



THIS WAS THE PLACE!

UTAH AND MORMONS ON AN OLYMPIC-SIZED STAGE

LDS IMAGE SOARS “SWIFTER, HIGHER, STRONGER”

AS THE 2002 WINTER OLYMPICS AND PARALYMPICS closed in Salt Lake City in mid-March, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seemed to breathe a huge sigh of relief. It had just completed the daunting task of playing an active role in the Games and projecting an image of friendliness and openness to tens of thousands of visitors to Utah and millions of viewers around the world. And the message worked!

After millions of dollars and years of preparation, the Church projected an image that was thoughtfully crafted and professionally delivered. Thousands of Mormon-related stories appeared in magazines and newspapers around the world. And though some reporters were obviously bewildered by many idiosyncrasies of Utah’s “peculiar people” or the finer points of LDS theology, for the most part, the media portrayed Utah and Mormonism in an overwhelmingly positive light.

“IF YE ARE PREPARED . . .”

PREPARATIONS for the media onslaught during the Olympics began several years ago. The Church’s Public Affairs Department vastly expanded the media resources available on the Church’s official website <www.lds.org>, adding materials and offering information in more languages. The department



A statue of Joseph Smith stands at the entrance to the News Resource Center created to help Olympics reporters get their LDS facts straight.

mailed information packets about the Church to media outlets likely to send reporters to the 2002 Games. And it sent staff members to make media presentations in select cities, primarily in the U.S. and Europe.

Most notably, the Public Affairs Department created a News Resource Center for Olympic-accredited media, strategically located in the Joseph Smith Memorial Building. There, staff and volunteers handled media requests, organized special tours for reporters, and provided story ideas

and resource materials. The center offered Internet connections, large-screen television coverage of the Games, ready information about the Church, and basic food services. “Tea and coffee will not be included with the food service,” clarified a media page on the official LDS website, “though hot chocolate and herbal teas will be available. We will show you where to get these services within a city block.” The center was a stirring success, hosting 1,324 media members and handling more than two thousand phone queries during the Games. Further, about two hundred reporters took advantage of the Church’s offer to research their genealogy.

“CONTAIN THE FIRE WITHIN”

PERHAPS the wisest decisions the Church made in preparing for the world’s spotlight were to tone down its normal proselytizing message and allow considerable media access to President Gordon B. Hinckley, the Quorum of the Twelve, and other Church leaders. According to Michael Otteson, director of the Public Affairs Department, President Hinckley’s two-fold charge to his team was “to be good hosts and to establish a legacy of good will in the community.” Playing on the Games’ theme “light the fire within,” Robert Kirby, the *Salt Lake Tribune’s* resident humorist, labeled the Church’s strategy “contain the fire within.”

In a public discussion held at the University of Utah a few weeks after the Olympics closed, several experienced journalists agreed that these strategies had paid off very well for the Church. They also hoped the goodwill the Church enjoyed during the Games will help it decide to remain as accommodating to the media as it was during this remarkable period.

Of the decision not to proselytize, the *Tribune’s* Peggy Fletcher Stack suggested the Church probably became “best known in these Games for *not* proselytizing.” Echoing Stack, Howard Berkes of National Public Radio added that “the act of not proselytizing was, in effect, the Church’s most effective proselytizing.”

Berkes, who has covered Salt Lake City and the Church for more than twenty years, stated the level of openness from the Church toward the media was “more than he’s ever seen before”—something he hopes will be a lasting Olympic legacy. In the same discussion, *Deseret News* religion editor Carrie Moore suggested Church leaders had “long been afraid of the media, but now seem less so.” According to Moore, they have acted



from fear that reporters were out “to skewer the Church, to do it harm.” She believes the Church is beginning to understand that “reporters like people who are willing to talk; if you are not willing to talk, they think you have something to hide.”

All three journalists praised Otteson’s influence in helping negotiate this new openness. Otteson demurred, saying it is easy when the Church has such an enjoyable and media-friendly president. Stack agreed. Commenting on the difference between President Spencer W. Kimball, the last Church president before President Hinckley to make a real attempt to reach out to the media, she added: “President Kimball only tolerated it. President Hinckley loves it; he relishes it.”

Whatever lies behind the changes, it is working. Berkes

shared a story about a skeptical reporter who, through his experiences, “became open-minded and sympathetic.” But troubled, the reporter confessed to Berkes his worries that if he wrote about his actual feelings and experiences, “His editor would be disappointed.”

PLEASE PASS THE LOZENGES

MEMBERS of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir were among the busiest of all official Church ambassadors, and far and away the most reported-about. Clad in white sweaters, scarves, hats, and coats, the choir performed during the Olympics opening ceremony seen by an estimated audience of up to 3.5 billion.

TEMPLE SQUARE PUTS ON ITS OLYMPIC FACE

WITH DAILY CONCERTS AND TOURS, AND the “Light of the World” spectacular playing most evenings in the adjacent Conference Center, Temple Square was a powerful magnet for tens

of thousands of tourists, reporters, athletes, and dignitaries. For the first time in history, visitors to Temple Square were required to pass through metal detectors and submit to a search of their belongings. Yet with smiling, hospitality-trained volunteers at every



Visitors pass through metal detectors and have their belongings searched before entering Temple Square.



checkpoint, most visitors perceived the inspection procedure as friendly and polite. Keeping in step with the Church’s decision to tone down its missionary emphasis during the Games, Temple Square missionaries and volunteer guides were admonished instead to be “FRIENDS,” an acronym for “Friendly, Respectful, Informative, Enthusiastic, Non-judgmental, Dedicated, and Spiritually prepared.” Street banners contained an image of the temple spires and proclaimed, “Friends to All Nations.”

Temple Square’s two visitors centers had been completely renovated in 2001 (see SUNSTONE, Jan. 2002), updated with many high-tech and interactive displays emphasizing Jesus Christ and the importance of fami-

lies. A new pamphlet was distributed containing information about twelve nearby Church buildings open to the public during the Olympics. Small cards picturing the Salt Lake Temple and a smiling family invited readers to the new, official LDS missionary website at <www.mormon.org> (see related story, p. 76).

With a cast of more than a thousand, “Light of the World—A Celebration of Life” was performed ten times in a sold-out Conference Center. The theatrical and musical spectacular celebrated the human spirit and the ideal of world brotherhood. Despite a statement by Church spokesman Dale Bills that “the intent is to have a message that will appeal to any faith,” the show conveyed an unambiguously Christian message. At show’s end, Jesus Christ was presented as the “Light of the world,” and an enormous image of Thorvaldsen’s *Christus* was projected onto a backdrop curtain.

In contrast to the Church’s non-confrontational, non-proselytizing approach to visitors, several anti-Mormon, evangelical, and anti-abortion groups distributed literature and organized protests, some near Temple Square. Several evangelical groups, including the Utah Lighthouse Ministry and the Mormonism Research Ministry, prepared a “Temple Square Visitor’s Guide,” a free newspaper with critical views on Mormonism. A bit more respectful than most anti-Mormon tracts, this guide presented a rational critique of Mormon doctrine and practice. “As you will see, Mormonism is very different from biblical Christianity,” said the paper. “In fact, LDS Church doctrine states that only Mormonism is true Christianity. We politely disagree.”



Signs posted outside Temple Square to clarify where proselytizing was and was not taking place.



A NEW SYMBOL FOR THE CHURCH?

IN A MOVE that surprised many, the Church approved the installation of a twenty-one-story-high Olympic banner on the Church Office Building's west wall. The banner was one of a dozen placed on Salt Lake City high-rises. And though the Salt Lake Temple remained the Church's most recognizable symbol, the "Skating Lady" evoked both humor and serious reflection from Mormon-watchers.

The strange, massive image of a scantily clad woman in an elegant pose adorning the headquarters of the usually staid and conservative Church led to a great deal of fun. A satirical website, the *Deseret Tribune* <www.deserettribune.com>, teased readers with a fictional news account of a compromise reached between Church and Olympic officials to cover the Skating Lady's legs to the knees for modesty's sake. The story was accompanied by "before" and "after" pictures, the latter showing the Lady with blue leggings. That satire aside, when asked about the Lady in an ultra-short skirt and display of long, sexy legs on the side of the Church's world headquarters, Church spokesperson Michael Otteson said he would tell questioners: "Well, the pioneer dress played havoc with the pirouettes."

Seeing the Lady more symbolically, some wondered if this image of a young, slender woman caught in the moment of performing a graceful skating move characterized an image LDS leaders were attempting to convey: a young, vigorous church optimistically looking upward. And just as the Skating Lady's difficult pose may look effortless, the Church's reshaping of its image for the new millennium could in reality be a very complicated, even painful, balancing act.



The Skating Lady garnered more attention during her performance than many traditional LDS symbols.

With high winds and temperatures dropping slightly below freezing, the Choir lip-synced to pre-recorded Olympic selections: the "Star-Spangled Banner," Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," and the official 2002 Winter Games theme, "Call of the Champions," composed and conducted by John Williams.

The opening ceremony was just part of the Choir's grueling Games schedule of rehearsing for upcoming tours, singing in "Music and the Spoken Word," and performing in "Light of the World"—an Olympic-themed extravaganza performed numerous times in the Conference Center. And just hours before the opening ceremony, the choir sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" to President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush at the state Capitol. In a short media session following a brief visit with the First Presidency, President Bush mentioned he was "looking forward to hearing the Choir tonight. . . . Thank you for tuning them up." To which President Hinckley replied, "They're all ready to go."

According to Otteson, the Choir members' hard work and sore throats were well worth their efforts. Stories published about the Choir led all other Church-related stories by a wide margin.

CHANGED MINDS, CHANGED HEARTS

THE 2002 OLYMPICS was a catalyst for collaboration between Mormons and non-Mormons in Salt Lake. It helped shift local attitudes toward open-mindedness and respect for diversity. Whether motives were pure or simply from a need to look good, sincere efforts and real progress were made. Mormons were energetic about welcoming the world, so a mood of cross-cultural appreciation began overtaking Salt Lake City, and interfaith work surged.

An Interfaith Roundtable was created in 1998 to provide religious support for the Games. A subcommittee of the Salt Lake Organizing Committee, the Roundtable brought together a rare collection of clergy—sixty-five men and women representing more than twenty-five diverse local faiths. I joined the Roundtable as a practicing Gnostic and woman in ministry. At the Roundtable, our differences were respected, and collaboration was sincere; members put aside mistrust and fear. At each meeting, the group said a prayer of unity that embraced us all for who we are, regardless of belief, practice, or gender. We petitioned God for inclusiveness. This act alone was healing. Being accepted as a feminist was a turning point for me. I found peace and fulfillment working with LDS men in the group. This doesn't mean we agreed on everything, but it means we appreciated each other.

The Roundtable co-sponsored a number of projects during the Olympics, including an evening of interfaith music and blessing, a directory that listed local faith services, a team of thirty-two Olympic chaplains for the athletes' village, and an Olympic edition of the book, *A World of Faith*. Yet perhaps our most crucial work was the alliance we formed ourselves.

Salt Lake is changing. New relationships are forming. Those who are moving forward are finding positive language and common ground. To fall back on old habits would only perpetuate past imbalances. The Olympics may have saved Salt Lake City from stagnation. The best legacy to come out of the Games may be our own ability to change. —MAXINE HANKS

