

Full circles: Greek native recounts Olympic journey home By Anna Gammal/

Special to the Crier *Thursday, September 23, 2004*

Anna Gammal stands inside the 1896 Olympic Stadium, where the modern Olympic Games got their start - Courtesy photo

The Dream

It was in early 2001, after having established my massage therapy business, Body & Beyond, in Hopkinton, MA, that I realized I could combine so many different passions in my life into a single goal - massaging elite athletes at an Olympics in my own country of Greece.

Throughout my life, physical fitness - running, gymnastics, etc - has been important to me. Some of my most fond memories are of being a teenager in Greece, training for long distance running, the sport that had given me confidence and taught me discipline and goal setting. From these early days, I had always had a secret dream of being an Olympic athlete. As an adult, my life took a different course, but sport and running was always there. As my career in massage therapy was unfolding, I realized the satisfaction and gratitude that I was receiving from working with any type of athlete - from recreational to the elite - and helping them reach their own goals was incredibly rewarding. All of them were pushing themselves to be better...and I could help. Massage therapy helps prevent injury, relax the athlete and prepare them for competition by increasing blood flow and ridding the body of wastes such as lactic acid, which builds up in tired muscles. The idea of having that experience at an Olympic level and in my home country was irresistible.



In Greece, the Olympics are not just an event that occurs every four years. The Olympics are part of the fabric of our national history and pride. There was no way I would miss Athens 2004, and even more, I wanted to be an active part of it. With sport massage therapy, I could.

The Pursuit of the Games

I had the dream but I didn't know where to start. Luckily, my husband had just joined a company called Synectics. He was attending a workshop and talking with one of the principals there when he found out Synectics had worked with the marketing leadership of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Geneva. One referral led to another, which led to another, and finally we got the name of the key person in Athens, the Chief Medical Director for the Athens Olympic Committee (ATHOC). It was about this time, in February of 2002, that I met George Kousaleos. An American of Greek descent, George was conducting a Massage Therapy workshop I was attending. Coincidentally, he had the same goal of being in Greece 2004. We hit it off. George had knowledge and experience in Atlanta '96. My team was forming. The first meeting with the Chief Medical Director came in June 2002 when I was home visiting my family in Greece. It was very informal and eye opening. ATHOC had never even considered that massage therapists would be needed at the games. This was the first shock and the beginning of what I would later understand as an unfortunate lack of awareness, appreciation, and understanding of my profession in Greece. The second shock was that being young and a woman was not a good combination for being taken seriously at that high level in Greece. Our proposal to bring massage therapy to the games was rejected ...politely.

Getting the Go Ahead

I could not give up. We worked back through the IOC and got some support for our efforts. Over the next six months, Roger Olbrot, Stanley Mavridis, and Bryan Buckley joined on. Roger, in particular, was a great asset as he had put the Salt Lake City 2002 Massage Team together, handling a great deal of the coordination and logistics. By the Fall of 2002, we crafted an introductory letter to ATHOC which roughly set out our intent, as a newly formed Athens 2004 Massage Therapy Leadership Team, to assist ATHOC by recruiting, and managing a VOLUNTEER team of massage therapists. This time there was interest. Over the course of the next several months, we prepared a formal proposal for 350 volunteer therapists. This proposal was delivered in March of 2003 but would take a full eight months and many revisions to get approved. In November, after many discussions, including in-person meetings with ATHOC staff during my trip home in the summer of 2003, the official go-ahead came for recruiting, coordinating, and managing 160 therapists for the Olympics and Paralympics. It was far less than we felt was needed but we accepted. Our Web site (www.athenssportsmessageteam2004.com) went live immediately and we went public with our recruiting for the Athens Sports Massage Team 2004. The dream was becoming real... and the ride would only intensify. Parenthetically, all of this was happening just as I was about to give birth to my second son, Lucas, about to pack up and move to a new house my husband and I had been building, and in the midst of getting a new business off the ground -- Body & Beyond Family Wellness Center - that I had just opened in April. I was absolutely insane but excited... and totally indebted to my husband for all his support, patience, and understanding.

Making it Happen

We were off and running ...and from December 2003 until I left for the games in Mid-July 2004, every Wednesday evening was reserved for our weekly conference calls. Long discussions each week reviewing over 600 applications, handling questions and logistical issues, reacting and adapting to weekly changes in the plan from ATHOC - all of this finally yielding a solid team and a plan for managing it. But still, there was a sense that anything could happen when we got there.

Arriving in Athens

The first sign I saw when I got off the plane in Greece on July 14th was - "Athens 2004 Olympic Games - Welcome Home". This was true for the Olympic Games and true for me, personally. I was thrilled. However, despite two years of planning and preparation, I was not prepared for the roller coaster of activity and emotions I was about to experience.

First of all, I thought I had at least three weeks of vacation with my parents and kids at our home on the island of Poros before the work would begin in earnest. I was wrong. A phone call on July 17th from ATHOC informed me that, as the first therapist leader to arrive, I had to go to Athens to attend the orientation and accreditation process so that I could, in turn, teach those on our massage team when they arrived.

"Athens celebrates" was the message sent by the mayor of Athens, Dora Bakoyanni. Athens is a city in which you can discover a new thing every day. In the heat of the games Greece changed a lot. The message and the philosophy that was all over Athens was of joy, hope, and celebration.

Every day something was going on, including an extensive program of cultural events that would last until the end of the paralympics. All the athletes and visitors had the opportunity to see so much.

Athens is a city with a lot of history: the hill of the Acropolis, in the center of Athens, is considered a gem for Athens and all of Greece. The architecture is tight and crowded, made of white cement, with buildings rising as tall as 20 stories. It lacks skyscrapers, but is comparable in bustle and energy to New York.

The Olympic Stadium, where the games were held, was located to the north of the acropolis, and 20 minutes away from the stadium was the Olympic Village, where athletes and staff lived for the duration.

Just below the acropolis hill are two ancient theaters built in the 4th century B.C. Ancient Agora, the National Gardens, Byzantine Churches and the Panathinaiko Stadium, where the 1st Modern Olympic Games were hosted in 1896, was more than enough to make this Olympics unforgettable. All of this came to life not only for the visitors but for the Greeks as well. This Olympics stirred an already strong sense of pride among Greeks for their country and their heritage - something they were happy to share with the rest of the world...a world that doubted them...but would soon respect and acknowledge their success.

Working/Experiencing the Games

The orientation was great, very informative, and it took place in the Olympic Stadium which was just breathtaking. Although not completely finished, I was confident the Greeks would pull it together...and they did. It was like the Siritaki dance, start slow and by the end you can't catch your breath. Another aspect of seeing the Olympic Stadium hit me personally. The moment I walked in, I was flooded with memories and emotions of my own running years. I was proud to be there.

The accreditation process was another story. Computer issues and organizational surprises forced me to spend endless hours on the phone trying to straighten out information for the 100-plus therapists that would arrive in just days. Somehow we just handled all the little fires as they came. "Flexibility" was the motto we would emphasize with the massage team throughout the Olympics. This was fitting. After all, this was Greece. But in the end, just like the rest of Greece, we pulled it off well.

The first group of MT's arrived on July 26 and on Aug. 1, with the arrival of the Olympic athletes, the active work began - more than a week before the opening ceremony. I started working at the Olympic Village from Aug. 1 to Aug. 31. The Olympic Village is where the athletes live during their stay, and that is where we had many therapists stationed - including me - until the games actually began. It was THE place to be. Wherever you turned you would see an Olympic athlete - happy and friendly. They were ordinary people participating in an extraordinary experience. And no one seemed concerned about terrorists or the like. I felt very safe as the security seemed very tight. We worked with the athletes while they trained.

On Aug. 11, as a thank you, our volunteer massage team was invited to the rehearsal for the Opening Ceremonies. It was absolutely spectacular - rich with meaning and history.

After that, the games began...as did the workload. All of the therapists had six-hour shifts with one or two days off during their two week stay. As both a coordinator and therapist, my days began at 8:30 in the morning and ended at 12:30 at night. It was tiring and stressful at times but I was excited just the same.

On Aug. 15, I began my assignment at the Track & Field events in the Olympic Stadium; this was in addition to coordinating the other therapists at the Olympic Village. I've always loved track and field, and it was an honor to help these world class athletes either prepare for or recover from such important moments in their athletic careers.

In thinking back, the highlight for me was being allowed right next to the track witnessing Fani Halkia of Greece take the Gold in the Women's 400 meter hurdles. You have to understand, more than half of spectators were Greeks and the entire stadium exploded. And there I was 10 feet away from a barefoot Halkia taking her victory lap draped in the Greek flag. It was an unforgettable moment.

On Aug. 29 the Games ended. The closing ceremonies were quite different but just as spectacular as the opening ceremonies. On this night, it was a celebration and, true to the Greek spirit, the Olympic Stadium was transformed into a party for all of Greece and the entire world to enjoy. It was filled with music from a century ago right up through the present - and Greece's most famous singers of the last 50 years sang them all. We danced, we sang, we cheered. It ended with style, it ended with flare, and it ended with respect for the athletes and for the Games themselves. Memorable!

The Heart of Greece

It was not luck that the Athens 2004 Olympic Games were such a success, but because the Greek people and everyone involved - whether an organizer, contractor, one of the unprecedented number of volunteers, or a citizen/spectator - put their heart, passion, and pride into making these games unforgettable ...and I was proud to be one of them.

A Step Forward for Massage Therapy

Massage Therapy was a big success at these Olympic Games. In total, we gave about 5,500 massages to Olympic athletes - 3,500 at the Olympic Village and 2,000 at the Olympic venues where therapists were assigned. This is a huge number for only 100 massage therapists. All of the athletes were very appreciative of the therapy they were receiving, and our therapists were more than excited and willing to give. Despite unexpected twists and turns, we had done it.

As I write this, the rest of our massage team and coordinators are at the Paralympics. There too, we are making a big difference. As we look to the future, we hope and believe Massage Therapy has won a permanent place at the Olympics. Not leaving it to chance though, we have already begun discussions for the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy. Why not? You've got to dream.

Before I end, there's one other quite unexpected pleasure that this experience has brought me - and that is having taken the first step in showing the Greek doctors and physiotherapists with whom I worked that Massage Therapy is not just for "relaxation", as is the common belief in Greece, but a truly therapeutic and important health service. It's a first step, but if I can continue to help bring this understanding to the health community in my home country, then this Olympic adventure may have afforded me the chance of helping far more people than I imagined.

(Editor's note: Three years ago, Anna Gammal dreamed about returning to her home country, Greece, as part of the 2004 Olympics in Athens. Today that realized adventure is a cherished memory that may have won the profession of massage therapy international)