

INSECT OLYMPICS: A GRASSROOTS REPORT

**by Pamela Rosa Rinaldi
Newport Daily News, 8/9/08**

While much has been reported on the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, China, very little is known about a similar event that takes place each year in the insect world. Held at several undisclosed locations, the Insect Olympics provides arthropods of many species the opportunity to display their prowess in such events as weight-lifting, swimming and track and field.

This past week, I received a personal invitation to attend these secretive games. What could be better than a firsthand report of this incredible extravaganza during a summer when our young readers are involved in the statewide reading program entitled "Catch the Reading Bug!" We librarians had noticed quite an "infestation" of "bug-eyed" readers interested in the many insect themed books and "pestering" their parents to take them to the various insect-related activities being offered at the Newport Public Library.

I was thrilled that Venus Flytrap and Buzzy Beetle had been able to secure tickets for me to several Insect Olympic events. With a promise to tread lightly on the grass, I armed myself with a pair of high-powered binoculars and set off to view the competitions. The morning was bright and sunny and perfect for viewing the swimming heats. Water boatmen and backswimmers were pitted against one another in a 10 lap freestyle. Using their powerful, hairy legs as oars, these bugs traveled underwater across the pond. It was interesting to note that the backswimmer moved in an upside-down position. Later, the water strider, who uses his long slender legs to skate across the pond's surface, took home the top honors for his talent of practically walking across the water.

Weightlifting competitions were interesting since the top contenders for the gold medal were red and black ants. Although several rhino and stag beetles attempted lifting with their strong antler-like jaws, they were no match for the ants who are known to lift an object that is 20 to 50 times more than its own body weight. In my opinion, the beetles would fare better in the wrestling competition where they can "lock horns".

The high jump featured fleas as the only competitors in the field. Each Olympian arrived on a host dog from their country. These minuscule mites proudly rode a dachshund from Germany, a bulldog from England, and a poodle from France while the flea from China was lost in the wrinkles of a shar pei. It is a well-known fact that a flea can jump to a height of 8 inches and a distance of over 15 inches. That's amazing when you consider that this tiny creature is only 1/8 of an inch long. If he were the height of an average child, he could jump over some very tall buildings!!!

The broad jump followed soon after with crickets, katydids and grasshoppers vying for the gold. All three insect Olympians have powerful hind legs and such endearing personalities that this event brought hordes of excited, adoring fans to their feet, jumping for joy.

The final event in the category of Track and Field was the 500 inch dash featuring fleet-footed silverfish, cockroaches and tiger beetles. Since these contestants are nocturnal, this event was held after dark. By the light of thousands of glowworms and fireflies, I watched in amazement as they scuttled, scurried and swept past the finish line. The crowd chirped, whined, and buzzed their approval as the gold medal was awarded to a cockroach who won by half an antenna.

My senses were reeling as I left my gracious hosts, Venus and Buzzy at the Caterpillar Café where I bid them good night and promised to relay to my readers all the exciting news of my day among the smallest sports champions of the world.

Suggested Reading:

- Barraclough, Susan. *Bugs: the World's Most Terrifying Insects*. Backpack Books, 2005.
- Bonotaux, Gilles. *Dirty Rotten Bugs? Arthropods Unite to Tell Their Side of the Story*. Two Can, 2007.
- Imes, Rick. *Incredible Bugs: The Ultimate Guide to the World of Insects*. B&N Books, 1997.
- Taylor, Barbara. *1000 Facts on Bugs*. B&N Books, 2005.