

The Bare Necessity Games - May 2004

Criticize the Greeks about their forthcoming Olympics and you do so at your own peril! That's the first lesson I learnt on my recent visit to Athens. Arriving at the Markopoulus Shooting Venue on Easter Monday which was less than a week before the official test event, the World Cup, I was dumbfounded. The Shotgun Range was a shambles. It was a dustbowl located on the top of a wind swept hill with not a blade of grass in sight. Just as I was leaving the range for the first time my good friend and journalist Ron Reed called me to ask how the Michael Diamond/Nathan Cassells shoot off was shaping up. I described how things were at the venue and he reported my comments in this newspaper the next day. Within hours I went from being the hunter to the hunted. I should have remembered that Melbourne harbours one of the biggest Greek communities in the world outside of Greece and word would get back. The following day the Athens newspapers ridiculed my criticisms and I was made to feel very uncomfortable by some of the officials at the range who had the unenviable job of running the competition. During the speeches at the official Opening Ceremony one of the key dignitaries made mention of my report refuting my comments and then going on to describe the shotgun range as the "greatest in the world". I maintain it is arguably not even the best range in Athens!

For the next five days after Ron's article appeared over five hundred tradesmen worked around the clock to bring the range up to a bare minimum standard. A few of the locals even thanked me for my opinions as they said it never would have been finished otherwise. The workers couldn't do anything about the wind or the grass though. Over the week long World Cup I watched the world's best clay target shooters get totally demoralized with some of the worst scoring I have witnessed in over twenty five years of competition. There is an old proverb in shooting that says "you can't hit what you can't see" and the light red dirt that the range was built upon coupled with the orange clay targets that were being thrown for the shooters to fire at made visibility appalling. The chilling wind didn't help matters either. There is some good news however for the Olympic Marksmen in that the Greeks expect to grow lush green grass in the dust by the time the Games begin. The bad news is that by August the ice cold winds high upon the hill are expected to change to extremely hot gale force winds, as this is the most blustery month on the calendar in Athens. I currently hold two Olympic Shooting Records, both will still be mine going into Beijing in 2008. I am not suggesting that I am any better than today's Olympians by any means, but this range in Athens is merciless and high scores won't be needed to win.

I will concede that the Greeks showed fantastic co-ordination to get the facility to where they did in the last week prior to the World Cup. I don't believe Australians could have done this much work so quickly. They did it with an arrogance that made me believe that this is how things are done there. Forget the fact they had six years prior to get this venue going, they were confident they could do the bare necessities in the last few days and they did. That is what you can expect to find in Athens during the Games. The bare necessities. This will be an Olympics that I will liken to the purchase of my first car. It will have the basics. No air conditioner, no C. D player, no electric windows and certainly no GPS Navigation as not even the taxi drivers know where they are going in

central Athens. But like your first car it will get you there eventually and it will have character. I made the trip into the old part of Athens to visit the Acropolis detouring past the main stadium on the way. It looks impressive even without any seating in it, but by far the most breath taking aspect of the new arena is its roof lying on the ground beside it waiting for someone to figure out how to lift it up and bolt it on in time for the Opening Ceremony on August 13th. We were very spoilt in Sydney four years ago, but I didn't realize how so until now.

One pleasing aspect from a competitor's perspective is that the Athletes Village is of a very high standard with the accommodation being two or three story strata titled apartments which have already been sold for private use after the Games. Full points here, our team will sleep well. The Athenians in general were very friendly people, the food is great and the culture is deep. They are doing their very best to build bus lanes to all the major venues as well as a railway line to the airport. This is still a long way off completion with some stations still only half built. If you plan on going as a spectator then allow lots of time to get anywhere. In fact you may have to leave yesterday to get to tomorrow's event! The Athens Olympics will go ahead with or without grass, bus lanes, railway stations or stadium roofs. Like the Shooting Venue, I struggle to see how they can finish the entire infrastructure by the end of July, but I won't underestimate them again. They are very proud people who like to show you what they can do when faced with adversity. Trust me, they are facing a mountain of it in the next twelve weeks.