They've sacrificed years to make it to the Olympics. Then, for the two most important weeks of their lives, they're pent up with 10,000 other tense, fun-deprived athletes. What happens when they all finally let loose?

by ALEX FRENCH AND HOWIE KAHN
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The race is on. Not in the pool or on the track, but through the congested streets of Athens, at a quarter to three in the morning. It’s August 2004, and the Summer Olympics are in full swing: games all day, parties all night. Ouzo! Opa! But if Evan Morgenstein, an agent who has taken some medal-winning clients out for a night of celebratory Southern Comfort, doesn’t get his charges back to the Olympic Village before their 3 AM curfew, he’ll be screwed and they’ll be homeless — and not just for the night. Because no matter how many medals an Olympian is wearing around his neck, no matter how many twists he can do off a springboard, if he misses his curfew, he’ll be out on the street — for the duration of the Games.

“Holy shit,” Morgenstein recalls saying. “It’s 18 minutes to three.” With minutes to go and much of the city to cover — the Village is 12 miles outside Athens — Morgenstein starts chucking Greeks out of the way to get out of the bar. At the curb, he pushes his athletes into the back of a Mercedes cab, and the three of them squeeze in, shoulder to shoulder. But the driver won’t budge. “No,” he says. “No.” He hates Americans, thinks George Bush is the devil — so Morgenstein lies. “We’re Canadian!” he says. That gets the driver moving. But not fast enough, so Morgenstein reaches for his wallet and starts throwing twenties at the guy. “We have to be back!” he yells at the driver. “I don’t give a shit what you have to do!” Somehow, they manage to stumble past the Village checkpoint with seconds to spare. They’re in — gold-medal drunks laughing their asses off, laughing to the point of tears because they realize how much that ride just mattered: It saved their spot in the Village, the rarefied confines of Olympic privilege whose highly selective gates open every four years, as they’re opening now in London, to provide the world’s top amateur athletes with a safe, media-free campus, filled with young, incredibly fit peers, on which to truly let loose for the first time in years.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has published an official 342-page manual with the sole function of specifying every detail of the design and construction of the Olympic Village — from the number of athletes to a bathroom (four), to the amount of hanging space per closet (60 centimeters), to the number of locking drawers (two), to where live ammunition should be stored (somewhere far away from the rifles). And, of course, the IOC devotes a page to articulating the Village mission: “The Olympic Village caters to the athletes’ needs by creating a comfortable environment to facilitate the mental and physical preparation for participation in the Olympic Games free from disturbance from the outside world.” It says nothing about internal disturbances. It makes no mention, for example, of all-night house parties, maniacal roommates, or hormone-fueled gropefests. “It was like Disneyland minus the rides and with far more hard bodies,” says Amy Van Dyken, an American swimmer and six-time gold medalist, who competed in Sydney in 2000 and in Atlanta in 1996.

“You walk out of your dorm and into the quad,” says swimmer Cullen Jones, “and there are flags everywhere. You can see them hanging from the windows: That’s the Brazilian building, that’s the British building.” Beneath the flags — excessive numbers of flags are also mandated by the Olympic charter — exists a fully functional city where everything is on the house. There are florists and dry cleaners and a pharmacy, a post office, a travel agent, and a multifaith prayer center.

Athletes can go to the spa for lavender wraps or a Thai massage, scarf a burger and a Coke at the Village McDonald’s, or play a game of foosball. There’s a nightclub, where no alcohol is served, as well as a listening lounge with soft chairs and neutral lighting and a substantial music library. The Village at the Atlanta Games had a laser-tag “stadium,” where one Ecuadoran athlete spent so much time he was reported missing. There are sightseeing excursions and postings for special field trips.

At the Atlanta Games, gold-medal swimmer Amanda Beard answered a bulletin-board post and wound up escorting Vice President Al Gore and his family to a volleyball game. In Barcelona, free bikes
were available so athletes could pedal to an Olympians-only beach, where some of the world’s top female athletes spent their free days sunbathing topless.

Not all Olympic Villages are created equal. From the more than two dozen former and current Olympians interviewed for this story, a few common truths emerged: Barcelona (1992) was, predictably, a blast; Turin (2006) was remembered mostly for unfinished housing and frozen mud. Athens flew every national flag except the American one, for security reasons, and Beijing is universally referred to as the “no-fun Games.”

The American teams in Beijing were warned not to drink the water. In Mexico City, too. In Atlanta, the American women’s swim team was instructed to avoid touching the Chinese swimmers, who were so suspiciously brawny that the U.S. team wiped down toilet seats before sitting in order to avoid contact with topical steroids. Each Olympic Village has some common scenes. Enterprising Cubans sell boxes of cigars for U.S. dollars. At the Village medical center, athletes from less-developed countries take advantage of free dental surgery, MRIs, and CAT scans. Bass bumps in the Cuban house 24 hours a day; the Irish house, at least at the Beijing Games, was like a monastery.

In terms of high-visibility partying, the Australians, Canadians, and Americans are always favored medalists — no one in the Village is having fun. At the end of the third day, 20 percent of the Village is having fun. At the end of the sixth day, 50 percent of the Village is having fun. And the parties get louder and louder and louder.

For a great many Olympians, the weeks spent in the Village are the most fraught, tense, overanalyzed weeks of their lives. The pressure is so intense,” says Hall, “that you can walk through the Village and, without having any exchange of words, identify the athletes who have yet to compete versus the athletes who are done competing. It’s in their facial expressions, their mannerisms.” In all likelihood, those who are done competing have not medaled. “That can lead to some recklessness,” says Casey Barrett, who swam for Canada in Atlanta in 1996 and came in 11th. “It’s, like, ‘Shit, now what?’” There’s this big letdown. It didn’t matter what kind of a long shot you were — you came to the Olympics with dreams of winning it all, so when you don’t, and you react to the depression and the release, you can see how some dirty things happen.”

Over the years, the media has reported exhaustively on the distribution of contraceptives in the Village. According to reports, the condom machines in the Albertville, France, Village (Winter 1992) had to be refilled every two hours. At the 2002 Winter Olympic medals. “But every day, 10 percent of the athletes complete their obligations, and then they’re ready to party. So by the end of the third day, 20 percent of the Village is having fun. At the end of the sixth day, 50 percent of the Village is having fun. And the parties get louder and louder and louder.”

A social hierarchy exists in the Village. At the bottom are the “Olympic tourists,” those athletes who don’t have a realistic chance of winning a medal. “Some people see the Olympic Games as a nice trip, an all-you-can-eat buffet, a vacation with great front-row tickets to see some of the real competitors,” says swimmer Gary Hall Jr., a 10-time medalist. And then there are the elite: the ones who throw a javelin like some winner of the Olympics or almost anywhere youthful abandon flourishes. They’ve abstained from refined sugars, sleepovers, and teenage sloth. They have consumed 9,000 calories a day in bland, boiled proteins and supplemented it all with so much creatine, glutamine, and nutritional powder that their digestive tracts gush like waterslides.

But once their last event is over, they’re free — truly, wantonly free. “The Olympic Village begins with a rather serious tone because everybody there has a job to do,” says swimming icon John Naber, who won five

Olympics in Salt Lake City, 100,000 condoms were given away (though hot tubs were removed in response to “excessive sexual activity”). In Athens, the condom count increased to 130,000. The first 70,000 went so fast in Sydney that organizers had to order 20,000 more. The Cuban delegation was reportedly the first to burn through their allotment. Graham Richardson, mayor of Sydney’s Village, reported that demand was furious and that he witnessed female Olympians “rummaging around in a condom bowl for the right color and size.”

“You’re creating an environment where they want to make sure it’s as safe as possible to be promiscuous,” says Morgenstein. “You can’t keep all these athletes who have all this pent-up energy in one place for so long and expect nobody’s going to hook up; it happens all the time. I’ve had clients break up with boyfriends or girlfriends on the way to the Olympics because they know going to the Games there’s no way they’re going to be able to stay committed. I’ve had athletes who have shared that their significant other was there to cheer them on, and unfortunately, at some point during their time in the Village, they were with other people. The Olympic Village is sort of this Fort Knox of sleep, sex, and eating.”

The bars around the Village swell to capacity with bingeing jocks. In the clubs, medals command attention, though not always admiration. Members of silver-winning relay teams show up with medals around their necks, subtle as searchlights. “The guys who are really high profile, collecting a bunch of gold on their own,” says Barrett, “don’t need to do that. Girls already know who they are.” Girls certainly knew Italian slalom king Alberto Tomba, who won five medals in four Olympics and was known to travel with an entourage. U.S. ski-team coach Johno McBride recalls Team Tomba setting up huge parties. “They’d have the whole back of this nightclub sort of roped off,” he says. “These people would be partying like rock stars, and though there was this perception of Tomba as a playboy, sort of ripping around parties every night, he would have a sip of water and slip right out the back door.”

Other Olympians get so drunk they need to be dragged through the Village gates. In her new book, In the Water They Can’t See You Cry, Amanda Beard recalls going to a Sydney nightclub, where “the fittest, most focused folks in the world were knee deep in hedonism,” she writes. “With low body fat and long periods of abstinence, they were breathtaking conversation with a lithe long jumper from Cuba or an Amazonian badminton player from Sweden, the mutual longing so evident it was almost comical.”

One veteran Olympian boasts of the alleged prowess of the athletic set: “Sex is unquestionably a physical activity, so it stands to reason that Olympians, being the best at physical activity, would be the best at sex.” According to Jasha Faye, a weightlifter who just missed making the Olympic team in 1996, the correlation between athleticism and sexual appetite is direct. “I lived at an Olympic Training Center for four years. It’s essentially the Olympic Village on a day-to-day basis. You get a lot of sexual deviancy. We lived in coed dorms. You couldn’t turn around without somebody showing you their boner. There was pornography everywhere. There was a time when the U.S. women’s rowing team was out there — they’re these gorgeous, 6-foot-tall, 200-pound Amazonian beasts. They train harder than anybody I’ve ever known. Their testosterone levels are probably 10 to 20 times higher than the average woman’s. They’re aggressive; they’re grabbing your nuts. They get a little drunk, and they’re doing stuff like an aggressive dude would do. Whistle at one of these chicks — you might get laid. You’re walking down the hall in a towel — after these girls have been training their asses off — you’ve got a six-pack, deltoids like cannonballs, and they see you — you’re getting laid. It’s that simple.”

We could find only one country whose athletes had to sign a pre-Games agreement to remain celibate. “Apparently the Canadian team was so poorly behaved in Barcelona in 1992,” says swimmer Casey Barrett, “that we had to sign an agreement, under oath, for Atlanta in 1996, that we wouldn’t engage in any sexual relations the entire time we were part of Team Canada. Apparently, it’s a product of other people screwing up four years earlier. It definitely made people from other countries pay more attention to us: ‘Oh, what about that contract?’” 

Allegedly, after performing poorly, Team Canada broke its pact with a big Canadian orgy. “That was the rumor,” recalls Amy Van Dyken. “Everybody was, ‘Do not go near there. Do not go near the Canadian dorm.’”

Otherwise, there’s some sort of omertà in play (owing largely to the fact that many former Olympians don’t want their kids reading about who they hooked up with in Los Angeles in 1984, and many current Olympians don’t want to botch huge sponsorships deals by acting like sex tourists). But secrets do leak: Australia’s lady swimmers stripped on their Barcelona balcony. Prostitutes — allegedly signed in by an employee of an American TV network — were expelled from the Sydney Village. Unidentified female athletes at the Seoul Games put posters in their windows inviting male athletes up for “coffee.” That year, so many used condoms piled up on the roof terrace of the British team’s residential block that the British Olympic Association reportedly had to explicitly ban outdoor sex.

Sex isn’t the only preoccupation in the Olympic Village. Fast and strong and feeling limitless, Olympians tend to take a shot at petty theft as if it were a medal event — particularly if they’re stealing flags. Speedskater Peter Mueller returned to his room in Lake Placid, in 1980, after a botted flag-napping attempt. His roommate, gold-medal-winning speedskater Eric Heiden, recalls Peter being “pretty blasted, swearing up and down, saying he just got caught stealing a flag by Barney Fife of the Lake Placid PD.” American swimmers Troy Dalbey and Doug Gjertsen were busted after lifting a marble lion’s head from a Seoul hotel in 1988.

And Olympians occasionally light things on fire. When a rower
(from Canada, of course) set his hat on fire at the Sydney Games, he drew the attention of the Village fire department; some time later, Team Canada was spotted riding around the Village on a fire truck, sirens wailing, having mounted a moose sculpture on the roof.

**The Village** can be a crushingly lonely place, as well. “My roommates in Montreal called me ‘connie fag,’” recalls diver and five-time medalist Greg Louganis of the summer of 1976. He was 16 at the time, years younger than the other American divers living together in a small two-bedroom suite. The Soviet divers, on the other hand, were closer to his age, and despite Cold War taboos, he preferred hanging out with them. “We ran around the Village,” says Louganis, “going to the discotheque and movies and shopping and doing silly kid stuff.” Eventually, Louganis staged a non-political defection. After his events ended, he crashed on the Russians’ floor. “I was underage,” says Louganis, “but they had Russian champagne and vodka and caviar. That was our diet.”

Some roommates are destined to derail any hopes their cohorts have of winning a medal. After skating a clean and satisfying short program at the Calgary Games in 1988, Paul Wylie had a quiet dinner with his parents. “I got back to the dorms at the university around 11,” he says, “and I thought that was pretty late.” His roommate, Christopher Bowman, hadn’t returned yet. “He came in at 2 or 3 AM every night,” says Brian Boitano, that year’s gold medalist. “Paul was always telling him, ‘Christopher, we have to skate at seven in the morning. Go the fuck to sleep’!” At around 5 AM, Bowman burst into the room. “He jumped up on my bed,” says Wylie, “and started screaming, ‘Molly Hatchet! Molly Hatchet! Molly Hatchet!’ Bowman jumped higher and harder, rocking out on air guitar. Then, says Wylie, he recounted, in stunning details, the encounter he’d just had with a female journalist. “I’m pretty sure he was on something,” Wylie says of Bowman. “He would not let me go back to sleep.”

The pleasures of rooming with Bowman, who died of an overdose in a Los Angeles motel 20 years later, weren’t limited to late-night antics. “He spent the entire day with that disappointment? ‘I became an Eric Heiden groupie,’ she says. “I went to all his events because Eric was so adorable, so handsome, so talented. It was just the natural thing to do. Each time he would win, they’d have a party at his trailer. He’d go out, win another one. We’d go back and celebrate.”

But even while the competition goes on, the otherness that the Village provides, the exclusivity, has a way of turning up the love for every Olympian. “I remember the first time I left the Village,” says Barnett, a nonmedalist swimmer who suddenly found himself being treated like an international luminary. “People walked up and asked for my autograph,” he says. “They didn’t know who I was, but it was mind-blowing.” After years of training in obscurity, he was suddenly worth protecting at the highest level. Fans handed him a pen and waited for Barrett to sign his name. And they remained waiting out there, for Barrett and thousands of others, for the duration of those Games — they’ll be there for every Olympic Games. They’ll be waiting in London this month and in Sochi in two years and just beyond the boundaries of Rio’s rainforest-inspired bubble in 2016. “It’s all because you’re behind those gates,” says Barrett. “It’s the most special, overwhelming place for any athlete. There’s nothing in the world like being part of that Village.”

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