



A photograph of the enthusiastic crowd at the opening ceremonies of the Montreal Outgames in 2006. Image provided by montreal2006.org.

## Outgames

by Linda Rapp

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The first world Outgames, held in Montreal in the summer of 2006, brought together some half a million glbtq people and allies for sports competitions, cultural events, and a conference on human rights.

The Outgames were born out of controversy. Montreal had been chosen in 2001 to host the 2006 Gay Games, but disputes over financing between the Federation of Gay Games (FGG) and the Montreal organizing committee led to an impasse that resulted in a decision by the FGG to withdraw the award to Montreal and instead hold the 2006 Gay Games in Chicago.

Olympic champion Mark Tewksbury had been a key member of the Montreal committee. After the loss of the Gay Games to Chicago, he took the lead in proposing that the city hold its own glbtq sports festival in 2006. With excellent facilities, including some built for the 1976 Olympic games, and strong support from federal, provincial, and local governments, Montreal had all the makings of a successful venue.

The Montreal organizers sought to create an event that both celebrated and transcended sport. They invited glbtq people from around the world to participate not only in athletics but also in cultural programs and, importantly, in a conference on glbtq human rights.

### **International Conference on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Human Rights**

Launching a major international event was a considerable challenge for the organizers of the Outgames, and the task was made more difficult when some 250 people from 60 countries invited to the International Conference on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Human Rights were initially denied visas into Canada despite the fact that many of these participants had received financial help from the Canadian International Development Agency to cover their expenses.

Most of the cases--including that of Edwin Cameron, a justice on the highest court of South Africa, who was only admitted after authorities were convinced that he held a full-time job--were successfully resolved, but a number of people remained excluded. Among those denied visas without explanation were all two dozen of the Cameroonian athletes as well as a choral group.

The Republic of Cameroon's sole representative was lawyer Alice Nkom, who had defended eight men and a teenage boy arrested in a raid on a bar and imprisoned because of their homosexuality. She expressed regret that her countrymen were not present "to bear witness to what we saw here and to hope that someday such things might be possible in Cameroon."

Despite the absence of a few expected participants--among them a Lebanese delegate who could not leave the country because of the armed conflict with Israel but who managed nonetheless to send a videotaped message--the International Conference on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Human Rights drew an impressive 1,516 participants.

Speakers at the four-day conference included Vladimir Spidla, the former Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, and Waheed Alli, the first openly gay member of the British House of Lords. Both applauded progress made in the European Union but noted that homophobia remains a serious societal problem. Alli pointed out that although some positive steps have been taken in Europe, they are threatened by pressure brought to bear by religious fundamentalists. He further noted that in seventy-five countries homosexuality is still considered criminal.

The discussions at the conference resulted in the formulation of the Declaration of Montreal, which enumerated the basic human rights all too often denied to gbltq people and called upon governments and all sectors of society to work for legal and social changes to secure complete equality.

The delegates adopted the Declaration at the final session of the conference on July 29, and that evening tennis champion Martina Navratilova read it at the opening ceremony of the inaugural Outgames. On August 1 the borough of Ville-Marie, home to the Outgames Gay Village, became the first political entity to endorse it.

### **Opening Spectacle**

The Outgames began with pageantry as participants from 111 countries processed to the infield of Olympic Stadium. Spectators cheered them all but were particularly effusive in their support of those who came from nations where homosexuality is still a crime. Among the participants so celebrated was Nkom, who, although she is not an athlete, bore the flag of Cameroon as the lone representative of her country who had succeeded in getting into Canada.

Montreal mayor Gérard Tremblay was enthusiastically received when he delivered a welcoming speech, but the crowd showed their disapproval of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who refused an invitation to attend Outgames and who had earlier announced his government's intention to attempt to revoke the legality of same-sex marriages in Canada. The spectators drowned out Michael Fortier, the Public Works Minister, who was standing in for Harper, shouting "Shame! Shame!" and making a racket by clattering the folding seats of their chairs. Tremblay called for quiet, but the crowd would not be mollified.

The festivities following the speeches featured musical performances by singers including k. d. lang (who had earlier in the week publicly blasted Prime Minister Harper for his absence), Martha Wash, and Sylvie Desgrolliers, who led the crowd in the singing of "Over the Rainbow." A troupe from the Cirque du Soleil put on an impressive acrobatic show.

### **The Competition**

The motto of the Outgames, "We Play for Real," emphasized the seriousness of the athletes who competed in the thirty-five sports and games disciplines. The athletic events were sanctioned by Canadian and Quebec sports federations. Almost 2,000 competitions took place at 41 venues throughout the Montreal metropolitan area.

A highlight of the competition was the world record set by American swimmer Daniel Veatch in the 200-meter backstroke in the 40-44 age category. Veatch's time of 2:14.83 edged out the previous record of 2:15.49 set in 1999.

Participants vied for medals not only in events traditionally associated with summer games, such as track and field, swimming, cycling, gymnastics, and ball games, but also in two indoor winter sports, ice hockey and figure skating, as well as games including bridge and pool. In the cultural portion of the Outgames groups and individuals participated in six events, including music, dance, and bear and leather

competitions.

The Outgames are open to people of all sexual orientations. Approximately fifty of the athletes at the first Outgames were transgendered. Rachel Corbett, the executive director of the Gay and Lesbian International Sports Association (GLISA), who has worked with the Canadian Olympic Committee to secure equal rights, saw the Outgames as a competition that could help to clarify the status of transgender athletes. "We're going to learn things at the Outgames here in Montreal this summer, and we're going to make refinements and improvements to our technical policy," she stated.

A poignant moment in the Outgames occurred when Patricia Nell Warren, the lesbian author of the acclaimed novel *The Front Runner* (1974), ran the last lap of the men's 5,000 kilometer race at the Claude-Robillard Sports Complex, symbolically completing the event during which the hero of her novel was killed, a victim of homophobia. Afterward, she presented the awards to the medalists.

### **Montreal's Support for the Outgames**

The Outgames highlighted the glbtq presence in Montreal. Posters promoting the event were everywhere; Viger Square became an athletes' village; and St. Catherine Street was closed to traffic, which, wrote Cyd Zeigler, Jr. of *Outsports*, "created a mile-long block party in the Village."

The Outgames drew an estimated half million people to Montreal, generating considerable revenue for the city. The Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal put the figure at around one hundred million dollars.

The Outgames received the strong support of politicians from local, provincial, and national government. Some two dozen officials attended various events. Among them was former Minister of Social Development and sitting member of Parliament Ken Dryden, a legendary superstar of hockey. He presided at the opening face-off of the hockey final, a hopeful sign for both glbtq athletic events and for hockey, a sport with no out current or former professional players.

Openly gay Parliament member Réal Ménard, whose riding includes the area of the Olympic Village, took an even more active role, winning the silver medal in the Masters' division (age 35 and over) of his weight class in men's wrestling.

### **Future of the Outgames**

Notwithstanding the gratifying support of the federal, provincial, and municipal governments, the Outgames wound up losing money, perhaps as much as \$5,000,000. Despite this disappointment, the event was counted a success.

At the closing ceremony Montreal mayor Tremblay passed the GLISA flag to Martin Geerson, the mayor of culture and leisure of Copenhagen, had been awarded the right to host the second world Outgames in 2009.

Organizers planned to make the Outgames a quadrennial event, but moved the second games up one year to avoid conflicting with the Gay Games. In 2006 the two glbtq sports festivals were held within weeks of each other, making it a practical impossibility for many amateur athletes to attend both, and practically assuring that both events would lose money. It is hoped that the revised schedule will result in even greater participation.

Prior to the second games, GLISA held two regional competitions, the North American Continental Outgames in Calgary in 2007 and the Asia-Pacific Outgames in Melbourne in 2008.

### **Second Outgames**

The second Outgames was held in Copenhagen from July 25 to August 2, 2009. It was one of the largest international sports and cultural events ever held in Denmark, with some 8,000 participants.

The 2nd International Conference on LGBT Human Rights, held in conjunction with Outgames, was co-chaired by Rebeca Sevilla and Svend Robinson and included keynote speakers such as John Amaechi, Virginia Apuzzo, Axel Axgil, Georgina Beyer, and Cleve Jones, among many others.

### **Third Outgames**

The third Outgames was hosted by Antwerp in the summer of 2013.

The future of the Outgames appears bright, due in large measure to the excellent organization of its governing body, GLISA. Marshaling the support of governments, corporate sponsors, sports federations, and some 5,200 volunteers, GLISA put on extremely well-run games in Montreal. Athletes were impressed by all aspects of their experience, from venues and officiating to scheduling and transportation.

The Canadian--especially Montreal--press and broadcast media provided extensive coverage of the first Outgames. Unfortunately, however, the events went virtually unreported in the United States despite the fact that the American delegation was second in size only to the host nation's.

At the closing ceremony of the first world Outgames, Tewksbury stated, "The Olympics ask us to be better athletes, but the Outgames ask us to be better human beings." By combining the pursuit of athletic excellence with the joyous celebration of community and culture as well as the commitment to work for the full civil rights of glbtq people around the globe, the Outgames did just that.

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