More than 7,500 young athletes from 131 countries participated in the first World Youth Games, which took place in Moscow from 11 to 19 July 1998.

The opening ceremony was held two days later in order to allow the IOC President and other guests, including 32 IOC members and 43 NOC presidents, to attend the FIFA World Cup final in Paris before travelling to Moscow. The ceremony was held in Luzhniki in the presence of 80,000 spectators. One of the most emotional moments was the arrival of the Olympic flame, which had been lit on 23 July 1998 in Athens before travelling through 13 regions in the Russian Federation. The mayor of Moscow and the IOC President addressed the spectators, and the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, declared the Games open.

Some 7,500 young athletes aged 11 to 18 took part in the competitions, which were very well organized. It is interesting to note that in some sports the World Youth Games competitions were more representative than the respective world youth championships. In athletics, for example, there were 678 representatives from 87 countries, while in rhythmic gymnastics 309 girls from 59 countries competed. In basketball, 382 players from 25 countries took part in the World Youth Games. Although medals were not the most important thing, it should be mentioned that athletes from 77 countries took home awards, and that gold medals went to 22 different countries. The participants, spectators and guests at the World Youth Games commented very positively on the organization: indeed, the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, was awarded the Olympic Order in gold by the IOC President in the Square of Nations at the Olympic Village, in a ceremony attended by the World Youth Games participants.

Events such as the World Youth Games attract the younger generations of athletes, help them to chart a path in sport, and promote the Olympic spirit of friendship and mutual understanding. The World Youth Games also have a special meaning for Moscow and the Russian Federation, as they were the largest sporting event in the country since the Games of the XXII Olympiad. The Russian people were proud to be host to this international festival of youth and friendship.

The World Youth Games were not merely a sporting event. The programme encompassed sports, culture and science, and among other events there was an international “Youth - Science - Olympism” forum: a Marathon into the XXI century: sport against AIDS and drugs: a unique concert of the World Youth Orchestra performed in Red Square; an All-Russian festival of traditional toys, etc. All the volunteers were youngsters, and a special daily newspaper was produced by teenage journalists.

The motto of the World Youth Games - “Moscow - the open world for childhood” - thus became a reality.

It was on 27 November 1995 that a small delegation from the Moscow city government had visited Lausanne in order to rally support for a proposal to organize a major international youth competition under IOC patronage in the Russian capital, in the summer of 1998. The project was based on the city’s experience of

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YOUTH

The World Youth Games in Moscow

by Alexander Ratner*
staging tournaments in different sports for teenagers from the Moscow school system and their foreign counterparts during the summer.

The IOC granted its patronage to the “World Youth Games” and an agreement was signed in April 1997 between the IOC, the city of Moscow and the Russian Olympic Committee setting out working relations and respective responsibilities for the event. This established a solid network of contacts between the organizers, the NOCs and the IFs, and thus laid a strong base for international participation.

Meanwhile the preparations in the city were underway. By September 1997, when Moscow was celebrating its 850th anniversary, the reconstruction of the Luzhniki Large Sports Arena was completed. The stadium had been built in 1955-1956, and in 1980 it became the heart of the Games of the XXII Olympiad in Moscow. But after this refurbishment, it looked completely new, with a roof over the stands.

The other major project was the construction of the athletes’ village. Because this complex was deemed to have particular architectural importance by the mayor of Moscow, all the works were placed under the control of the city government. The construction project was based on the success of the Olympic Village for the 1980 Games in Moscow, which later became one of the most prestigious residential areas in the city. In addition to a residential zone consisting of five 19- to 25-storied houses, there was also a cultural and sport centre in the new athletes’ village. It was landscaped to include artificial hills, lakes and cycling tracks over the 23,000m² it occupies.

Of course many other facilities were built or renovated in preparation for the World Youth Games, because in addition to the official programme of the Games which included 15 sports - football, basketball, swimming, tennis, athletics, fencing, rhythmic gymnastics, synchronized swimming, judo, artistic gymnastics, Greco-Roman and freestyle wrestling, table tennis, volleyball, and handball - there were demonstrations of 29 other sports, such as sambo, golf, billiards, American football, etc.

Much has been said already about the future of the World Youth Games. A number of cities, NOCs and countries have expressed their wish to continue these Games, and the mayor of Moscow was requested to prepare a report which will be submitted to the IOC Executive Board meeting in Lausanne in December 1998.

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(left to right) Boris Yeltsin, the IOC President and Yuri Luzhkov.

Yuri Luzhkov, recipient of the Olympic Order.

Lighting of the flame.

A young gymnast.

Moscow by night.