

Road to Atlanta adds time to stop, chat

By Ben Brown
USA TODAY

ATLANTA — On July 19, 1996, when the Olympic torch travels the last few hundred yards to the cauldron atop the specially designed tower next to the Olympic Stadium, it will have completed one of the most celebratory journeys in public relations history.

For just about any other symbol of human striving, this would be overkill: **42 states in 84 days, 10,000 torchbearers, an 110-person traveling support group.**

But scenes of the Olympic flame passing before a backdrop of Americana — fields of grain attended by saluting farmers, tiny towns festooned with flags, awed workers in the concrete canyons of mighty cities — are sure antidotes for cynicism.

Besides, it's tradition.

In the olden days, even before the arrival of Coca-Cola and other sponsors who now seem so crucial to the Games, ancient Greeks used torchbearers to hype approaching competitions.

Modern Olympians reintroduced the torch relay in Berlin in 1936, when the process took all of 12 days.

By the time Los Angeles staged the Games in 1984, torchbearing had escalated. On the way to L.A., the torch passed through 33 states and required 3,636 runners in Greece and the USA.

L.A. organizers, who reinvented the modern Games through marketing hustle, charged runners \$3,000 to tote the flame.

Bearers of the torch to Atlanta won't have to pay. But most will have to be former Olympians and celebrities or "community heroes" to impress official presenters United Way and Coke.

Also unlike the L.A. relay in '84, **this torch relay stops to party.** The idea is to add an Olympic element to regional celebrations by stopping long enough to take part.

—Don't worry about **flame security**, even in the badlands of America. There are 110 people, 40 motor vehicles and 20 bicycles assigned to this enterprise.

And in communities planning to host a torch pass-through, there will be extra security folks.

The torch features 22 aluminum "reeds" gathered in the center. The "reeds" represent the 22 times the modern Olympic Games have been held.

The names of the 20 host cities, including Atlanta, are etched on a gold-plated band near the base. A handle of Georgia hardwood makes the torch easy to carry.

The torch has a dual-burner system that helps the flame resist wind and rain during the relay.

The flame, ignited in Olympia, Greece, is kept in a lantern that travels with the relay. The lantern is closely guarded to ensure the flame is never extinguished.

A single torch is lit from the flame every morning for that day's relay.

The flame is scheduled to begin its 15,000-mile tour of the USA April 27, when it arrives in Los Angeles from Greece.

It will arrive at the stadium during the opening ceremony July 19 and be extinguished during the closing ceremony Aug. 4. The athletes who will light the Atlanta flame have not been named.

Plotting out torch route not easy job

By Janice Lloyd
USA TODAY

DENVER — Most of the torchbearers won't even begin to break a sweat carrying the Olympic flame for a kilometer, or a little more than half a mile.

But Lori Stone and the other five advance managers for the torch will be sweating it out every step of the way.

Stone, manager of the torch's Region 2, is responsible for the Olympic flame for 16 days and hundreds of miles — exactly how many is being determined.

Stone's job is to make sure the torch travels from Echo, Utah, to Memphis on time. She's cruised along on the main roads and bumped along on the back roads, driving with an IBM laptop for a navigator. The computer is loaded with road maps — and horse routes.

"In March, I was driving through Nebraska with the laptop trying to find the Pony Express routes," Stone said. "We knew we'd be traveling with horses, but the support vehicles need to chase the express, and they can't go where the ponies go."

Next up: determining how many miles are in her region so she knows how many carriers are needed.

"I've traveled to 80 towns and talked to another 100 on the phone," she said.