

Retiring with an Olympic Spirit

Bob Christianson is what you would call an Olympic Historian. Attending every Games since 1976, the passion Christianson possesses for the Olympic Games is comparable to the grandeur for which the Games are known.

"I'll have five continents under my belt after Sydney next year," he proudly exclaims. "Spain, Norway, Canada, Japan, Korea, Yugoslavia, just to name a few," he says, "even the Soviet Union when the American athletes were forced to boycott."

Christianson worked for a major insurance company in New York City for 35 years before being forced into retirement through a strange mix of physical disabilities and corporate downsizing. Finding himself retired years before his original plan was understandably disconcerting, but Christianson managed to pick himself up and retire in Olympic style relying on a decades-long hobby to find a way to fill his days doing something he loves.

When asked the catalyst for his infatuation with the Games, Christianson affably relays a story about going to Madison Square Garden as a young boy with his father to watch track and field events as a reward for bringing home a good report card.

"The old guy," Christianson says, "would explain that, yes, these guys are great, but the best of the best are Olympic athletes!" This left young Christianson

both fascinated and inquisitive. Then a movie called *The Bob Mathias Story* was released in 1954 further captivating the young man and sealing his fate as an Olympic devotee.

Christianson can remember watching the movie in awe, drinking in every aspect of the Man and the Games. He remembers a particular scene depicting Mathias at the decathlon's pole-vaulting competition, an event that usually runs long and often loses spectators little by little before the end. Christianson noted in the film how during this event there were only a couple of hundred people in the stands. He remembers thinking, if I were lucky enough to attend the Olympic Games, I would never leave before the end.

In a serendipitous turn of events, Christianson found himself years later at another track and field event that often runs long. True to his word, Christianson was one of the last spectators in Montreal Olympic Stadium that day. As he looked over the stands at the dedicated fans, who did he see sitting down a few rows, but the great Bob Mathias!

After the first Games he attended in Montreal, Christianson purchased a packet of Olympic stamps as a stocking stuffer for one of his sons. The stamps were buried in the post-Christmas rubble when days later he began looking at them. Remembering the piles of memorabilia that he took home from Montreal (tickets stubs, daily programs, postcards, and one single pin of the Montreal

official logo symbol), Christianson found a fascination with the Olympic-related mementos.

Over twenty years later, the retiree is one of the foremost collectors of Olympic memorabilia, possessing over twenty thousand artifacts. His favorite collector's item, and ironically the thing that the six-foot-four Christianson is most known for is the Olympic Mascot. This historian is one of the foremost authorities on these funny little critters, possessing every mascot issued since they were introduced at the 1968 Olympic Winter Games in Grenoble, France.

Christianson basically collects anything Olympic, but his latest passion is Olympic music (he currently has a web site under construction: www.olympicmusic.info). His collection includes recordings of 1932 Olympic champion Mildred "Babe" Didrikson playing a harmonica solo, and Jesse Owens singing a song called "In the Jungle." He treasures, as well, a few Olympic torches, 40,000 pins, one winners' medal, several thousand tickets and 4,000 posters.

Christianson fills his days with Olympic-related activities using the Internet to make things even simpler for the avid collector. When he first went on ebay.com, a mere two years ago, there were 200 Olympic items listed on the website. Today there are approximately 10,000 such items listed. This surge has also resulted in a significant increase in items for typically difficult-to-locate target groups like Olympic collectors.

Collecting has also become somewhat profitable for Christianson — or as he puts it “at least it stopped the hemorrhaging cash-outflow-only aspect of my hobby” — and provided him with an entirely new link to the Games. Collecting has also introduced him to many people who, like himself, love the Games and want the spirit to last long after the torch goes out. “Collecting can fill the big gaps of time in between the Games, and thankfully there are only two years now instead of four,” he says.

When asked if the Olympic Games are something the average American retiree can attend, Christianson answers with an emphatic, “Yes, of course!” The best advice this historian can give to the Olympic neophyte is “Do not be intimidated.” There is something about attending the Games that intimidates people — especially Americans. Fellow travelers are often in awe when Christianson tells them of his Olympic travels. He finds it puzzling that Americans have a tendency to believe that the Games are something that can only be watched on television.

One easy way to break into the Olympic world is collecting. Pin collecting has almost become an Olympic event. Show up outside one of the venues during the Games with a few pins attached to your lapel or hat and you will undoubtedly get “propositioned” for a trade. “Pins are cheap,” says Christianson, “and they can easily be turned into money or tickets.” The Collector himself has traded pins for

event tickets at almost all the Games. To get started, want-to-be collectors can begin by using the Internet. Many retirees are finding a whole new world opened to them with their computer, and this applies to Olympic travel as well. Two good web sites are www.pintraders.net and www.olympianartifacts.com.

"Be resourceful," is another piece of advice that Christianson has to offer. "With a lot of money anybody can attend the games, via tour groups. But that's not the way to do it," he says. "If you are willing to be a little tolerant and patient, things can be done quite economically with the added benefit of experiencing the real atmosphere of the host city and the Games."

Quite often Christianson will arrive in the host city with no long-term reservations. Through phone calls and the Internet, he will secure one or two nights, and then after arrival find lodging for the rest of his stay. In Norway, his group of ten split the cost of renting a house from a silver medalist no less, making each person's cut a mere \$48 per night. The resourceful traveler found lodging in both Barcelona and Nagano for \$50 per night, and in Sarajevo for only \$11 per night! His latest success was through a group in Beijing that was offering month-long homestays with families who wanted to take advantage of the Games to improve their English language speaking skills. The cost for the month equaled approximately what many Americans opting for official U.S. travel agency package tours would pay for each *day* of their trip.

The Games have seen a substantial increase in popularity and Christianson has seen the repercussions of this increase firsthand. He remembers Opening Ceremony tickets in Montreal were \$2-\$3. "Opening Ceremony tickets in Beijing will be \$1,000 or higher," says Christianson. "That should not discourage anybody from attending the Games, however, as the Opening Ceremony is clearly the premier event."

"What is it about the Games that enthrall you?" One would have to ask. "It is pure sports," Christianson replies candidly, "and people watching those sports for the pure pleasure of seeing individuals strive to do their absolute best. There are no big contracts and no huge endorsements. The Games have an almost religious overtone with all the rituals and symbols, except with a minimum of the politics and negativity that are sometimes associated with those things."

"I was very glad to hear John Lennon's 'Imagine' performed at the closing ceremonies in Atlanta," Christianson says. "It just seemed to be the perfect anthem for the Games. The Olympic rings," he continues, "are one of the world's most recognizable symbols, just behind the Cross and the Star of David."

When asked if he has any Olympic dreams left to be fulfilled, Christianson replies enthusiastically, "Of course!" His goal is to be fully credentialed by the IOC. "I am already far ahead of where I ever thought I'd be," he beams. Christianson gave two speeches before the IOC in recent years

regarding Olympic memorabilia and even had a question addressed to him by President Samaranch. "To me, it was the equivalent of a Catholic meeting the Pope!"

After the Atlanta Games, Christianson and his group wrote a letter to Samaranch, complaining about the lack of adequate programming available to Olympic spectators listing the events currently taking place and the previous day's results, etc. The group likes to think they had something to do with the fact that Sydney is now going to have a complete sports program with some 30 different sections (one for each sport).

When asked if any of his children share his passion for the Olympic Games, Christianson replies, "Maybe not a passion..." his voice trails off, "but, all four of my sons have attended Games with me." Christianson ticks off the statistics proudly, "Let me see, Bob went to Moscow and Montreal; Nick went to Barcelona; Don went to Lake Placid, Atlanta, Nagano and Lilyhammer; and Joe went to Calgary."

Christianson says enthusiastically, "My granddaughter has a love of sports. Who knows? Perhaps she might make it to an Olympics in volleyball, track and field, or even as an Equestrian"

There is an abundance of hope for that torch of passion to be passed along!

