

Salt Lake City - 2002

Tales from Olympia - Unpublished

Kevin Donovan

Five Rings, five Olympic trips, and this one is like coming full circle. It's been 15 years since Ed and I caught the last two seats on a spur of the moment flight up to Calgary, our first chance to see the Olympic flame in real life. We saw a few events, met the Jamaican bobsled team before anyone knew who they were, and felt the sense of humanity-as-one that is unique to the Games. We were living in Salt Lake then, a city just beginning to wake up (although many would say it's still asleep). Hosting the Olympics had been a distant dream for decades among the more progressive, but the resistant held a slight edge back in the '80's. Unfortunately Salt Lake City has never been a magnet for diversity, in large part because there is a shared appreciation for cultural isolation that is sustained by rampant human reproduction. Those of us that share conflicting values usually end up moving on, leaving behind only our worn ski boots and club memberships as opposed to a litter of diversity minded children.

Still, we had a great time during the years we lived there. It was a drastic change from our childhood surroundings and that's a big reason why the "Utah Years" were so special. And in our brief (in geological time) absence, I'm happy to report that Salt Lake City appears to have made its own progress, no thanks to those among us who are not considered "saints" (or at least not until we're dead). Returning to this beehive of a metropolis at the foot of the Wasatch brought back wonderful memories of our manifest destiny. We were pioneers in the most 20th century sense of the word, a wagon train of Toyotas, Hyundai's and Nissan's stretching from Hackensack New Jersey to the Great Valley of the Salt Lake.

Full Circle, because it was 1988 when we went on our first trip from Salt Lake City to the Olympics in Calgary, and now we returned to see our young city, "all grewed up" with the same fire in its own back yard.

The Karma had begun working well before we arrived. Mike and I had waited until January before finalizing a four-bedroom condo at the unbelievable price of \$600 a night. A condo that would sleep 9 if we could fill it. We didn't know who was coming and when, but we put the money down anyway, and within five days, we had confirmed all of our attendees, gotten their credit cards and began putting together our menus.

With enough people going for the week and a few people interested in part of the week, we devised "packages". The "Gold Medal" package would be for people staying the entire week and it would be priced at \$490 or an amazing \$70/night. Next was the long weekend package, from Friday to Tuesday aka, a Silver Medal package. This went to Tom and Tim for \$360 total or \$90/night.

Finally, Greg and Stan took the Bronze Medal package – three midweek nights – Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday for only \$180 or \$60/night. With a couple of minor adjustments, we came out exactly even with our payments and had the wonderful benefit of not needing to worry about any collecting of funds a full month before we got there. Never has Olympic Karma provided such advance notice of its magic. The invisible hands were already at work.

Thursday, February 14th 2002

Valentine's day in Tulsa – you haven't lived until you've tried it. I wanted to get in early on Friday and this was the only way to be sure I would. The nice part about flying from Atlanta to Salt Lake City is the high number of “secret passage ways”, and Tulsa is one of them. That's where I arrived, at around 11:00pm on Thursday night at the Hilton Airport Garden Inn or something like that. Usually, when they say “Garden” that's a clue that you might be either sleeping in a Garden, or that's where they get the food for the restaurant. Bottom line, it wasn't much. I thought, maybe one beer before bed. Maybe I could find me a nice Okie Valentine for a cocktail.

The “bar” was a nice shiny self-service pantry. I hung out at the pantry for a little bit, but no one showed.

Friday, February 15th

Oh, I forgot to mention, since the last Olympics, “the world changed”. We now benchmark the events in our lives in a manner similar to the way we track history as either AD or BC, except now we say pre or post 9/11. So now, in post 9/11, there was much concern that the whole concept of the Olympics is simply a dangerous anachronism that will unleash the worlds most evil arch enemies known to man. Not to diminish the seriousness of the tragedy, but I am of the school that if we don't diligently pursue our own optimistic ascendancy toward higher forms of civilization, then yes, “The terrorists win”. The nice part about such a phrase is that it comes in handy for just about everything. If we don't have the World Series “The terrorists win”. If we don't have the Super Bowl, “The terrorists win”. If I don't get my cat neutered by mid March “The terrorists win” (in this case, my cat would most certainly be a terrorist).

Regrettably, the sad reality is that the terrorists have won on some fronts, like for instance, not letting us go to the bathroom within 30 minutes of arrival in Salt Lake. The rule was that no one could get out of his or her seats once we were within a half-hour of landing.

This brings to my imagination the following terrorist conversation

Terrorist #1: “Sorry, I couldn't fly that plane into the Olympic Stadium”

Terrorist #2: “Why not?”

Terrorist #1: “We couldn’t get out of our seats within 30 minutes of arrival!”

Such are the knee jerk adjustments in response to fear. We have been called to action for the sake of action in a vacuum of cluelessness. The flight crew was certainly on edge, but when they gave us the “10 minute warning” notifying us that we only had ten minutes before we hit the 30 minute mark, they might as well have said “Attention terrorists, you now only have ten minutes to hijack this flight”. I do feel bad for them, but I also hope that the majority of us have enough “pluck” to stop cowering at some point.

Salt Lake has pluck

Last I saw Mike, we were in Australia. Seemed like yesterday, but here we were again. We got our long ride out of the inversion of the valley, up into the Olympic traffic and through the mountain pass that took us to the relative peace of Deer Valley and our condo. A fantastic place, four bedrooms, four bathrooms and a hot tub with a view of the nearest venue.

I won’t pick on Mike for his fussiness about the bedrooms, - the fact that he claimed one and then claimed the other once he found out mine had a TV - No, that would be simply mean petty gossip. So I won’t do that. It’s silly.

Truthfully, we were very happy. Very happy. And when the food arrived – a near weeks supply of provisions – we were even happier.

And then the others started to trickle in. It was going to be all guys, primarily because of the common phenomenon known as the “only girl” syndrome. It is a dreaded affliction of the opposite sex that defies rational explanation, but suffice it to say that there were no girls because the ten or fifteen girls that we did invite would not come for fear that they would end up being “the only girl”. And so they all canceled each other out in a giant rash of syndromatic femininity.

Thus, while civilization reached higher levels just beyond our snow-framed doors, the challenge among us men was to prevent the deterioration of our microcosmic civilization, the slow gradual “lord of the flies” like descent into the depths of caveman like grunts, farts, burps and drooling at the crotches of the female figure skaters.

I’m pleased to report that we failed miserably.

Along with Mike and me, Tom, Tim, Chuck, Jim, Brian, Travis, Stan, and Greg proudly raised the flag of Neanderthal man. Our small nation was regrettably not invited to Opening Ceremonies, but we did manage to conduct our own events (more on that later).

The hot tub was delightful and actually served as our very first stop. But after a few celebratory beers we were on our way into Park City via a private shuttle. Main Street, as expected, was teeming. They wisely closed off the street

and eventually got rid of the whole infamous membership process in favor of cover charges. Ah yes, the memberships: Technically, Utah is a dry state, but you can drink if you're eating (so you can drink in restaurants). You can also drink in the "privacy" of your own club, meaning you need to be a member of the club to get in. We spent much of the first few days at a place called the "No Name Saloon". Nice place, but as the natives were probably saying once the games began "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded." Still, we squeezed in, because during the Olympics, you never quite know who you might squeeze into. It was a good kick-off evening, with a western style meal at Texas Reds and delicious 3/2 Budweiser at high altitude to give us the placebo buzz that I remember so well from my Utah Days. And Main Street immediately took on a "Storgata" like atmosphere, modeled after the famous street that runs through the middle of Lillihammer and served as their center of social revelry.

Saturday, February 16

We all can be very thankful that Michael is now a key member of the staff of his fiancée's bed and breakfast. He had pre-ordered all of the ingredients and created a splendid eggs Benedict thing for the entire contingent. We were already spoiled.

Chuck arrived that morning and accompanied us into town before we would make our way to bobsledding. This gave us a chance for a few drinks and a better understanding of the man we would come to know simply as . . . Chuck.

Chuck is about 50, twice married and divorced, and with stories to tell. Lots of stories, stories that are so good to tell that he can't tell them. A genuine marketing guy, sincere in his embellishment and as we would later learn, the undisputed Gold medalist in the condo farting competition. During the course of our stay, he actually brought a toilet to its knees.

Time to head to the venue, and enjoy the pleasure of saying Olympic type things like "Time to head to the venue". I've never bought Olympic tickets in advance, but I did get some this time: Bobsledding, because that's why we go to the Olympics. It's the wackiest, most novel sport, and each time I see it I'm reminded that often the distinction between Winter and Summer Olympic athletes is not athletic ability but suspected brain damage. The bobsled recalls those people who used to go over Niagara Falls in wooden barrels. It was fun going with friends who had never seen it before. Not the greatest of spectator sports, but certainly a festival with as much international diversity as any event.

I must say that, having been to four bobsled competitions now, I think I've distilled the enjoyment down to one single sensation. When you go to your next bobsled competition, this is what I recommend: Stick your head over the rail and lean as close to the oncoming sled as you can.

Helpful tip: Avoid decapitation.

Feel the percussive blast as they go by at 80 miles per hour as if they really know what the hell they're doing. Listen, feel, see, and enjoy.

We waved our flags, tried to get on camera, drank beers - the usual things you do at a bobsled run. Then we went out for some of that Great Utah Thailand Food. A place called "U-Thai". Okay, I made that up - it was a bit more elegant than that. Actually very nice, but we were witnessing the classic example of a town being swept away by throngs of patrons like a fiddler crab in a tsunami.

After dinner we set back out to increase our familiarity with Main Street and observed the obsession over this Olympic's "hot item". A beret. This beret happened to be worn by the U.S. Olympic team, giving it a slight military air, (which was fine since, "The world changed") and the beret itself, something of a magical quality.

The Magic Beret bestows upon its wearer powerful forces of self-absorption. The owner of the sacred piece of floppy flannel could be seen parading proudly up and down the street, especially past the long line of people waiting to buy one. \$19.95 off the internet, but the sheep population of Main Street either hadn't discovered the internet yet, or perhaps they thought they were politely waiting to clear security for Main Street. At the same time, people were paying hundreds of dollars for these things just for the right not to stay on line (there were apparently no problems with supply).

Mike got one. Jim got one. Travis got one. Chuck got one. And the rest of us retired to our lowly world of lesser human beings.

The biggest winner in all of this was a Canadian company called Roots. They somehow deposed Sara Lee/Hanes as the official uniform provider and immediately hit the jackpot with their design. And so our U.S. Olympic uniforms were proudly manufactured . . . in Canada.

Sunday, February 17

I used to ski all the time when I lived out here. I skied my brains out. Skied for work, skied for play, skied right through that first year in Utah, almost every weekend. I actually got tired of skiing, and extremely picky. After skiing the greatest snow on earth, I refused to ski on anything that had a hint of ice on it. Also, I liked spring skiing, so it couldn't be cold (ruling out everything east of the Mississippi and West of the Atlantic). I didn't like long lines, because in Utah I never had to deal with them. And don't try and charge me more than \$30 for a day of skiing (didn't have to do, don't wanna do it). In short, I became an extremely high maintenance skier. So then I tried snowboarding.

Deer Valley, the pristine home of "lifestyles of the rich and famous skiers" hosted the half-pipe snowboarding competition among other 'rad' events. Now

that boarding is legitimate, a blessed Olympic sport, I was certain that Deer Valley had come to their refined senses and would therefore let me do some boarding of my own.

“No, I’m sorry, we don’t allow snowboarding at Deer Valley” said the lift ticket woman.

There were a few ways to handle this. I could first ‘report’ to her that I saw some people snowboarding the other day there. And they were on TV too. Or I could just heckle the crap out of her in the following manner “You just hosted the Olympic Snowboarding competition!!! Did you know that?!! Did you?!!”

I restrained myself. Skiing would have to do. But then there was the boots and skis and pole and gloves and hats and all the shit that goes with skiing. We bought a full day ticket, waited on ski rental lines for almost two hours and finally got out on the slopes at quarter of noon, half-hour from the beginning of a half-day. A pain in the ass.

But the next four hours made up for all of it. Nobody on the slopes, a perfect day, perfect powder, great skis, and for me, the greatest skiing I’ve ever had with the exception of one euphoric episode at Alta. This was the kind of day where you race down the hill in the late afternoon to catch the lift one more time, the kind of day followed by a night of dreaming you’re still skiing. We couldn’t get enough.

Afterward, we found the nearest open bar that hadn’t been invaded by a corporate hospitality junket and enjoyed a perfect Apres-Ski evening. It was there that we witnessed a sample couple – the Svengali husband and his trophy wife. He from Hollywood, an agent to the stars. She, a shopper. No other word for it. She shopped, and I’m sure that whenever she saw a shop as she did in the place we were in, she shopped it, returning with booty so it wouldn’t “get away”. Something of a huntress, she had bagged a big one in her husband and now had won the right to shop wherever booty was available without regard to the peasant concerns of price, usefulness and durability. They had arrived on the G-5, which is filthy rich people’s talk for a Gulfstream private jet. He seemed exhausted. I don’t think it was because of too much sex, but she was quite attractive so I suppose I could be wrong. In any case, the value exchange between them was clear.

Ironically, I had more energy after skiing than before. We did it all, including a big improvised dinner at the condo thanks to Tim and Travis. And then onward and outward to the No Name, the Wasatch Brewery and eventually a late night pizza.

Although its understandable that Salt Lake City would host an “American” Olympics, this one seemed more American than I had expected. I was lucky enough to find a few Norwegian brethren and sing the fight song from Lillihammer, and there were plenty of Canadians, but beyond that, it was hard to find the melting pot that I had become so used to in other countries. Maybe this

was a case where the terrorists had won, I couldn't tell. But we still made friends, and ended up closing down the street. We opted not to stay out at "Fat Boys" for the open bar that would last til 6:00am.

Monday, February 18

What did I do wrong to deserve the hangover I had that no one else seemed to have. I am beginning to acknowledge that the negative impact of alcohol is rising with my age and on this day it felt more painful than I can ever remember. It was one of those hangovers where you can feel your heart beating in your lips. It made me angry, because I was on vacation and suddenly I was not enjoying it. It had to be the altitude, because I don't remember drinking that much. Of course, that's probably why I don't remember. Either way, by the time the late morning rolled around, I was going to get out of bed and get with it. I was not going to let "The terrorists win".

Tim had gone into the Salt Lake and I opted to meet him back in Park City. I found a quiet place on Main Street where I could continue my re-hab and have something civilized, like tea maybe. I had hot chocolate instead, read a newspaper and concentrated heavily on reproducing brain cells.

He showed up, and then so did my friends Matt and Jane, and their two kids. Matt and I were original pioneers back in '87, he from Brooklyn and me from Long Island. We started with Delta on the very same day 18 years ago and so we have a bond that has weathered both time and turmoil. Last time I saw Jane, the kids, Katy 13 and Brian 10, were a baby and non-existent. This was part of the "full circle". Our history, our own leap back in time when we were crazy enough to move to Utah. Matt has remained, but I would claim that this is largely because he succeeded in reproducing. My failure to do so meant banishment to Atlanta – land of the single and childless.

We headed up to the top of Main Street and watched a hockey game on a big screen and then had dinner at the Wasatch Brewery. It was a large group: Chuck, Travis, Tom, Tim, Mike, Matt and his family. It was a nice extended family dinner that was rudely interrupted by the most beautiful, statuesque blond that I had ever seen in three dimensions. And she was drastically three-dimensional.

I don't consider myself a gawker, but one must remember that our condo had enough testosterone in it to fill the hot tub. So while young Katy and Brian and their parents enjoyed a family meal, my fellow cavemen and I slipped into a state of barely restrained tension more characteristic of sexually deprived rhesus monkeys. This was a girl that you just hoped had some flaws so you had an excuse to stop looking at her. She screwed up everything.

Tom and I tried to put an analytical spin on this, as if that was going to cure us. The nature of the beautiful woman, how her life is so very different than ours.

How she lives in a world in which she is always the center of attention. How she must be accustomed to putting people in a state of shock when she walks into a room. It's a strange and fascinating planet that she must live on.

We all wanted to live on that planet.

Matt took a couple of gulps of water following his discreet peek, and then we headed out on the hunt. Unfortunately, I was still considering myself in re-hab, so Tim and I hit the hot tub.

Tuesday, February 19

Time for another event. Jim had lined up some tickets to the Aerials and it was our job to hunt them down.

Aerials, in this case, are not the things connected to your car radio. Basically, Aerials involves a man or woman launching themselves seven stories into the air before turning themselves into a human gyroscope. Some of these guys spin so fast I'm surprised they come down. Its one of those "new" Olympic Sports, so its got the loud background music and unless the aerialist lands on their face, they almost always finish their stunt with excessive fist pumps to inform the judges that their jump was quite possibly the greatest thing that's ever happened to mankind. If they had a football they would most certainly spike it.

But first we had to get in. My own Olympic past includes a stint with my company working on our hospitality program in Atlanta. I came to know a lot of the "players", most of whom follow the Games wherever they go. By sheer coincidence, we ran into a few of them when we were picking up the tickets, and in fact, they were the one's who had the tickets. But like all Olympics, one finds the best and worst of humanity, and in this case, the company holding the tickets – Lucent Technologies – wanted to make an extra hundred dollars off of us. We were ignorant of that, and fortunately, we got them for what we expected which was a hundred each, virtually face value, rather than the \$200 each they wanted from us. This is probably why Lucent is or was near bankruptcy and perhaps how they think they'll come out of it. Although we were lucky, although tickets for this event were going for three and four hundred, I was a bit miffed by the specter of greed among those who are most often overflowing in tickets that will never be used.

Onward we went, Travis and I and not far behind us, Jim. We were lucky, but we didn't expect to see history. This guy named Ales from the Czech Republic did something called a "quint". That's five spins, twirls, whatever. Its not like we could have counted them – he was spinning too fast. It would have been like counting how many times a helicopter blade goes around while it's flying.

Anyway, the judges apparently were counting, and Ales won the Gold. They told us it had never been done before, and I would have to believe that, or qualify it slightly: No one has ever done that before . . . and lived.

This was a fun event, and the only one we could actually walk to. As we headed back, the second wave had arrived – Stan and Greg in the Deer Valley lodge. They joined us for the rest of the hike to the condo and then later we headed back into town. Following a delicious meal at Ciceros we began to disperse. I was almost dried out by now, but I did have a few in the bar downstairs before heading back. Something about that hot tub that kept me coming back to the condo, and of course the desire not to experience the pain I had gone through the day before.

Wednesday, February 20

We awakened to snow, the first time it had fallen since we were there. Travis, Jim and Stan headed for the skeleton, another new, or in this case, resurrected winter sport involving tossing ones body down the bobsled run on the equivalent of a cafeteria tray. A very tough ticket but they all got in. In the meantime, Greg and I caught a van down to the valley. We took a stroll through the Olympic Park, something that now marks every Olympic games. Basically, it's an "open to the public" trade show of sponsor pavilions. We could have been in Nagano, Sydney, or Atlanta – it was always exactly the same. The global economy in microcosm. But first, we would need to pass through security. Again.

Nothing wrong with this, since "the world had changed", but its noteworthy that we were among the millions who had become completely accustomed to the routine. This gave rise to what I can only label as "the official bodily position of the 2002 Winter Games". First, spread your arms, then spread your feet, then smile so you don't look like a terrorist. I didn't mind it, but when Travis found himself unconsciously starting to do it in restaurants, it brought home just how much our behavior has been changed. To overcome this, the security volunteers appeared to be a bit perkier than most. I think they were trying to infuse the security lines with a festive state of camaraderie, as if in the absence of any other activities, we might excitedly say to each other: "Hey, lets go wait on the security line!" Not a big deal, but when you consider we were waiting to get through to see a bunch of inflatable pavilions "presented by" your friendly neighborhood multi-national corporation, there is a bit of an irony.

We went into the Samsung pavilion and looked over the latest cell phones, many of which haven't appeared in this country yet. Or, if they have appeared, no one can find them. They're too small.

I concluded that they could only be made for Japanese fingers. Viva la difference, that no global economy can actually make people physically the same.

And so we may never see many of those phones in our country, unless our fingers someday evolve into sets of needle-thin styli.

Onward we went. It was raining in the valley, a bit dreary, but the city was striking in its growth. A beautiful light rail train now runs the length of the valley, something we'll probably never see in Atlanta. We headed out of the Olympic Park and over to the Marriott Hotel, home of Delta's hospitality program. This for me was another peak over the wall into the world of the spoiled and fawned over corporate gluttons, and I must say, it's much more gluttonous when viewed from the other side of the wall. I spotted one of the characters, someone I had last seen on the platform in Tokyo escorting Kristi Yamaguchi from Nagano.

Rob Prazmark is a nice fellow, but a pure and successful product of the hospitality machinery. Friendly and engaging, he will be eternally armed with tickets, athletes, contracts and VIP passes to carry out his lucrative corporate seductions. He invited me to a figure skating event Saturday night featuring all of America's sweethearts from the last 40 years. Tempting, but I would not be staying that long.

Back closer to earth, a fellow Delta employee had just arrived for hospitality duty and was already seeking escape from it. Bob Somers dumped his bags, got into his play clothes and we were out the door to find lunch. Our arrival at the hotel was a happy coincidence for him and us as well, since we had several afternoon rounds of beer and lunch expensed as we watched one hockey game after another.

Squatter's brewpub had been in existence since I lived there, and it is undeniably the best beer in the valley. Clean beer without any ill effects, we enjoyed a jovial afternoon as it poured rain outside. Greg's likely high point was his discussion with the waitress. He had already quit smoking several times before the trip, and after bumming more than one from her, he would continue his quitting through the duration.

The waitress was on temporary assignment at Squatters before returning to her real job training elephants in Katmandu. You realize of course that I can't make this stuff up. This required validation, so the three of us delved into our working knowledge of Tibetan elephant training guidelines to see if we could stump her. She nailed every single question.

Matt arrived for a few more beers and then Bob returned to the other side of the corporate hospitality wall. We drove down to the "e-center", the hockey venue that would host the next game, which coincidentally happened to be the first medal round match-up – USA vs. Germany. I'm not sure what the "e" is for. The building is a few years old, built during the peak of the Internet revolution, so that could be part of it. But then, it wasn't like we were going to an "e-hockey" game.

Stan, Jim and Travis had made their way down to the valley and beat us there, paying \$150 for \$250 tickets, except for Travis, who got his ticket for free

by first befriending and then becoming a part of an innocent and unsuspecting Mormon family. By the time the game was over, he had married into the family and was already sending his first offspring to BYU.

As for Greg, Matt and I, we stuck with our initial demands for three tickets together at \$50 each. An obnoxious Australian scalper laughed in our face before chasing us down to accept our offer as we walked away. And that was that. Those Australians seemed much nicer back in Australia. It was nearing the end of the Games and I got the sense that the scalper market had become quite frustrating by this time, with all the no-shows and undercutting. I couldn't really blame him, since we had just gotten our tickets at a cumulative savings of \$600.

But the ticket market had been extremely volatile from the start and more so for these Games than ever before. This is in part due to "the world changed" factor. For our part, we had managed to play these games to near perfection. The Olympic Ticket Racket, an event open to all attendees, involved the establishment of an initial market value combined with an assessment of the conditions leading right up to the moment of an event starting. If there were a lot of tickets passing between people, this was an indication that we had a good buyer's market and the anticipated price crash moments after an event started represented an excellent opportunity.

The seats were perfect, just over the goal that the U.S. was shooting at for the first and third periods. For the third period, we moved right down behind the goal. Aside from that, it wasn't much of a game. As expected, the USA trounced Deutschland, uber alles, 5-0. This was a team of NHL all stars, a team that had humiliated themselves four years ago in Nagano with their poor behavior on top of their poor play. This time they would not take anything for granted and for the first time since perhaps the late 1700's, America could almost be considered sympathetic favorites. They would go on to win the Silver, losing to a superior Canadian team.

Throughout the games, there was much reminiscing about the 1980 team that shocked the world by winning the Gold against the USSR and returned to light the cauldron the night of opening ceremonies. This caused some members of the Gold Medal winning 1960 US hockey team to be pissed off. They wanted to be remembered too. So sue us.

After the game, we packed ourselves into Matt's car and weathered the end of a freezing rain. We navigated another security checkpoint and climbed to the very top of the soggy bleachers for the medal ceremony of the evening. This one included the first black person ever to win a medal in the winter Olympics, strangely in the first woman's bobsled competition. It also included the Gold Medal in the Skeleton for Jim Shea, a third generation winter athlete who lost his grandfather in a car accident just about a week before the games started. The rain stopped, the medals were awarded and Matt and I sang the National Anthem. We

took a crack at the other anthems too but had to make up the words. Overall, it was a splendid show of dramatic lighting and flag raising.

One more stop - dinner at the Red Rock. Still another brewpub. The beer at this place was a cut below Squatter's, but a nice atmosphere. Fortunately, we had Matt to take us back up to the condo afterwards. We were tired, but not too tired to have a final few beers in the hot tub. Twas a great Olympic day.

Thursday, February 21

By the final full day, it felt like we'd been there for a month. We certainly had gotten our fill, but there was one last event, at least for Matt and I. Ski-jumping at the Olympic Park. No, we weren't going to actually do it, just watch these people jump off cliffs. There were about 40 of them and they came pretty fast, one after another, like paratroopers jumping out of their plane. This was the jumping portion of the Nordic Combined, an event presumably based on the conditions one would meet during a typical cross country trek. A trek that includes the occasional mountain. A mountain that you are supposed to jump off of. Nothing to it.

And so they did. They would jump and then walk right through the crowd, up some stairs, across the platform, and to the lift so they could jump off again. If they really wanted to make it the Nordic Combined, then I suppose they should have been required to ski up the mountain every time they jumped off, but we would have been there all day.

In such close proximity, the crowd understandably gawks at these guys, probably thinking, "this is what a lunatic looks like up close". The suits they wore - "ski-jumping" suits, I guess - seemed to be of a reflective space-age material. Perhaps some alien non-cloth kryptonite thing. I have no idea what they would be reflecting. Also of note - these guys were bigger than normal. Tall, but with wide shoulders. Like human kites, which is actually what they were trying to be.

I would imagine there is some type of Darwinian natural selection that goes with the discovery of a world-class ski jumper. Everybody who ski-jumps and is not shaped like a kite is probably dead. This would be analogous to the small and soon to be extinct colony of squirrels that enjoys playing in the street. And this in turn must make the "ski-jumping" attire business highly competitive and a supreme example of niche marketing.

The first round of jumpers actually jumped too far, resulting in the judges moving down the starting point so that the jumpers didn't fly so much. The crowd was roundly disappointed in this. I think we wanted to see these guys land in our laps.

It was over in just a few hours. Afterwards, Matt and I had lunch and shared our recollections of the early “Utah Days”. Then he headed back down to the valley and I took one of the many buses back into town.

The buses; vehicles from every major American city that seemed to have lost their way. There were Muni buses from San Francisco, Mountain climbing buses from Denver, Metro buses from Cleveland, and heavily billboarded buses from San Diego that had never seen snow before. And of course, in the valley was our beloved MARTA buses from the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority. In most cases, there was nothing rapid about any of the transit, but it was kind of funny to see this nationwide convention of buses, probably secretly complaining to each other and talking about how little funding they get back in their hometowns. I felt bad for the Munis. They always could be counted on to go up hills at sea-level, but not mountains at 6000 feet, and the Munis that we often took back from the Olympic Park struggled and strained mightily, wishing the Olympics were almost over.

It took me most of the afternoon to get back, just enough to get some hot tub time in and start barbecuing our final meal together. Unfortunately, the grill ran out of propane about five minutes after we loaded on the flesh. This led to us becoming acquainted with the broiler, which soon became acquainted with a smoke alarm so sensitive that it’s surprising one of Chuck’s farts hadn’t set it off days earlier. It went on for a very long time, eventually becoming part of our aural landscape until the genius of a condo maintenance person disengaged it by removing the batteries. We coulda pulled that one off ourselves.

Nevertheless, a full dinner of chicken and ribs served as excellent fuel for our final sojourn to downtown. At the basement in Cicero’s, I ran into Michelle, a friend from Atlanta and producer with the Weather Channel. I knew she would be producing some spots and insisted that I could be her man on the street. In fact, if I had stayed the extra day, I could have. Hours of practicing enlightening meteorological revelations like “Its snowing” would now all go to waste. We had some very bad Heineken (they just don’t know what to do with it when they put their prohibitionist hands on it) played some pool and watched the women’s figure skating. Sara Hughes, a 16-year-old Long Islander won the Gold Medal by default, the only contender who succeeded in not falling on her ass.

It should be noted that this is probably considered the premiere event of the Winter Games. They talk about the pressure and how the Gold medalist is assured a shower of millions for various Miss America type appearances. I don’t really get it, but the pressure is felt by both skating fans and Harley lovers alike. With each fall, the barroom crowd howled as our lil American girl got closer and closer to her Gold. And then when the judges made their final decisions, we remained clueless other than the fact that we knew Sara must have won the Gold because she was rolling around on the floor with her coach.

Friday, February 22

Departure day. We hit the airport just right, no lines and a chance of getting on earlier flights. All of us except Stan got on the first one, but he followed on the next one and we were all back in Atlanta by early evening. Greg and Stan stayed, and Tom and Travis joined us for an evening at my local pub, recounting the events of the last week.

My own observations included an acknowledgment of our shared competitive nature, whether it be for tickets, beret's, pins or other trinkets of fleeting value. I said I was going to write about it, but I wasn't sure what. The only thing I could say for certain was that I found it quite interesting, which lit a fuse of anger among my closest friends, in part because I was not taking a clear opposing position about this behavior (I had none), and in part because I appeared to them to be taking it much too seriously (not nearly). The discussion took an escalating path of circular argument deep into the night, until finally we were kicked out of the bar and had to find a few other bars to prolong the discussion until 4:00am. In conclusion, I can only say that being on the defensive gave me further insight into the forces that motivate us to beat our peers. Not a lot of insight, and certainly nothing worth taking seriously, but it all was most definitely. . . interesting.

And so another Olympics Games is in the books. We had the Olympic Karma once again in our favor, we flew faster, higher and stronger this time and we took a big bite out of the experience. Salt Lake City has come full circle as well. The Games and the way they were presented - with courage and pride and excellent organization - made me very proud to say I lived there once. As previously noted, Salt Lake has pluck

“The Fire Within” - the simple slogan of the Games - is representative of all humanity. The whole “flame” idea continues to be a perfect metaphor for the human spirit, but this short phrase takes it one step further, generating the consciousness and desire to release that part of us that is closest to our true nature as individuals, whether that nature be a human kite, a writer or a member of some large bureaucratic corporation.

There's much to be said for consciousness, and with so much “fire” going on in the world around us, nothing could be more inspiring as we go back to our daily routines.

The world has changed, but it hasn't touched the fire within.

