



## **The Games of the XXVIII Olympiad,** **Athens, Greece**

**ISF Prague Cup 2004, Prague, Czech Republic**  
**White Sox to the 2004 Canada Cup, Vancouver, Canada**  
**Blacktown International Challenge, Sydney, Australia**  
**XI Men's World Championship, New Zealand**

**UMPIRE'S REPORT – by Wayne Saunders**

*May the flame lit in Olympia ever be alive in our hearts*

### **Appreciation**

I thank the International Softball Federation through Merle Butler for my appointment to the Olympic Games, Athens, Greece. To be assigned to umpire the Olympic Games the most important tournament on the softball calendar is indeed a unique honour. I further thank ISF Vice President's Bob Leveloff and Pavel Prachar for their assistance during and leading up to the Summer Games. I thank the Czech Softball Federation for inviting me to their Inaugural Prague Cup. I thank the Australian Softball Federation for their invitation to the Blacktown International Series. To Softball New Zealand, and in particular National Director of Umpiring Bill Smith, thank you for facilitating the opportunity for me to work the above tournaments and for assigning me to the White Sox Canada Cup tour and to the Men's Worlds. To Hadyn Smith and the staff at Softball New Zealand, thank you for your assistance with those many items that required your attention.

I would also like to record my thanks to my employer Sinclair Knight Merz who has continued to assist me throughout my umpiring career. Without their support I would not be able to commit the time required. It has and continues to be an honour to represent Softball New Zealand at the International level and I acknowledge the continuing support Softball New Zealand has provided.

### **XI Men's World Championship**

This was the third World Championship held in New Zealand that I have had the pleasure to umpire at. Of the three this was the best staffed and organized from an umpiring viewpoint. The appointment of all our top male ISF umpires created a unique opportunity for all to work together as a team in the true international softball environment. We had previously discussed as an umpiring group the differences and difficulties in the performance expectations that exist between umpiring in New Zealand compared to other countries. Unlike the Junior Men's our field performance delivery was not significantly different to that of the other umpires attending. I make particular reference here to the pitching regulations. Often New Zealand's own softball interpretations are expected to be delivered by its umpires, where the umpires real role is to be a member of an internationally independent crew under the direction of the tournament chief umpire at any International event.

For the first time at a home World Series our umpires were uniformly outfitted. Softball New Zealand and our Umpiring programme should be complimented and this recognition of umpires should be a template for the future. The accommodation was excellent and the fact

that wives where welcome to stay made the tournament a true family experience. With our own NDU heading liaison and transportation there were no problems in these critical areas.

It was a proud moment for New Zealand umpiring when all New Zealand umpires were assigned to the six-man crew for the bronze medal game. The New Zealand crewmember's performance was quoted as being "very solid and strong". This tremendous compliment from Merle Butler was very pleasing to hear particularly when most had no experience at this level of competition. I would like to add my own words of praise as well and make special mention of the performance of our younger two blues, Wiremu Tamiki and Michael Smeath. Michael in particular had an excellent tournament. I believe our umpiring has finally come of age Internationally. New Zealand umpires are now well preformed and respected throughout the world.

Special congratulations to the "Black Sox" who are true world champions and continue to raise the bar, and to the World Series committee and volunteers for a job well done.

### **The Umpires**

It was a great honour to act as hosts to Merle Butler, Henry Pollard and Margo Koskelainen and the umpiring crew. There were 16 field umpires assigned. They were from The Netherlands (Bert Loggen), The Czech Republic (Radomir Tuma), USA (Bryan Smith, John Costabile), Canada (Randy Souliers, Gary Schmit), South Africa (Teboho Vincent Maeong). Australia (Damien McCauley), Venezuela (Fernando Salinas), Japan (Yoshinori Sato) and New Zealand (Lindsay Edwards, Michael Smeath, Wiremu Tamaki, Stu Hodges, Lance Type and Wayne Saunders) "The Crew" was a pleasant mix of experience and very professional.

### **Blacktown International Softball Challenge**

As part of my build-up to Athens I attended the above International Tournament in Sydney. In attendance were Canada, China, Chinese Taipei, Italy and two Australian teams, each country in the process of finalising their Olympic team. This was an opportunity for me to work with players and coaches that I was to meet later in the year. Also this was the first time I have had the pleasure to work with Margo Koskelainen and her team in Australia.

There are still marked differences between Australia and New Zealand in the way basic mechanics are delivered. I see no need for New Zealand to change its ideology. These matters have been discussed separately with Bill Smith. There is no doubt that the very close working relationship we have with Australia is important for the development of umpiring in Oceania. The Grand final was played between Australia and the Australian Institute of Sport.

### **The Umpires**

There were 12 field umpires in attendance. They were from Italy (Stefano Russi), Canada (Ian Brown), Australia (Andrew Rindfleish, David Crowe, Darrell Shephard, Diane Waller, Debbie Keogh, Sue Itzstein, Neville Lawrance, and Bruce McCahon) and New Zealand (Nicky Ogier, Wayne Saunders). All Australian umpires being ISF accredited.

### **White Sox to the 2004 Canada Cup**

Traveling with the New Zealand White Sox Team to the 2004 Canada Cup was another step in my build-up to Athens. In attendance were the Olympic teams from Canada, China,

Chinese Taipei, Japan and Australia. The opportunity to work with these players and coaches and three other Athens bound umpires was very valuable.

The support and assistance given to both my wife and myself by team manager Fay Freeman is gratefully acknowledged. Throughout this tour we were always made to feel welcome and were included in the teams scheduled activities. Fay is an exceptional manager who always has the interests of New Zealand softball and that of her charges to the fore.

I am grateful to Mike Walsh for allowing me to participate with the local players in their pre-tour training schedule and to all the coaching staff for the comradeship extended to us both while on tour.

### **Tournament**

The Canada Cup is currently the premier women's softball tournament outside the Olympics and the World Series. Again Mike Hornack was TCU-CC and my very good friends Brian Van Os and Keith Hazel were joint TCU's of the Futures. This tournament is extremely well organised and a pleasure to umpire at. An umpire's information package was distributed at the pre-tournament clinic covering rules and administration matters. ISF rules were used with only minor exceptions. Umpires were instructed that bats and helmets must be checked before the start of each game. A list of bats approved by the ISF was available at each diamond.

It is a credit to the organisers that they choose not only to provide softball for the elite but also give the same opportunity to the youth and the less fortunate. The Special Olympic teams were a breath of fresh air to watch. Seeing these players getting so much pleasure from playing softball reminds one of how fortunate most of us are.

Softball City, Surrey was the venue, a well-laid out four-diamond softball complex that was part of a larger sports facility area. The umpires were housed in the changing rooms of the Ice Hockey Stadium adjacent to the ballpark. Separate facilities were provided for male and female umpires. Transport was provided to and from the visiting umpire's hotel accommodation a half an hour away from the ballpark. Umpires provided for their own meals and drinks. Drinking water was provided free of charge.

### **Umpires**

There were fourteen umpires assigned to the Canada Cup and over thirty more to the Special Olympics and Futures divisions. The crew was a good mixture of mainly experienced umpires. There were six females and eight males with seven of the crew ISF certified. The Canada Cup is very popular amongst umpires with many applications to attend received. The tournament assigners have a difficult selection task having to cater for local senior umpires, promising up and coming local umpires, umpires appointed by Softball Canada, USA umpires and visiting overseas umpires with the International teams attending this tournament. It was a bonus to have ISC chief umpire Ron Brinkman working this tournament. We had opportunity to discuss the differing umpiring philosophies between ISC and ISF. Our umpires attending the ISC World tournament will find Ron a very pleasant person to work with.

The umpires were, from Canada (Leanna Pacini, Kelly Hunter, Tonya Rabilkin, Susan Strafford, Chris Lee, Brian Sharples, Bob Henning), Australia (Neville Lawrence), Japan (Toshio Saito, Toyomatsu Tabinuki), USA (Lori Bish, Cindy Stinson, Ron Brinkman and Greg Pohl) and New Zealand (Wayne Saunders)

## **ISF Prague Cup 2004**

Following enquires I was able to secure an invitation from the Czech Softball Federation to umpire at the ISF Prague Cup. There were a few anxious moments the week before departing. After arriving back from Canada I contracted a serious infection. My slow response to antibiotics saw me hospitalised for three days.

In consultation with Softball New Zealand travel details were personally arranged through Air New Zealand. The availability of suitable connecting flights and the restrictive baggage allowance if travelling via Asia influenced the final route via Los Angeles and Frankfurt to Prague.

The tournament was a double round robin with championship play-offs. As a final build-up to Athens the Canadian and Chinese Taipei teams played the team from the Netherlands and hosts Czech Republic. With the temperatures between 28 and 32 degrees it was an ideal opportunity for me to step out and acclimatise. The venue was a recently constructed softball and baseball complex, an idyllic setting surrounded by hills and overlooking suburban housing. Pavel Prachar was the ISF tournament representative and Miroslav Dolejs the TCU. The tournament was played under ISF World Championship rules. Canada accounted for Chinese Taipei in the grand final.

### **Umpires**

There were ten field umpires in attendance. They were from Canada (Joyce Bellini), Germany (Alex Vogel and Frank Wagner), The Netherlands (Bert and Caroline Loggen), The Czech Republic (Radomir Tuma, Miroslav Dolejs, Pavel Vychodska and Rostislav Vedtich) and New Zealand (Wayne Saunders). The majority of this crew are amongst the most experienced umpires in Europe. The fact that I had worked with seven of the crew before made the occasion a kind of a reunion.

Post tournament I had about a week before heading to Athens. During this time I worked games involving the Greek National team and games in the Czech National League. Pavel Vychodska acted as my host on a number of occasions showing me around the older part of this beautiful city. Pavel Prachar and his wife hosted Kevin Henderson and myself at their home for dinner one very long evening. After working the National League games it is worth commenting on the tremendous job Kevin has done as coach in helping to develop the Czech National team into a competitive emerging unit.

## **The Games of the XXVIII Olympiad, Athens, Greece**

Pavel Vychodska and I departed Prague at 10.40pm arriving Athens 2.15am 11 August. Arrival procedures at the airport were well organized. Immigration clearance and official accreditation went smoothly. We arrived at our accommodation compound The Agios Kosmas Centre about 4.30am. This compound was ring fenced but open to the west to the sea of the Saronic Gulf. There were three security checkpoints plus a baggage-screening machine to negotiate each time we entered the compound. Technical Officials were accommodated in two per room with four rooms per block and a total fifteen blocks in all. Don't flush the toilet paper. Internet and phones. Breakfast each day. Very friendly official games volunteers. Armed Greek army guards patrolling the fence line in addition to the very alert security police. My roommate was Neville Lawrence. It was home and we all got to like it.

### **Technical Meeting**

All umpires attended this meeting along with the team and official ISF delegations. A thirty-six page Technical Manual and Guide for the Olympic Softball Competition was distributed. The ISF Technical Code and Rules applied, a number of these rules were further clarified in this guide. I list a number of generic points of interest.

- Each team may video the game they are playing in only. Cameras must be in place twenty minutes before start time and removed within fifteen minutes after the completion of that game
- Disputed Plays – Team manager or head coach may consult the game officials. All other persons must be kept out of the discussion. If required an interpreter may also take part in the discussion
- Powdered Resin – Only the defensive team's resin bag can remain on the field during live play. The defensive team is responsible to remove their resin bag at the completion of their half inning as the defensive team.
- Time clocks – these will be used and a set of operating rules were included. The clocks were under the control of the DUIC Henry Pollard. Sensitive use saw no timing penalty issues arise.
- Umpires may be assigned to games involving their national association/federation. When six umpires are used an umpire may be appointed in the outfield of a game involving their own country.

### **Pre-Championship Umpire Clinic**

Merle Butler conducted the usual pre-championship clinic with the assistance of Henry Pollard. A written handout covering salient issues was provided. In addition the ISF four-umpire system was revisited on the diamond. There were a number of matters that only related to this event and the way it was to be managed. Muzuno supplied a new field umpiring uniform. I have listed below items from this clinic that are of generic interest and or are new interpretations or mechanic revisions

- Sunglasses, as long as all black and not reflective, may be worn. The sunglasses must be removed if the manager approaches the umpire and has something to discuss with the umpire.
- Do not allow profane language or any obscene actions. Managers are to report any unsportsmanlike or derogatory acts by players or spectators to the umpires. (UIC will notify Tournament Coordinators of any spectator acts)
- Bats were inspected before each game and two bats from each team were tested by ISF after each game.
- Jewelry if deemed dangerous should be removed.
- Catchers helmets must be worn any time a pitcher is warming up (before an inning or in the warm-up area)
- Pitchers glove: a yellow coloured glove is legal under the current rules. This will be reviewed. Any excess lengths of lacing shall be cut off. A white manufacturer's logo on a glove finger is acceptable.
- Keep the catchers hustling, be proactive and prevent the catcher going out to join the infield and the pitcher after the warm-up pitches.
- A minor modification has been made to the set position for base umpires prior to the delivery of the pitch. Base umpires will briefly assume the set position 6 to 7 metres from their base. They shall release this position and take one step forward with both legs,

simultaneous with the delivery of the pitch. The umpire should now be positioned so he is able to push off either leg to move to position.

- Reintroduced first base mechanic on a short hit or bunted ball near the first base line. The umpire is to rotate further around into the diamond to be in a position to make a call at near to 90 degrees to the angle of the throw to first base.

### **The Championship**

Umpires were given their assignments for the entire round-robin play over the first seven days of competition. Each umpire was assigned to ten games during this phase so there was ample time to organise your day. USA was the stand out softball team with excellent pitching and batting depth. They went through undefeated. The only team to come close was Japan who held them scoreless for seven innings before relenting in the tiebreaker. This was the best-balanced pitching game; I had the pleasure of working the plate for this one.

Four-umpire crews were used throughout the round robin and six-umpire crews were used for the single page system play-offs. Japan eliminated China while USA went straight to the final with a win over Australia. Australia accounted for Japan to face USA again in the Gold Medal game. Power batting by Crystl Bustos and a fine pitching display by Lisa Fernandez saw USA home by 5 runs to 1. This was to be the only run they gave up throughout the entire tournament. I had the pleasure of working a most enjoyable game at first base. Of the eleven New Zealand field umpires or referees assigned to the Athens games, I believe only two were directly assigned to the Gold Medal game. This fact I have only recently discovered, making this an even more special game to me.

### **Umpires**

There were twelve field umpires assigned by ISF. They were Leanna Pacini, Kelly Hunter (Canada), Mary “Marty” Makar, Debbie Lauderback, Lelani Okuda (USA), Haruhi Goto (Japan), Yang Yi (China), Santos Vasquez (Puerto Rico), Teboho Vincent Maeong (South Africa), Neville Lawrence (Australia), Pavel Vychodska (Czech Republic), Wayne Saunders (New Zealand). This was a largely experienced crew, with in depth on and off strengths. It was a genuine pleasure to work with every one of this crew. In addition again I had the pleasure of working with our Chief Scorer Russell Moffat at a major international tournament.

In my opinion this tournament highlighted the value of umpiring experience. USA and Canada aside the rest of the world does not have large numbers of female umpires with this kind of experience. Special importance needs to be placed on the retention of experienced female umpires and in particular umpires in their thirties or early forties. If an appointment to the Olympic games is the ultimate appointment for an umpire to aspire to, consideration should be given to allowing female umpires to be considered for appointment to a second Olympic games. This I believe would have a very desirable impact on retention.

### **The Olympic Games**

Attending the Opening Ceremony was the major non-game highlight for me. I got to see close-up for the first time the much vaunted, new stadium roof, engineering designed by Sinclair Knight Merz. For an engineer it was an impressive structure (sorry for the diversion). The stadium was full and as the sun went down the official opening ceremony began. It was the most impressive live event I have seen in my life. Greek history from the gods of the ancient world through the development of civilisation, the ancient Olympics to the modern Olympics were all superbly presented. This was followed by the march past of the athletes, the raising of the Olympic flag and the lighting of the Olympic flame, all soul touching events

to see live. It was hard to realise you were living a real life dream, no words can do justice to those feelings.

Most nights the umpiring crew would dine out together. This made for the development of a strong bond between crewmembers. Other separate joint sessions and activities together helped develop this further. One of our favourite places to dine was “mamma’s place”, as it got nicknamed. We would arrive and set-up the plastic beach furniture at waters edge and partake in a variety of Greek finger food and fine ale remising all manner of things until it was time to go home.

We had free access to public transport including the new light-rail and the underground. This made getting around very easy and convenient. It was Greek mythology and history; ancient temples to the gods and ancient stadiums that were complimented by many new stadiums in this city sighted for the sun. The Acropolis under restoration was hugely impressive. The Pantheon and the many other buildings that make up the Acropolis are architectural masterpieces. There was no shortage of photographic opportunities. Excellent shopping was to be had in Plaka’s narrow streets at the base of the Acropolis. Olympic merchandise was everywhere, prices seemed relatively high but shopping was brisk.

The softball venue was an impressive new purpose built stadium (again engineering by Sinclair Knight Merz) with separate warm-up diamonds. The softball stadium was located in the Helliniko Olympic Complex a new multi-sport development including baseball, basketball, hockey and others sports built on the old international airport site.

In my free time I watched the New Zealand teams play hockey and basketball, plus the USA v Australia basketball game in a pulsating packed arena. Bob arranged an all venue VIP pass for our last day in Athens. Ten hours of competition at the Velodrome and the Main Stadium in the very best VIP seat was an awesome experience.

It was a great honour to be part of such a large and significant event. I thought the games were very well run and the Greek people just fantastic hosts. To be part of the historical return of the Olympic games to it’s birthplace was indeed a unique opportunity and very hard to place in real life terms.

### **General Observations and Recommendations**

From what I saw at each of the above tournaments there were very few issues with the implementation of the current ISF published four umpire mechanics. There were a few missed rotations, however the overall experience of the international crewmembers ensured that there were no coverage issues. However it is clear that these mechanics are not well practiced or preferred by the umpires in North America. This can be put down to the fact that nearly all international umpires are appointed through and take directions from ISF. The ISF mechanics are more suited to the variants of worldwide international play rather than the localized variations developed by umpire groups to suit the style of play within their leagues. In the past these umpires have attended World Series and have been instrumental in having the published mechanics of the day modified to suit their style. I strongly recommend that ISF continue with the good work it is doing in standardising mechanics under the leadership of Henry Pollard. Sure there will always be good reason for change but these changes should be well reviewed and published and kept up-to-date on the ISF website from were all umpires can gain access. This in my opinion is the only way that all umpires throughout the world can be sure that they

are teaching and using the latest versions. Recommendations can also be channeled through this source so all the good ideas can be considered.

There were three major areas of applications that are worthy noting

- Basic positional setup when first calling tag plays. Still in my opinion one of the major causes that lead to controversy in judgment calls. Many umpires still make these calls from oblique angles looking through fielders or runners. Many of their discussions are based primarily on timing rather than actual factual detail. This is more obvious in two and three-umpire mechanics and at home plate in four-umpire mechanics. The simple principle of having the four essential elements clearly visible appears to not be fully understood or taught. In the days of instant television replays, calling it how it looks from the stands is just not good enough. We only have to look at the importance placed on getting it right through the use of replays on point scoring plays in professional sport. With so much expectation and finance invested in a major event that only occurs every four years it won't be long before the same can be expected in softball. Critical international games must continue to have at least four-umpire coverage.
- The lack of understanding of a growing presence of professional obstruction and interference by the top-level players. With the stakes ever getting higher the professional coach and player is on a constant lookout to gain an advantage, this includes what an umpire is looking at and more particularly what he is not looking at. This has led to more casual positioning of fielders without the ball around the bases and on the basepath of runners. Fielders not in the act of fielding a batted ball initiating contact with a runner by actions not associated directly with fielding the batted ball. Runners themselves are using illegal tactics in slides and now using their legs not just their arms to dislodge ball or interfere with a fielder attempting a secondary play. Much of this play is perpetrated by the very skilled players and is only used when certain situations exist in a game. Much of this can go unobserved when an umpire is changing from outside to inside the diamond or after a tag play when the umpire is focused on selling their call or has prematurely transferred their point of vision away before the play has been entirely completed. Much more training of umpires working at this level of the game is required if we are to keep pace with the developing skills in our players.
- In my opinion I think it is timely to revisit the current fastpitch pitching regulations. The gap in rule compliance and rule enforcement between what is happening in the men's game compared to that of the women's game is the widest it has been at anytime in my umpiring career. Having been a strong enforcer when New Zealand took a strong stand on compliance and now hopefully a good listener I think it is timely for the introduction worldwide of two separate pitching rules. The current rule is well observed and reacted to by the women and thus should remain unaltered. For the men compliance and enforcement has been drastically undermined by the more liberal rules that are now well cemented in the North American men's game. It is time for all controlling bodies in men's softball to sit down and agree on one acceptable and enforceable rule. One rule that would make a game a pleasure to watch and participate in.

**Olympic game schedule appendix attached**



Yours sincerely,  
Wayne Saunders.



## APPENDIX - OLYMPIC GAME SCHEDULE

### Round Robin

USA	v	Italy	3 <sup>rd</sup> base
China	v	Greece	2 <sup>nd</sup> base
China	v	Italy	1 <sup>st</sup> base
USA	v	Japan	Plate
China	v	USA	1 <sup>st</sup> base
Greece	v	Chinese Taipei	3 <sup>rd</sup> base
Chinese Taipei	v	Italy	Plate
Canada	v	Australia	2 <sup>nd</sup> base
Italy	v	Canada	1 <sup>st</sup> base
Greece	v	Australia	3 <sup>rd</sup> base

### Championship Playoff

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> v 4<sup>th</sup>

Japan 1	v	China 0	2 <sup>nd</sup> base
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### Gold Medal Game

USA	v	Australia	1 <sup>st</sup> base
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*The Olympic Gold Medal Game was my 135<sup>th</sup> game umpired in nine ISF World Series and Olympic Tournaments attended.*