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Gay Games open at Baker Field

By ROLANDO F. PUJOL

Spectator Summer Board

Kicking off a week's worth of athletic competition in a diverse number of fields, opening Ceremonies for Gay Games IV and an accompanying Cultural Festival were held Saturday night in Columbia's Wien Stadium at Baker Field in northernmost Manhattan.

Considered by its organizers as the single largest sporting event ever convened, more than 11,000 athletes from 43 nations entered in 31 events at some 42 locations around the metropolitan area.

The opening ceremonies provided a venue as well for over 25,000 spectators gathered at the stadium to cheer the athletes as they marched in the colorful opening procession.

Wearing rainbow-colored costumes and carrying multi-hued balloons, umbrellas, and flags, the sheer

number of athletes resulted in a procession which lasted for over an hour.

The Gay Games, which President Bill Clinton has described as “a vivid illustration of the fundamental ideals of participation and of reaching for one’s personal best,” are designed, among other things, to challenge society’s traditional homophobic attitudes in both the sports arena and in the world at large and to focus attention on issues surrounding AIDS, which was identified one year before the first Gay Games were held in 1982.

Beverly Boyarsky, assistant director of communications for the Gay Games and Cultural Festival, said the significance of the Gay Games rests largely on the desire of gays and lesbians to break stereotypes and to show the majority heterosexual community that they are “just like everyone else.”

“We are serious athletes and artists. From what I see in the press right now, people believe us. We are getting excellent coverage in most of the newspapers and networks,” said Boyarsky.

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who delivered the State Address, was met with both widespread applause and considerable booing as he took his place on the platform.

Giuliani explained that the Games exemplify the ability of sports to unite people.

“The Gay Games are about more than athletic competition. They offer a deeper understanding of America where tolerance and skills

overcome stereotypes and prejudice," Giuliani said.

After Giuliani's speech, the athletes marched around the stadium's track, which encircles a football field. The delegations of some countries, like Canada, included hundreds of athletes, while other countries, such as Colombia, had ranks so small they had enough people only to carry their national flag and a sign proclaiming their country's name.

Other highlights of the opening ceremonies included the gay and lesbian marching band, which featured a baton twirler wearing a blue bathing suit and a foot high bouffant hairdo.

All people regardless of sexual orientation are invited to participate. Most participants, however, are homosexuals, including a 13-year-old Belgian whose parents are letting him swim, and some HIV positive athletes who needed special government permission to enter the United States, the Associated Press reported.

Among the 31 events are aerobics, basketball, cycling, golf, power lifting and wrestling.

The Games will draw to a close on Saturday with closing ceremonies at Yankee Stadium, where singers Patti LaBelle and Cyndi Lauper will be among the performers.

The Gay Games, taking place in New York for the first time, were planned by organizers to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, which is widely considered as the start of the modern gay rights movement.

After years of police harassment, hundreds of gays and lesbians rioted for two days after police raided the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street on June 27, 1969.

New York City is expecting more than a million visitors and participants for both the Gay Games and the activities commemorating Stonewall over the next week, according to published reports.

**-Additional reporting by
Aileen Soper**