

OLYMPICS: Volunteer works with royalty, watches medal wins

National pride spoken during gig at Games

BY SANDRA BOLAN
sbolan@yrmg.com

Stouffville's Ruth Patterson rubbed elbows with Canadian politicians, IOC bigwigs and a prince and princess from the Netherlands, all while watching the Canadians win medal after medal in the Olympic Oval.

For two-and-a-half weeks during the Vancouver Games, Mrs. Patterson was a protocol language assistant in international client services at the Richmond Olympic Oval.

Along with escorting VIPs to their select seating areas, Mrs. Patterson also provided French language translation services and Olympic speed-skating information to those who asked.

Mrs. Patterson had no problem accommodating the seating arrangements of dignitaries or providing information in French or Estonian, English, German or Italian for that matter.

But when it came to providing information on the intricacies of speed skating, Mrs. Patterson was at a loss.

"I know a lot more now," she said of having to learn the sport while on the job. "What was exciting about the sport was that you weren't as sure of the outcome because a dark horse could come in."

COUCH SURFING

Like most Olympic Games volunteers, Mrs. Patterson got her spot by applying online. That was three years ago.

A year after she applied, Mrs. Patterson was contacted by VANOC and went for an interview in Toronto.

About six months later, she was told she was going to the Games.

The news was met with mixed emotions.

"Initially, I was a little disappointed. I'll be stuck at the oval, I'm not a skater and I know nothing about speed skating," she said.

But Mrs. Patterson changed her mind once she landed in British Columbia.

"It was just unbelievable to be sitting on a bus, walking down the street, doing anything in Vancouver," she said. "The actual excitement of being at the venue and seeing how the athletes and volunteers (interacted) ... we supported each other and cheered on each others' teams."

'RECIPE FOR WORLD PEACE'

Like all Olympic volunteers, part of being accepted was conditional on housing. Mrs. Patterson has a sister in West Vancouver and indicated on her application she would stay there throughout the games. That was the plan anyway.

But the one-to-two-hour daily commute to the Richmond Oval was tiring, so Mrs. Patterson did what every good Canadian has done before - couch surfed.

"Every day I carried my knapsack with me and slept somewhere," she said.

This was not Mrs. Patterson's first Olympic experience. That came in Montreal during the 1976 Summer Games. Mrs. Patterson volunteered as an athlete village hostess.

But the experiences were vastly different.

"I don't remember that incredible pride and how it was shown in the way people dressed," she said of the Montreal Games versus the sea of Canadian garb worn by the nation last month.

Mrs. Patterson, who is a hiker and cyclist, learned the value of organized sport.

"The way it can bring people together. That whole ideal of why the Olympics started was to celebrate excellence and bring people together ... it can really be achieved," she said. "It's a great recipe for world peace. If you get everybody doing sports, they won't have time to fight."

Mrs. Patterson also learned something



STAFF PHOTO/NICK IWANYSHYN

Ruth Patterson, who translated languages at the speed-skating venue during the Vancouver Olympics, shows off some of her souvenirs. The Stouffville resident sensed more national pride than when she volunteered at the Montreal Games in 1976.

about herself.

"Like a lot of other people, I didn't realize how proud I was to be a Canadian," she said, adding that during the speed-skating events all volunteers inside the oval,

no matter their country of origin, were to remain impartial.

"(But) when the Canadian skaters started winning, we just couldn't help it," she said.

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