

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL



CIRQUE DU SOLEIL GOES TO THE OLYMPICS

Cirque du Soleil will be present at the Olympic Games in Athens this summer. Why go to the games? It's not complicated: When it comes to athletes, gymnasts and swimmers, Cirque du Soleil needs the best—and the best go to the Olympics.

Cirque has had an informal presence at the Olympic Games since its foundation in 1984, and the company has been sending acrobatic talent scouts to the games as a formal delegation since 1996.

Their mandate is to take a snapshot of what's going on in the sports community as a whole, to look for new orientations and to identify countries that are moving up in the world of sports, and to develop and maintain a network of contacts among the coaches and national federations.

It's all part of Cirque's unceasing quest for acrobats, athletes, swimmers, martial artists, divers and gymnasts to appear in its touring shows and its resident productions in Las Vegas and at Walt Disney World Resort® in Florida.

Building long term relationships

"But before you can permit yourself to cast, you have to put your partners at ease," says Lyn Heward, the company's President and COO, Creative Content. "The sports federations and coaches are very much the incubator of talent at Cirque, and we have to be respectful of their contribution. We don't take our artists from scratch and train them from scratch. That is done by other people. So the first thing we have had to do is establish a healthy relationship based on dialogue. We have to be really sensitive to the fact that we are viewed on one hand as a future career prospect, and on the other, as something of a threat."

What is the nature of that threat? Well, there is a degree of resistance on the part of many coaches and national federations because of their suspicion that Cirque du Soleil is coming to the Olympics on nothing more nor less than a poaching expedition: They have put in the hours, months and years it takes to train and prepare their athletes, and here comes a circus company to whisk them away with promises of a glamorous life in showbiz.

To counter that perception, Cirque Talent Scout Fabrice Becker says, "Our policy is not to talk directly to the athletes. We don't want to be perceived as an organization that comes to a competition to steal athletes. We'd rather build up a strong relationship with the coaches year after year. That way we can give them information about our shows, and we've found that over the long haul this policy leads us to interesting new candidates, because the coaches are now keeping us informed about when their athletes are planning to retire. And they now know that we're prepared to wait."

Before joining Cirque as a Talent Scout, Fabrice Becker won the gold medal for France in freestyle skiing at the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville. But he says Olympic medalists aren't always the best fit for a Cirque du Soleil show, because they often perceive themselves as stars, or superstars.

"And there's never a star in our shows," says Becker. "The show is the star. That's why we're not necessarily interested in medalists. We're more interested in people who have the desire to experience something else, to explore the unknown, to discover new things—people who are ready to apply their abilities to something different."

From the Olympics to Cirque: a challenging yet unique opportunity

Bernard Petiot, the former gymnastics coach in charge of training at Cirque's Montreal headquarters, agrees that it's difficult for many top-level athletes to become part of a team effort. "As an individual, you kind of disappear within the group," he says. "But people from the world of sports don't want to disappear. They want to be on the podium, standing there with the gold medal. So it's tough on the ego."

For those who can make the transition, Cirque offers a unique opportunity to learn entirely new skills in stagecraft and to extend a sports career by many years. That is something brand new in sports such as diving, synchronized swimming, gymnastics, trampoline and tumbling. But the transition can be a trial for many athletes, particularly if they have never danced or acted in their lives.

"You can count on them if they're doing, say, a triple somersault; you know that it will be really, really good," says Petiot. "But we have to work hard to get them to relax and be more open artistically. In the sports environment, they're the best, but when they come here, they're less accomplished in the artistic area, and that frustrates them a lot."

Cirque influencing the world of sports

In this relationship between circus and sports, the traffic hasn't all been one way. Lyn Heward points out that Cirque du Soleil's innovations, both artistic and technical, have had a noticeable influence on the world of sport.

“Our shows serve as an inspiration to trace out where a sport can go artistically,” she says. “You can go to the games, and in synchronized swimming, gymnastics and figure skating you’ll find competitors using Cirque du Soleil music. You’ll also see the influence of our costumes, and our choreography has been very inspirational, too.”

Heward adds that Cirque is also known for its technical innovation in terms of the relationship between the body’s biomechanics and the equipment used in sports. “We evolve more quickly than they do in that area,” she says, “and that becomes an interesting basis of exchange as well.”

In the end, everyone benefits. By building strong relationships with the sports community, Cirque can continue to attract the best performers from that world. And the performers benefit too. Athletes, gymnasts and swimmers who retire from competition have few career options, and even fewer that permit them to carry on practicing their specialties in front of an audience that will pay them a salary. For them, a role in a Cirque du Soleil show can mean anywhere from five to 20 more years in their chosen field, and the possibility of other career paths once their performing days are done.