

Chapter XXXVII

The Olympics

All that brings us to the mid-1980s: Ronald Reagan, a former Hollywood actor, was President of the USA; Margaret Thatcher was Britain's first female Prime Minister; and sewing was the biggest thing on the planet.

For those of you reading this decades later, it may be difficult to believe that, in the 1980s, sewing was the world's favourite sport. Whether you were a Crown Prince living in a palace, a kid listening to early hip-hop in the Projects or a worker hunched over in a rice field, the names of all the world's greatest sewers were known to you.

I like to think that no matter how difficult your life was, whether getting home from a tough day at school or work, you always had sewing. You could watch highlights of the latest ranking tournament on television, you could study your World Sewing Association *Official* Sticker Album or just eat your dinner off a plate with the face of your favourite sewing star on it.

With sewing everywhere, it was only natural that it would become an Olympic sport. For many sewers (I have always been uncomfortable with this homonym, but it is what we are), the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles was difficult to watch: sewing events had been overlooked as synchronised swimming was chosen to be a new event. That, in my opinion, is one of the most scandalous decisions in sporting history. How many synchronised swimmers can you name?

Exactly.

Sewers, on the other hand, are everywhere. We all have a favourite.

The International Olympic Committee atoned for its grave error, elevating sewing to an Olympic Sport for the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea. All around the world there was expectation in

the air, an abundance of hyperbole and a unanimous belief that there could only be one winner.

And he wrote this book.

The 1987/88 sewing season was the best of my life. In conversations about the greatest sewer of all time, my name was stopping the conversation. I racked up 13 Masters victories, won the '87 European Championships with a day to spare (even choosing to *knit* in the final round in an act of showboating I would later regret) and sponsorship deals were flooding in.

My life was Terry's chocolate oranges , yachts and inventing new stitches like Garibaldi's Birthday stitch (I am still the only man or woman ever to have successfully sewn a garment using this stitch – it is housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, should you wish to see it).

In Seoul, sewing immortality awaited.

As now, there were huge tensions between North and South Korea. An island divided could agree on only one thing: sewing. Whether you walk down a street in Seoul or Pyongyang, you will see the same thing: everyone's clothes have been sewn together. Confident that my training meant I was in great shape for the Olympics (I was doing 13 hours in the gym every day in addition to 15 hours of stitchwork), I decided to embark on an ambitious project.

I was going to use my fame - not to mention sewing – to bring peace to the Korean Peninsula.

As a regular guest on television talk shows, I started to sow the seeds of peace. In an appearance on CNN on January 23rd 1988, I coined the phrase 'too much needle' to describe the situation between the two countries. Soon my campaign for peace was building up momentum: however, I must confess that my motives for seeking peace were not entirely selfless.

I was worried that, if war broke out between North and South, the greatest sewing contest in history (the 1988 Olympic Games) would be cancelled. Having already cleared space in the trophy room in my Kensington mansion for my Olympic gold, I would not – could not – let this happen.

It was for this reason that I embarked on my Sewing for Peace mission. It enjoyed early success – the media coined the term cross-stitch diplomacy to refer to the negotiations between both sides; I attended, sewing bespoke gifts for representatives of both sides whenever they were reasonable. With garments sewn by my own hand fetching six-figure sums in auctions as Sotheby's (this was before the days of ebay), this proved to be a huge incentive. Within days of the launch of Sewing for Peace, we had a huge success.

Both nations agreed not to start a war until *after* the Olympic Games.

It was a huge relief personally. The people of both nations also felt relief too. Koreans are huge fans of sewing. They did not want a war to disrupt the greatest event in sewing history.

Although it is difficult to recall exactly when I got carried away, there is no doubt that I became too ambitious. It may have been when I started seeing Koreans wearing 'Drop Stitches, Not Bombs' T-shirts – admittedly, this slogan is not the best. Dropping stitches is not considered a great thing in sewing circles. Or squares.

That was not the only problematic slogan during my peace-making. In the early days of the campaign, I said, 'Idle threads, not idle threats'. Unfortunately, the leaders of both nations interpreted this as meaning that rather than using words against each other, they should use weapons.

With this unfortunate development, I hired a film crew and decided on another publicity stunt. If the North Koreans and South Koreans could not make peace, I would reunite the country by sewing the country back together.

This was a poor decision. Stitching rocks together, even with state-of-the-art needle and cotton is impossible. Understandably, both sides were nervous about the border. Unsure about exactly what I was doing there, soldiers on both sides saw me as a threat and started shooting at me. Fortunately, one eagle-eyed soldier spotted I was merely a 'British fool with a needle and cotton' and the shooting stopped.

When I was released from jail (I can confirm that South Korean jails are more pleasant than North Korean ones), I once again turned my attention to winning Olympic gold. As mentioned before, I was clear favourite, but one man stood in my way.

Mitch 'The Stitch' O'Reilly.

My rivalry with The Stitch is not something I need to bore you with here – you know all about it. We didn't get along: this was a needle match. Gee, this was professional sewing - everything was a needle match.

In the early rounds of the Olympics, my preparation was paying off. Although it was difficult to put a likely meeting with the Stitch out of my mind, I was single-minded. Tricky opponents from Cuba, West Germany and Uruguay were sewn out of the competition by my solid professionalism.

The phony war was now over. A match-up that many thought should have been the final was happening two rounds early. It was estimated that more than *one billion* people would be tuning in to watch my Olympic quarter final. The match was scheduled so that it would be on live television all over the world at the same time - 6pm on Thursday 22nd September, 1988.

I was ready.

The disaster that befell me shortly after this was to be the worst experience of my life.

Until I went into teaching.