

Memories of an Atlanta Olympics Volunteer
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Opening Ceremony

It was ten years ago this month that the Olympics came to Atlanta. IBM was a major corporate sponsor and encouraged our employees to volunteer to help give the world a first class impression of the United States, IBM, and Atlanta. I was among the first to fill out the paperwork, along with my wife, Jan. We didn't mark any preferences, just the box that said "available for whatever is needed". I also volunteered to be available for the entire seventeen days of the Games. There was nothing at IBM that wouldn't wait for my return and this was an opportunity of a lifetime.

I was given two assignments – working for IBM I was to be a host, helping take care of our big customers who came in from all over the world. My Olympics committee assignment was as a security guard, assigned to the main Olympics Stadium (now Turner Field, home of the Atlanta Braves) where the opening and closing ceremonies and all track and field events were held.

The weeks leading up to the start of the Olympics included fittings for uniforms, classes on what was expected of us, and generally getting this great volunteer force of Atlanta area citizens prepared to greet the world. Each time we met, you could feel the excitement and electricity in the volunteer force. We soaked up all the information provided, happily stood in lines to get our uniforms, and many of us started exercise routines to get into better shape for this adventure. Some Atlanta citizens worried about the traffic jams (which never materialized) and left town. Not me – I wouldn't ever miss this opportunity to participate in a world class event. Excitement continued to build all across Atlanta as the day of the opening ceremony approached.

For the 9:00pm start to the opening ceremony, our job was to report for duty seven hours earlier. Jan and I showed up at the appointed time, she not quite as excited about this new adventure as I was. We volunteered to be a walking security patrol – our job was to walk from the middle of the stadium on the west side, around the inside north end of the stadium (on the walkway about halfway up the stadium), to the middle point on the east side and continue to repeat the process. Our job was to do whatever was necessary to help the guests and maintain security.

We were an interesting looking patrol, me at 6'2" and 200 pounds (plus) and Jan walking beside me at 5'1" and 100 pounds soaking wet. If there was ever a Mutt and Jeff looking team, we were it.

The July Atlanta sun, humidity, and heat bore down on us as we walked our beat, greeting early arriving guests, watching the preparations on the field, and generally having a good time soaking in the experience. On the east side of the stadium was a

cache of bottled water, in a special place known only to the volunteers, to keep us hydrated. I made a pit stop at some point, and Jan continued the patrol, knowing I would catch up with her. As I approached her, she came to me with a concerned look on her face, asking for help.

The rules of Olympic stadium were that no smoking was allowed inside the stadium – this was in the days when smoking restrictions were just starting and were not universally accepted. An usher had seen a man smoking and called Jan, the nearest security guard, to take care of it.

You have to picture this situation. Ushers were volunteers from the Atlanta area, just as we security guards were. They came from IBM, Coca-Cola, Delta, UPS, Home Depot, banks, and various other Atlanta area corporations and individual volunteers from all walks of life. It was the luck of the draw, or some specified the job they wanted, that separated the two groups of volunteers. We all had the same level of experience at our jobs and earned the same money – zero.

The usher uniform was sharp looking – Panama hats with a colorful sash around it, colorful shirts with the Olympics theme emblazoned across it, comfortable khaki shorts, and white tennis shoes. In contrast, we security guards had forest green long pants, black tennis shoes, white short sleeve collared shirts with the appropriate badges and patches sewn on to make us look like a “rent a cop” at some office complex or professional sporting event. What set us off the most were the tan safari pith helmets that we all wore. To some our uniform was ugly, but me, I loved it.

If there was ever an obvious looking class system among volunteers – it was obvious that the ushers looked to be in a higher class than we security guards. And, even though most of them wouldn't admit it, the ushers probably considered themselves to be a notch above the security guards. Their job was to help guests find their seats, smile, talk to the guests, and call for help if anything out of the ordinary came up. And security guards were who they typically went to for help.

That was the situation that greeted Jan. The usher had politely asked the man to put out his cigarette, he had refused, and she had dutifully come to Jan to solve the problem. When Jan walked up to the man, all 5'11" and 100 pounds of her, wearing that funny looking pith helmet, and again politely asked him to put out his cigarette, the man told her the same thing – he was not going to do it. That's where I entered the picture.

As Jan explained the situation to me, I reverted back to my military experience and decided to fix that real quick. I stood over him with my tallest posture, a stern look, and was polite but very straight to the point. “Buddy, either put that cigarette out or you are out of here. If you don't want to do that, you can look at that Atlanta policeman over there (wearing a gun). His instructions are to back us up and do what we ask him to do. The choice is yours – quit smoking or leave.” With a few expletives, he put out his cigarette. On each subsequent round on our patrol, I made sure to look into his eyes to make sure he understand that he wasn't to smoke – and he didn't.

The crowd started to build; we volunteers took turns with a break for a quick dinner in a tent outside the stadium, and then were back on our assigned tasks. Jan still wasn't feeling the excitement of the moment like I was and the heat and constant patrolling was starting to wear her down. As for me, I was still fresh – sweaty, but still ready to tackle anything that came my way. I was still having a great time.

Around 7:30pm, the dignitaries started to show up in the reserved area around the 50 yard line on the west side. Being a card carrying IBM sales executive, I took it upon myself to greet them and welcome them to Atlanta and the Olympics. The looks on many of their faces were priceless. In their countries, lowly security guards didn't talk to heads of states or dignitaries. I knew that was the case but I was a proud American volunteer, not a paid guard from their country. I continued to greet them as we patrolled - as much to see their reaction to my loud voice and smiling face as to welcome them to Atlanta.

As it came closer to the start of the night's events, we had finished our umpteenth circuit of the day and turned to start another one and then head to our stationary post assigned for the ceremony. As we walked back along our route, a man in a suit and tie blocked our way. "You can't come this way," he said.

"Whadda you mean?" I said. "We've been walking this route since 2:00 this afternoon – get out of my way."

He stood his ground and stared at me and repeated, "You can't come this way." I then noticed he had an ear piece with a clear tube running down his neck and into his suit. It then struck me – President Clinton must be coming in and they are sealing this area off. He was obviously a secret service agent. I told him my dilemma, "Our security post is at the top of the stadium behind you. How do you suggest we get to it?" His response was simple, "Not my problem, you can't come this way."

Being a man of reasonable intelligence, and with my wife standing beside me with a worried look on her face, I decided not to push the issue any further. We retreated, found a ramp that took us under the stadium seats, past the concession stands, and another ramp that brought us back up close to our assigned security post.

If you watched the opening ceremony of the 1996 Olympics, you will recall the dancers who performed on a platform around the top edge of the stadium. All the entertainment was excellent but there was something about the dancers silhouetted against the night sky and Atlanta skyline that the crowd really loved. Our security post was at one end of that platform. My instructions were to not let anyone other than the dancers onto the platform. The breeze was nice at the top of the stadium, we wouldn't be walking for the next two or three hours, and I was looking forward to the assignment.

As we got to our post, we saw our good friends and neighbors sitting on the top row, right next to our guard post. I smiled to myself – they had paid top dollar (\$625 per seat) for the four tickets for their family, and Jan and I had free admission and got a set of

uniforms as well. Plus, once the dancers were off the platform, my job was to patrol the platform so I wasn't stuck in a seat. I could leisurely walk along the platform and had a great view of not only what was going on down on the field, but also could watch the staging of the next performers outside the stadium. Jan sat on the steps beside their seats, glad to get off her feet after the long day of patrolling.

It was a great performance. Everything went off perfectly. Watching the excited athletes parade into the stadium was a thrill. From my walkway, I remember watching the Olympic torch as it appeared in the distance and quickly moved through the parking area and approached the stadium. Carrying the torch on a leg of the route was an honor which many people cherish still today. I could feel the history and the thrill of the Olympics experience as it came closer and closer and finally was carried right below my post and disappeared into a doorway leading into the stadium. The torch was passed while under the stadium and at least once after it came onto the field of play. We all know who carried it the final few steps and lit the big Olympic cauldron that burned throughout the games – boxing great and former Olympics champion (Cassius Clay) Muhammad Ali.

Jan rode home with our neighbors; I hung around to be available if needed and to soak in more of the excitement after the opening ceremony was brought to a close. I walked across the field and came face to face with another boxing great – Evander Holyfield (man I wouldn't want to get into a ring with that big guy). I finally made my way back to the bus which took me to my car in a remote parking lot and got home after 2:00am. My body was tired but my mind was racing as I replayed the events of the day.

My adventures were just beginning – at 8:00am that same morning I was to be in my IBM Olympics host uniform and begin that duty. Track and field events in the Olympics Stadium weren't to start for several days, so until then, I was focused on my IBM host duties.

IBM Host in Centennial Olympics Park

Although my night's sleep was short, my adrenalin was flowing as I drove to the SwissOtel, headquarters of IBM, the next morning. IBM had reserved much of that hotel and the Ritz Carlton across the street to house our customers as they flowed in and out of the Olympic Games. We would bring executives and their spouses in for three to five days and then they would leave and would be replaced by another set of executives and spouses.

With over 25 years of IBM experience at the time, I fully understood and believed in our Basic Beliefs – two of which are “Provide the Best Customer Service in the World” and “Strive for Excellence in Everything You Do.” This was going to be an opportunity to do just that – look out for our customers and make this a memorable experience for them.

I was briefed on the day's events (IBM is big on briefings and making sure everyone knows what is expected of them). My first job was to ride the bus with our customers down to the large, air conditioned IBM tent adjoining Centennial Olympics Park.

Everyone was in a festive mood as we made the trip and were all impressed as they walked into the home-like atmosphere of the IBM tent. That was their place to return to when they got tired or needed a break or were ready to head back to the hotel. Plenty of food stations, comfortable overstuffed chairs, and a staff eager to help were always there.

My assignment was a simple one. I was to stroll through the park, no specific route required, carrying a small white IBM sign on a three foot long white stick. That sign, along with my purple IBM host shirt (much better looking than my security uniform – plus we wore khaki shorts instead of long pants) were what our customers were instructed to look for if they had any questions while out in the park. Effectively, I was an ambassador of good will for IBM and the Olympics, a job which I eagerly dived in to.

When I got hot or tired, I would return to the IBM tent, get something cool to eat or drink, sit for a while, and then go back out into the mass of people and answer questions. Many more non-customers than customers asked me questions and my extroverted personality was in full bloom as I again worked in the searing Atlanta sun and heat. I helped people find engraved bricks that they had bought (a large area of the park was covered with bricks, sold as an Olympics fund raiser over the previous two years) and took the time to find the ones I had bought in honor of Soldiers of the 4th Infantry Division and 22nd Infantry Regiment (my old Army units).

I learned where all the venues were and where things were in the park, directed people to where they needed to go, answered hundreds (sometimes it seemed like thousands) of questions, and often explained why I was carrying the IBM sign. My answer was always, “IBM put me here to help you. What can I do to help?” I’m sure lots of the general public walked away thinking that IBM wasn’t the big stuffy giant that they might have previously pictured. Customers of other corporate sponsors also knew my purpose in being there so they frequently came to me with their questions. Others like me from IBM and from the other corporate sponsors were constantly strolling through the park whenever our customers were there.

At the end of my shift, I made it back home and crashed into my easy chair before an early bedtime. The following day, I was down there doing it again.

That day, Sunday as I recall, did not have as many early volunteers as we had the previous day. I showed up and spent time in the IBM tent talking to customers before grabbing my IBM sign and headed into the park. As key IBM executives were having conversations with customers in the tent, they would grab one of us to take over for them as they moved from customer to customer and worked the room. I was talking with the “Who’s Who” of IBM’s largest customer executives and also with IBM’s top level executives. It was great to see these executives in this different environment, away from work and having a fun time.

That Sunday was also the day that all the negative press was hitting the news wires about the IBM systems not working properly. Around 9:30 that morning, IBM chairman Lou Gerstner walked into the tent with a scowl on his face. He walked through the tent, spoke

to only a very few people, and then stalked out. Even the casual observer would have known that he was not happy that morning. We soon found out from the big TV sets in the tent about the computer problems. Fortunately, other key IBM executives were there, in good moods, making our customers feel special.

Jan had also volunteered to be an IBM hostess; her shift started at noon. She joined me in the strolls through the park and was also bombarded by people seeking information. That day was even hotter than the previous two had been and around mid afternoon we decided to head back to the IBM tent for some ice cream, a cold drink, and a cool place to sit.

As we entered the virtually empty tent, we were approached by a lady, part of an outside events planning firm that IBM had hired to help out, who said that, "Purple shirts aren't allowed in here, this is for IBM customers only." I explained to her that I was an IBM executive, had been there the day before and that morning, had been talking to customers regularly, that several high level executives (who I named to her) had thanked me for my good work that morning, and started to walk into the tent.

She stepped in front of me and said again, "Purple shirts aren't allowed in here." At that point, my blood pressure went through the roof. Nobody, especially a contracted events person who did not understand the IBM culture, was going to keep me out of an IBM location. I went to the back of the tent, the nerve center, and told her manager, also a contracted person (not an IBM manager), that the first basic belief of IBM is "Respect for the Individual" and that my wife and I had been working hard for IBM out in the heat and we needed a place to cool off.

The manager listened to what I had to say, saw that I was fuming, and told me to not get in the way of customers, to stay in the background, and we could stay in there as long as it wasn't too busy. That upset me even more – I was used to working with IBM managers who solved simple problems like that one. Jan finally had to take me out of the tent to let me cool off (in the 95+ degree heat). After calming down a little, I picked my IBM sign up, put the smile back on my face, and finished my shift in the heat.

When I got off the bus back at the hotel, I went directly to the great Atlanta based IBM Olympics management team, many of whom I knew, and expressed my shock and dismay that we IBM volunteers were not welcome in our own company's hospitality tent. To make a long story short, there was never again a problem with us "purple shirts" going into the IBM customer tent. The contractor event lady steered clear of me any time that I walked in after that.

Except for that one little glitch, my experience as an IBM host was very positive. Our shifts were of reasonable length and if spare tickets were turned back in by our customers, they were offered to us to use if our schedules allowed. I was able to take our two sons to several track and field events during the seventeen days, plus their favorite event, the bicycle racing. We volunteers were treated with all the "Respect for the Individual" that I had always expected from IBM. The total experience - before, during,

and after the Olympics - was a great shot in the arm and made me even more proud that I was working for IBM.

Bomb at Centennial Olympic Park

The night of July 27, 1996 will live in infamy in the annals of the Olympic Games. That was the night that a bomb exploded in Centennial Olympic Park, killing Alice Hawthorne and injuring 100 others.

As fate would have it, that was the one day that I did not work during the Olympics. I had taken the day off to go with my sons to attend the cross country bicycle races and spent the evening relaxing at home, preparing to put my security guard uniform back on the next day as my responsibilities moved from host duty at Centennial Olympic Park back to the main Olympic stadium to provide security for the track and field events.

I was sound asleep when my phone rang around 1:30am that morning. "Daddy, are you okay!?" exclaimed the worried voice of my daughter, Kristen. She had been working the night shift as a nurse at a hospital in Oklahoma and had seen the news as it hit CNN. My grogginess quickly went away and I was wide awake and clicked on the television. I assured her that I was far away from the bombing and she could quit worrying. The rest of the night I watched the raw, unedited film footage that was being run on CNN as they tried to piece together what had happened. Sleep was the farthest thing from my mind. I knew that my Olympic experience had taken a sudden change in focus.

As scheduled the next morning, I showed up at our check-in location to resume my work as a security guard. (With more than enough volunteers eager to work, Jan opted to let me have the fun as a security guard, she hadn't enjoyed it nearly as much as I did. Her next security duty was at the closing ceremony). Our briefing was longer than the one before the opening event and we all paid more attention to every detail they gave us. At that point we had no idea whether this was a random bombing or the first of many more to come. The killings of the Israeli team members at the Munich Olympics in 1972 crossed my mind.

Rather than being assigned a walking post, I was assigned to an entrance to the stadium, just under the Olympics torch cauldron that was the landmark of the Games. While staying very alert, I resumed my jovial greetings to all who approached me. I tried to keep a positive tone and act like everything was just fine. As the crowds started to come into the stadium, I stayed alert. What were the odds that someone would bring a bomb to this spot? Really pretty good, if they were so inclined. As stated above, the torch I was standing under was the landmark of the Olympics. If someone wanted to make a statement, what better target was there than the torch and those standing around it?

Around mid morning, a man approached me, pointed to a small rectangular box covered in canvas, sitting on a ledge on the outside of the stadium, near the very the top of the stadium, and high above my location. He identified himself as a retired New Jersey police detective and said it looked suspicious to him. My response was simply, "It does

to me, too – I'll go check it out.” I headed into the still sparsely populated stadium and up the steps, my heart pounding. I motioned for a couple of uniformed Atlanta policemen to come with me and explained what we were doing as we climbed the steps. The thought crossed my mind, “Babcock, why in the world are you doing this?”

As I got to the top and peered over the ledge, a feeling of relief came over me as I saw what the canvas covered box was. It was part of the electronics of the public address system, not a bomb. The policemen were as relieved as I was – and we went back to our assigned posts.

On another day, we arrived around 2:00pm for the afternoon and evening shift. Events would start in the stadium around 6:00pm and the gates would be opened to admit guests at 4:00pm. Our first instructions were, “there has been a phoned in bomb threat, it is scheduled to go off at 4:00pm, and our job is to search the stadium to see if we find anything.” All the security guards spread out and systematically searched the stadium. Our team was very focused as we walked through our assigned sections, eyes scanning everywhere to insure no nook or cranny was left unsearched. At about 3:45, we re-assembled under the stadium for our debriefing. Again my common sense and military training came into play. I suggested to our team leader that if a bomb was scheduled to go off in fifteen minutes, didn't it make more sense for us to hold this meeting out on the field of play rather than under the stadium? He agreed with my logic and we moved out to the track.

The time for the suspected explosion came and went and nothing happened. The gates were opened, the guests came in without ever knowing about the threat – the Games went on as scheduled.

The bomb put a higher level of concern on all of us at the Olympics, but it did not ruin the experience. Although we always kept alert throughout the Games, there were many more good memories than the few related to bombs.

Fun Memories of a Security Guard in the Olympic Stadium

Since I had looked forward to the Olympic experience for so long, I wasn't going to let the bomb or threat of more bombs stop my work or cloud my enjoyment of this once in a lifetime experience.

Whenever possible, I volunteered to be a security guard near the finish line of track events. Right after the athletes finished their races, they came into a special area just off the track, walked past the always present NBC television camera, to talk to reporters from around the world. Our job was to keep the reporters on one side of a metal crowd control fence and the athletes on the other side. That wasn't always an easy job. By nature, reporters are pushy and like to go into places where they don't belong. We were constantly telling reporters to get back to their designated area and not to get out onto the track or area surrounding it. As long as we kept an eye on them, most of them

begrudgingly complied with our instructions. One reporter, however, was bound and determined that he was going to get onto the field of play to do his interviews.

Not all security guards were as aggressive as me and didn't take it as a personal challenge to do the job as it was supposed to be done. For some, they did their best and if that wasn't good enough, they accepted it. The reporter found one of those security guards and barreled his way past her. I saw what he had done and decided that keeping him off the field was going to be my personal responsibility. I saw it as a game, and the reporter probably did, too. I approached him on the field, told him he was not where he was supposed to be, and told him to get back with the other reporters. He eyed me up and down and said he wasn't moving. I moved closer and towered over him by several inches. My size and aggressiveness seemed to get his attention so he retreated to the reporter area.

As soon as I turned my back and started scanning the area to see what else needed to be done, he headed back onto the field. I spun on my heel and cut him off at the pass. He tried an end run on me but I had the angle and stopped him again. Maintaining my politeness, I again played my policeman card. I pointed out the uniformed Atlanta policemen standing nearby and explained that if I told them to, they would escort him out of the stadium and take away his press credentials (I don't think I had that authority but I acted like I did). He again returned to the reporter area.

Each time I drifted too far away from him and if he thought he could elude me, he started edging toward the field. Since I had assigned myself as his one on one security guard, I stopped whatever I was doing and headed for him. He finally gave up and accepted that as long as I was on duty, he wasn't going onto the field. I enjoyed the experience, and he probably did, too.

Other memorable things happened around the finish line. I found out that athletes from a lot of countries do not understand what deodorant is. The smell of many of the athletes was not something I like to remember.

Many world record holder and well known American and global athletes were within arms length of me at the finish line area. It was obvious to see that they were at the peak of physical fitness – great specimen of the human race.

A German female athlete came to the reporter area after her race. She was good looking and very well endowed. Her spandex (or whatever material the uniform was made of) uniform left little to the imagination as to what was under it. I was standing behind her, looking at the reporters who were interviewing her. It was comical to watch their eyes – few, if any, were looking into her eyes. Most were focused around her chest level.

Olympic pin trading was a tradition that I knew nothing about prior to the Olympics. In a nutshell, corporate sponsors and others produced metal pins in various designs which were traded among the guests and athletes at the Olympic Games. I'm not sure when the tradition started but it became a great source of fun. As volunteers, we were given a

supply of the various IBM Olympic pins and we pinned them on a cloth shoelace type necklace that we wore with our Olympic credentials. It was common for people to approach you, examine your collections of pins, and offer to trade for one or more of them. One of the rules for the volunteers was that we didn't harass or bother our customers trying to get their pins, but we were welcome to trade with them if they initiated it. I loved trading pins – it became like trading baseball cards. I got a few “Mickey Mantle rookie card” equivalents with my trading, and kicked myself a few times when I traded one of those prizes for something that I later decided wasn't nearly as valuable. One of these days I'm going to dig those Olympic pins out of my memorabilia storage and admire them again.

The day of the closing ceremony finally arrived. In some ways, we were ready for it, in other ways, it all ended too soon. The newness and excitement of the opening ceremony was not felt by me during the closing ceremony, but I was still enjoying myself and staying alert in my security guard role. I was fortunate, along with Jan, to have been able to attend both the opening and closing ceremonies. The pageantry, pomp, and ceremony were carried off without flaw. My only memorable security event was when an IBM vice president asked me to get him into the NBC hospitality suite in its prime spot overlooking the ceremony. I had to explain that NBC security guards at the door of their suite trumped us lowly “rent a cop” security guards and there was no way I could do that. He took it in good humor – at least he gave it a shot.

All in all, my work as an Atlanta Olympics volunteer was an experience I will never forget, will always enjoy remembering, and wouldn't trade for anything. I made friends, shared great experiences, and my IBM work was still there waiting for me when I returned to it after being gone for seventeen days.

As we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Atlanta Olympics, I'm proud to be able to say that I was one of those thousands of volunteers who, in our opinion, made it the “best Olympics ever”.