

My Volunteer's Journey of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games

By Stan Kochanoff, LPP, MCIP, RCA
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Coming from Nova Scotia, I was fortunate to be one of the 40,000 people or so to be interviewed and selected for the 25,000 volunteer positions that the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee (VANOC) brought together as the volunteer workforce team for the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games.

Since volunteers were expected to pay their own way to and from the games and to look after their accommodations while there, it's understandable that most volunteers and paid staff came from British Columbia and particularly the Greater Vancouver area. There were also people from other regions of Canada, the USA and other parts of the world that were part of the volunteer and paid staff workforce team.

Like probably 10,000 others, I volunteered to work at the hockey and skiing venues, but it appears that most of those positions went to locals from the Greater Vancouver area. I was assigned to work as a transport attendant at the Olympic Family Hotels in downtown Vancouver. My work was predominantly at the Westin Bayshore Hotel, where I completed 15 of my 17 shifts. Two others were served at the Marriott Hotel, the second of the three Olympic Family Hotels serving major IOC and NOC dignitaries and committee members.

Our Transport Group shared space with the Olympic Client Services Group and the official greeters from the International Olympic Committee in the main lobbies of the OFH-designated hotels. Our tasks included providing transportation information and arranging transportation to and from the various games venues in Vancouver and Whistler for IOC and NOC client members staying at the Olympic Family Hotels.



Part of the Transport Team at the Westin Bayshore OFH Hotel

Olympic committee members from both the international and national committees staying at the three Olympic Family Hotels were designated into different groups according to the transportation that was to be provided to them. The top category clients (T-1s and T-2s) had personal chauffeur service with a designated driver 24/7. For T-3 clients, cars were made available on demand from 7:00 am to 11:00 pm; anything after that had to be on a reservation basis, which we looked after. Our job was to look after transport needs for our clients between 7:00 am and 11:00 pm daily at the three OFH hotels.

Celebrity sightings at our hotel included Jacques Rogge, the IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch, former IOC president, Dick Pound, former WADA (drug agency) head, Princess Anne, the King of Denmark, King Frederick, the former deposed King of Greece, King Constantine and a couple of princes from Jordan, and William of Orange from the Netherlands. The hotel was a locked-down facility with heavy security and tons of police all around!



The volunteer reporting for work

Many of the clients we served from the IOC and NOC were ex-Olympians from the past and were now representing their countries. While on the desk, I met a former lady Olympian rower from the 70s who was an alumna from Cornell University, my old alma mater. We also had a sighting of Jean-Claude Killy, the famous Olympian skier from France who is now a member of the IOC.

General Motors supplied the 4600-car fleet for transporting people around the city and for the Cypress Bowl Mountain venues. Buses were used mainly to shuttle people back and forth to Whistler Village, with the exception of some of the very high profile people and royalty.

Beyond Squamish, regular vehicular traffic was restricted on the Sea to Sky Highway to Whistler to permit holders only during the games. Most of the volunteer drivers were from the Greater Vancouver area.

For most of us, working in transportation was pretty interesting. We had our ups and downs in busy times, and in general we were probably overstaffed. We did have a great bunch of co-workers, with most of them from the Greater Vancouver and Victoria areas. When not busy, we were fortunate to have a TV monitor close by and managed to take in most of the games activities while working. As volunteers, we had free access to the Vancouver Transit system (Bus, Sea Bus and Sky Train) to get around at no cost. For me, after driving my car 5000 kms a month for business, I found their transit system excellent and very efficient.

Towards the end of the games, the transport team volunteers were treated to a tailgate party. We were able to watch the exciting Canada-Slovakia hockey game and enjoy a buffet meal, drinks and games.



Party time at the Renaissance Hotel for the transport gang

My live venues included two hockey games: the USA men's 6–1 win over Norway at Canada GM Place, and the 13–1 blowout by the Canadian ladies over Sweden at the UBC Thunderbird Arena. Both venues were outstanding and I had great seats to watch the games. I was lucky enough to pick up the men's hockey ticket at a discount for \$100 from one of my co-workers, while paying \$220 for the ladies game, compared to a number of people around me who paid the original ticket price of \$25. What a difference buying your ticket a year ahead makes!

My highlight of the live venue action was seeing the gold medal curling match, which Canada's Kevin Martin won over Norway. We were fortunate to have tickets given to us by Maleah, our head transportation supervisor. As with all the live venues, getting through the lengthy security procedure was similar to airport security, taking from 45 minutes to an hour to get into the buildings. People were lining up for 1 1/2 to 3 hours for many of the events, as well as some of the downtown non-athletic venues sponsored by various countries and provinces.



At the gold medal curling match with co-worker Rob.

During time off between shifts, I managed to visit Atlantic House at Granville Island and sample some free mussels, which the folks from PEI were giving out to visitors. Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland were also represented there with displays and live acts.

My most memorable day of the crowds in downtown Vancouver was a sunny Saturday on one of my days off.



Robson Square and skating rink

The crowds at Robson Square downtown were unreal and the spirit shown by Canadians and others from all over the world was amazing! The place was a sea of red hockey sweaters, all kinds of Canada gear and hats, and painted faces. People were very friendly, with lots of high-fiving and singing of "O Canada." I was also amazed at how many people thanked us volunteers whenever they saw us in our blue jackets and vests. The atmosphere at the games and the spirit and patriotism shown by Canadians and Vancouverites was incredible. It made me proud to be a Canadian!



The crowds at the Olympic Torch

In general, the weather was fantastic, especially when we had about six clear, sunny days in a row. You could see the mountains in the background against the city skyline and the water.



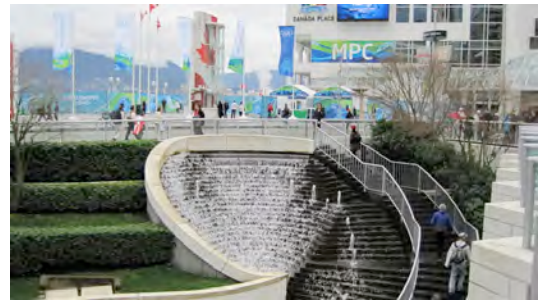
North Vancouver skyline

As a planner, I was very impressed with the way the greater Vancouver area handles building heights and green spaces. It's quite a contrast with Halifax and its preoccupation with controlling building heights and heritage properties. Vancouver is a beautiful city, with tall, magnificent buildings, lots of green space, water features, landscaping and beautiful trees. Many trees were in flower, such as cherries, plums and magnolias, along with the daffodils and other spring flowering bulbs. I was able to get some good ideas for a paper I'm presenting at the ISA international tree conference in Chicago next summer.



Burrard Street Transit Centre Park with cherries and magnolias in bloom

While I was there I was fortunate to have a tour of a number of Vancouver's parks and street tree plantings introduced for the Olympic games courtesy of several fellow graduates from the School of Horticulture that I attended in Niagara Falls.



Canada Place Square

We also managed to organize a fun reunion of former Niagara Parks Horticulture School grads living in the Vancouver area and Vancouver Island who are still working in horticultural pursuits or have retired.



Hort School Reunion at Horseshoe Bay

During my stay, I was also able to have a couple of short reunions with family and adopted family. My niece's daughter, Stephanie, from Mississauga, Ont., is working on environmental projects for the Evergreen Group and we had a tour of one of her park projects in North Vancouver.



Steph's evergreen naturalization project at Mahon Park, North Vancouver

I also got together with my adopted 90-year-old mother's son and daughter from Niagara Falls who had migrated to British Columbia 35 years ago. Patricia and her husband Nick came by to see the thrilling gold medal hockey game. I caught up with her brother Gerry, a practicing physician in Vancouver, for lunch before going in for one of my last shifts.



Visit with "AD brother" Dr. Gerry

My Olympic volunteer journey was a fantastic once-in-a-lifetime experience and it was a thrill to be a part of this historic event. Our Canadian athletes did

extremely well, setting the gold medal record haul and placing third overall in the medal standings. There were many memorable, poignant, tearful and happy moments, as most people who watched the Olympics would have seen. The opening and closing ceremonies were fantastic and really gave the world a look at what Canada is all about.

Enough can't be said about the leadership of VANOC CEO John Furlong, who provided excellent leadership in his handling of a workforce of 50,000 people, including 25,000 volunteers and 25,000 staff members. With amazing coolness, he handled all the pressures brought on by a tragic event on day one of the games and the many problems due to the unseasonable weather in the snow venues at Whistler and Cypress Bowl. He was always very gracious and appreciative to the volunteers he came in contact with and he gave a fantastic speech at the closing ceremonies. I was fortunate on our last day at the Westin OFH Hotel, where he came nightly to thank the volunteers, to have a picture taken with him and my transport co-worker volunteer.



Stan, John Furlong, VANOC CEO, and Terri, a volunteer co-worker

Like many of you watching events at home, the thrilling gold medal men's hockey team overtime win against the Americans on the last day of the games was the highlight, and what could be a better script for the ending than having Nova Scotia's Sidney Crosby score the winning goal.



Watching the Gold Medal hockey game with “AD sister” Patricia and Nick

Our Canadian ladies team did the same as well, defeating the Americans in a close, exciting gold medal game. All our Canadian athletes did us all proud with their record gold haul and performances in 19 different sport venues.



“The golden guys”

In closing, I can't say thank you enough to my host and hostess, Martin and Kaarina Moore of North Vancouver, who provided me with great accommodations for five weeks and

made me feel very much a part of their family. This article is dedicated to them for their great Vancouver hospitality and our long friendship. Martin and I were classmates back at the Niagara Parks School of Horticulture in the early 60s and he has retired from his position of Manager of Parks for the City of North Vancouver.



The volunteer with Kaarina and Martin of North Vancouver, my “Super Hosts”

The people of The Greater Vancouver area and the province of British Columbia should be very proud of their efforts in staging this world-class event.

Despite the fact that volunteers had to look after our expenses getting out there and our living expenses, it was a thrill and an honour to be involved with the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics as part of the volunteer workforce - or the “Blue Smurfs” team, as we were affectionately nicknamed. The memories will last a lifetime, and for me it was an awesome experience and a big notch on my "bucket list."

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