

Souvenir Olympics a test of medal

By Pete Jedick

As athletes from around the world compete for precious medals in Atlanta during this summer's Olympics, most of us will be watching the events from the comfort of our living room.

However, as anyone who ever attended an Olympics in person can tell you, there is another highly competitive underground event occurring at the same time: The Quest for Olympic Souvenirs.

Olympic pins are probably the best known souvenirs but most tourists will buy anything with an Olympic logo attached, from toothpaste to pantyhose. It is almost as frenzied as Indians Fever.

The competition for rare items is world class, matching the athletes on the playing fields. Gentle fans from Belgium turn into Elvis groupies when the opportunity to snatch an athlete's jock strap presents itself.

And the ferocity increases as the Games near their conclusion.

I remember standing on the field of Olympic Stadium in Montreal only minutes after the closing ceremonies of the 1976 Summer Olympics.

Tourists were literally pulling plants out of the ground and cutting out patches of grass to transplant around the world. I walked off with a potted plant that thrived in front of my garage for a few years.

But I was with a few friends and watching the carnage only made us greedy for more. "Why be satisfied with such chump change?" we decided. "Let's go for the gusto."

Surrounding the stadium was a ring of flagpoles waving the colors of all the participating nations. Nightly television broadcasts opened with a blimp-eye view of the colorful panorama.

What if we brought home one of these Olympic flags? Let the commoners buy Montreal key rings and Olympic beer mugs.

With my friends standing watch, I set my sights on Old Glory.

Wearing only a pair of cutoffs, T-shirt and tennis shoes, I began my ascent. I climbed upward like a monkey in search of a coconut.

Have you ever seen the greased-pole contest at St. Rocco's carnival each summer? This was the Olympic version, a 50-foot metal pole that narrowed near the top.

I began to fantasize as I entered the upper atmosphere. I could see myself sitting on my front porch, watching Old Glory wave in the wind as I told my grandchildren stories of Olympic triumphs.

In no time I neared the top. But then I realized the Canadians must have visited St. Rocco's themselves. They greased the pole. Who told them? How did they know there'd be some crazy American kids trying to rip them off?

I hugged harder, like a sailor holding the mast in a storm. But for every 2 feet that I pulled up, I slid back down 1. I was within inches of the bottom of the flag. My right arm reached out, my fingers stretched but I could not hang on any longer.

I began to slide. I came down the pole faster than I went up. My feet hurt from smashing the pavement. My clothes were plastered with grease. I'd failed to bring home the gold. I was experiencing the agony of defeat.

My friends laughed at me but I could take it. Those who have never competed on the world stage could not be expected to understand. Only those who aim high fail gloriously.

We were ready to give up when I tripped over something behind the bushes surrounding the poles. It was a ladder. A very tall ladder with a special canvas top rung.

It didn't take us long to figure out that it was specifically designed to service the flags. Those wily Canadians greased the poles but stored the ladder nearby. How naive. No wonder we stole Alaska from them.

Now it was my friend's turn to represent the U.S. of A. He had a Swiss army knife and was ready to go for the glory. But I would have to wait for the Stars and Stripes.

He wanted the Olympic flag, the five colored rings representing the five continents living in harmony. We held the ladder for him.

He flew up it like a cat and began cutting the ropes.

"Hurry," I hollered. I couldn't wait for my turn.

Just then a couple of Montreal policemen walked by. They stopped and gazed up at my friend with curiosity, asking us a question in French that we did not understand.

"Maintenance," I said, in my best Jacques Cousteau accent. Visions of an international incident raced through my mind.

"Oui," they answered and continued on their way.

We took down the Olympic flag, the same one viewed by millions around the world each day. It was huge. It took four of us to fold it.

By now our courage was depleted. The two policemen with guns had dampened it. An international group of tourists gathered around us. They wanted to take their turn at the 50-foot pole-climb event. We left the ladder standing against the pole and disappeared into the crowd.

The only obstacle that remained was sneaking it across the border. But that's another story.

Just remember one thing if you plan to visit Atlanta this summer. Don't expect to excel in the Souvenir Olympics unless you've trained properly and brought a ton of cash. Do your country proud.

Pete Jedick is the author of "Cleveland: Where the East Coast Meets the Midwest."