

Did you get tickets for 2012?

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Did you get tickets for 2012? Did you apply and fail? Will you apply in the next ballot, or the one after? Are you going as a Games Maker? Or will you just watch on the telly?

The Games are now a year away, a time when it will already be dominating the thoughts of fans and spectators. But it will also be dominating the thoughts of the world's top players as they plan the build-up to the most important competition in the sport.

Before the Olympics in Sydney in 2000, I had a carefully orchestrated campaign of training and competitions that started 12 months out and culminated in a series of camps, first in Belgium, then Germany and then finally on Australia's Gold Coast as the clock ticked down to the opening ceremony.

Alex Perry, the former England champion and Alan Bentsen, the Danish international, flew out to the Gold Coast with me and offered tremendous camaraderie and training opportunities in a local club that had been decked with precisely the same flooring that would be used at the competition venue.

Three days before my opening match, I flew across to Sydney and moved into the fabled Olympic Village, the vast accommodation and restaurant conglomeration that hosts all competitors for the duration of the Games and which is carefully patrolled to ensure that nobody unauthorised enters.

On the day of the match, I arrived early and spent my usual 30 minutes practising in the training hall, honing my shots, sipping water to ensure hydration and nibbling on an occasional banana to keep my blood sugar level at the optimum level. With 30 minutes until the off, I went out to do some mental preparation, getting my head into the right place to deliver a top performance.

With 10 minutes to go, I assembled alongside the other players scheduled to play in that round, and filed into the referee's room for a logo check. This is specific to the Olympic Games, with its stringent rules on branding – any logo larger than a certain minimum must be covered with masking tape to ensure that it does not breach guidelines on sponsorship.

From there, it was into the competition arena.

There really is no feeling in sport quite like that when you walk into the flashbulb light of an Olympic stadium. Many of the fans are not there because they love the specific sport being contested, but because they want to be a part of the Olympic experience. It is more festive, more celebratory. And infinitely more intense.

The Olympics only occurs once every four years and is, as a direct consequence, precious. Fail once and you may never get another chance. It is momentous, forbidding and, if you win of course, exalting. As Simon Barnes, a colleague on The Times, put it: "You walk into any venue and you are watching someone involved in the most important day of their lives".

I rather fell apart in Sydney, overcome by the hugeness of it all, going down in three one-sided games to Peter Franz, a German. It was a crushing disappointment and even on the way back to the village I had already called British Airways and changed my flight ticket to go home. But my disappointment was matched by the euphoria of my opponent, through to the next stage, still in with a chance of a medal, possibly gold. It is the stuff of dreams. And nightmares.

Even now, one year out, I find myself already throwing forward in my mind to the final stages of the Games. Who will join that celebrated list of champions, alongside the likes of Waldner, Kong, Deng Yaping and Wang Nan? Who will raise their game and claim the most precious prize in table tennis, in sport?

It is a tantalising prospect, for fans and for players. And, taking place on home shores and with guaranteed British competitors, it is surely not to be missed.

By Matthew Syed

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