

Concerns for 'the day after'

With the Olympics at their end yet still under way, questions arise regarding their full impact

BY JOHN ROSS
KATHIMERINI ENGLISH EDITION

It is so very tempting, entering this third and final weekend of the Summer Olympics that seem to have begun a lifetime ago and which many said would have no life at all, to begin rounding up this unique experience that's rapidly counting down. That's something for the inner mind but not yet for outer consumption. The Games have produced a blizzard of images, but like a snowstorm, it's difficult to single out snowflakes and there's a changed scene afterward.

There will be plenty of time for postmortems, though we still have neither a "post" nor a "mortem" since the Games are still very much alive and will be until early Monday. For many athletes it boils down to this weekend of finals. Races, bouts, games and medals remain to be decided; joy, relief and sorrow to be experienced, and sweat to be expended by teams and individuals. And this just covers the Olympics' first, better-known, half; the Paralympics come next month, and plans for that are much less precise. We're far from done. As the Salt Lake City Winter Games of 2002 showed, even a well-organized event can steam along nicely until the last days only to start breaking down; in that case, mounting drug disqualifications and a destructive judging scandal cast a late shadow. It's not over until the last athlete has left, and the accumulated fatigue of the past two non-stop weeks, following a summer full of preparatory tension, is not the ideal basis for a smooth or error-free ending.

After all, the Athens Games opened in a bewildering combination of triumph and despair, an exquisite opening ceremony that helped counterbalance the fallout from the Games-eve drugs evasion case of Katerina Thanou and Costas Kenteris. A lot can happen in 48 hours; patience and fortitude are still required, not least with a full moon at tomorrow night's closing ceremonies to illuminate (or spook) the proceedings a little more.

Summary writ small

Still, much can be said by way of preliminary conclusion. Greeks proved to be a lot more flexible, more willing to suspend normal habits, more willing to forget about the family car, follow the new rules, and indeed come out to



A lone worker mops the Olympic Velodrome cycling track as the finishing touches are put to the Olympic venues on Friday, August 6, ahead of the opening ceremony on August 13.

the Games more than many observers expected. The fears of Athens simply not being ready, or city chaos even if it was, never materialized. Athens was calmer, with a better spirit, than it almost ever is. Traffic moved fairly smoothly; people respected Olympic lanes; buses came on time; nobody missed a start because of tie-ups (yet, anyway).

The operational side of the Games has steamed along more smoothly than most outsiders dared imagine. International

turning to the north from the Olympic complex had to trek to the new station of Nerantziotissa on foot, as Irini station was closed in that direction. Even locals were offering cold water to hot and angry walkers. Reaching the Games already involves a lot of walking, and this made matters worse. Taxis did not always help; plenty of people got overcharged and the "Olympic taxi" designation was very generously interpreted.

Athens and Greece have proved they can handle demands of such a

questions. Will Athenians come out again and support the Paralympics as they have the Games, or will post-Olympics fatigue make them an afterthought? Will all the new venues around the city find viable post-Games use that balances financial viability with public need? How will Greeks respond to the economic pressures created by Olympics spending and a summer holiday lost due to longer work hours? Will the brand-new transport network maintain both high demand and ample services, or will old habits re-emerge? Will the coming debate over the longer-term consequences be marked by good will or by ill will?

Some of the bigger questions, in fact, revolve around the Olympics themselves. The biggest is the ever-amplifying problem of drugs, and combating the next generation of hormones and growth-enhancers. A record number of athletes were disqualified at these Games. Another is judging, which produced some bizarre scenes at the pool, with the temporary disqualification of 200-meter backstroke winner Aaron Piersol before his gold medal was reinstated, and in the gymnastics hall, where the federation admitted to a scoring error that gave Paul Hamm a gold medal, yet lacked the power to do more than pressure Hamm to give it up after the hard-done-by Koreans strenuously (and rightfully) protested.

A third is the problem of "gigantism," in which many sports mired in minor status cling to the IOC's coattails because of the exposure and money it brings. And yet, the newer sports are not the burden; the triathlon has been more suc-

cessful than many believed, while beach volleyball was a huge success in Athens. It may be irrelevant, but it may be the Olympics future.

The question, perhaps, is not which cities can handle the Olympics, but rather, why should we expect any single city, anywhere, to handle such a huge thing? Beijing 2008 looms as a far bigger test even than Athens, which was forced by circumstance not to get too grandiose. But Beijing already has a budget several times that of Athens, and could turn the Games into a truly overblown spectacle that forces big changes. The cities pitching their case for 2012 should be looking carefully.

These Games have been a chance for Greeks to be Greeks instead of partisans of the fragmented body politic they so often are. Most Greeks have felt chagrined or embarrassed at the Thanou-Kenteris controversy, thrilled over Fani Halkia's stirring 400-meter triumph, pleasantly surprised over water polo success. Greece's female athletes have generally outshone the men. Sport has again been a unifier, although it did have unpleasant moments when ire was directed against other teams.

And the unity has extended further afield, as the Olympics, for all their compromises, can still bring people from all over into a common celebration. It is one of the oldest clichés, but there is a reason it is so old. Greece has become a bit more cosmopolitan with all the easy interaction of peoples right here in Athens. This can only be to the good.

Audience size and ticket sales have proved a stubbornly persistent issue, where small Olympic crowds have been a public talking point. Unquestionably, there has been a huge discrepancy between events. Preliminaries in less-known sports often drew small crowds in the early days. Even the gymnastics finals were not full. But most venues I visited had healthy crowds, with both enthusiasm and knowledge running high.

With such a rousing opening, growing interest, great sport, smooth operations, and a gloss of success, the Athens Games have proved, so far, to be a tonic. That's probably a reliable indication that the finger-pointing and political gamesmanship will return; signs are already there. And that's probably the best reason not to look too far ahead just yet.

It's not over until the last athlete has left; patience and fortitude are still required, not least with a full moon at tomorrow night's closing ceremonies

Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge canceled the last meetings of his monitoring committee because there was little to do, though it wouldn't take much to convene again. The IOC's good guy/bad guy monitor all these years, Denis Oswald, was out watching events, as was Athens 2004 chief Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki. We, and possibly they, expected a bunker mentality; the reality was more like a sports holiday. The big news was all that did not happen, the problems that did not materialize but were braced for. The problems that did — principally doping — were already known.

One problem did occur with the old ISAP train line: passengers re-

huge, precision-based event, and do it with style. Showing up the doubters has unquestionably had its benefit. Creating a huge work force of volunteers, and making it work well, was, to my mind, one of these Games' greatest successes in a society with almost no volunteer tradition. And many of the thousands working for Athens 2004, often criticized for hopping aboard a gravy train, have worked for years only to have to spend their Olympics in front of computer terminals and at help desks, seeing little if anything for themselves.

Some questions

It's far too early for all the answers, but not for some of the big

Cameras focused on Athens transformed for Olympic Games

Greek film directors give their own vision

BY MARIA KATSOUNAKI
KATHIMERINI

The spotlights are trained on Athens as hundreds of cameras broadcast around the world images of changes that have taken place in this Olympic city, the ancient monuments, modern architecture, the streets and squares, the people and the atmosphere. We asked five Greek film directors what they would highlight in this changed metropolis.

Dimitris Athanitis "Welcome to the Athens Olympics! Anything can happen here! Welcome to the city of miracles!" cries the reporter in Dimitris Athanitis's film as she greets and introduces the characters in the Games pouring into the Greek capital from every corner of the globe. A Japanese couple come to be married in the Olympic city, a female American student meets and falls in love with a French photographer, a Greek athlete is faced with dilemmas, all personal struggles being played out as a backdrop to the Games.

"I'm trying to see the city within the film's heroes and to recreate an image of Athens," said the director as he prepared the day's shooting in the port of Piraeus. "It is amazing how little contact we have with the sea although it is right beside us. That is because the city has no access to the sea."

In his fifth full-length feature film, "The City of Miracles," Athanitis uses his architectural training more than in other films.

"Once entered an architectural competition for a project in Kerameikos. I am very interested in the historic center of Athens, the areas around the Acropolis and Metaxourgeio. I think the greatest problem with

our city is that private space prevails over public...I think the feeling that Athens emanates is unique in the world. It combines the dynamism of a megalopolis with a laid-back atmosphere."

Antonios Kokkinos Kokkinos spent six months jogging through Athens — his hero begins training for the marathon six months before the Olympics and finishes off at the end of the Games with a jog from the Olympic Stadium to Glyfada. As he runs, the town changes around him.

"Although over the past few years everyone has been racing away, they don't know what from. Just before the Olympics, the city itself was racing, to meet a deadline. I think that we are still in the middle of this process, of the city's attempt to change. The results will become evident at some future date. During the filming, I got to know a city that was in an orgy of construction being carried out by a multicultural swarm of workers. I talked to Poles, Romanians, Pakistanis, Russians and Yugoslavs, and experienced an appealing babel, although I still believe that Athens is a city whose history is written by solitary people. Take my hero, for example: He 'races' between his personal and professional lives, while essentially remaining alone."

Constantine Yiannaris Yiannaris is one of the first film directors to deal with Athens's nightlife in the western suburbs, among the immigrants who seek a release through dreams or nightmares. His latest film, "Hostage," is not as focused on the city to the same degree, since most of the film was shot in a bus, but the director does not really move away from Athens. (The film relates the true story of an Albanian immi-



"I would like to film a night-time journey with the metro or the old urban rail," says film director Constantine Yiannaris.

grant who in 1999 hijacked an intercity bus and took seven passengers hostage.)

"The atmosphere has changed in Athens and I have mixed feelings about it. After half a century, Athenians are trying to develop an urban consciousness as citizens of a Balkan megalopolis, a multicultural city that has restored its sense of pride. The infrastructure and transport have distracted Athenians from their petit bourgeois individualism. They are abandoning the mindset of 'me and my car' and are trying out the public transport. I find that wonderful. On the other hand, I no longer feel I am 'home alone.' I am under continual surveillance."

"A new Greek nationalism is on the rise today...The question now is: Am I a proud Greek and xenophile, or a proud Greek and a xenophobe?" There is also a sense of an emerging self-confidence. The public works are to a great extent responsible for that, particularly the architectural masterpiece by (Spanish architect Santiago) Calatrava, which serves as a reference point for the future, the starting point for innovative changes. Personally, what attracts me most about Olympic Athens are the metro stations. I would like to film a nighttime journey with the metro or the old urban rail."

Panos Koutras "To tell you the truth, I can't see that much of a change. Life in the city is the same," says Koutras, as surprising as in his films, from the futuristic "Attack of the Giant Moussaka," where Athens

is threatened by a huge sliding mass of the "national" dish, to the recently completed "Real Life", in which Athens appears as if on a postcard.

"I use the city as a background, but to be honest, this is what I feel about Athens — it is an imaginary city. I left it to live in France, but when I returned it exercised that same imaginary power. Perhaps this is because of its stark contrasts, the fact that there are no constants. On the one hand is the ancient, poetic city and on the other, a landscape that is absolutely modern. There is no logical continuity or cohesion. The Acropolis seems almost unbelievable, it looks like a stage set. It is a city in continual flux. There is no sense of legality, permanency, nothing is sacred. I like that a lot. Buildings are pulled down and others go up in their place. Athens is like a 'work in progress,' it creates a temporary feeling. It is different and anarchic, just like the spirit of the people who live in it."

Nikos Panayiotopoulos "I would like to make a film on the orange line along the main roads (separating the lane reserved for Olympic officials, athletes and VIPs from the rest); that is, to show how one side sees the other. I imagine feelings of pride mixed with pity on the part of those in the left lane and on the other side, on the part of the beleaguered commuters and common mortals, admiration mixed with envy. You see, anything can be a subject for a film."



©2004 American Express Company



YOU'RE INVITED
TO THE
AMERICAN EXPRESS®
CARDMEMBER CLUB

Where: 52 Adrianou Street, Plaka, Athens, near the Monastiraki Metro Station

Why: Enjoy a drink or buy a light meal, and watch our large-screen televisions in air-conditioned comfort*

Who: American Express® Cardmembers plus two guests

When: August 13-29, 2004, 8:00 AM-midnight



SPEND €300 IN GREECE ON YOUR AMERICAN EXPRESS® CARD AND RECEIVE YOUR FREE, LIMITED-EDITION BACKPACK.**

*Fees may apply for certain services. **Charges must be made with the American Express Card. Present receipts totaling €300 or more at the American Express Cardmember Club (52 Adrianou Street, Plaka) for merchandise and services purchased in Greece August 1-29, 2004. Excludes spending on gifts and accommodations. Offer valid while supplies last.



LET US SHOW YOU AROUND™