

Torch relay an Olympic opportunity for Niagara

Contest seeks torch-bearers for next year's relay

Updated 2 months ago

With so much bleak economic news lately, you've got to find a bright spot wherever you can.

That's why Niagara Falls should look forward to next year's Olympic torch relay. Mayor Ted Salci raised a torch relay flag Monday in front of city hall, signifying this city's role as what the Vancouver 2010 Winter Games committee calls a "celebration community."

Next year, the Olympic torch will be in Niagara Falls Dec. 20 and Dec. 21. That's about halfway through the 100-day relay. The timing is good. It's during during the Winter Festival of Lights and just before Christmas. It's exactly what the tourism industry loves to see – an out-of-town guest staying overnight. Just wait till the Olympic flame finds out how much a Fallsview room is. The Vancouver games are already having budget problems.

The organizing committee for the Vancouver 2010 games sent the mayor a snazzy blue jacket and a blue scarf. He actually took off the mayor's chain of office long enough to wear the scarf during the 10-minute flag-raising ceremony. Salci says he won't be one of the torch-bearers. It's an honour he'll leave to city residents. This time next year, the mayor will be more likely gearing up to run in an election, not a torch relay. We're just waiting to see what he's running for. Mayor? Member of Provincial Parliament? United States senator from Illinois?

The website for the organizing committee of the Vancouver 2010 games says the torch relay will be "like a path of northern lights stretching from horizon to horizon."

"The relay will create last memories for the many who will feel the glow of the Olympic Flame and its power to inspire," the website says.

Across Canada, there will be 12,000 torch-bearers who carry the Olympic flame along a 45,000-kilometre before it arrives in Vancouver for the Winter Games opening ceremony, Feb. 12, 2010. Each torch-bearer is supposed to carry the Olympic Flame about 300 metres. That math doesn't exactly work out. There must be long stretches between cities where the flame rides in the back seat of somebody's car.

You can see some obvious pitfalls in running the Olympic flame through Niagara Falls. Naturally, they'll have to take it to the brink of the falls, but how embarrassing would it be if the mist douses it? Or if the Olympic torch ends up in a pawn shop. Or when the winter Olympics are delayed because one of the torch-bearers lost the torch on a spin of the roulette wheel at Casino Niagara.

The last time the Olympic flame came through Niagara Falls was in 1988, on its way from Greece's Mount Olympus to the Winter Games in Calgary. Back then dozens of torch-bearers took part in the relay. Next year, their children could conceivably be the ones who take part in another special moment in history.

For next year's relay, two Olympic sponsors – Royal Bank and Coca-Cola – are running separate contests to pick torchbearers. For the bank's contest, you have to write about how to make a better country. The Coke contest encourages people to explain how they "live Olympic" every day. Apparently that can mean being active, caring for the Earth, or "sharing the spirit of global friendship."

So here goes. Journalists give Canadian readers the information they need to understand the world they live in. By making readers into informed citizens, we're helping make a better country. And if that doesn't work, we throw shoes at President George W. Bush. OK. It needs more work.

As for "living Olympic," who better to symbolize the Olympic "faster, higher, stronger" spirit than a desk jockey, who spends his day in front of a computer, on the phone or in meetings listening to other desk jockeys?

There. Where's my track suit and tuque? Put me down to run the stretch that ends in front of the Lundy's Lane beer store.

With Niagara kids about to have 10 days off school, entering the torch-bearer contest would be a patriotic way to spend part of the Christmas break. Niagara Falls and Fort Erie should flood the Royal Bank and Coke websites with entries.

The way the Canadian economy will struggle for the next year, it's time to take comfort in life's simpler pleasures like this kind of community event.

Being part of an Olympic torch relay will be an exciting community event that will give Niagara Falls residents the chance to be part of history. It should appeal to that part of human nature that makes people yearn to be part of something bigger than themselves.

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