

# Chapter 26

## The 1996 Olympics

From July 19 until August 4, 1996, Atlanta hosted the Centennial Summer Olympic Games, an event that was without doubt the largest undertaking in the city's history. The goal of civic leaders was to promote Atlanta's image as an international city ready to play an important role in global **commerce**. Preparations for the Olympics took more than six years after the awarding of the bid to Atlanta and had an estimated economic impact on the city of at least \$5.14 billion. In the process Atlanta changed dramatically, as new sports venues were built, park space was created, sidewalks and streets were improved, and housing patterns were altered. During the seventeen days of the Olympics, more than 2 million visitors came to Atlanta, and an estimated 3.5 billion people around the world watched part of the games on television. The 1996 Olympics produced a significant legacy for Atlanta and its leaders.

### Fun Fact

The United States has won more medals at the Summer Olympic Games than any other country. The USA holds 2,189 medals!

### Commerce:

The activity of buying or selling on a large scale



Above: The official logo for the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, Georgia, USA

## Bidding

In 1987 an Atlanta attorney and former football player at the University of Georgia, Billy Payne, conceived the idea of hosting the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. Atlanta mayor Andrew Young was among the first to join Payne in the quest to develop a bid and sell the proposal, first to local business leaders, then to the U.S. Olympic Committee, and finally to the members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The

local organizing committee headed by Payne and Young produced a two-volume bid document outlining the city's plans for the sporting events, financial support, and accommodations for Olympic visitors. Major selling points of the bid were the warmth of southern hospitality and the city's unique **heritage** as the birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr. and a major center of the civil rights struggle. Atlanta competed against five other cities for the right to host the 1996 Olympics: Athens, Greece; Belgrade, Yugoslavia; Manchester, England; Melbourne, Australia; and Toronto, Canada. Payne, Young, and other volunteers traveled around the world promoting the city's bid to IOC delegates.

Former U.S. attorney general Griffin Bell (left) and former U.S. senator Sam Nunn served as legal counsel to Atlanta Olympics chief Billy Payne and former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young at the House Commerce Committee's August 1999 hearing on improprieties in the Atlanta Olympic bid process. The rich prize of hosting the Olympics resulted in a pattern of **lavish** gift-giving and providing favors to IOC members that cost the six cities competing

### Heritage:

A special or individual possession; an allotted portion

### Lavish:

sumptuously rich, elaborate, or luxurious

for the games in excess of \$100 million. This pattern of attempting to influence IOC members appears to have been the norm among all the competing cities at the time.

***“The announcement that Atlanta had won the bid for the 1996 Olympics triggered a massive celebration in Atlanta.”***

Members of the IOC selected Atlanta because it offered excellent facilities in a secure environment and could guarantee large television revenues. The Georgians in the official delegation saw this as an opportunity to display Atlanta as a symbol of racial tolerance and economic progress in the new South.

## Preparation

Preparations for the games were intense, since many of the sports venues had to be expanded and others needed to be designed and built. Funds came from a variety of sources, including more than \$1 billion in public money as well as ticket sales and corporate **sponsorships** that were sold to many types of businesses.

Private investment came in the form of hotel construction as approximately 7,500 rooms were built for the games. National chains opened themed restaurants along Peachtree Street in hopes of profiting from the crowds of Olympic visitors. The federal government spent millions of dollars on replacing sidewalks, installing pedestrian signs,



*Top: The construction of the Olympic Stadium, now Turner Field  
Bottom: The finished Olympic Stadium*

### Sponsor:

Provide funds for a project or activity or the person carrying it out

# Planning and Hosting the 1996 Olympic Games

Construction of the Georgia Dome is completed

**September 6, 1992**



**1990**

**1991**

**1992**

**1993**

Atlanta announced as the host for the 1996 Summer Olympics

**September 2, 1990**



**July 25, 1992**

The 1992 Summer Olympics begin in Barcelona, Spain

planting trees, putting up new lighting, and installing public art. As soon as the streets in the downtown area were fixed up for Olympic visitors, a representative of city government leased space to temporary vendors in tents, stalls, and carts, creating a carnival atmosphere.

## Let the Games Begin

The opening ceremony on July 19 attracted a capacity crowd of 83,000 to the Olympic Stadium for a display honoring southern culture and the **centennial** of the modern Olympic movement. The artistic success of the opening ceremonies gave way to problems the next day when the athletic competitions began. Members of the international press corps experienced transportation problems getting to venues near downtown from their housing in scattered

### Centennial:

Of or relating to a hundredth anniversaries





**July 10, 1993**

Construction of the Olympic Stadium begins

The Opening Ceremony marks the beginning of the 1996 games



**July 19, 1996**

**1994**

**1995**

**1996**

**1997**

The 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway



**February 12, 1994**



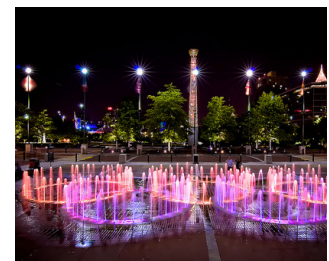
**August 4, 1996**

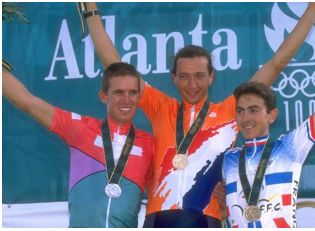
The games officially end at the Closing Ceremony

locations throughout the metropolitan area. Many journalists were late or missed events as some buses broke down and a few drivers became lost. There were also delays in reporting the results of athletic events as a state-of-the-art computer system failed to deliver data from the various competition sites. This caused missed deadlines and added to the frustration of journalists from all over the world. Their reports on the games were critical of local organizers and the city itself.

Those who came to watch the athletes were not disappointed by the 10,318 competitors representing 197 nations in 26 sports. Other visitors came to Atlanta just to be a part of the huge event, creating a lively crowd enjoying free concerts in Centennial Olympic Park and other activities downtown. The pleasant mood of the Olympics changed suddenly in the early morning of July 27, when a pipe bomb exploded

*Below: The Centennial Olympic Park Olympic Rings Fountain*





*Top:* The four gold medals of American swimmer Amy Van Dyken

*Bottom:* The medalist of the men's cross country cycling celebrate their victory

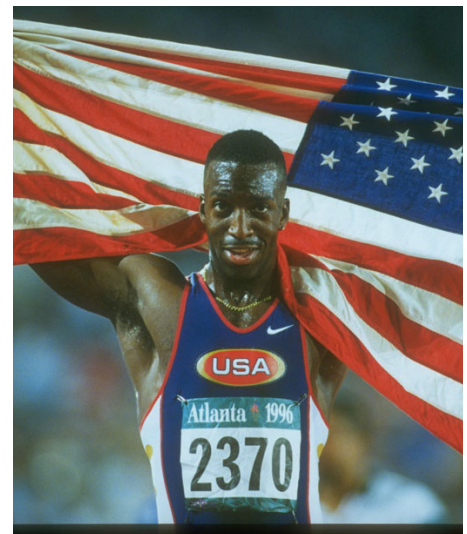
in Centennial Olympic Park during a concert, causing two deaths and more than 100 injuries. While the athletic competition continued, security became tighter for subsequent Olympic events.

A memorial now stands in Centennial Olympic Park as a way to remember the tragic incident that took one life and injured over one hundred others. Eric Rudolph, the man behind the bombing, later apologized to the families affected by the attack.

## Results

10,318 athletes from 197 National Olympic Committees (NOCs), competed in 271 events in 26 sports during the 1996 Olympics from July 19th to August 4th. 79 NOCs won at least one medal, leaving 118 countries without a medal. The United States won the most gold medals (44), as well as the most medals overall (101). It also won its first medal in a women's team sport, gymnastics. Donovan Bailey of Canada set a world record in the men's 100m race (9.84 seconds). Michael Johnson of the United States also set a world record in the 200m race (19.32 seconds) and Naim Suleymanoglu from Turkey also set the record of three consecutive Olympic titles in weightlifting. Armenia, Belarus, The Czech Republic, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Slovakia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan were represented for the first time at a Summer Games.

had competed previously as Czechoslovakia, and the other nations were formerly part of Soviet Union. Of these, only Kyrgyzstan did not receive any medals. This Olympics also marked Hong Kong's final appearance as a British colony, before its return to China, during which it also won its first ever medal; a gold in sailing.



*Above:* Michael Johnson holds the American flag after placing 1st in the men's 400 meter race

## Tourism

The Atlanta Olympic Games held in the summer of 1996 hold the official Guinness World Record for the largest attendance at an Olympic Games. A total of 8.3 million tickets were sold for the games, equating to more than half a million spectators watching on each day of the two-week event. To host the attendees, the athletes, as well as visitors who did not

attend the events but merely came to experience the city during such a huge event, Atlanta had to build new infrastructure and have adequate supplies and services. The economic boost from these infrastructures and the games themselves helped the city grow. The Olympics helped put Atlanta on the map as an important city of the world.



Above: The Centennial Olympic Park attracted many visitors, especially the Olympic Rings Fountain

## The Legacy of the 1996 Olympics

Following the closing ceremony on August 4, there were mixed assessments of the games. Surveys showed that most visitors were impressed with Atlanta's efforts to host the games and left with a favorable opinion of the city.

***"The members of the International Olympic Committee were pleased with the athletic competition, the all-time high attendance, and the television coverage."***

Downtown Atlanta received several tangible legacies from the Olympics. In addition to an improved pedestrian environment, preparations for the games included the construction of new housing and the conversion of existing buildings into lofts. This gave the city a twenty-four-hour population that helped reverse several decades of decline. Housing in several low-income neighborhoods near



Above: Krisztina Egerzeji of Hungary on the way to taking the gold in the women's 200m backstroke in what is now the Georgia Tech Aquatic



## Fun Fact

The five Olympic rings represent the major regions of the world – Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania, and every national flag in the world includes one of the five colors.

## Investment:

The action or process of giving money for profit or material result

## Resources:

georgiaencyclopedia.org  
articles.latimes.com  
itinerantfan.com  
richardweisser.com  
articles.latimes.com  
nytimes.com  
cnn.com  
olympic.org  
guinnessworldrecords.com  
databaseolympics.com  
sports-reference.com  
search.credoreference.com

downtown also changed in preparation for the games. For example, the Techwood Homes public housing project was replaced by mixed-income apartments and dormitories to house Olympic athletes. Many of Atlanta's sports facilities were replaced or upgraded for the Olympics, including the Olympic Stadium, which was refitted as Turner Field, the home of

Atlanta's professional baseball team, the Braves. The new Centennial Olympic Park provided additional greenspace and has attracted **investment** in housing and hotels in the area. Atlanta's tourism industry also received a boost from the Olympics. During the five years after the Olympics, the number of conventions hosted by the city increased each year, and the number of international tourists also grew.

The hosting of the 1996 Olympics made a lasting imprint on Atlanta, bringing increased attention and investment to the area from around the globe. In 2006 the city celebrated the ten-year anniversary of the games with ceremonies and celebrations, including the opening of the Centennial Olympic Games Museum at the Atlanta History Center in July.

Below: Gold, silver, and bronze canoeing teams

