

Interview with Bruce Robertson of the 1974 Commonwealth Games

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Interviewee: Bruce Robertson

Interviewer: Stephanie de Boer and Eileen Hesselink

Background:

Bruce Robertson was one of the many athletes who represented the Canadian swimming team in the 1974 Commonwealth Games held in New Zealand. It was here that he competed in six events, and claimed a medal standing in all six. He excelled at both individual and team events, which is evident in his medal count. Winning gold medals in the 4×100 Medley Relay and the 4×100 Freestyle relay, collecting silver medals in both the 100 and 200 meter freestyle events, and lastly, claiming bronze in the 100 meter butterfly and the 4×200 Freestyle Relay. Not only did Robertson participate in the Commonwealth Games, but also took part, previously and after, in the Pan American Games, twice in the World Championships, twice in the Olympics, the British Championships and the United States Nationals. In all of these various competitions, except the 1976 Olympics, he won an assortment of medals in the events in which he competed. Through his career, Robertson held Canadian records in the 200 meter Freestyle, 100 meter Butterfly, and the 200 meter IM.



In acknowledgement to his many great victories, Bruce Robertson has received numerous honours in his name. In 1973, he was named “Canada’s Male Athlete of the Year”. In 1974, he received the Nationals High Point Award. The award for outstanding male swimmer, The Sir Edward Beatty Trophy, was awarded to him in 1972, 1974 and 1975. He was also “appointed an Officer to the Order of Canada”.¹ Then in 1977 he was induct into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, and then later in 1979 into the British Columbia Sports Hall of Fame.

Today Bruce Robertson still remains very much involved in the Commonwealth Games. “Robertson, an Olympic medalist in swimming, has been the regional vice-president of the Americas region since 1995. He also has chaired two committees: Marketing and Games Co-ordination”.² He became the Vice President of the Commonwealth Games Executive Board (cwg website) in 2003. He helps organize the upcoming Games, including the 2006 Games that will be held in Melbourne. Bruce Robertson made an outstanding impact in the events that he competed in. He established many medal winnings, record times, and other great honours. He represented team Canada with pride and glory. His accomplishments have not stopped after his years of competition, rather, he is still a key influential aspect of sports today, emphasizing in the Commonwealth Games.

Interview:

I. Getting to the Games

A. How did they get started into their particular sport?

Basically my parents had a summer camp and it was a matter of them not wanting me to drown, so I started swimming at age three. The camp had a summer swim club that I joined, it was very organized. At the end of the summer, the swim club

had a competition with other clubs, and I entered.

B. How did you get selected?

When I was 16 I began to swim all year round with a club, mainly because I didn't want to work. From there, I continued to train and I continued to qualify for the various competitions available.

C. Training regimes for the games?

Training was about four hours a day, five-and-a-half days a week, 22 hours in the water, and probably three to four hours of strength training and a couple hours flexibility training.

D. What did it mean to you as an amateur event?

It's different; it's one of major international games. The Commonwealth Games is probably, as far as quality, 4th on that list. The US Nationals, the Pan American, the World Championship, and the Olympics being the others on that list.

E. How did you travel to the games? Time it took?

I went through LA, I just flew down. It was probably about a 17 hour flight from there. So all around about 18- 20 hours from Vancouver.

II. Significant memories:

A. What is your best memory of the games?

There are memories on a couple different levels. Competition wise – the 200 freestyle, I swam in 6 and got 6 medals. In the actual Games setting, you remember the strangest things, but I remember that they had fresh strawberries in the village cafeteria. The campus was very pleasant; the party at the end was by far the best party I had ever gone to. I stayed after the games for 2 weeks after the games to travel around, so that was pretty great.

B. What is your worst memory of the games?

As an athlete you look back on event where you did poorer than you expected. One of my events where I did poorer was the 100m fly, I got a bronze.

C. What it meant for them to represent their country?

That's always been for anyone, a source of pride. I was always proud to be representing Canada. Canada was well respected, internationally as a country, not just in the sporting world.

III. Issues around the Games:

- A. Were there political/cultural issues that they remember that surrounded the games?

Not as an athlete, that I would have been aware of. There was the 1972 attack [an attack on Israeli athletes], but that didn't seem to result in a lot of heightened security because of the location and the fact that only the commonwealth is represented. The attack was on Israeli athletes and Israel doesn't participate in the Commonwealth games. It certainly wasn't anything that we were worried about, it wasn't an issue.

- B. Who paid for what?

Usually the organizational committee pays for everything related to competition. That's anywhere from 700 – a billion dollars, back in 1974 it probably would have been anywhere from 100 – 150 million dollars. In each country there is a commonwealth federation and they are responsible for getting athletes from their country to the country where the games are being held. They also do all administration for the teams. They're budgets are in probably around 350 million dollars, back then it would have been around 100 – 1.2 million dollars.

- C. Were females treated equally?

Within the swimming team they are and always have been, it's a 50/50 team. As for the total team, boxing and wrestling were men only. So I would say that it was about 30% women, now its about 45% women. Nowadays women do participate in judo, boxing, wrestling. Women have netball now, which men do not participate in.

- D. Specific questions about issues around those games.

- A. The slogan for the Commonwealth Games is "Quality, Humanity, Destiny". Would you say that the games live up to this reputation?

Well it is a very friendly atmosphere. As for quality, it's getting there, as far as the training environment, the facilities, the coaches, there's obviously huge disparities, its going to be many years before you can say that every country has the proper training. Humanity, very much so, the games tries to be very focused around the athletes, when they get to the games they are treated very equally. Destiny is really very individual – you are there to reach your potential. Nothings perfect but they're there because they show what we are aiming for as a federation.

- B. Did you, as an athlete, ever notice the media paying attention to certain other athletes?

There are two major types of media – broadcast and press of all types. There can be anywhere from 4000 – 5000 athletes and the same number of media. The vast majority of the coverage just focuses on the competition – quality, how specific athletes perform. They also may pay attention to the organizational committee - only if they have done a bad job – which is fair game. The media looks for stories of human interests, within certain personalities. But back then the focus was more on certain medal winners, if they did single out an athlete, now a days they may set one aside and follow them – they pick someone with a certain profile, certain potential, good in front of a camera, regardless of how they do. Back then they didn't really do that – or we didn't really notice it.

C. History of the Games:

A. What do you know about the history of the games?

A fair amount because I sit on the international committee – vice president, chair marketing, chair coordination commission – a group that evaluates how the organizing committee is doing. It's basically looking at the preparations that they are making for the upcoming games. Now I know a lot, back then I knew virtually nothing. It was just another competition for me.

B. How they view the progression of the Commonwealth Games.

From a 1974 perspective, of what I knew then as an athlete for me it was nothing but another competition – although it was very important and high profile. As an athlete at that age I was pretty ignorant. In the last ten to fifteen years the games have made huge strides forward in a sense of marketing, financial stability, importance. We're getting new sports and team sports. It's making good progress.

IV. After the Games:

A. The impact of the Games on their lives following the games?

Because I continued to compete – my focus turned to the next competition and I focused on how I had to prepare – it was sort of, out of site out of mind. What stuck with me was that it was probably the most relaxed environment, extremely friendly environment and people. Spending time after was great; it was the things around the games that stuck with me more so. Another thing that contributed to the friendly atmosphere was the fact that English is the main language. It added some commonality between everyone partaking. All of the countries that host have some English basis; in the village everyone speaks English which makes everyone feel more at home and relaxed. All in all it was far friendlier and more open because of the language added that ability to relate to people from other countries.

B. Contrasting experience if they attended more than one game.

I've actually only attended one Commonwealth Games where I was competing. But I've been to many since, and the level of competition is still around the same, and still well organized.

C. Contrasting Commonwealth to other games they attended.

Compared to the World Championships and the Pan American Games the quality of the organization, the transportation, the quality of the food, I found the Commonwealth Games to be better in those areas. However, the competition was relatively the same. It's the things surrounding the games are the most different.

V. One word description of their feelings about the Games.

It's known as the friendly games but it's very true, if there was one thing that differentiated it was probably the fact that everyone was so friendly with each other.

¹ http://www.swim.bc.ca/hall/bruce_robertson.php

² http://www.canoe.ca/Slam031211/oth_com-cp.html