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 liked 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.

I really did not want to be involved in the 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.

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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 slugging it out toe to toe with such courage it was amazing to see, and the roar in the arena was measured at 115 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’s bout against the Chinese boxer Cancan Ien. This time the roar in the arena reached 137 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 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 kwon 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 cheery 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.