



OLYMPIC LOGO ILLUSTRATION: JASON MALMBERG

2020 Vision

We've hosted two Olympic Trials and partnered with San Francisco in its failed 2012 Olympic bid. With the Winter Olympic Games upon us in all their glory, could this be Sacramento's time to toss its hat into the proverbial rings as the host city in 2020?

by Mark Kreidler

ONE OF THE BEAUTIFUL ASPECTS of sports is that they can get otherwise grounded people thinking elevated thoughts, thoughts that might otherwise strike them as, well, slightly north of reason. When I first contemplated the words "Sacramento" and "2020 Olympics" in the same sentence a while back, I was graced with one such momentary dizzy spell. And guess what? For an Olympic bid, a touch of unreasonableness is exactly what is needed. It has worked before. Just ask Atlanta.

With the Vancouver Winter Games finally in full view and with Chicago's recent losing bid opening the door for another U.S. city in the near future, now is the time to think big. Quite simply, we should put together a Sacramento bid for the 2020 Summer Games. Forget for a moment the issues of infrastructure or financing or odds; there will be ample time for all that. Right now, it is a discussion of elevation. How high do we want to reach?

I wondered about that while reading with some surprise that my humble hometown, Tulsa, Okla., was dreaming Olympic dreams. Civic leaders there have already publicly declared their intention to explore a bid for the 2020 Games, capitalizing on the area's Native American history to draw international support that might otherwise be slow in materializing. And the mayor of Birmingham, Ala., rallied the community there to organize a 2020 bid. These are places whose metropolitan populations are dwarfed by Sacramento's, and yet each decided on its own that the Games are a dream worth pursuing. This goes directly to the heart of perception on two fronts: how the areas are seen and how they see themselves. They are ready to be recognized in the global marketplace. They want to be understood as players. What better way

than to launch a truly audacious effort at the kind of event that has always been understood as big-boy territory?

Going for the Olympics can indeed function as a sort of “Here We Are” moment along a city’s lifeline, but that’s not the only benefit. New York’s bid for the 2012 Games ultimately fell short, but accomplished something else important—creating a blueprint for growth. The head of the New York bid recently told *The New York Times*: “What the bid did was create a plan for the future development of the city and the pressure of a specific deadline to get things done... giving the Bloomberg Administration a level of physical development unprecedented in the modern history of the city.” Imagine the catalyst it could provide here.

Sacramento is the seat of power of one of the most dynamic areas on Earth, the state of California. And Mayor Johnson understands the unique synergy between high-level sports and striving cities. As tricky as the relationships can sometimes be, the consensus among large American cities is that big-time sports are worth pursuing.

As with virtually every city that bids on the Olympics, facilities are the major hurdle. While the International Olympic Committee foots the bill for the operating costs of the Games by culling funds from broadcast rights, commercial sponsorships and ticket sales, the cost of infrastructure and facilities is normally covered by government dollars. The IOC insists on an open-air stadium of at least 60,000 capacity to handle opening and closing ceremonies and the track and field competition. Sacramento certainly lacks that. Of course, so do Tulsa and Minneapolis-St. Paul—two of the cities that are exploring 2020 bids. In fact, of the handful of cities that have expressed a desire for the 2020 Games so far, only Boston has a large enough modern outdoor stadium.

But the state of California has a trump card: all that land at Cal Expo, just waiting for a project (and the floating of a few bonds once we dig ourselves out of this current slump) to fill it. Beginning with the major stadium and running through perhaps several smaller event-hosting facilities, Cal Expo’s availability for a collection of sports venues is alluring—and that 60,000-seat facility can then become the catalyst to capture an NFL or Major League Baseball franchise down the road. (After the 1996 Olympics, Atlanta downscaled its Olympic Stadium into a baseball-only facility, Turner Field, that today hosts the Braves.)

The city’s by-then-completed new sports arena would take care of basketball, gymnastics, volleyball and such. Lake Natoma

Track star Gail Devers competes in the 2004 U.S. Olympic Trials at Sacramento State.



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which will soon be home to the U.S. Bicycling Hall of Fame, is the perfect spot for the velodrome. And there are myriad regional solutions to facility needs around Northern California, from Napa to the Bay.

When the group of motivated Tulsans staked their unlikely claim to a 2020 Olympics bid last summer, its essential position boiled down to this: why not? The argument was that the area was fully deserving of the kind of attention an international bid would create, and that Tulsa could handle the event no matter how much construction became necessary. The downside to losing out was zero. The upside of being identified as part of a global field of Olympic would-be hosts was enormous. The marketing potential alone was worth the considerable time and effort involved. There *was* no worst-case scenario.

Despite my now-lengthy ties to California, I felt a swell of hometown pride to see that Tulsa would even attempt such a thing. It was, in its own way, a truly grown-up thing for the city to do.

Now consider Sacramento. A metropolitan population of 2.1 million, compared with Tulsa’s 916,000 or Birmingham’s 1.1 million. Rich in sports history. Host of fabulously successful U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials in 2000 and 2004. Launching pad of Olympic successes like Mark Spitz, Summer Sanders, Debbie Meyer, Jeff Float, Evelyn Ashford and Stacy Dragila (and both Billy Mills and Eric Heiden eventually made this their home). Warm, dry summer conditions that produce lightning-fast times on the track. And a growing, maturing area that will only be bigger, stronger and more internationally diverse by 2020.

When Atlanta decided to make its bid for the 1996 Summer Olympics, it was considered to be the longest shot on the board—a city from the Deep South with traffic, construction and funding problems. No one from the Georgia contingent ever got sidetracked by that; they were too busy building their argument for why they belonged on the world stage. They elevated. Now it’s Sacramento’s time to reach for the rings. ♦

was already the front-runner to host rowing when San Francisco was bidding for the 2012 Games, and whitewater kayaking was lined up for the American River here as well. Elk Grove is in the early stages of planning a massive new civic center project designed by world-renowned architect Zaha Hadid that might include an aquatic center. Davis,

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