

THE SOCOG DODEC STORY

By Paul Matthews 2022

So just what is a “SOCOG DODEC”? Well the full name is the “*Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games Roller Dodecahedron*”. 22 years old this year.. and with a story to tell. *And here is that story.*

Back at the end of last century as art director David Atkins pulled together the closing ceremony of the Sydney's Olympic games, his team were in that typical pickle everyone gets into at the end of something... they had run out of money. He wanted something campy like a massive disco party.. but only had a tiny fraction of the budget he had for the opening ceremony. A big shiny disco ball was a must.



Of course what Sydney ended up with.. is now long the stuff of history. At the centre of the field stood a strangely shaped stage on which performers did their thing. Underneath? It was actually a 40 year old carnival ride which had been modified in the early 1970s to become a “giant dodecahedron stage” which could be folded up and down at will. Originally used in an arena sized production of “Jesus Christ Superstar” way back in 1972, it had then sat disused in a carny backlot out the back of Londonderry until one of his engineering team (Mark McKinley, a guy I knew well from my '90s film production years) made him aware of its existence.

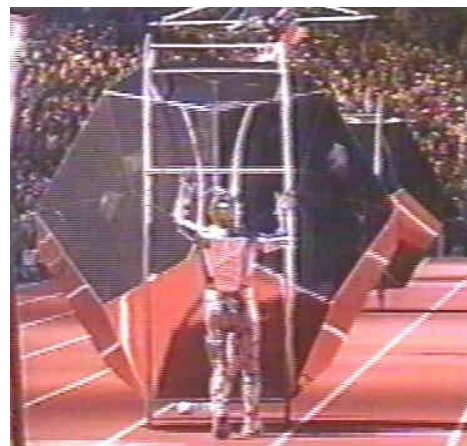
It was perfect. Best of all it was an absolute bargain! Nothing like re using old second hand things to make the accounts look better. Mark got to work rebuilding the ancient beast, completely reconstructing the hydraulics, mechanical works and stage surface to meet current safety standards and work reliably. Once this giant “dodecahedron stage” had been confirmed as the centrepiece of the ceremony, the theme of shiny disco balls and dodecahedrons had been established. All they needed was... MORE of them.

On a tight budget and with Atkins determined to celebrate the human form, tight shiny spandex was poured all over the dancers. The remaining budget extended just far enough to allow manufacture of a set of eight “roller hedrons” (we'll just call them DODECs) for the dancers to roll around the field and provide some spectacle. Manufactured by Mark and his team from aluminium and with MDF panels covered in silver plastic mirrors, they were duly delivered by truck from the SOCOG Redfern workshop to the rehearsal fields at Schofields Aerodrome a few weeks before the Olympics started.



The Sydney Olympics closing ceremony—with the giant dodecahedron stage in the middle—folded up to create a projection surface. The “Roller Hedron” balls can be seen being rolled around the field on each side.

These things were huge—and weighed around 350kg a pop. Never the less on the level ground of the stadium they would be more than satisfactorily handled by two dancers each as they were rolled around in time with Vanessa Amorosi's "Absolutely Everybody" pop track from the year before. However they were designed by Mark to be rolled straight. By the end of the rehearsal, David had the dancers twirling them around in circles.. which put far more stress on the aluminium frame welds than Mark had anticipated.



Little known to Mark or anyone else, the DODECs were returned to Redfern, stored and then moved directly to the Olympic stadium on the night of the closing ceremony. As they were rolled off the trucks the breakages started. The welds which had been stressed and cracked during rehearsals and transport, started to break apart. Many of the DODECs had at least three welds broken, meaning that they would almost certainly fail and fall apart during the performance. It was 4pm. The stadium was filling for the final time ready for the 7pm start. One of those "Oh, fuqk" moments!



The David Atkins designed "Dodec Dancer" costumes—on which my own would be designed.

Meanwhile up high in the bleachers, Mark McKinley had arrived to take a seat in the crowd with his family ready to watch the ceremony, one of the few times he had been able to actually attend an Olympic event as a punter. The search was on.

It took the team around 40 minutes to track Mark down and tragically declare that "the dodecs are falling apart, they will not last the dance, we need you NOW!" Mark explained that he wasn't in the habit of bringing his welding equipment to family events and that it was still sitting in his ute in a workshop way over the other side of the precinct.

Sufficed to say that by the time the dodecs finally rolled out onto the arena, Mark had been able to return to his truck and collect the welder with a forklift, get to the marshalling area and find suitable power to fire it up. Outside.. the show had already started... and Vanessa's song was coming up fast!

Picture the scene—Mark desperately trying to lay aluminium welds on the small, circular shafts where they had cracked, in the tunnel just beyond the Olympic stadium entry. Only to find that once two were done, the dodec would be rolled onward half a revolution and two more would crack! By the time those dodecs rolled onto the field, many of them still had red hot welds on them. Mark was screaming at the dancers to be careful not to touch them!

History would record *that all eight dodecs –JUST–*survived the performance that night, although several did not survive the trip back to Redfern. It's another one of those hidden, quintessentially Australian pub talk stories that you hear about.. how Aussies will do anything to keep the show on the road and that really, all of our best achievements are carried out by the seat of our pants!

Once back at Redfern, the five remaining dodecs that were still in one piece would become part of a huge public auction of Olympic memorabilia held a few months later. And this is where Yours Truly enters the picture.

The SOCOG workshops were right next door to Historic Electric Traction's Redfern workshops, where volunteers toil away most Sundays restoring vintage electric trains to operate on the Sydney rail network. On this particular Sunday, I was one of those volunteers. During lunch break and with a few mates from HET, we decided to spin around and see what was happening during the Auction.



Well... I thought it was a good idea at the time...

I'm not sure what really got into me that day. Could it have been my fascination with David's vision of the closing ceremony and all that spandex? Who knows. Maybe just an impulse buy? But for whatever reason, I returned to the HET shed that day the proud owner of one huge rolling dodecahedron for \$200 bucks. Faced with the challenge of now finding a home for the giant thing, the following week I managed to fit it and its original steel carriage on to a 8x4 box trailer and get it back to the small factory unit I rented for work in St Marys.

I had this idea that it might make a good float entry in some of the local street parades that SWRFM (my other volunteer pastime) participated in. I reckoned that I could get a spandex costume made up to look just like the original dancers.. and basically do the same dance to Vanessa Amorosi's song. To that effect I had also been successful in securing an original headpiece from the Olympic auction. So all I needed was the suit and a little make up.

But I wasn't about to wait for all that. Within a month, my first opportunity came calling when SWRFM was invited to participate in "Santa's Parade," a short trip through Blacktown streets to the Westfields' shopping centre. I decided to enter the dodec along with myself wearing one of my older costumes, the "Metalder Ranger".

Around this time I was also courting a Blacktown girl online who was eventually to become my wife, Sashi Kiran. I let it slip to her that I was going to be in the parade. Shortly afterwards, a photo appeared in my inbox. From that point the dodec became quite an integral part of our early life together, with Sashi even participating herself in one parade a few years later in a costume she made specially for the occasion.



The first ex. Olympics use of the dodec (note the absence of the welded frame strengthening). Photo taken by the girl who (back then) I hadn't even met—but who was destined to eventually become my wife

During its first "non Olympics" use on hilly public streets, one thing became immediately apparent to me about the dodec. *It could be downright lethal if not carefully controlled!* All it would take was one momentary lapse of concentration and the thing would quickly become a public menace, uncontrollably wiping out anything in its path. My 34 year old muscled frame was quite capable of handling the thing.. however any sort of steering involved lifting and sliding, as the two rails that rolled along the ground were about 1200mm apart. As Mark had said during the Olympics—these things were designed to roll straight—not go around corners, or for that matter.. up and down steep roads.



The second thing that became apparent was that the original design really wasn't capable of supporting its own weight. By the time I got it back home after the Santa parade, no less than three welds had snapped again. Some major engineering would need to be carried out if I was going to continue to use it in street parades.

Early in 2001 I took it down to a local welding shop and let the guys take a look over it. Their solution was to cut a selection of new triangular braces and weld these into place to strengthen the otherwise concentrated load points where the ball attached to the rolling frame.

Left : A close up of the dodec frame showing where the ball frame joins the round road treads. The original cracking point can clearly be seen—this is where most of the dodec balls failed shortly before the Olympics ceremony, with many of them showing multiple weld runs where Mark tried desperately to repair them minutes before they rolled out onto the field. Alongside this can be seen the strengthening repair triangle pieces welded into position by myself in early 2001.

With my imitation PVC spandex dancer suit now also completed thanks to a local seamstress, I was ready to roll into the 21st Century. It's probably best to let pictures tell the story as the dodec enjoyed no less than eight more outings in the following nine years:

2001 Holroyd Festival—Silver Dodec with Metalder Ranger
2001 Blacktown Festival—Silver Dodec with Black Dodec Man
2003 St Marys Festival—Silver Dodec with Black Dodec Man
2004 Blacktown Festival—Silver Dodec with Black Dodec Man
2005 Holroyd Festival—Silver Dodec with Black Dodec Man

2008 Holroyd Festival—Grey Undercoated “Dodec” with Blue Dodec Man

2008 Blacktown Festival—Tri Colour Dodec with Blue Dodec Man

2009 Holroyd Festival—Tri Colour Dodec with Blue Dodec Man (with red garter)



Early Dodec debut at Blacktown Festival in 2001—with Sashi in her own silver suit



Original Dodec and Black dancer costume at Holroyd Festival, 2005

The Blacktown Festival in particular is a very difficult street parade route, up and down hilly terrain and through several car parks, a very different environment to Sydney Olympic stadium. The gap between 2005 and 2008 saw the dodec relocated from St Marys to my new home in Tennyson with it stored outdoors for a few years (under tarps) before I could get the chance to build a proper shelter for it.

Unfortunately the original silver plastic mirrors on the dodec didn't fare too well with being stored outside, with a number of them falling off and becoming damaged. As a result, it was decided in 2008 to strip the dodec back to wood and repaint it in a new colour scheme more befitting its sponsor at the time (SWRFM).

The original spandex suit made in 2001 was also showing severe signs of wear by this stage and so I commissioned a dancewear seamstress to make two new PVC suits, a replacement black one plus another one in deep blue. The original Olympics headpiece remained in use throughout this time. All the suits were worn with a standard dance belt underneath.



Repainted dodec in use at Blacktown Festival in 2008



Blacktown Festival—2008. One of the last rolls of the dodec in public

A little known side issue with these parades was the problem of having to remain in the suit for very long periods, usually half a day or more. This coupled with the extensive physical workout of handling the dodec plus the need to constantly keep hydrated, led to some awkward moments when I would suddenly find myself needing to pee with no facilities anywhere around.. and zero chance of getting out of the suit.

The solution (if not a rather unusual one which I discovered by accident) was just to pee the suit. I mean, wetsuit wearers get away with it, so why not me? On most parades I used to pour volumous amounts of water down the neck of the suit anyway to keep cool, so anything would quickly get washed out. Peeing yourself in public

while casually carrying out conversation and waiting for a parade to start or finish became something I got rather used to. "I guess this is what older incontinence sufferers have to do all the time" I thought, without a whiff of knowledge that ironically in around 15 years time (as a prostate cancer sufferer myself) I would end up becoming one of those incontinent elephants..



The Dodec's home in Tennyson until 2022



The FINAL ROLL—2022

The 2009 Holroyd Festival ended up being the last time the dodec would be used in public with SWRFM then moving to other ideas for their parade float entries. In all fairness the rolling frame itself (i.e. the part that comes into contact with the road) was showing significant signs of wear and tear with micro fractures beginning to show around the support welds. Even if it did come out again it would be for only one more roll at best.





From that point, the dodec would remain stored in its purpose built shelter at Tennyson until 2022. By this time I had decided that my dodec rolling days were over. Needing the space occupied by the dodec, I decided it was time to strip the dodec of its MDF wood panels which by this time were showing signs of moisture damage anyway.

In April 2022 the panels were removed and stored. The aluminium frame now sits proudly on display at the front of our rural property in Tennyson as a landmark for everyone to enjoy.

More than 22 years after the Olympics closing ceremony, the dodec lives on!

Footnote : Of the remaining four units sold in November 2000, two were procured by the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney (of which one remains in their Sydney Olympics collection in original condition).

The other two were procured at the auction by a promoter who took them to Orange (NSW) where (it is believed) they were used in a single showground parade event there before being scrapped shortly thereafter.



Dodec in its final resting place as a landmark for Tennyson

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