

SETTING THE STANDARD

Stan Kephart has worked in the fields of security and policing for more than 40 years. 27 years ago, his brief was security at the Los Angeles Olympics – and he believes the 1984 Games still set the standard.

By Adam Fraser



Stan Kephart's pride in the success of the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles is still evident almost three decades later. Though Kephart points to the leadership of Peter Ueberroth (inset) as the key factor in the Games' success, his own role, heading the security operation, was vital to the event's legacy over the last 27 years

“I had a meeting once with the Los Angeles Police Department, and one of the captains said, ‘You’re doing the security very well, and that’s all well and wonderful, but what happens if, at the opening ceremony at the Coliseum, we have terrorists that come in with kites – motorised kites – and drop hand grenades into the crowd?’” recounts Stan Kephart. “And I said, ‘Well, that’s simple, we would activate the phasers.’ And he said, ‘What phasers?’ And I said, ‘What terrorists with grenades and kites?’ And I wanted to add, ‘You silly ass, this is ridiculous. Maybe we should concentrate on the things that we know are going to happen.’”

There were certainly enough known challenges in Los Angeles for motorised kites to be at the back of Kephart’s mind during his time heading the security operation for the 1984 Olympic Games. “They said it would never work,” he remembers now. “I had relatives in Los Angeles who said, ‘We’re going to sell our house, we’re going to rent our house out, it’s going to be gridlock, biggest traffic jam in history...’ and of course none of that happened, because it was very well put together.”

Kephart puts that success down to in-depth planning of every aspect of the 1984 Games, from the overall concept to the

forementioned traffic concerns. “People were afraid of the traffic, but we had a very wonderful man, Bill Forsyth by name, who did the traffic management. Brilliant. Genius. He was so successful they hired him to go to Barcelona in ’92 – he did the same thing there. He’s a magician.” But Forsyth’s wizardry was just one part of the larger spellbook. “By any measure we were arguably the most successful Olympic Games in the history of sport,” says Kephart proudly. “We produced a US\$230 million profit – never been done before and hasn’t been done since. Everything was just perfect.” And for all the importance of a great team, he adds, the great leader was



even more crucial. “It’s all to the credit of Peter Ueberroth – and if it sounds like I’m genuflecting at the altar, I am – a brilliant man,” he says simply. “The consummate entrepreneur. He said, ‘No money from the government, we’re a private corporation. Let the free-handle price system do what it can do best. Take the shackles off and let us run.’”

Few in the sports industry need reminding that Ueberroth, *Time’s* Man of the Year for 1984, followed the success of the Games by heading up both Major League Baseball and the US Olympic Committee, but events at Atlanta in 1996 are evidence enough that a single security incident in LA might have made the past 25 years very different for one of US sport’s most acclaimed executives. Luckily, it wasn’t the case. “We did good planning, precision planning, especially as it related to security,” recalls Kephart. “No incidents; it was safe; it was done cost-effectively; and it produced a wonderful, wonderful standard. We haven’t seen any place since, including Beijing, that we would back up to. I’m not just saying that because I was involved. Realistically there isn’t anywhere. We did well. We did very well. We didn’t have a playbook, if you will; we had to create from scratch.”

That involved extensive research – much of it from, perhaps, a surprising source. “We went to Disney Corporation,” laughs Kephart.

“Disney Corporation has a very complete security system but you never see it. That’s important. It’s not a festival of security, it’s a festival of sport, and the omnipresence of security – an overwhelming omnipresence; kids with acne with sub-machine guns – only has a disquieting effect on patrons. So our idea was, let’s make this into a system that doesn’t showcase security. We had it all: the SAS, GIGN, GSG 9 – we brought all of those people together. We were ready to be able to deal with terrorists, to be able to deal with any of those kind of things. Thank God, it didn’t happen, because there would have been loss of life, of course. But we had the capabilities, you just didn’t see it – and that was the idea.”

Like many of his peers at the International Sports Security Conference (ISSC) in Doha, Kephart advocates the importance of planning but stresses the need for adaptability depending on circumstances – something

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not restricted to the sports arena. “Richard Nixon came to San Jose, California when I was a police officer and I was part of the crowd control,” he recalls. “They had a demonstration – this was trying to get us out of Vietnam – at San Jose State University, who were very active. They marched a thousand students down to where he was speaking and surrounded the building. And the Secret Service was at the point where they were with their attaché cases almost ready to bring out the sub-machine guns. And the president, who didn’t play nicely, came outside and was going like this,” laughs Kephart, waving his hands enthusiastically above his head. “These are not your friends, sir, these are people who would like to see you out of office. This,” he waves again, “is not a good move from a crowd control standpoint.” It did, though, provide a valuable lesson for someone whose work in the sports arena has continued alongside his career in the police and as a security

consultant; more than one sports star, after all, has been known to incite a crowd.

Kephart’s most recent location has seen a fresh rekindling of his love affair with sport. Alongside his long-established consulting work, he currently serves as chief of police at the Salt River Police Department in Arizona; working with the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, his force oversees some 250,000 people conducting business and travelling within its borders each day. Kephart will leave his position at the end of June to take on a new role with Martinelli & Associates, a California-based justice and forensic consultancy firm. In the months leading up to his departure, though, he has played a key role in the development of a major new baseball complex, taking in a newly developed stadium, 11 additional fields of play and more. This spring saw the community host Major League Baseball’s Arizona Diamondbacks and Colorado Rockies for spring training in the Cactus League, shattering attendance records by 130,000 people, with more than 350,000 spectators taking in the action; the Diamondbacks drew an average of 11,161 fans to 17 games, with the Rockies pulling an average of 10,598 fans to 16 games.

While security and safety went well, even a 45-year policing veteran like Kephart claims to have learned new lessons. Indeed, he insists he is always doing so, hence his enthusiasm for an increasing exchange of knowledge around the world through projects such as the ISSC. “Our nation is focused on baseball,” he explains. “It was a medal sport in the Olympic movement; it’s now not. But you have countries like Cuba, Mexico, China, Japan, Brazil now embracing baseball; it is part of the global sporting movement. Pan-American Games, it’s one of the sports. But how you police a baseball stadium – evacuation procedures, those kind of things – is distinctly different from soccer, distinctly different from a tennis venue, from football. So in order to make it work you need to share common best practices.”

And, of course, you need to be willing to learn as well as teach. Kephart most certainly still is. “We all have our belief that we are the alpha and the omega of everything that is good for sport security and policing,” he admits. “And of course that’s not true. We can all learn from each other.” ■