

## **ATHLETES CHEERED BY THOUGHT OF HOME CROWD**

**Author(s):**

JODY MEACHAM, Mercury News Staff Writer

**Date:** July 19, 1996

**Section:** Sports

More than half of the 7 million Olympic tickets sold were bought in Atlanta and surrounding counties, home to Newt Gingrich's red-white-and-blue faithful and America's Other Team, the Braves.

All of them, from Georgia hillbilly to Jimmy Carter, can - and will - yell U-S-A at the slightest provocation.

Is there a home-field advantage at these Games?

"Hell, yeah," said swimmer Tripp Schwenk of Sarasota, Fla. "Fifteen thousand fans at the pool and a majority of them cheering for the U.S."

Anticipating a preacher giving an invocation at tonight's opening ceremonies, Atlanta-born comic Jeff Foxworthy said, "Lord, let us welcome the foreigners from other nations and prepare them for the butt-whuppin' they are about to receive."

Even forgiving the reverend his Southern-fried patriotism, the U.S. Olympic team should benefit significantly from playing these Games on its own turf, mats, courts, pools and table tennis tables.

Four years ago in Barcelona, the host Spanish team - with a previous Olympic legacy encompassing all of four gold medals dating to the inaugural Games in 1896 - won 13 golds, seven silvers and two bronzes.

Unheralded Spaniard Fermin Cacho beat the man considered the world's best distance runner, Noureddine Morceli of Algeria, in the men's 1,500 meters. And the Spanish soccer team erased a 2-1 deficit in the second half to win the gold medal on the final day with King Juan Carlos in the stands.

The Spanish government had invested heavily in the success with a four-year buildup of financial support for its athletes, and the king contributed cars to the gold medalists.

In its way, the United States has done the same thing. U.S. athletes have received increased financial support over the past four years from the U.S. Olympic Committee. The unpopular summer Olympic Festivals were canceled and the money redirected into a program called "Hometeam '96" that, among other things, financed athletes' moving to the South for training and acclimatization.

All U.S. medalists will get prize money from the USOC - \$15,000 is the reward for a gold - and some individual sports federations are chipping in additional bonuses topping out at \$50,000 in swimming and weightlifting.

But the most significant home-field advantages are intangible: the lift of a sympathetic crowd, Mom and Dad sitting in the front row, the inspiration and opportunity to do your best in front of the people you most want to impress.

"The Georgia Dome is great," said Stanford gymnast Jair Lynch, whose parents will travel to the Games from Washington. "The only thing we're not prepared for at this time is Saturday when 40,000 screaming folks will be here. But I can tell you we will be able to deal with that."

This team is the oldest - average age 26.9 years - the United States has ever sent to the Olympics, almost six years older than the team that represented the United States in Los Angeles in 1984.

The eligibility of professionals, which has allowed Olympians to delay retirement, and new training methods have helped to inflate the team's age. But it also reflects how important a home Games was in keeping around a nucleus of experienced and successful athletes who might otherwise be in real estate by now.

Carl Lewis, 35, will compete in his fourth Olympics to cap one of the most distinguished careers in the history of track and field.

"There's probably a 90 percent chance I'd not be competing if the Games were not in Atlanta," he said. "But when they said 'Atlanta,' I told myself, 'You know, I can do this.'" Janet Evans was 17 when she won two gold medals at the Seoul Olympics. Now 25, she's back at her third Games and still the favorite in the 400-meter freestyle.

"My goal the last four years was to be on this Olympic team and compete on home soil," she said.

Wrestler Bruce Baumgartner, 35, will carry the U.S. flag in the opening ceremonies and has a good chance for his fourth Olympic medal. Sprint swimmer Angel Martino, 29, has five medal chances.

Even the "women's" gymnastics team is older. Three of the seven members are 19; two, including Amy Chow of San Jose, are 18. The oldest U.S. women's gymnast in Barcelona was 16.

Former world champion Shannon Miller, future Stanford student Dominique Dawes and Kerri Strug are the first U.S. female gymnasts to compete in a second Olympics since Julianne McNamara, Tracee Talavera and Michelle Dusserre from the 1980 boycott team hung around for the '84 Los Angeles Games.

"For the three of us who competed at the '92 Olympics, one of the reasons we decided to stay in was that because they were going to be in Atlanta," Miller said. "We love competing, and we love competing for our country. It's that much better to be competing in your country."

Copyright (c) 1996 San Jose Mercury News