

THE FRIENDLY GAMES

One of Canada's great moments in international sport came in 1978. Our athletes won an unprecedented 45 gold, 31 silver, and 33 bronze medals at the Commonwealth Games, held that year in Edmonton, Alberta.

This summer, Canadian athletes hope to excel again during the fifteenth Commonwealth Games. They will take place in Victoria, British Columbia, August 18 to 28. Some 300 million people around the world are expected to watch on television.

The games take place every four years. The first British Empire Games took place in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1930, with 400 participants from 11 countries. Since then, they have grown in size and importance.

The Commonwealth Games are known as "the friendly games." Canadian runner Charmaine Crooks has won Olympic silver and Commonwealth gold in the 800-metre event. She says: "There is a high level of competition at the Commonwealth Games, but they aren't as grandiose as the Olympics, so there isn't the same kind of tension. Athletes from a lot of Commonwealth countries speak English, so it's easy to communicate. And we have a lot of fun trading pins."

Some 3200 athletes from 66 nations are expected to attend the games this year in Victoria. Events include track and field,

aquatics (diving, swimming, and synchronized swimming), badminton, boxing, cycling, gymnastics, lawn bowling, shooting, weightlifting, and wrestling. There will be a record number of events for women. Field lacrosse will be a demonstration sport.

This year, for the first time, athletes with a disability will take part in the Games as members of their national teams. Around 100 handicapped athletes will stay in the Games village with the other athletes and take part in six events: men's and women's visually impaired lawn bowls, two women's wheelchair races, and men's and women's 100-metre freestyle swimming.

The whole city of Victoria is involved. More than 13 000 volunteers are helping with special projects, and some will take part in the opening and closing ceremonies. A year-long Arts and Culture Festival is already under way. Aboriginal people from across Canada are also coming to Victoria in 1994 to celebrate their cultures through traditional sports and ceremonial events.

After all the visitors have gone home, Victoria will be left with a new Aquatic Centre and track and lawn bowling facilities. There will also be a new Commonwealth Centre for Sport Development, which will offer support programs to athletes and coaches.

The Games are entertain-

ing for observers and challenging for participants. Organizers also believe they have other purposes: they help tie the Commonwealth together; they are a means of promoting the principles of the Commonwealth; and they are a means of helping young people. Says Ms. Crooks: "If the Games can get one more kid involved in sport and improve that kid's life, then we will have done our job."

There are more than one billion young people in the Commonwealth making up 60 percent of the population. Commonwealth leaders worry that many of these young people are unaware of the association, its principles of justice, tolerance, and equality, and the many cultures it embraces.

George Heller, president of the Victoria Commonwealth Games Society, notes that sport is important to youth in every society. Sport:

- provides role models, and inspires youngsters to pursue excellence;
- teaches values such as equality and dignity of the individual, non-discrimination, and fair play;
- helps young people develop social skills and leadership;
- improves their health and well-being, and makes them more productive and creative members of society;
- builds bridges by increasing understanding and forging friendships.