

Athens - 2004

Kevin Donovan

Travis and I have something in common with the Greeks. It has to do with waiting until the last minute. They waited until the last minute to finish upgrading their venues so they were in better condition than when they were last used two thousand three hundred and ninety six years ago; and we waited for the last minute to decide to go. Sure, we had talked about it, Mike, Travis and I. The three of us had an enviable streak underway, having been to the Olympics in Atlanta, Nagano, Sydney and Salt Lake. And my streak even stretched back to Lillehammer in '94. But I was pretty certain this would be the year the streak ended

Contrary to the light and pleasing atmosphere of the last Olympic Games, it's not quite as easy for an American to just stroll into the nearest worldwide pub and start up a friendship with a native anymore. We have regrettably become one of the most disliked nations in the world, importing a new brand of ugly Americanism by invading a country "preemptively".

But that's another essay for another time.

The upshot is that a certain degree of wariness and reserve is now a far more appropriate behavior than our typical swagger. Maybe going all the way to the near Middle East of Greece wasn't as dangerous as it might sound, but it certainly wasn't going to be comfortable, and that was enough for me to put it out of my mind. I could start a new streak when the winter games arrived in Turin, Italy in 2006.

But then all those people from around the world marched into the stadium, the flag was raised and the torch was lit, and then Travis began channeling the Olympic Gods with an e-mail that wondered what the hell was up? How could we not go to the very place that the Olympics were born? That was just very "un-Olympian" of us.

We were feeling the magnetic pull, the gravity of the life-force gathering together. And we were feeling very left out. So I began to harmlessly think it through on my own, or at least I thought I was on my own. There was the money issue. I don't have much money these days and our darling airline is teetering on the precipice of bankruptcy.

"Good reason to go now then," said Athena.

I suppose I should defer to her, being that she is a patron of wisdom among the gods and goddesses.

"But there's no one to take care of my pets while I'm gone," I said

"How do you know that? You haven't even asked anyone," said Hermes.

As a messenger, maybe he had taken care of that already for me. Still, the flights look horrible for standby.

“We don’t have a hotel and of course, we don’t have tickets to any events,” I said.

“Now when has that ever stopped you?” said Zeus.

I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was questioning my manhood. He’d been talking to Travis already.

“I’m too old for this,” I finally said.

“No you’re not,” said Aphrodite.

For a 3000 year old goddess, she had really kept her figure. The words “too old” had made it from mind to mouth, and that, I had to concede, was ungodly. Her scolding was gentle but direct.

“It is the nature of the spirit to overcome the constraints of age, to transcend the physical through life and even beyond it. It is all we have that endures. You may no longer match your fellow man in strength and speed, but you can certainly match him in spirit. It is up to you to try. We will help you the rest of the way,” she said.

She talked me into it.

The pieces started drifting into place. The pets would stay with a friend, the vacation days were approved, and the flights, well, the gods did say I had to try, and they were using Travis as their medium. We caught a Saturday morning flight up to JFK with plenty of hours to spare before the single flight to Athens that evening at 5:30p. The agent gave us a bit of smirk, I suppose because she thought, even being overbooked by 18 people, we were still crazy enough to try to get all the way to Greece. As if I had a choice under the watchful gaze of the gods.

Saturday August 21st - 12:45pm – Kennedy Airport – New York

After an early flight out of Atlanta, we found a bar near the international gates. The bartender was an extremely skittish Hispanic woman whose concern over her job was entirely palpable throughout our term of patronage. We asked her to change the TV channel to the Games and she immediately explained that the channels of the TV were restricted so that no one could watch any porn. I don’t *think* we looked like porn freaks.

“Okay, that’s fine. We just want to watch the Olympic Games.”

She grudgingly assented and began to fumble with the remote, finally landing on CNBC, which was handling the afternoon broadcast. The event was women’s beach volleyball, featuring four women competing in their normal bare midriffs and revealing uniforms.

“No, you can’t watch that,” said the bartender. She changed the channel.

“You’re kidding right?” I asked.

“I can’t let you watch that.”

“It’s the Olympics!”

“I can’t have that on the TV in case there are children,” she said.

“It’s a bar! There are no children here.”

“It’s also a restaurant.”

She wasn’t budging. I sarcastically asked her if they sold alcohol.

“I’m not laughing,” she said with her arms crossed.

Ah, it was great to be back in New York, host city candidate for the 2012 Olympic Games, in which – if this bartender has her way – the beach volleyball competition will be played in full scuba gear. We would have to wait until we got to Athens before we could see anymore of the 2004 Games.

3:15pm - Kennedy Airport – New York

We were stretched out in the gate area of our flight when a premature darkness enveloped the terminal. Were they tinted windows, or was it really that dark this early in the afternoon? It was dark, because what followed was a torrential downpour with vicious gale force winds that rippled the building’s exterior.

“The Olympic Gods are at work,” said Travis.

Of course! People would be flying into New York from around the country to connect with their flight to Greece. *But not anymore.* Weather like this wouldn’t let them in, at least not until we got out.

5:30pm – Kennedy Airport – New York

But would it mean anything if our flight was also delayed (which it was)? So far there were not many people in the gate area. The delay was extended to 6:00pm, then 6:30pm, and then 7:00pm, but all through it, our names were still displayed high enough on the list to get us on, or so it seemed. Apparently we were missing a pilot, who was now en-route from Connecticut to come fly the plane. Not sure what happened to the original pilot, or why this guy was in Connecticut when he was supposed to be taking off, but it did look for a time like the whole mess would be our undoing and we’d be flying back to Atlanta that night. This was not necessarily a bad option. We had given it a shot. I’d be at my local in a few hours, I’d save some money and a few vacation days and I would be relaxing by the pool tomorrow.

“You will be at a pool tomorrow!” said Zeus. He sounded mad. “But it will not be your own!”

Okay, so maybe we should go to Athens now before we got hit by a lightning bolt from Zeus. He had already wreaked havoc on the New York area to keep all those connecting passengers away and that was very thoughtful of him, but he obviously wanted us to shut up and get on the plane. But first they had to call our names.

“Passengers Donovan and Werner,” said the gate agent.

We were going to Athens.

It took some time to get off the ground, the storms having created a backlog of zigzagging aircraft, each one slowly making its way to the end of the runway. But the clouds had now broken up and drifted out beyond Jamaica bay. A perfectly defined band of setting sunshine glowed behind the skyline of the city and out my window in the distance there was a brilliant rainbow.

I’m not making this up.

4:00am - The Atlantic Ocean + 30,000 feet

I only say 4:00am because that’s what it was back east, but we were somewhere over the Atlantic. We didn’t sleep well. In the first row of a coach section, there is a monitor with all-night programming. Unless you’re into all-night programming, this is simply one of the many methods of torture for transatlantic coach passengers. We did pick up a technique from the flight crew, however. By knotting two corners of the large flannel napkins that pass as blankets, the screen is effectively obscured. I probably got about an hour of sleep before the sunlight started pushing through the bottom of the window shade, but that was okay. We still had an hour to come out of our grogginess, and by the time we made Greek landfall, we were able to open the shades without total blindness.

I took a look. From 20,000 feet, the Mediterranean coast and its necklace of islands are uniformly brown with flecks and clusters of white residences. Where land meets water, there is an apron of turquoise that blends into the darker blue of the deeper sea. It is an un-deserted desert, arid but obviously inhabited with increasing density as the hills of Athens come into view. The plane banked around a low mountain and descended over fields of olive trees. It struck me as unusual that a country that had been populated for so long could still have broad stretches of farmland so close to its urban center. This was the timeless canvas upon which contemporaries had merely invaded but never really changed. They were simply the top layer of civilization.

Sunday, August 22, 2004 - 11:00am – Athens Airport

We had our to-do lists. Change our clothes, empty out the airline food from our digestive tracts, get a healthy supply of euros and figure out the best way to get

into town. I would normally take a greater role in logistics planning, but Travis had done the advance work, so I was happy to defer to him on direction and means of transportation into town. My smartest decision was to pack exceedingly light. Without a hotel, I expected to do a lot of walking, and I didn't feel like wheeling a suitcase through downtown Athens on what could be a long hunt. The extent of my personal belongings was limited to: two shirts, two pairs of shorts, jeans, a hat, underwear (which I probably could have left behind, since we *were* in Greece), running shoes (in case I needed to fill in for any of our runners) and of course, sandals. You might say I was carrying nothing but the modern equivalent of a toga and sandals. I got them all into a small backpack, so that when we left the airport, I was as ready as any un-showered hostel hunting college student could be for the adventure ahead. Of course, this particular look is probably what led the transportation information person to suggest we take the less expensive bus as a way into town rather than the train. We chose the train.

It was obvious from the gleaming marble throughout the station and platforms that this train was a product of the Olympics. Little credit is given to the Olympics for generating the urban renewal and infrastructure that host status brings with it, but no city in memory had transformed itself to the extent that Athens had. Throughout our stay, there were fairly clear cut lines between what was before and what has become. The trains were the most obvious, sparkling with precision and speed, from the airport into the subterranean corridors of an ancient city.

12:30pm – Monastiraki

The contrast between modern and ancient was greatest when we got off the train and came up out of the ground. We were in a square, bustling with people. We did a 360 and caught site of the dominant structure in our midst; the Acropolis loomed above, archaic structures visible atop manmade walls that blended with the default color of the city, the arid light brown we had seen from above.

I made my one directional decision of the trip and suggested we head down the largest thoroughfare at our feet. Within a few blocks we spotted a hotel. This would be easy, I thought. We'd be in a hotel room within a few minutes. Especially since it wasn't a particularly nice hotel, and I had heard a lot of people left the city to avoid the Olympics anyway. Piece of cake.

"All full," said the swarthy clerk upon our entrance. We then proceeded to encounter seven or eight communicative varieties of "no vacancy", (including hand signals) over the next few blocks.

"This may take awhile," I told Travis. To make matters more difficult, there were people who looked just like us, ahead of us, scouring the landscape of hotels

for rooms. If there actually was a room in the area, they would get it first. We had to either leapfrog them or change direction.

We took a turn along Pireasus street and entered a place called the Hotel Elite behind a couple. This was a long shot considering there were people already checking in in front of us. They probably got the last room. But I had to see it through just in case.

“Any rooms available?”

The guy looked up at his cubbyholes with the keys in them and then finally turned back to us.

“Two people?”

“Yes.”

He pulled a key with a bulky plastic key chain from one of the cubbyholes and placed it on the desk in front of us. We had ourselves a room. And at only \$150 euros, we recognized that thanks were due to the Olympic Gods. It would require an offering, and we soon realized what it was. The room was only available for a single night, but we could get a second night in a room without air conditioning if we wanted it. We wanted it.

The room was actually two rooms – a suite of sorts, with two beds, our own bathroom, a TV and even a refrigerator. Sure, it was stark, like many European hotels, but now, with an established base of operations, any deep-seeded anxiety that we previously felt creeping in was now being replaced by the Olympic euphoria that we had journeyed to experience. Our pilgrimage was complete.

3:45p – Hotel Elite

We returned to the street and found the neighborhood subway station that would lead us to the train out to the main Olympic venues. It was exceedingly easy, and within 45 minutes, we were at the gates of the Olympic Sports Complex. A swarm of scalpers swirled around us– the same ones who pop up at every Olympics, with rolls of money and fists of tickets in their little fanny packs, hawking the visitors as they descend from the platform.

Travis has become an expert at exploiting what we agree is a perfect market. Unless you are intent on seeing every minute of a competition, the market value of desired tickets will plunge moments after an event starts, and suddenly they are yours for less than face value. The exception was probably that evening’s track and field competition – a hot ticket featuring the finals of the 100 meters, traditionally the ten seconds that bestow the title, fastest man in the world.

Because of the consistency of the scalper persona, Travis easily picked out a novice at the base of the platform. He sent me over to investigate. Sure enough, it was a young Brit, just trying to get rid of a couple of track and field tickets for the morning session the following day. They were \$30 euros each. He was

exceedingly pleased to take \$40 USD for both. We accepted his generous thanks, being the humanitarians that we are. That covered track and field. Now we didn't even need to get to the evening session that night, but we did want to get in the gates of the complex, something you need a ticket to do.

After much haggling, we landed some women's water polo tickets for a session that was already underway. Two tickets for \$60 euros each fell into our hands for \$40 USD total, and we made it to the pool in time to catch the second of two games.

Zeus was right. It was Sunday and I was at the pool. But I can't say it was peaceful in there.

5:30pm – Olympic Aquatic Center

The match between Hungary and Italy had just begun when we took our seats. I am convinced that the object of water polo is to drown your opponent. The game is peppered with near constant whistles from the referee, which is a signal to one of the players to stop assaulting the other. Without that whistle, the game is basically just one very wet boxing match, except that kicking is also allowed (as any underwater camera reveals).

Another aspect that is well beyond my comprehension is the strength of these women. I think I could play the game myself if either 1) it was played in four feet of water, or 2) I could wear water wings. But it is not and I can't. Consequently, the body strength of those who actually do play is off the charts. They seem to be able to swim without any fatigue. Even during timeouts, they are able to tread at rest, an oxymoron for most of us mortals. Then there's the previously mentioned underwater camera, which reveals a ferocious amount of kicking and kneeing, proving once again that women show no mercy to each other below the surface, not that the above surface action was much different.

The crowd was boisterous, as one might imagine Italians and Hungarians to be. Lots of chanting and flag waving among the throngs. Curiously, the Italian flag is an exact replica of the Hungarian flag if you turn it sideways. Which means that the Hungarian flag is also an exact replica of the Italian flag if you turn *it* sideways. This means that we could have passed for a fan of either country if we had a perfectly square flag and new when to turn it.

Italy prevailed, gloating and floating as the horn sounded.

6:00p – At the top of the swimming pool bleachers, in view of the Velodrome

We could clearly see into the nearby velodrome and catch the cycling competition. Because we saw it live and in person, we considered this to be a *counted* event in our portfolio of event attendance. *Final decisions from the Olympic Gods regarding this claim are currently pending.*

7:15pm – Olympic Sports Complex

Fortunately, neither Travis nor I are the kind of people who become ornery without consistent meal times. Our state of hunger involves a perfect baton hand off between metabolism and adrenaline, so there was no griping by either of us. But it was time for some food anyway.

After some failed last ditch efforts to get track & field tickets for that evening, we found the giant quadrennial Coca Cola fold-up traveling road show and purchased some bad hot dogs to go with our good Heinekens. We also had time to take in the venues and Olympic park. The architecture is stunning, marked by a walkway that is encased in a long chain of brilliant white arches. There is a feeling of airiness throughout, with sweeping arms of steel that both embrace and shade the sunlight. All along the way are Olympic volunteers – the home town people- perched atop lifeguard chairs with megaphones and information for all of the visitors. They were exceedingly nice, caught up in the euphoria and pride of their city. It was clear from their demeanor and the surroundings that Athens had done it, and their nature was suffused with both enthusiasm and relief.

Our fists full of sustenance, we found a couple of chairs at the next best place to being there: right in front of the giant screen, displaying the first night of track and field a few hundred yards away.

The first night of Athletics is traditionally a big night, featuring the finals of the 100 meters. The screen had to be at least 20 feet tall, allowing us to see what we would have never seen had we been inside the stadium.

We could see into the athlete's eyes.

The eyes reveal why the Olympics are different. These are people we've never seen before and will probably never see again. They are facing the defining moment of their life, and in their eyes, before the gun goes off, one can clearly see the struggle between discipline and emotion, the former an accumulation of years of training, the latter the awareness that it all comes down to this.

Justin Gatlin was the surprise winner of the 100 meters, inching out the favored and eternally cocky Maurice Green. The shock, tears and joy exploded out of Gatlin with the same suddenness and power that got him out of the blocks just tens seconds earlier. There were no announcers describing the images. There didn't need to be.

11:00pm – The Plaka

We took the train back into Monastiraki and began our own traditional Olympic event, typically known by friends of ours as “prowling the streets.”

In many respects, the streets of Athens appear to be just one big restaurant at night. There are few conventional bars or pubs as we imagine them. People sit at

tables rather than bars, and the tables cover the streets. And they seem to be always full. These people never sleep.

Travis wanted to send his wife an e-mail so we found an internet café on the top of one of the buildings. While he was doing that, I surveyed the neighborhood from a balcony. A few buildings over, on a rooftop, there was a party going on. That was where we wanted to be, I decided. On the outside of the building there was a red, white and blue striped logo over the word, “Russia”. I began running through my inventory of Russian words, which only lasted a fraction of a second, because I only know one word “Nyet”. We rang the doorbell and were met by a gentlemanly bouncer, and I totally understood him because he used the one word I know in Russian. He was very nice about it though, even after I dropped a name. “The list is very restricted,” he said with a smile. It was worth a try.

1:00am - Monastiraki

We started back to our hotel, popping into bars along the way. It was a short walk thanks to our prime location, but we needed something to cap off the night. It had been a long time since the hot dogs. I wanted Ice Cream. We found it right across the street – wonderful pure creamy gelato type stuff. Even after a typical “arrival in Europe” day – a day that lasts two days - I wasn’t even that tired, but we had track and field the next morning, so it was time to call it quits. Once in bed, sleep was a quick plunge, overtaking the adrenaline, in a small hotel on the seventh floor, under a full moon in the center of the city that was once, and now again, the center of civilization

“Welcome Home” is what they were telling us. The Olympics had returned to their birthplace, but along with the Games themselves, perhaps every ancient and precious value that they embodied would once again be welcomed into our modern souls.

There is a clearly defined purity; a rawness to the Greeks. They are justifiably proud of their ancestor’s role in defining what it means to be civilized. Certainly there were, and there continue to be lapses, but the transcendence from the principles of pure domination of the *some-over-the-few*, to an understanding of the power of the common good undoubtedly set our species on a course toward all of the post-primordial achievements that have benefited mankind. So much of humanity’s potential was unlocked in Greece; the act alone of being civilized – of

engaging in higher levels of thought, debate, government, arts and literature – represented a milestone in social evolution.

Of course, it did not manage to erase our darker instincts, one of which is the constant assessment of the self compared to others. Typically, this question has been answered through the ages by warfare. Man instinctively loves war with his darker heart, and history tells us that it almost always wins the battle with his lighter one. The desire to dominate connotes an outcome of destruction. This powerful drive flew in the face of what one would consider civilized.

There had to be a better way.

There had to be some *outlet* to this desire to “compete” without the uncivilized consequence of death.

And so it began in the small town of Olympus, a competition that would allow civilized men to assess themselves against others. They would have tests of strength, speed, intelligence and strategy, with victory celebrations and hero worship previously reserved only for victorious warring armies. This was the outlet that provided the test that could see just how much faster they could run, stronger they could be or higher they could jump. I don’t think it’s ever been said before, but I do believe that the entire purpose of the Olympic Games was to save lives and preserve civilization without sacrificing the natural drive and undeniable beauty of competition. This noble institution created a culture of competition without death. But apparently the goodwill we associate with the Olympics was not as prevalent in the early days, perhaps because it was treated like the war it replaced. However, over time, the culture of competition presented something new: an appreciation and respect for one’s opponent that remained, in large part I believe, because they were no longer “dead”. In later years, the dynamics and subsequent benefits of teamwork were also discovered, and these have since been applied throughout corporate and government institutions.

Oh, I suppose someone else would have discovered sports in one century or another, but the hardest part of this discovery was the acknowledgement of our instincts and the faith in mankind that competition could exist without the casualties. (Yes, I can imagine that first contest being a bit testy). Sports and friendly competition are now so ingrained in modern culture that we can’t help but take for granted this achievement of civility that took place 2400 years ago upon the rugged land that is Greece. It is a beautiful and enduring gift to mankind.

Monday, August 23, 2004 - 8:00am – Hotel Elite

It was sunny early. Monday morning in Athens is significantly more bustling than Sunday. We had one task ahead of us before we hit the streets. We had to pack and check our bags with the front desk so they could move us to the only room they would have for us that night – the one *without* air conditioning. We had the barest of continental breakfasts before we left (bread, jelly, coffee and juice), because like almost all European hotels, ours included breakfast. Then we were on the subway to the venues.

The Games turned out to be many millions of dollars over budget, in part because of these subways. They may be beautiful, artistic, clean, smooth and fast, but all that had nothing to do with the cost overruns. No, it wasn't the expense of labor and materials that ate all that money. It was instead, a pit, literally. Because you see, the modern city of Athens will forever rest upon the ancient city of Athens. Consequently, every time you stick a shovel in the ground, you hit some priceless artifact from ancient history. The excavations for the subways unearthed numerous undiscovered structures, in some cases layer upon layer of them. Many of the stations serve as small museums full of pots and goblets and jugs, crafted by artisans that would have never guessed the impact they were having on mass transportation. One station is literally a window into the past: a wall of glass provides a cutaway view of what can only be described as an ancient townhouse. A fixer-upper if there ever was one.

9:15am – Olympic Sports Complex

We arrived at the venues and scouted for a second event of the day. It would be softball – easy tickets at face value for later that afternoon. We would be privileged to witness the gold medal game between the U.S. and Australia.

Aside from the earthen brown of the arid land, the dominant colors of Greece are blue and white, and their flag is a perfect match. Whitewashed edifices clutter the hillsides against a backdrop of blue sky and sea. The architecture of the Olympic venues updates the look, framing the blue sky with arches of white. This is most obvious at the Olympic Stadium. The building features two parallel cylindrical arches that leap into the sky, pulling the roof up with it. The roof is partially transparent, maintaining the blend of blue and white while still providing much needed shade. It is a striking and graceful building, fully fit for athletic feats that are higher, faster and stronger than ever before. This ability to capture the sky is consistent throughout all of the venue architecture. The structures are huge, but they are not “massive”.

We settled into our seats for the women's hammer throw, an event featuring violently twirling tosses of a ball and chain. Considering the symbolism, this would be a great “poster child” fundraising event for women's rights.

We were not far from the point at which they let go of the apparatus, which is why the hammer throw is perhaps the only Olympic event that originates inside of a steel cage. More than once, the hammer was thrown into some portion of the cage that protected us. A successful throw must exit through a narrow aperture and head towards a landing zone that radiates outward. Still, there were photographers camped out at their own peril on the border of this zone, presumably because it's hard to get a good picture of someone through a cage. Occasionally, when the hammer skimmed the edge of the cage and veered toward the edge of the landing zone, it would scatter the paparazzi like an incoming mortar.

We were on the third turn, so it wasn't the best perspective, but we did see the first three events of the decathlon (100 meters, long jump and shot put), and the first heats of the women's 200 meters. We stayed until the very end of the session and then decided to go have some authentic Greek McDonald's hamburgers. This was purely a matter of hunger combined with laziness combined with a tight time schedule. It was essential that Travis elbow his way on to the Today Show set and display his yet to be created "*I Love U Heather*" sign for his wife, along with Matt, Katie and Al. While I watched some other action on the Samsung giant screen, he scampered off to his sign-making studio, which doubled as a restroom. Our short stay in Athens demanded that we never miss an opportunity to multi-task.

2:30pm – The Today Show set

In Athens, the Today show started at 2:00p. We spent a few minutes loitering in camera range, listened to the hooting and hollering of Matt & Katie fans, and then finally began the trek to our next venue. Big whoop.

4:00pm – Helliniko Olympic Complex

Softball required a train to a bus, but like so much of the transportation, it was a breeze. This venue was on the opposite side of city, just a few hundred yards from the Mediterranean. There were twin stadiums – one for softball and the other for baseball, along with a large windowless building for fencing, handball and probably a half dozen other sports. A third stadium consisting of a set of parallel bleachers stood off in the distance. That one was for Field Hockey and it appeared to be filled to capacity.

In the meantime, a groundswell of interest in the softball game had grown over the course of the day; tickets that were at one point easy to get now seemed increasingly scarce, perhaps because there was now a realization that we were entering the arena of the gold medal game.

It was perfect little field, a patch of clayish brown, then green, enclosed by a turquoise fence 220 feet from home plate. And then the contrast – arid Greek hills on the horizon, speckled with whitewashed villas under the eternally blue sky.

Up to this point in the softball tournament, the American women were undefeated and unscored upon. They were about as dominant as any team could be, but the Australians, in their green and yellow colors (the only country I know of whose colors don't match their flag), were primed for an upset. Ah yes, Australia. Their Ozzie colors and blond pony tails brought back memories of Sydney. Cheeky beauties they were; 'gulls' out for a g'day at the ballpark.

But the USA broke on top first and gradually pulled away with Crystal Bustos busting two home runs, the second a shot to left that would have been out of any major league ballpark. And this against pitches traveling 45 feet at over 60 miles per hour – the equivalent of a 90 mile per hour fast ball.

The Aussies did manage to get a run, but the U.S. played flawlessly. The only snafu throughout the game: all of the kegs seemed to run dry, giving me plenty of time to joke with the Australian friends that I had made while waiting on line. "If they're going to host an event between the U.S. and Australia, they need to get the beer situation figured out before the game starts," I said. This was followed by a small chorus of "Yer roit, mate."

I didn't want it to end, but unfortunately, as I was preparing for singing during the seventh inning stretch, the game ended. And that's when I discovered they only play seven innings. The American girls piled on to the field and mobbed their pitcher. We waved our American flags with the other Americans and celebrated. A half hour later, the field was filled with podiums and the US, Australia, and Bronze winning Japan all marched out on to the field with decorum for the medal ceremony. The flag was raised right above our head (since we were now down near the railing), and so we got to sing anyway.

We spent the next hour outside the stadium like star-struck groupies, waiting for our girls to come out. I wanted a picture with Jennie Finch, a striking blond that has been known to strike out major leaguers (if they want to risk it). Jennie is one of those woman that men like me unconsciously try and find something wrong with because she's simply too perfect to imagine. She even throws perfect games!

A few of the players came out, as did the Japanese; all of them exceedingly gracious to the fans, but the Americans had understandably been monopolized by the media. While I'm sure they were peppered with questions like, "What was going through your mind when that ball was traveling and 60 miles per hour right at your face, and also, what are your pets' names?" this only delayed our meeting with them beyond the point of tolerance.

Well, there was always the Mediterranean, and I had never been to the Mediterranean. We found our way to a near deserted beach a few hundred yards from the stadium as the sun set beyond a pair of Greek islands. A couple was swimming, suggesting we get rid of our clothes and jump in. We went in, but not to the point of removing clothes. The water was calm, beautiful and clear. It

would have been very romantic if either Travis or I was a woman. But he's married and I'm a flaming heterosexual. Yeah, we were in Greece, but don't even think about it.

We had seen our events, and gone from Helliniko and back, so now, with less than twelve hours before it was time to head home, it was obviously time to start doing Greek tourism things. We caught the bus back into the center of the city and walked along the promenade at the base of the Acropolis. Hundreds of people were strolling, and a symphony orchestra was getting underway in an amphitheater just beyond an ancient stone wall. The Parthenon glowed from above, barely visible over the rim of the acropolis. We wanted to climb it – a great caper to our pilgrimage - but they were closed for the evening. Well, it's been there 3000 years; I suppose it'll still be there if I ever returned. We headed back to our hotel.

This was probably a good move, since we had left our bags with the front desk and weren't sure yet what room we would be in for the night – only that it would be lacking air conditioning. I was beginning to like our hotel though, especially when they smiled upon our return. We had proven our reliability and so had they. We lugged our stuff up to the room, did a quick change of clothes and hit the streets again. Destination: The Holland House.

I believe the Dutch are still the only people that will let the general public into their "house", which in this case refers to the temporary gathering place for a country's athletes, coaches and fans. We had first experienced the Holland House in Atlanta when it was semi-private and relatively modest. Since then, the Holland House has evolved into one of the hottest night spots at every Olympics. The operation had grown, now serving several variations of local and popular foods, and of course, the freshest Heineken anywhere outside of Amsterdam. There was a long line beyond the door, but it moved quickly and we were in within twenty minutes.

A band was playing and TV's were tuned into a Netherlands station covering the Games. We found seats at a table with an elderly Dutch couple and watched what had become a recurring episode of bad Gymnastics judging. Paul Hamm had won the gold for the U.S. as a result of a judging error. On this evening, he was waiting to perform on the high bar when the crowd erupted into a torrent of whistles, booing and obscenities over the judges scoring of the previous athlete's routine (a Russian). And then we saw something we had never seen before. The judges decided to change the guy's score. The spectators had actually heckled the judge into raising it for the Russian. Insane!

Still the crowd booed, until the Russian athlete finally came out and made a very sportsmanlike gesture, asking them to calm down just so Hamm could do his routine. The couple next to us joined us in sympathy and mild disgust over what

had become a major story of the games – the bizarre behavior of gymnastics judges. The losers pointed to the travesty that occurred in Salt Lake, when the French figure skating judge admitted to being coerced, leading to dual gold medals. Now it seemed as though everyone who was a victim of questionable judging wanted a gold medal. I *don't* think this is what the Olympic Gods had in mind.

12:00 midnight – The Holland House

With the orange of the Netherlands all around us, it seemed like everyone was turning into a pumpkin. But they kept dancing, and this had the looks of one of the numerous all night parties. Despite the fact that there was little to look forward to back in our non-air conditioned room, we needed to calculate our potential sleep deprivation and plan our escape the next morning. I was reminded of the power of the equator when we walked back through the Plaka. Every table was full, every human looking as if sleep was no where near a part of their agenda. Perhaps if we had another 24 hours we would have squeezed into a table and communed with the natives – something I regret not doing enough of – but we had captured the essence of the Greeks and a few great events to go with it.

Travis's internal compass performed brilliantly that evening during our walk back, all without any disagreement from me. As previously noted, I had voluntarily chosen to turn mine off and I didn't want another Nagano incident, in which I had circumvented much of the city before landing back at the hotel. On this night we made a beeline, but before we headed in, it was time for our ice cream.

As cool as the ice cream tasted, it didn't cool off our room, so sleep was a challenge. I opened the door to the balcony for a little while, but that only yielded sporadic strings of cacophonous Greek conversation that efficiently wafted up the seven stories and into our room. I shut the door and ventured fitfully into a shallow sleep, dreaming of a room full of ice cream.

Tuesday, August 24, 2004 - 8:30am – Hotel Elite

If we didn't get out of Athens on one of the two overbooked flights, we would have to hope that a hotel room in the vicinity would house us. The train brought us right in with hours to spare. Still, we had the ominous feeling that comes with entering a foreign airport, seeing hundreds of people with thousands of bags, and knowing that every one of them is confirmed on their flight and you're not.

We would get two chances.

12:30pm – Athens Airport

Travis was, of course, on a buddy pass, and since it was from me, he had no visible problem with our intent to split up if necessary. And it looked like that's what was going to happen. My name was called, and I was shuffled through the gauntlet of security to the gate area. It was going to be close. It was close. I didn't get on.

The next flight, a half hour later, was just fifty feet away, but through a series of glass corridors that required an escort. I sat down and waited in a cloud of doubt.

"Kevin, you should know better by now," said Athena.

"Know what?"

"Know that we're going to get you home. We certainly wouldn't have talked you into coming if we didn't think we could get you home. How can you not have faith in us?" she said.

She was right! Faith!

But what is faith? Is it a wholly religious term, or is there something universally human about it? I am inclined to believe in the latter, but it is still a strange and ambiguous concept to me, this idea of believing in something without any proof. And besides, hadn't my past experience served as its own proof? Had the gods ever failed me before? At what point would I finally believe? My weakness was being revealed in the face of strength – strength in the gods, in the athletes, in the enduring civilization of Greece, and in the Olympic Ideals. Travis had it – there was no doubt in his mind, especially since he had channeled the gods to get us there in the first place. I needed to stop being such a wimp about it and .

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"Passenger Donovan, please check the gate" (so you can pick up your boarding pass in business class).

Like I was saying, there was no doubt in my mind, and so I sauntered on board and accepted the glass of champagne. And with the help of my newfound faith, I willed Travis on board only moments later, and soon we were climbing out over the aqua blue of the sea-in-the-middle-of-the-land.

Faith. Allow me to return to it for a moment. The only fear I have is that of expectation, of taking for granted that which deserves to be so deeply cherished. Expectation erodes the joy, surprise and delight of the great unknown, and faith is an act of human will that generates expectation. But perhaps the void of pleasure that expectation creates can be filled with the joy of anticipation.

"You've figured it out."

"Socrates! What the hell are you doing here?"

"I am pleased with your internal discourse and I commend you for it. But more importantly, it is okay to have faith. You're not going to offend the gods if

you occasionally ponder the alternatives to it. That, my friend, is a sign of civilization.”

He looked kind of funny out there on the wing of the plane, his toga blowing all over the place and the frills of his curly hair – what was left of it encircling his bald scalp - rippling in the jet stream.

“Thank you sir. Can you also pass on my thanks to the Gods?” I asked.

“Who do you think I am, Pheidippides? Don’t worry, they know already. They’re gods. They know this stuff.”

These are admittedly anxious times, where true faith is in short supply and false faith is simply a substitute for fear. But the Olympics once again have delivered a ray of hope to the world, a window into civilization that is much larger than the one we saw in the subway station. This gathering of man transcends religion and all of the destructive anxieties that go with it, and despite all the scandals, politics and commercialism, the innocence of the endeavor remains.

There are forces of humanity, of tremendous goodness, that can and will overcome everything from the soul-diminishing nonsense of our day-to-day world to the ever prevalent instinct of war. These are the forces of good that are more powerful than any single nation or any man-made religion.

And so now, I have faith too.