

a e SPORTS

# Take Me Out to the Outgames

## An Observer's Commentary

BY MIKHAEL YOWE

**W**hat do you get when 109 nations come together in the party capital of North America? You get the 1st World Outgames in Montreal, Quebec.

It began on the 26th of July with the International Conference on LGBT Human Rights. Roughly 2,000 delegates from around the world came together for workshops and discussions. The conference ended on July 29th with the adoption of the Declaration of Montréal, an LGBT human rights proclamation.

International tennis champion Martina Navratilova and Canadian Olympic champion Mark Tewksbury presented the Declaration during the opening ceremony of the Outgames. Among the Declaration's provisions: Protection against state and private violence; freedom of expression, assembly and association; freedom to engage in (private, consensual, adult) same-sex sexual activity; and a worldwide information campaign to be launched at the 2nd World Outgames in Copenhagen in 2009.

In the spirit of true inclusiveness, the games were open to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, age, gender, race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, physical challenge, political beliefs, physical ability, athletic and artistic skills or HIV/health status.

The Outgames' ideals were based on the principles of Participation and Celebration, Respect and Fairness, Innovation, Diversity and Empowerment (PRIDE). There were no minimum athletic standards to qualify for the Outgames. The

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only requirement was the desire to support the stated ideals of the event.

People with specific needs or disabilities were integrated as full-fledged participants, volunteers, officials and spectators. By accepting the Outgames' challenge, all participants automatically became winners.

I went to the Outgames to watch my friend from Detroit swim the 1500-meter freestyle. At 49 he needed all the encouragement that we could give him. Besides, I'm a people watcher and a room full of Speedo-clad athletes just can't be missed. My friend stayed in the upper one-third of all of his events. Not bad for some one pushing half a century.

About 15,000 athletes from 109 nations came together for 35 different events. Everyone from seasoned athletes to beginners showed their mettle in usual

Olympic sports; and in things not so usual, like badminton and bodybuilding.

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Some 250,000 visitors came to watch the events and the people. Montreal's ban on indoor smoking pushed patrons outside to the sidewalks, so city leaders closed St. Catherine Street during the games. It was a good thing, too. The foot traffic took to the street and was shoulder to shoulder, a literal sea of people from around the world, laughing and celebrating life.

It was a bonus that the International Fireworks Event was happening the same week. Every night a different country hosted the display of "pyro-art" over the city.

To say the least, it was a great experience and the eye candy wasn't so bad, either. ▼

➔ Mikhael Yowe is a married trans-queer leatherman who lives in Williamstown, Vermont.

### GAY GAMES OR OUTGAMES?

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men. The advertising, the posters and pamphlets, the parties and events, seemed so geared to the tastes of gay men that she felt lesbians were almost invisible. Neither of us saw transgender presence acknowledged. Though I had noticed much the same in Chicago, I had attributed it not to bias, but to economic interests focusing on those with deeper pockets and more enthusiasm for public partying.

Most of the athletes were men, which is true in the straight world as well. You can spend all your time following your favorite women's softball team, or you can loosen up and enjoy watching the guys show off. The spandex index was off the charts, and I thought the barechested strutting and choreographed warmup exercises alone were worth the price of admission; that is, if the gatekeepers at either place had bothered to check spectators for tickets.

Compared to the straight meets, I find gay men in general much more accepting and supportive of women in sports, and particularly friendly to us older ones.


Of course, Montreal and Chicago both had thousands of participants and dozens of events scattered all around those big cities. Even with the free transit pass I used in Chicago, or with the willing friends who drove Al about Montreal, we could sample only the tiniest bit of what was available and can make no claim that our experiences are typical. Both of us attended a musical competition each to sample the artistic side of the games. Al heard the choral groups and I went to the bands, both with high quality ensembles from around the world. We estimated that maybe a quarter of those attending in both cities were from outside North America, which is a treat in itself.

During the Gay Games and the Outgames there was an on-

going block party atmosphere in the gay sections of town, and the crowds of the likeminded in the streets there made visitors feel welcomed and safe. In these fundamentalist times, no city will show you a 100 percent gay positive face, and I passed through religious picketers and ranters on occasion. Even in liberal Burlington, LGBTQ space is found mainly indoors or in secluded rural areas.

If you decide to get yourself in shape and go to either Cologné or Copenhagen for the next round of Gay Games or Outgames, I think your most memorable experience will not be the gold medal around your neck, but the joyous celebration of thousands of members of our community. ▼

➔ Fran Moravcsik and Alverta Perkins are former board members of Mountain Pride Media.




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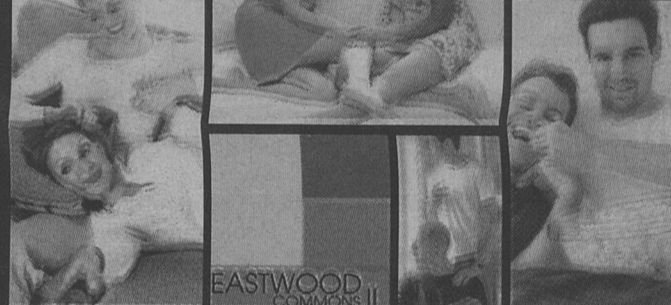
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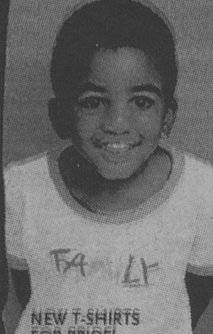
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