

## BROCK'S BANTER: Rap it up

By Brock Weir

"I hate this place!" exclaimed the small voice beside me on Saturday night.

I was well aware of where this small voice was coming from as I watched the source inch ever closer to my right shoulder out of the corner of my eye.

He was being carried with great ceremony on the shoulders of his father (to give the benefit of the doubt to his greying conveyance) on the lookout for that perfect place in the crowd.

He seemed content, however, in where he was, and his mode of transport, so, the definitive tone of his statement was slightly surprising.

Who could possibly hate this place? We were in Nathan Phillips Square as Panamania went into full swing.

Initially, I was hesitant about taking part in it. Of course, it sounded like fun, but the way talking heads "pro and con" were going on about it made the impending descent of hundreds of thousands of people onto the Greater Toronto Area sound like it would transform our comparatively sleepy neighbouring city into Tokyo at the most extreme of rush hours.

However, I bit the bullet and headed down to the city after grabbing a bite to eat at the Aurora Farmers' Market. Although I don't have tickets to any events in particular, I made my day taking in the public spectacle whether it was along the Waterfront, outside Union Station, or at the epicentre outside Toronto City Hall.

Crowds on the subway left much to be desired. There was not a noticeable increase in the amount of commuters. In fact, regular commuters seemed to be elsewhere and, in their stead, were a smattering of people in official Pan Am uniforms and a larger-than-normal number of people decked out head-to-toe in Canada gear.

By the time the evening rolled around, I returned to Nathan Phillips Square. There wasn't much to be seen there during the daytime hours, but by 8 p.m. it was a completely different story. Thousands of people filled every nook, cranny and overhang that was available to be had.

Haitian-Canadian rapper Wyclef Jean was only a fraction into his apparently four-hour set (I didn't stick around the entire time to gauge the accuracy of Mr. Jean's forecast) but there was no doubt the crowd was feeling it.

By the time he started killing the audience softly with his take on the song of the same name, the little cherub made his entrance. His eyes widened as he looked over the sea of people from his lofty perch, pointing out a large contingent of fans from Brazil (their shirts certainly stuck out in the crowd) as his minders looked for a good place to take in the rest of the show.

"I hate this place!"

The words echoed as they were exclaimed during a momentary period of quiet as Mr. Jean changed his shoes on stage. (You don't ask questions about these things).

What could there possibly be to hate about this scene?, I wondered. It certainly couldn't have been the noise. It didn't seem to bother him coming in. It certainly couldn't have been the crowds as, despite their sheer numbers, the pure warmth in the crowd towards each other, regardless of which country each individual happened to be cheering, was evident to all and, although I do not go out of my way to listen to rap (yet, it wouldn't be truthful to say I don't enjoy it from time to time) the music itself was pretty good.

Then I looked up.

Unbeknownst to the guy attached to the shoulders this kid was sitting on, he just happened to pick a spot by a potted tree on the patio and the kid was doing battle with the foliage and losing. Pointy twigs were poking this kid in the face, his "Go Canada!" shirt was snagged on a branch, yet nobody seemed the wiser. It seemed the kid had a point. There was a lot to hate in that.

I, however, can't hate.

Until very recently it would be a stretch to say I had bought into Pan Am and all the hype surrounding it. And I was certainly no subscriber to Panamania. Don't get me wrong, I was certainly on board with the Pan Am Torch Run and the excitement it had the potential to bring to every community it touched (mission resoundingly accomplished in Aurora), as I was, and continue to be, with highlighting the Pan Am achievements of all our Pan Am athletes.

But, I've now taken a swig of the Kool-Aid and it was good to the last drop. Excitement of the games themselves aside, a few things struck me as I roamed around. The first was the ability of municipalities to get long-stagnant projects completed and pristine projects completed as soon as they learn company is about to arrive. (Yes, I'm talking about you, Union Station) The second was the camaraderie in the air of people boasting jerseys from various nations chatting together and teasing each other as they made their way to the venues. Third, and perhaps most important, was the pride Torontonians seemed to have in showing their city off, a pride

that is quite often evident but typically understated to the point of muted.

Toronto ? and all participating GTA municipalities ? have good reason to be proud. Naysayers are always out in force, but I'm going to side with the optimists that this will not only provide a boon to businesses, but leave a lasting legacy.

In preparing for these games, Toronto and the venue hosts have forged and redefined their identity and what they want to show to the world, something Aurora will have to do if plans to create a viable tourism market get taken to the next level at Council this week.

While the tourism study before Council puts a significant emphasis on promoting Aurora's existing draws to a wider audience and, in turn, casting a wider net in drawing people into our community, I certainly hope the next step ? a tourism advisory committee ? then sets to work on just what Aurora wants to be.

We need a hotel, that's a given, and it is not surprising that is priority number one. It is also hard to argue with the second priority of placing an emphasis on a new sports facility; after all, if a world class venue had already been in place, Aurora might be getting a piece of the Pan Am action as we speak.

Our existing draws, whether they are the sporting facilities we do have, or arts and heritage mainstays like the Aurora Cultural Centre, Hillary House National Historic Site, or a smattering of festivals held throughout the year, are already fulfilling their defined niches. But if all the key players were to come together with a united vision of what Aurora is ? and should be ? bringing people in will remain a perennial debate.