

Empire Games Set Crowd Mark, But Closing Rites Are Bittersweet

By ANTHONY CARDINALE

The ninth annual Empire State Games drew a record 176,085 people during the four-day meet but closed on a sad note Sunday because of the death of the man who worked hardest to bring them to Buffalo.

Herbert J. Mols, known as "The Father of the Western Region" and a pioneer in establishing the Empire State Games in 1978, died early Sunday morning after suffering a heart attack in the Amherst press center of the State University of Buffalo, headquarters of the Games.

"We close these games on a sad and yet a joyous note," said Michael E. Abernethy, executive director of the Games. "We are deeply saddened because last night the Empire State Games and all of us lost a dear friend in Herbert Mols, one of the founders of the Games and Western New York regional director since their inception, and the leading advocate for bringing the games to Buffalo.

✓ Full sports coverage of the Games begins on PAGE A-5

"Our sorrow turns to joy at what a wonderful, positive impact he was on our lives and the lives of all the athletes of New York State. This torch is only a symbol of the flame that burns in the hearts of men: the spirit to take a challenge and meet it and do things better than they've ever been done before. And that's the flame that burned in the heart of Herbert Mols."

Abernethy also said in a statement: "His leadership was instrumental, not only in developing the Games, but in bringing them to Buffalo in 1985. His enthusiasm and dedication will be sadly missed."

The other regional directors, who earlier had decided that Mols should officially close the 1986 Games, invited his family to do the honors. A dozen members of the family, including several children, clustered

around the torch in front of the UB Recreation and Athletics Complex and said in unison, "We declare the 1986 Empire State Games closed."

Robert E. Rich Jr., chairman of the local organizing committee, thanked the volunteers and workers and said, "I hope that the Empire State Games have brought a lot of great memories to people across Buffalo and to the athletes who have been our guests."

Then he added a personal note: "Herb Mols was the first coach I ever had, in third grade. And I knew that he would love to be here sharing the joy of this great moment. I know if he were here he would tell Mike Abernethy and all the people from Albany to hurry up and bring these games back to Buffalo. This torch will go out today, but Herb Mols' torch in this city will never go out."

See Games
Page A-2, Column 6

Games

Continued from Page 1

said the family had no indication that he had any serious health problems.

"This was his baby," he said, looking around at the buses taking the last of 7,000 athletes away. "He went out in style. That was his life. He saw the future here in Buffalo. A lot of the athletes said they'll be sorry to go back to Syracuse (for the 1987 Games), because the facilities here are incredible, the officiating was just super, the organization was first class. I didn't hear one negative comment."

One of Mols' daughters, Sandra Hughes of Wilton, N.H., said his death was "quite a shock" to his family.

"He was so happy this week," she said. "We were so happy to be here to see him. We were here last

year too and just loved it so much. He's done a lot of work in athletics and really loved the Empire State Games. It was the pinnacle of what he'd been working for all those years.

"We'd look around and see all these kids, and it was just such an inspiration. There are so many things going on in the world that can drag you down. But when you see all those people marching into the stadium, you think, really, there is something positive in the world."

Games publicity director Michael H. Shaw said this year's attendance of 176,085 exceeded last year's record crowd of 172,800. Sunday's attendance of 40,100 included 6,600 at both the soccer and field hockey competition, 5,500 for men's basketball, 2,200 for softball and 1,500 for women's basketball. In all, 30 sporting events were held at 27 locations

in Western New York.

"The weather didn't really slow down attendance," Shaw said. "This turnout shows what a great sports city Buffalo is. But it couldn't have been done without the cooperation of the colleges and the various sporting organizations."

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