

Commonwealth Games:
1990 in Auckland, New Zealand

During the week and a half from January 24 to February 3 in 1990, the athletic world's eye was upon New Zealand as it hosted the fourteenth Commonwealth Games. During the entirety of the Games there were ten events participated in where as in the upcoming 2006 games in Melbourne Australia there will be sixteen events that athletes will be competing in. Hosting an event of this magnitude was nothing of a rarity to the New Zealanders for they have had the honours twice before, these 1990 Games being the second time in the capital of Auckland, a city population of 800,000. This country was quite capable of accommodating the athletes and spectators of the Commonwealth Games.

The 1990 Games where a year of great renewal in the competitiveness of the Commonwealth Games due to the lack of support four years ago. The previous Games in 1986 Edinburgh games, held in Scotland, where thirty-two nations would not compete in unison with the Commonwealth because of "apartheid in sports."¹The 1990 Games was a record breaking year, as far as country attendance went, where fifty-four nations were present at the games. The 1990 Games then brought forth "The Friendly Games"² atmosphere, which is what the mood was intended to be. Not only was the 1990 Games record breaking in attendance, but also a respectable twenty-nine countries took home

¹Higher Denomination, http://hiwaay.net/~hfears/com_2/com_2.htm, February 2,1990

²Commonwealth Games –Introduction, <http://www.thecgf.com/faq/faq11.asp> February 2,1990

medals from the possible six hundred and thirty nine. Australia took top place in the medal race taking home a stunning one hundred and sixty two medals. England took second holding one hundred and twenty-nine with Canada close behind with one hundred and fifteen. Following Canada there is a significant drop in the rank of the competing nations where only six other nations made it past the twenty medal count with Nigeria, Wales and Scotland barely making it to even this mark taking home twenty-five, twenty-four, and twenty-two, respectively.³

As far as being able to be the host nation for a specific Commonwealth Games a country must go through a lot of work even when getting noticed when trying to take place in the running. For the 1990 Games the selection process started seven years earlier. Other than New Zealand, Malaysia was a strong and very hopeful for the games, however they would not be seen quite as well as Auckland and would persist to attempt to host the games failing once more before given the right to host the 1998 Kuala Lumpur games.⁴

For the Canadians, it all started in the Ellerslie race track where there were three hundred and eighty fellow Canadians cheering for the six time Commonwealth butterfly swimming medallist Tom Ponting, as he was elected to be the flag-bearer for the opening ceremonies. On January 24, 1990, Tom Ponting from Calgary led his country into Mount Smart Stadium before 35,000 in full capacity attendance, carrying the Canadian flag. Ponting was honored to be carrying his country's flag amidst Prince Edward, son of Queen

³ 1990 Commonwealth Games Introduction <http://www.thecgf.com/games/intro.asp?yr=1990>, February 2, 1990

⁴ 16th Commonwealth Games, <http://www.thecgf.com/k198/default.html>, January 25, 1990

Elizabeth, who opened the games. Ponting and the Canadians looked forward to competition in the fourteenth Commonwealth Games.⁵

Canadians were predicted to stand out and be successful in swimming, track and field, gymnastics and diving with many medal hopes. In regards to the final medal count, many thought they would not do as well and not win as many medals as they did in the Edinburgh games where they won fifty-one gold and a total of one hundred and fifteen medals. Despite ranking an overall third, Canadians were able to meet their predictions, if not exceed, after unexpectedly matching their medal count from the previous year. This undermining prediction of matching their achievements from the 1986 games was because of the return presence of the African and other countries that boycotted the previous games regarding the apartheid in South Africa.⁶

The 1990 Commonwealth Games followed significant events in previous history. Sports would have to battle with two familiar issues, politics and drugs. The games were the first multi-sports event since the Ben Johnson drug scandal that rocked the 1988 summer Olympics Seoul. It was also the first time the Commonwealth countries met since the boycotted games in Edinburgh, Scotland. Athletes, organizers, and the Commonwealth countries hoped to create a brighter outlook as they faced the challenges of drugs and politics and their effect on sports. Both had been a concerning issue during the couple of years prior in the Commonwealth Games and other international sporting events⁷.

With this being the first Commonwealth Games since the big drug scandal with Ben Johnson in the 1988 summer Olympics in Seoul, it was obvious that there was going

⁵ Bill Beacon, "Medallist bears our flag and our hopes," *Hamilton Spectator* 25th January (1990)

⁶ Bill Beacon, "Medallist bears our flag and our hopes," *Hamilton Spectator* 25th January (1990)

⁷ Grant Kerr, "Games to confront politics, drugs," *Hamilton Spectator* 24th January (1990)

to be a needed concern as far as having control over the issue of illegal drugs used in sports. History had witnessed not only a medal being stripped from Ben Johnson, but several athletes had lost their records and medals after testing positive. Regulations needed to be made to keep the sporting competitions clean and fair. However, the Commonwealth Games Federation committee did not seem to take this concern seriously enough.⁸

The Commonwealth Games was expected to put a stop to cheaters within their sports. The sport of weightlifting was one specific sport that stood out as these athletes tended to often become caught up with the use of drugs, most commonly steroids. . There needed to be a stop to this otherwise it would loose more than just respect; the sport would be dropped from the Commonwealth games. The committee for the 1994 Commonwealth Games was present in Auckland and wanted to see a drug free performance within wrestling in order to insure that the sport would remain in Victoria, the next host to the games.

Unfortunately the Commonwealth Games organizers opted against the advice of the International Weightlifting Federation which wanted all medal winners to be automatically tested for performance-enhancing drugs. This main issues was proven to be a mistake since two weightlifters, Paul Subratakumar of India and Ricky Chaplin of Wales where stripped of their medals after testing positive for banned substances.⁹ Not only had the Games committee disappointed the International Weightlifting Federation, many of the officials for weightlifting had become frustrated with the lack of action by

⁸ Reuter, "Ben's Marks erased," *Hamilton Spectator* 26th January (1990)

⁹ Bill Bacon, "Weightlifter tests positive," *Hamilton Spectator* 29th January (1990)

the games organizers to keep the sport clean. The officials wanted to have all weightlifters tested no matter if they were a medal winner or not.

A weightlifting official, Sam Coffa of Australia, had become very angry in the direction in which his sport was going after reacting to yet a third doping disgrace at the Auckland Games. As Sam became overly frustrated with cheaters in his sport he banned together with athletes, administrator and officials to fight against the use of illegal drugs. Sam demanded for a more thorough dope-testing program no matter what the cost. He knew that the sport was quickly going down hill and losing respect due to the disgrace of illegal drug use within the sport.¹⁰ It was crucial for weightlifting to regain respect and bring it back to fair, clean competition.

The Canadians were facing similar problems as far as reclaiming their reputation. The Canadians came into the games baring the weight of the shocking Johnson drug scandal and needed to prove that they were not going to be a country to hold onto such a reputation. The Canadians knew that they would be looked at closely, but they were ready for that. The team came into the games, giving oath to each other, that all were clean of illegal drugs. At the end of the games, the Canadians were able to prove themselves as a clean team; no one on the team had been tested positive.¹¹

The 1990 Games were the first games back for many countries since the boycott that happened at the 1986 games in Edinburgh, Scotland. Four years ago, thirty-two countries boycotted the games to protest against Britain's reluctance to impose economic sanction against South Africa.¹² The fourteenth games held promise that most

¹⁰ From Canadian Press, "Official want cheaters thrown out of sport, *Hamilton Spectator* 1st February (1990)

¹¹ Bill Beacon, "Passing the test," *Hamilton Spectator* 28th January (1990)

¹² Steve Macleod, "An eye-opener," *Hamilton Spectator* 27th January (1990)

Commonwealth members wanted to reestablish their relationship with sport, especially African and Caribbean countries with predominantly black populations.¹³

With all intended Commonwealth countries present, the opening ceremonies went smoothly. However, that was something that seemed unlikely several days prior when African outrage over a tour of South Africa by rebel English cricket players threatened to evolve into a boycott.¹⁴ Only two days before the games, the threat of yet another international sporting boycott ended when African countries confirmed that they would participate in the Commonwealth Games following England's support of a Commonwealth Games Federation resolution condemning the cricket tour.¹⁵

During the Commonwealth Games, resolutions to the apartheid in South Africa were coming quick and strong as events happened within South Africa. There was big talk about the soon upcoming release of the famous prisoner, Nelson Mandela. This was such a media focused event that it nearly drowned out the end of the Commonwealth Games. The opening ceremonies were found on the front page of the *Hamilton Spectator* whereas on the day of the closing ceremonies the front page was preoccupied with the talk of Mandela's proposed release.

The *Hamilton Spectator* probably reflected the way most people felt about the Commonwealth Games. The general public knew about the games, but not always gave it special attention. The days leading up to the Commonwealth Games had little coverage or awareness of the games, except the odd article that regarded some important background on the games. The week of the games had consistent coverage in the sports section except surprisingly on the closing day where nothing was found on the closing

¹³ Grant Kerr, "Games to confront politics, drugs," *Hamilton Spectator* 24th January (1990)

¹⁴ Steve Macleod, "An eye-opener," *Hamilton Spectator* 27th January (1990)

¹⁵ Reuter, "Games boycott threat ends," *Hamilton Spectator* 29th January (1990)

ceremonies. It was not till the next day's paper that there was little coverage wrapping up the games.

The Spectator clearly gave favoritism and focus to specific sports. With the down play of wrestling as a clean sport the media was quicker to pin point the faults rather than the achievements by athletes in the sport. With Canada's expectations to do well in swimming, track and field, gymnastics and diving, the media decided to keep their focus on those sports. Athletes who were predicted to win medals in these main events were given more attention and fame through interviews and bibliographies than those from less talked about sports, even if there was a medal hopeful.

The media was able to present coverage of the Games without any discrimination in regards to sex, nationality or ethnic. Men and women received equal coverage and personal interviews, as well as photo coverage. No matter what sex or ethnic background the media was sure to cover anyone with an outstanding success. Though the media was quick to cover the dismissal of Julian Richardson¹⁶ they just as easily were not timid in mentioning the past mistakes of Ben Johnson.¹⁷ Canada, a part of the three main powers, England, Australia and themselves, found themselves all competing for the same medals. However, with several upsets as other countries stripped hopeful Canadian medallists, such as when the Aussie's swept the women's four hundred meter free style swim, the media still accredited other countries triumphs.

With the Commonwealth Games at hand, the media was still just as consistent as before on covering the everyday sports news. It was obvious to see what Canadians were committed too. There was still heavy coverage on the national hockey league even to the

¹⁶ Reuter, "Banished," *Hamilton Spectator* 2nd February (1990)

¹⁷ Grant Kerr, "Games to confront politics, drugs," *Hamilton Spectator* 24th January (1990)

point where it surpassed the attention of the Commonwealth Games. News from the NHL was often given to the front page of the sports section with the Commonwealth Games tucked in behind. In spite of the heavy coverage of the NHL, the media still committed to an acceptable coverage of the games.

The Commonwealth Games in Auckland, New Zealand closed with a success and an uplifting feeling for all Commonwealth countries. Despite the many battle's between countries concerning the controversial issue of the apartheid presence in South Africa, the Games in Auckland was a positive week for Commonwealth countries to unite in peaceful competition. As far as the issue of drugs in sports, the Auckland games were able to rule out those who cheated, however the committee learned that they will not be able to take this issue lightly in the future and that standards need to be raised to screen out cheaters from even participating. With the Commonwealth Games becoming bigger and bigger, as witnessed through Auckland's record making size of participants, events and the media's growing coverage, the games once again stand out to be a sense of peaceful unison between the Commonwealth countries.

1990 Commonwealth Games

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