

Opening Ceremonies

Contributed by Craig Harkins
Friday, 08 August 2008

This evening in Beijing is like a national holiday, or like being on the campus of a Final Four team in March. The city streets are crowded with throngs of people waving flags, wearing armbands or stickers calling out to each other and searching the night sky for the next burst of fireworks.

The day started slowly and normally enough. A quick breakfast then the bus over to the media center on the green but then it became evident that today was not a "normal day at the Olympics." After leaving the MPC (main press center) I was denied access to the Green where I wanted to get a look at the fencing hall. Only those with Opening Ceremonies tickets were allowed into the Green. (You'll also be reading this the morning after the Opening Ceremonies because WiFi access is locked down during the event.)

During the day, Beijing's air quality problems are readily apparent. A haze hangs over the sky and today was the first day that I saw people casting shadows. Most of the police stand under shades and a large number of the pedestrians carry umbrellas to protect themselves from the glare. Every now and again I would feel heat on my skin, though no direct sunlight was visible. It also gets dark pretty quickly here. In Atlanta, though it's almost the same temperature, it stays light about an hour to an hour and a half longer than here in Beijing. (I'm also using eye drops a lot more to keep my contacts wet – will probably switch to glasses later on in the week.)

Air quality aside, the little corner of Beijing that I occupy is something to see. People started lining the streets as early as 3pm and retail stores were all closing at 4pm to make way for the night to come.

The mood is festive. Lots of families were out and about having dinner and getting an ice cream. The crowds are well behaved and the streets are lined with police cars and police as traffic and crowd control. (None of the police that I saw carried a firearm.)

The crowds like the streets all near the "Bird's Nest" and even streets several blocks away. Anything that has a decent view of the sky over the "Bird's Nest" or a glimpse of the stadium is crowded. I use my pass to get past the crowd and into the controlled area of the apartment complex where they have some of the media housed.

There are a couple of places where big screen TVs are outside and it's just like a college campus – people crowded around to get a good view of the show and sharing smiles and comments about the Ceremonies playing out before them.

- Just saw a fireworks happy face. Now there are lots of them. Very cool! – (Sorry, you'll have to go to Reuters for the pics.)

The happy face fireworks cap off the presentation or art portion of the Opening Ceremonies. The performers give way to a throng of cheerleaders who line the inside track of the stadium as the athletes process by. The cheerleaders start off strong – jumping and clapping, but 5 minutes in they slow down a bit.

The athletes are fun to watch. Lots of them are carrying cameras filming the crowd and arena as they walk in. (If I had that opportunity, I'd be filming as much as possible!) This is their big chance to be on the world stage and strive to be recognized as the top of their sport. For most of the athletes, this comes only once in a lifetime, after lots of sacrifice, pain, and hardship. Accomplishments like this should be savored, they are precious.

For the people of Beijing and the athletes, tonight is a night of celebration and unity. Each individual, by being here, has become a part of something larger than themselves. That joy and pride of belonging was evident today and is one of the highest ideals of the Olympic Games.

Tonight, they are all brothers and sisters sharing the Olympic dream. Tomorrow they will start to do battle, leaving some disappointed or worse yet devastated, others joyous in victory, and still more just happy to have been granted the opportunity to shine with the best.