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Why Chicago? Pizza, comedy and tall buildings

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BY DON BABWIN Associated Press

It boils down to this: Do sports fans want to attend the Games of the XXXI Olympiad in Los Angeles or come to Chicago for Da Games?

It's likely not a question the United States Olympic Committee asked as it comes to a decision -- to be voted on and announced April 14 -- on which city to recommend to the International Olympic Committee as the nation's candidate to host the 2016 games. But it should be.

The fact is both cities will have stadiums, pools and Olympic villages. And it's not like one doesn't have enough room for the whole 26-mile marathon. So that leaves the experience each city offers fans when they're not watching all the running, swimming, twirling and shot putting.

And that's where Chicago has it all over L.A. From hot dogs to high rises and comedy to culture, there is no comparison.

Start with the food. There's the Chicago hot dog and the Chicago beef sandwich. There's also the pizza. Deep dish pizza was invented here -- a 1 1/2 inch thick pie loaded with sausage, mushrooms, pepperoni, onions and green peppers. For pizza with salmon caviar and something called dill creme fraiche, turn left at Michigan Avenue and go, say, 2,000 miles.

Sure, there's nothing unique about a Chicago hamburger. But the "cheezburger" is a different story. The Billy Goat Tavern that inspired the famous Saturday Night Live skit still serves cheezburger and in at least one location, "no fries, cheeps."

That leads to another difference between the two cities. Los Angeles may have far more celebrities, but many came from Chicago -- particularly the funny ones. John Belushi, Bill Murray, Steve Carrell, Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert and the late Gilda Radner all started at The Second City comedy club.

And while more celebrities live in Los Angeles, when they have something to say, they come to Chicago to say it to Oprah Winfrey.

Then there's the look of the city. From the massive Merchandise Mart (it has its own ZIP code) to the Wrigley Building to Union Station (think the baby carriage scene in "The Untouchables"), Chicago loves its architecture and public art.

And with its neoclassical Field Museum and the Bears' Soldier Field -- at least until a remodeling job made it look like a spaceship landed on it -- Chicago looks not only like it should hold the games but held the original version.

"It all looks like it came out of ancient Greece," said actor Joe Mantegna, a Chicago native who now lives in Los Angeles.

Chicago also has the tallest building in the United States in the Sears Tower, and there are plans for one that will be taller still.

Finally, there's the sports.

"Dodger fans show up in the fourth inning and they leave in the fifth," said Joe Canale, a Second City cast member, exaggerating just a little. "Cubs fans come to see a team that hasn't won in 100 years," exaggerating by just a year. "And they stay all game. Of course they're drunk, but..."

Los Angeles doesn't even seem to care that, oh yeah, it hasn't had a pro football team in years.

"If the Bears tried to leave, somebody would get hurt," Mantegna said.

Chicago also knows how to enjoy sports. There is more than a little truth in "Da Bears" skit on Saturday Night Live, the one in which men and their beer bellies -- Chicagoans George Wendt and the late Chris Farley among them -- washed down ribs and Polish sausages with beer as they toasted their favorite team.

For further evidence, go to Wrigley Field. There, instead of statues of muscled and naked athletes like the ones that greet visitors to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, is one of the late Cubs announcer Harry Caray. Fully dressed -- thankfully -- and sometimes holding a beer visitors place in his hand, Caray forever leads fans in "Take Me Out To The Ball Game" as he did for so many years from the broadcast booth.

Then there are the sports themselves. True, the Dodgers, Lakers, USC football and UCLA basketball have produced a lot more championships than Chicago's teams -- 98 years and counting, Cubs fans -- but the Olympic Games are about history. And when it comes to historic moments, even legendary ones, Chicago wins.

The 1919 White Sox threw the World Series here, forever becoming the Black Sox. Babe Ruth's "called shot" in the 1932 World Series happened here if it happened at all.

Fast forward to 2003. The Cubs were five outs from reaching the World Series for the first time in decades. That's when a fan -- with help, some say, from a curse put on the team in 1945 by a bar owner after his goat was turned away at the gate -- deflected a ball inches from a Cub's mitt. With that, the Cubs lost a sure out, the game, the next game, and their chance at the series.

Worse yet for the north side team's fans, their south side rivals -- the Chicago White Sox -- went on to win the World Series just two years later.

Even if Chicago doesn't land the Olympics, maybe, just maybe, by 2016 will come the most historic moment of all: A World Series championship for the Cubs.

Or maybe the city had better cross its fingers for the international gymnasts and track stars.

Chicago-based Associated Press reporter Don Babwin and his Los Angeles colleague, John Rogers, explain why their respective cities should play host to the 2016 Summer Olympics. The U.S. Olympic Committee will decide Saturday which is the American candidate. The International Olympic Committee will make the final choice in 2009.

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