45am. I tell you all this not because I need you to know my daily schedule but to set the scene for my next comment. After a very busy few hours, our team emerged into a break at about 10.30am, by which time we had missed breakfast. The workforce area had strict hours/minutes for serving food but, hey ho, we could sit in there after making our own drinks and watch the two TVs (normal size, not 'big' screens for all 200 of us) and catch up with the race.

Back to work, a debrief and a reset of duties for the return of the race and we finished about 5.45pm. It had been an exciting day. I had been shouted at by many nations (great fun to upset the support teams whose mission, I think, was to knock over as many people as possible), seen lots of 'worthies', watched a heart-wrenched Mark Cavendish pedal slowly by me nearly in tears after talking to the press after the race, worked with a fantastic team and was ready to do it all again for the women tomorrow. Before leaving, our ever-vigilant manager suggested that we looked tired and we should go and get some food before we left for the longish journey home. "Good Idea," we said, so off we went to get another meal ticket from the people at workforce check in, which, I am pretty sure, were some of the smiling aliens from the TV series 'V'. We approached nicely and asked politely "Please Sir can I have some more?" but in true Dickensian manner the reply from the Mr Bumble on duty was an askance "More?"

Joking aside, it was explained politely to us that we hadn't been on shift long enough to expect two meals, we needed to have done 12 hours and we had done a mere 11 hours 45 minutes. At this point can I remind you that we had all paid for our own accommodation, travel, etc, etc and been up since 4.30am? Not happy does not describe the emotion my colleagues and I felt at this moment. However, Mr Bumble eventually did find it in his heart to let us have some food and, at this point, the revenge was his because I am not sure it was human fodder when it was served up. Could I remind Lord Coe and friends that an army marches on its stomach and this made me even more anxious as our military colleagues, who were making sure the bad people didn't get us, were eating the same stuff.

In terms of support for us as volunteers throughout the rest of our time in London, all I can say is: LOCOG 0, cycling managers 10. Thank goodness the staff closest to us had good hearts and management skills because the central administration was poor at best.

However, I am sure you want to know some of the good bits too, so here goes. The women's road race was a pleasure to be at, although a little wet, and the time trials were fantastic. I was on the front of Hampton Court Palace for the whole of the women's TT and the crowd was brilliant. I was behind closed doors (well, wooden gates) for the men's event and it was eerily quiet for most of the time but the noise when Brad was screaming around the last bend was immense and, despite the fact that we were meant to be neutral at all times, all the staff, army and volunteers were jumping up and down shouting with the crowds outside.

Being stood right at the side of the medal winners, Princess Anne and the victory ceremony staff just before they went out to greet the crowd was a special moment too, and something I wouldn't have had if I had not been a Games maker.

Most of the time I was in London I didn't see much sport but that didn't matter; I wasn't there for that. I was there for the experience and to be part of an Olympic Games and for that, I have no regrets. However, insisting that I travel back to London (at my own expense) to collect my Paralympic uniform because they didn't have the capacity for me to collect it* while I was already there for the Olympics (never mind why they didn't distribute it when I collected my Olympic uniform) was another special moment, along with numerous instances throughout the last year when it was clear that the organisation felt that I should feel grateful that they had chosen me rather than the other way around.

So as I consider 'legacy' I have to ask myself: "Would I do it again? Will I be part of the Legacy of 2012?" I loved the people I met and my close managers were great, but did I feel valued by the organisation? A further question spins around my head: "Has it inspired me to volunteer in my local community?" Answer. I already do but I am seriously considering reducing my time as a volunteer as I am now pretty convinced (even more than before) that the government sees volunteers as cheap labour rather than as something positive in a community, despite all the rhetoric.

Will I volunteer at a national event again? Probably not. Will I carry on leading my regular Breeze Ride? The answer to that is a resounding 'yes' because the women I meet are great and we give things to each other that are better than money. So here is my response to the government and LOCOG about my volunteering experience (not that they have asked me yet). Please don't count me as a positive in any of your legacy figures because all you have inspired me to do is volunteer less. I really hope that the rest of the event is more successful in driving sport forward in this country because the people want it to and they need it. We can only hope the powers that be don't stifle it with red tape and smiling aliens.

** I did collect my Paralympic uniform on my last day in London, despite the system. We had phoned several times asking if it was possible to do this and our managers had tried to get us a place but we had been told all of the collection slots were allocated. A fellow volunteers and I decided to go to UDAC (the distribution centre) on the off-chance. When we arrived there were exactly two volunteers collecting kit in the whole centre, my colleague and myself!*

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