

Tahoe woman headed to 6th Olympic Games



Louise Feller, red hat, trades pins at the London Olympics in 2012. Photo/Provided

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – Louise Feller is all too familiar with overcoming adversity.

That's why when she decided to attend her sixth Olympic Games as a volunteer, the notion of particular challenges associated with Rio in 2016 left her unfazed.

After all, she worked the Games in Athens with a broken leg – the result of a bicycle accident near Lake Tahoe two months before. She was forced to do her volunteer job with a full walking cast. But there was no way the diligent 67-year-old who takes volunteering to a level unknown to many would change her plans.

The biggest obstacle was on a very personal level.

“All the bathrooms in Greece were downstairs,” she said.

The perpetual optimist took the challenge in stride, making the Olympic adventure her vacation of the year.

Sure, she knows Rio is plagued with issues. There’s the mosquito-borne Zika virus that has prompted some athletes, mainly golfers, to decline the invitation. Feller shrugged off the danger.

The threat isn’t enough to keep her away.

In addition, political strife resulting from a money-laundering scheme as well as rising crime has cast a shadow over the city. And Guanabarra Bay providing a water supply to residents remains polluted. Plus, the Tim Maia bike path collapsed killing two people and injuring three after a giant wave hit it.



Olympic memorabilia covers the wall above Louise Feller’s couch. Photo/Susan Wood

Still, when the lights come up, the athletes take their marks and the stories unfold – it will be all about the greatest event to display the best in humanity.

And Feller will be there to help like she has since going to

the 1996 Summer Olympiad in Atlanta as a spectator. It was like a light bulb came on.

“I said: ‘I’d really like to see the other side of the Games’,” she told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Adorning the walls of her Stateline home are posters from the various Olympic Games. In the kitchen, she created Olympic-themed collages with pictures and other take-aways from the various host cities. Feller has worked as a volunteer for the Games in Salt Lake City, London, Torino, Italy, Beijing and Athens – the birthplace of the Olympiad.

When she applied for her first gig in Salt Lake City, Feller was asked to secure her own lodging before even applying.

“I lived in a motor home for three weeks,” she said. It also helped that she ran an educational touring company.

She is often asked to be the “go-to” girl, running errands for coaches, directors and athletes. She tends to help out most in the sport of taekwondo. At a mere 5-feet tall, she performed security functions. It seems spectators and others would try to trespass or linger too long in the athletes’ dining room.

For South America, she has landed the dream assignment of working an information kiosk.

Volunteers are fed one meal per day on their shifts, but being a diabetic Feller brings her own food. Good ole peanut butter hits the spot for nutrition and diversity when eaten with other things.

The workers also get a thank you dinner, watch, credentials and uniform.

What is her favorite Olympic Games thus far?

Torino (or Turin depending on where you’re from) had her staged in a nice little apartment, with an Italian restaurant

on the corner. She built her own community at the eatery.

“I went to dinner there every night. They started making it for me (before I arrived),” she said.

On top of that, the Games sent her to the speed skating arena where she met Apolo Ohno, the U.S. short-track gold medalist.

Her stint in Beijing turned out quite interesting in terms of allowing the other volunteers to take the pins she brings to give away from her collection. When she laid them out on a table and asked her comrades to choose which ones they wanted “they’d have a hard time because in China they’re not used to choosing.”

And there lie cultural differences among the 50,000-plus volunteers who form a diverse army for the Olympics. There’s also a gap in the hierarchy between languages.

“English is an important language in the Olympics,” she said, adding that all referees are expected to speak it.



Memorabilia from past Olympic Games where Louise Feller has been a volunteer. Photo/Susan Wood

Feller doesn't tune in the Olympics while she's working at the Games. If anything, when they're in another country, the coverage is dominated by that nation's homeland athletes much like in the U.S.

She comes home to watch online.

Still, the experience overall is an incredible one – an event that allows a person to be a part of something larger than themselves.

"I like the camaraderie during the Olympics, and I wanted to give back," said Feller, who splits her time between Lake Tahoe and Florida.

"America is a great country. I love to share it," she said. "We're very fortunate."

The Rio 2016 Volunteer Programme is billed as “the place for all those who are passionate about sports and volunteering.”

“The volunteers are indispensable for the success of the Games. They are the soul of the event,” Flavia Fontes, head of the Rio 2016 Volunteers Programme, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “A person in the city could go through the Games without seeing an athlete with their own eyes, but it would be impossible not to meet a volunteer. They play a part in everything, helping and providing information to spectators, assisting heads of state and providing operational support at the ceremonies.”

The Olympic Games in Rio start Aug. 5 with the opening ceremonies in Maracana Stadium and end Aug. 21 with the closing celebration. A total of 7.5 million tickets are expected to be sold – 200,000 less than London’s 2012 Summer Olympics because the venues are smaller. NBC Sports will televise the Games for its duration.

More than 200 nations are expected to participate in 306 events at 33 venues in the host city and at five venues in Sao Paulo.