

Pan-American Games Open in Brazil with Olympic Boos for Lula, US and Argentina

Contributed by Rodolfo Espinoza
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The world's foremost sports event right after the Olympics, the Pan American Games, saw much music, dance, and fireworks in the Friday night ceremonies of its 15th Brazilian edition, but not much sportsmanship by the 90,000 people who came to the Maracanã stadium in Rio for the party.

The public was in a booing mood and among those jeered by at least part of the audience were the sports delegations for Argentina, Bolivia and the United States. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whose opinion polls consistently show high levels of popularity, was booed so many times that he ended up skipping the speech he had prepared for the occasion.

He didn't even had a chance to say "Good luck, Brazil." Carlos Arthur Nuzman, the president of the Brazilian Olympic Committee, said the phrase.

The imbroglio was explained later by Lula's aides as a ceremonial gaffe, but there are those who believe that the action was taken to spare the president more jeering.

The Maracanã opening celebrations were schedule to start at 5 pm, but there was a delay of close to an hour mostly due to the extra security that kept people in line being frisked and waiting to get in for a very long time.

Lula was booed at least six times. Every time his name was mentioned by the announcers or his face was shown in the stadium's big screen the public started the booing.

When it was announced that he was going to address the public and open the games the noise was so loud that you couldn't hear what the announcer was saying. The president stayed there standing for a moment before the microphones but went back to his seat while Nuzman declared the games open.

After the ceremonies neither Nuzman nor Lula would talk to the press. The president who was accompanied by first lady Marisa Letícia seemed very annoyed when leaving the Maracanã after the opening ceremonies.

Rio's mayor, César Maia, the only politician to be applauded in the stadium when names were announced, sided with the explanation that a ceremonial foul-up was the culprit for the presidential woes: "The president's office contacted the Brazilian Olympic Committee chief and asked that Lula be spared the announcement. But they forgot to tell Odepa's (Pan-American Sports Organization) president about that."

Mario Vazquez Raña, Odepa's chief, was the guy who announced that Lula was going to talk, since he wasn't told that the president had changed his mind and that Nuzman was supposed to do the president's part.

For Brazil's Sports Minister, Orlando Silva, the booing wasn't something spontaneous. "It all seemed orchestrated," he commented after the opening ceremonies.

The Brazilian president is scheduled to hand out this Saturday afternoon the first medals of the Games to the winners of the water marathon in Copacabana beach.

Only six countries sent chiefs of state to the opening ceremonies: Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Dutch Antilles, Panama, Honduras and Canada. The Brazilian government was expecting many more presidents and dignitaries.