

SIMON ROBERTS

Spectator Sport by Simon Kuper

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I live in Paris, and on July 6 2005, the day the host of these Olympics was chosen, I stood in the crowd outside the Hôtel de Ville expecting to see my new hometown get the nod. Instead, London won, and the assembled Parisians sighed briefly before disappearing into the BHV department store for a spot of retail therapy. I was briefly disappointed too. But now I am thankful that London was named host. These Games are deepening and enriching my understanding of a city that I thought I knew. I lived in London for 15 years, but I'm now seeing it as if for the first time.

On the day of the opening ceremony I happened to have a meeting in Marylebone, 300m from my old shared flat above a now defunct off-licence. I ran to Baker Street Tube, as I've done a thousand times before. Then I got on a media bus to the ceremony, passing Southwark Bridge and the FT building where I used to work in the 1990s. It was like a dream: you move through a familiar landscape that has been transformed, in this case for the Olympics.

Don't want it
to end? Exclusive
images by
Simon Roberts
capture the 30th
Olympiad in action

**RIGHT
ON
TRACK**



Danny Boyle's "Isles of Wonder" opening ceremony helped turn the Games into a reflection on London and Britain. The next day, after four hours' sleep, I got up and rushed around: from the cycling on the Mall to the beach volleyball just next door, then to the football at Wembley, and even to a play about the Berlin Olympics of 1936 at Sadler's Wells theatre. It's been crazy, invigorating, exhausting and unforgettable.

Sometimes that's thanks to the athletes. When the hitherto unknown Yorkshire cyclist Lizzie Armitstead wandered into the press conference with the first British medal of the Games (a silver), and began politely explaining to the waiting nation why she was a vegetarian (she doesn't like eating corpses), you felt joy at seeing a nice person become a national heroine in an instant. But what I like best about these Games is the voyage of discovery through London.

Simon Roberts' pictures capture that voyage. The usual version of sport we get in the newspapers is the action photo: a long-lens picture of the athlete crossing the tape, or beaming with his medal. The action photo is designed to elicit an instant "Wow!", although it doesn't always, because over the decades it has become a cliché. Roberts does something different: he uses the Olympics to photograph London and England.

There have been a million photographs of Big Ben. Most are cheap postcards. Photographing any London landmark in a fresh way is almost impossible, but that is what Roberts achieves here. Shooting from the stands at the beach volleyball on Horse Guards Parade, he treats the athletes as mere foreground. Because Big Ben appears off-centre in the background, almost as if it had happened to wander into the shot, we can see it anew. Seeing London during these Games, we rediscover the beauty of a place that we know too well to see.

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