Basking in the golden glow

Dr Amit Patel, a periodontist from Birmingham, shares his experiences as a volunteer at the London 2012 Olympic Games

I like everyone I tried to buy tickets for the Olympic Games over a year ago, and like so many other people I was unsuccessful. My girlfriend and I were desperate to get involved, so when the opportunity to become a volunteer came up we jumped at the chance.

My girlfriend and I like so many other people I was volunteering at the London 2012 Olympic Games as a dentist, I wanted the opportunity to do something new. I was selected to be a press officer. You may ask why and I know I asked myself the same question, but I was actually in, and last year I travelled to London for training in my new role.

It seems that some years ago only competitors in athletics would have a post-event interview with various media, but this proved so popular that it was rolled out across all the other sporting events. My role was to make sure the press of a certain country had the opportunity to interview its own competitors. Even if a country had just one athlete competing and they came last it was still important for that country’s press to cover the story.

Three months before the opening ceremony I was e-mailed the event I was covering. It was boxing at ExCel, and everyone thought being a dentist would prove useful. We were presented with our uniforms, which we were allowed to keep, and I took two weeks off, proudly telling my patients that I was to be a volunteer for the Olympic Games.

When we watched the opening ceremony on 3 August I just could not wait. My role started on the Saturday, and I am fortunate that I am from London, meaning I could live at my parents’ home and commute to ExCel by tube, while some other volunteers were driving 100 miles a day! When I put on my uniform I felt like a school-kid again and as I caught the train to Bank for ExCel I got the odd stares and snigger, but once I arrived I was surrounded by hundreds of volunteers, and we all had the same smile on our faces. We didn’t know each other but we knew we were going to be part of something big. You could feel the excitement in the air.

During the Olympic Games people sitting on the train would smile and ask us about the roles we played, it seems that for those two weeks London became the friendliest place in the UK.

One of the most important innovations for 2012 was the introduction of women’s boxing. There are just three weight categories for women while the men have ten. Team GB had three women contestants and seven men. I spoke to journalists from Reuters and the Associated Press and they were very keen to report on the women’s boxing.

As the days went by the intensity of the crowd’s excitement increased, then exploded when the first women’s bouts started, especially when Katie Taylor, the Irish boxer, fought Briton Natasha Jonas. This was one of the

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best fights I saw throughout the Olympic Games; the women were shugging it out toe to toe with such courage it was amazing to see, and the roar in the arena was measured at 113 decibels, even louder than the night before in the Velodrome, Katie Taylor won a well-deserved gold medal.

When each bout was finished I had to direct the combatants to the waiting press. This was a very difficult job; the loser may not want to speak to the media. To train so hard for four years then lose – you can imagine the emotions they must feel. I was also fortunate to see gold medal-winning Briton Nicola Adams’ bout against the Chinese boxer Cancan Ien. This time the roar in the arena reached 157 decibels, which is similar to the sound made by a jumbo jet taking off. The atmosphere was electric that night. I spoke to some of the crowd and they said they had never been to a boxing match or even seen a fight on the television before, but they really enjoyed the atmosphere at ExCel.

Afterwards, listening to some of the questions from the foreign press to the English-speaking contestants was amusing: one woman asked how many skirts a female boxer owned and what makeup she wore, not sure how useful that was.

I got to speak to Reuters and Associated Press again when the men’s gold medal bouts were starting and they said it proved a bit of an anti-climax after women’s boxing of such a high calibre.

I met “Batting” Barbara Burbeck an 82-year-old world champion boxer in the 1940s and 1950s, an amazing character who still had that look of the fighter in her eyes when she held up her guard. I met Lennox Lewis and Evander Holyfield and I was also lucky enough to also hold the Cuban light welterweight boxer’s gold medal, very heavy indeed!

I had access to all the training areas of the athletes in ExCel: the kwoon do, wrestling, fencing, weightlifting and many others. I tried to get into the boxing ring with no success, but just to have the opportunity to mix and talk with such Olympians was a great honour.

There were medics, paramedics and physiotherapists based at each sporting arena but luckily no need for dentists. Dentistry was provided through a purpose-built polyclinic at the Olympic Games Village, which gave athletes access to a dental clinic and other medical facilities.

I was lucky to meet and work with great people from many different backgrounds, this chap might be a barrister and that woman a physics teacher, we were thrown in at the deep end and it all worked really well. The volunteers really made the London Olympic Games special, especially those who still had the energy to be friendly and chery at one am in the morning after a long shift, I think I would have struggled with that.

If I had the opportunity to do it again I would grab the chance, I may well go to Rio in 2016.

• The Procter & Gamble Company, including Crest + Oral-B teamed up to help dentists ensure the best oral health for the athletes of the London 2012 Olympic Games. As part of this dedicated partnership, Crest + Oral-B supported LOCOG in its provision of the London 2012 dental clinic.

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About the author

Amit Patel BDS MDS MSc (Dist) (Liverpool) MDIising Specialist in Periodontics & Implant Dentistry. Amit is also a Specialist in Periodontics, practicing at Grace House Specialist Dental Centre in Birmingham. His special interests are dental implants, regenerative and aesthetic Periodontics. Amit graduated from the University of Liverpool and completed a 4-year specialist training programme in Periodontics at Barts, Kings & St Thomas Dental Institute. Amit is also an Associate Specialist in Periodontics at the Birmingham Dental School. He has taught an undergraduate and postgraduate level, including lecturing at dental practitioners both in the UK and internationally.