

# Jock Talk: Enough already

## NEWS

Published 01/16/2014

**by Roger Brigham**

[jocktalkroger@yahoo.com](mailto:jocktalkroger@yahoo.com)

Team SF marches in New York City 20 years ago at Gay Games IV opening ceremonies.

It's a busy month in the LGBT sports world, as much in meeting rooms as on playing fields. Last week, the Federation of Gay Games and Paris organizers finalized the license agreement to host Gay Games X, and an FGG representative will attend the mid-year meeting of the LGBT Sports Coalition in Chicago on January 24 as that group deals with organizational issues and long term strategy in the fight against homophobia and transphobia in sports. Sandwiched in between, the FGG will hold an open town hall meeting this weekend at the seventh annual Sin City Shootout in Las Vegas to discuss the future of LGBT sports.

The town hall meeting will take place Friday, January 17, in the lounge of the Tropicana Las Vegas Hotel and Casino from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Agenda items include the LGBT sports movement, at the local, regional, and global levels; the future of the Gay Games and the World Outgames; and the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. A second open "Building Bridges" meeting will be held at the European Gay and Lesbian Sports Federation annual meeting March 7 in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

The Las Vegas meeting will be the latest round of numerous discussions that have occurred since Montreal organizers bolted the Gay Games movement in 2003 and founded a competing event. While drawing some athletes and artists away from the Gay Games, the World Outgames have struggled to draw sustainable numbers and the demand for divided loyalties has put a strain on sports teams and organizations. The start of the World Outgames has also cut into the EuroGames, which were started by athletes and artists who attended Gay Games III in Vancouver. They originally were held three years in every quadrennial cycle, taking off in Gay Games years, but now occur only twice in a cycle.

In 2009, some organizations such as Team Berlin began requests that the FGG and the Gay and Lesbian International Sports Association merge their events. Others, such as Team San Francisco, called for an end to the World Outgames while pledging support for continental Outgames in underserved areas. The most recent round of merger discussions between FGG and GLISA broke down, setting the stage for further public dialogue.

Team SF will present a letter at the conference reiterating its position that the World Outgames should cease: if the LGBT sports and cultural world wants one quadrennial event, it should fall around the institution that has done a bang-up job the past three decades rather than trying to

appease an event that was formed in spite a decade ago.

"It makes no sense to Team SF that we should try to combine two such divergent events or organizations, with the resulting loss in vision and mission of both parties," the Team SF letter states. "We would rather see the FGG concentrate on what it does best (sports and culture) and GLISA on what it does best (conferences)."

The letter goes on to talk about the distinction between the two organizations.

"Our lives are profoundly changed by the Gay Games, collectively and individually. One of the most important but seldom discussed distinctions of the Gay Games is that it is an event entirely in control of the athletes themselves, through the membership mechanism of the Federation of Gay Games and the collegial relationship between hosts and the FGG that is built into the license agreements. This allows us to ensure that the integrity of our sports is respected and the mission of inclusion is never shortchanged for sake of economy. That is a position – and an event – worth defending," the letter stated.

When Montreal negotiators stormed out of license agreement talks 10 years ago, they wanted less FGG involvement in the running of the Gay Games, and an expansion of the program to include more parties and conferences. It was thinking "bigger" at a time when losses for previous Gay Games hosts and a global recession had the FGG thinking "smaller."

The FGG reopened the bid process and wound up selecting Chicago, one of the previous bidding cities, to host Gay Games VII. Indignant the FGG was going ahead with its own plans, the Montreal group proceeded with its plans for its rival event, to be held less than two weeks later than the Chicago Gay Games, and founded GLISA to sanction it.

The 2006 Montreal event was initially marketed simply as the Outgames. The "World" reference was added only months later in 2004 when GLISA announced it would continue the event on a quadrennial basis and add smaller continental events in the other years. Meeting informally at the start of the Gay and Lesbian Athletics Foundation in Boston in March 2004, GLISA representatives told club leaders the second World Outgames would be held in 2010 – the same year as Gay Games VIII.

I was a board member of the FGG at the time, and I remember sitting in one of the campus lounge areas at the meeting, hearing the shouting match going on between one of the GLISA reps and a member of an international sports federation.

"If you say you are going to do this in 2010, it will be telling everyone you are just out to destroy the Gay Games," the sports rep yelled.

The next morning, at the official session, it was announced World Outgames 2 would take place in 2009.

The Chicago Gay Games announced a year after its close that it had finished with a slight profit. After consistently maintaining it was going to finish with an enormous surplus, Montreal announced it had lost more than \$5 million Canadian.

The Gay Games and World Outgames are only superficially similar. They are different in their

scope, they are run differently, the hosts are selected differently. In deciding how they should move forward, we should consider a few questions.

Which model provides the experience we want? Which offers the best model to overcome in time the biggest flaw they both have: a predomination of affluent white males with disappointing numbers of women and people of color? Lastly, do athletes and artists want to pay for parties and conferences when they are already paying to perform and compete?

Having spent the past decade working intimately with Gay Games followers on multiple levels, I would argue that overwhelmingly the factors favor the Gay Games.

In the World Outgames models, human rights conferences are supposed to be one third of the program, equal with sports and culture, and the host city has virtually sole discretion to run events once it has signed a license agreement. The two issues I have with this are that the athletes' and artists' fees wind up subsidizing the conferences and parties, and hosts are transitory organizations that do not have this institutional knowledge to ensure the sports are truly inclusive, diverse, and empowering.

Diversity of athletic opportunity is not a factor high in most people's social consciences, but it goes to the heart of why the Gay Games were founded. Playing basketball or volleyball at a high level requires different skill sets than wrestling or swimming and can favor different body types and psychology. Some sports such as softball and racquetball require excellent hand-eye coordination; that is irrelevant in powerlifting or bodybuilding. Some require precise teamwork and cooperation; a marathoner runs alone.

A diversity of choices is necessary if people of different bodies and psychologies are to be able to find the sports in which they can best express themselves. The cost of those opportunities needs to be kept low enough to be able to enable people without means to participate.

An unchained host with no history in those issues has other things to worry about. Competition groups get collapsed and expensive individual sports get eliminated. And as the final report from Copenhagen 2009 stated, sports end up being cut to accommodate conferences.

The World Outgames set out to do more and end up doing less. And social diversity? Antwerp 2013 reported that three-fourths of its registrants were men. And a black lesbian soccer player from South Africa wrote a poignant online article about the isolation from seeing almost no other persons of color at the events.

Historically, the Gay Games balance is better but still a far cry from what it or anyone else wants. It's high time we stop worrying about propping up the World Outgames and concentrate on getting more women and more minorities out on the playing fields. That, not appeasement, is the name of the game.

Gay Games 9 will be held in August in Cleveland and Akron, Ohio. World Outgames 4 is scheduled for 2017 in Miami Beach.