

Keeping the Games torch shining

An Australian woman is guiding the Olympic Games torch on its problematic Journey of Harmony, writes **Anne Hyland** in Beijing.

The Olympic torch is supposed to be a potent reminder of the unifying force that sport has on the world's nations, but instead it is in danger of becoming a rallying point for anti-China protests. The torch's epic 130-day Journey of Harmony, which began yesterday, has been marred from the start when Free Tibet protesters interrupted the lighting of the flame in Greece on March 24.

Non-governmental organisations and even former British politicians have called for peaceful protests to follow the torch's international journey to highlight the campaign for better human rights in China, particularly after the crackdown in Tibet.

The intrusion of international politics adds yet another dimension of difficulty to what is already an extraordinary logistical exercise for Australian Di Henry and her firm Maxxam International, winners of the consulting contract for the Beijing torch relay. Like many foreign executives and companies operating in China, Henry won't comment on politics.

The protests will necessitate greater security for the torch's journey, much in evidence when it was in Beijing on Monday. None of the protests that have dogged the torch's journey has been reported in mainland China.

Henry and her team are used to difficult jobs. It took two years for Maxxam to convince Chinese government officials that it should win the contract for the torch relay. It takes about the same time to walk the 7300 kilometres of China's Great Wall.

Henry, who turns 50 the day after the Olympic torch lights the cauldron at Beijing's Bird's Nest stadium, has never shied away from a challenge. She was once part of an ambitious team of Australians who endeavoured to take a hot-air balloon over the Himalayas. They succeeded on the second attempt but by then Henry had moved on to a career in film and television and later into events management, where her passion lies.

But it would not be Henry's last brush with a hot-air balloon. While working in England during the 1980s she was invited to an extravagant balloon bash held by Malcolm Forbes, the late flamboyant millionaire and publisher of *Forbes Magazine*, at his 17th century Chateau de Balleroy in France's Normandy region.

Forbes, a hot-air ballooning enthusiast, was launching a balloon in the shape of the composer Beethoven's face. Henry, who thought she would be attending a small event put on by Forbes for ballooning buffs, instead found herself rubbing shoulders with Elizabeth Taylor, Walter Cronkite and the King and Queen of Romania.

"It was total decadence for three days," recalls Henry. "Forbes's staff were wearing these red overalls and written on the back [of the overalls] was 'Capitalist tool'. He had a sense of humour, that man."

Humour along with patience and an irrepressible energy have been several of the tools Henry has kept in her kit bag to succeed in China and elsewhere.

Maxxam's break into the Games world came when it won the right to direct the torch relay for the Sydney Olympics. Since then Maxxam has done the torch and baton relays for the Sydney Paralympics, the Manchester and Melbourne Commonwealth Games, the Turin Winter Olympics and the Doha Asian Games.

Maxxam is one of a number of Australian companies that have won a series of Games contracts after cutting their teeth at the Sydney Olympics. Henry describes them as "Games junkies".

The Maxxam team of just six, including Henry, is one of a small group of international consultants who have won the respect and trust to be permanently based inside the offices of the Beijing Organising Committee for the Olympic Games.

Henry admits it's been tough working in China. "It's always challenging working in a different culture and a different language," she says.

"Culturally it's been fascinating. We end



President Hu Jintao lights a cauldron with the Olympic torch to start the relay. Heavy security highlighted concerns that protests may tarnish its historic journey. Photo: AFP

up getting to the same place, but we have different thoughts about how to go about it and different methods. Of course, all this does is teach you incredible awareness of another system, its people, and patience. You shouldn't be doing this job internationally if you don't have patience."

A test of that patience came in December 2005. The Chinese government asked both Maxxam and its competitor, the American firm Alem International, to make their final presentations on the bid to win the Beijing Olympic torch contract on Christmas Day in Beijing.

"My competitor and I went: 'That might be an issue for both companies'," recalls Henry. "So we asked: 'Can we delay it a bit?'"



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Beijing Olympic Games torch relay consultant Di Henry

Both companies made their final pitches a week later, and in February 2006 Maxxam was declared the winner. Henry says Maxxam won for a multitude of reasons but if she had to pick a few they would be the following: "We had a lot of relays behind us. We showed we had a logical way of going about it and we were happy to train the Chinese."

The last point is important since the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou will host the Asian Games in 2010.

Henry says several Australian firms have gone on to win multiple Games contracts after being involved in the Sydney Olympics because they're perceived as hardworking. But fearing that may sound a little self-serving, Henry laughs and adds: "It's also because we're probably cheap compared to

other people and we're not afraid to talk it up or go in and hope for the best."

The planning, management and execution of any torch or baton relay for a Games event is a daunting task and a logistical nightmare. The torch relay for the Beijing Olympic Games is even more of a challenge because it lasts for 130 days (April 1 until August 8). Henry, Maxxam staff, Chinese officials and sponsors are accompanying the flame until it reaches the Bird's Nest stadium.

The torch will travel the globe, visiting 21 cities, including Hong Kong and Macau, and then 113 cities on mainland China. In this time it will go up to the summit of Mt Everest and as far west as the city of Kashgar (known as Kashi to the Chinese) near the Kyrgyzstan

"You've got so many balls in the air, and that's what I quite like," says Henry of the juggling act. But even then she doesn't take her eye off the main game. "If you don't stay focused on what the mission is, it's going to unravel out of control."

She says there are frustrations in the job. "As an event organiser we often laugh, especially on big events, that they seem to employ you to run the event and then you have to spend pretty well all the time from then on justifying why you're doing it, and what you need and why you need it." There is also the dissatisfaction of sometimes being a consultant to an event rather than the organiser.

"I'm not an overly great fan of being a consultant," says Henry. "I like being the organiser. We are events people and we like running things."

She says the long hours and hectic travel schedule mean her biggest achievements are having a personal life and keeping a loyal team of staff happy. Her partner, Louis, also works for Maxxam.

Maxxam has just won the contract to do the Queen's baton relay for the Delhi Commonwealth Games and is looking next to the London Olympics and the Glasgow Commonwealth Games. Henry attributes Maxxam's success to its staff. "You are only as good as the rest of the people."

The prospect of more Games events has not stopped Henry from seeking a new challenge. "I would like to run a games," she says.

"There are a lot of games in the world: paralympics games, deaf games, gay games."

Being an event manager who has carved a niche in organising games torch and baton relays is not the career path Henry imagined she would take. But nor is she surprised that she has ended up there.

"You don't wake up and think, I'll be a torch relay director," she laughs. "I love travel and I love adventure."

"I also discovered when I was about 12 that I was a bossy little thing. If you put all that together you can't help but end up organising events."