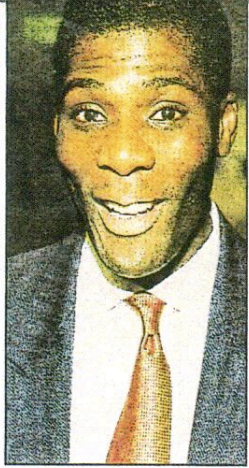
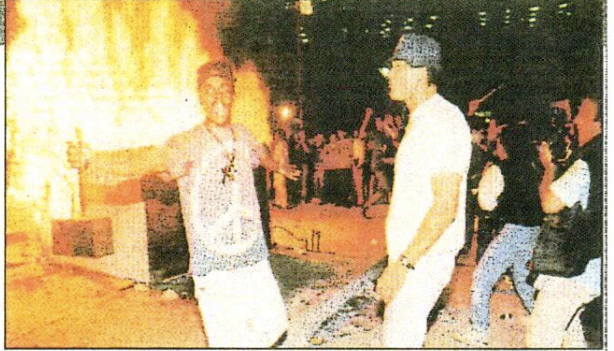


# The lessons we can learn from riot city's teenage troubleshooters



■ GEOFF THOMPSON: The former world karate champion went on a fact-finding trip to LA



■ BURNING WITH HATE: Flashback to the Los Angeles riots when demonstrators took to the streets in protest over the acquittal of four police officers charged with the videotaped beating of motorist Rodney King

# LA burns with hope

● ONE of the results of the Los Angeles riots in 1992 was the visit to Britain in May this year of 20 Los Angeles youngsters, all from deprived backgrounds, all members of a special youth task force, getting involved in front-line community projects.

● These teenage troubleshooters came to learn from the British inner-city experience as part of the Spirit of Los Angeles initiative, and to pass on their message that disadvantaged groups do have a voice, and the power to change things.

● Among the people they met in Manchester was former world karate champion Geoff Thompson, who was a roving international ambassador for Manchester's Olympic bid. So impressed was he with the group, that he recently visited Los Angeles to discover more about them. This is his story...

I WAS fortunate in my role as a Manchester Olympic bid ambassador to have met the young people on the Spirit of LA youth tour, observing them, talking to them and working with them as they were exposed to British culture.

I was amazed not only at their ability to grasp the issues surrounding youth culture in this country, but at their ability to communicate and express their observations.

Their contribution made such an impact on all who came into contact with them that I felt compelled to find out more about this group and how they came about and to see what could be realised in assisting our youth culture through sport.

I boarded the plane to LA with mixed expectations. Had the bond so firmly established now evaporated with each of them returning to the cultural divide which makes up their everyday existence?

I was soon to find out, but my mind wandered back to the last journey I made to LA, some four years ago, when I had Olympic aspirations and was training at San Diego State.

LA was a vibrant cultural mix. My English accent, within a dark skin, opened many doors. While the gang culture was something that was only discussed while I dined among the Hollywood elite, my only personal experience was being caught downtown "after hours" in a suit and tie, where I could have been mistaken for a tourist, ripe for the picking.

These individuals surfaced as if they were part of Michael Jackson's Thriller video and I only survived with the well-timed arrival of my car. As my colleague said then: "This is only the beginning."

Arrival at LA this time provided the first real feeling for what I was about to experience. The atmosphere was tense, people observing from a distance. Apart from the Hare Krishna follower who tried to sell me a copy of his leader's teachings, I felt as though I was in a glass bowl. Was it my paranoia, or was it just that I

‘People think we’re stupid and we can’t cope, but we can take control of our lives and help our generation’



■ LA COMES TO TOWN: The teenage troubleshooters on the Spirit of LA youth tour when they were pictured outside Manchester town hall on their visit to Britain

was not an athlete any more, just a civvie?

Or could it have been the fact that a culture tension hung in the air with the "LA Four" trial of two black youths on an attempted murder charge following the LA riots of 1992.

### Starting

Manchester has stunning similarities with LA. Although nowhere in comparison in land size, comparisons can be drawn in the cultural diversity. Both are going through a major regeneration process and both have used sport to achieve it.

I found other startling similarities. Their Rebuild LA programme is the equivalent of our City Challenge. The LA Sports Council operating along the same lines as our own.

We both have great academic institutions, the University College of Los Angeles

and Manchester university. Our North West Business Leadership Team, like the British American Chamber of Commerce, providing an economic, as well as social, commitment to the future of their respective cities. And what social force were they using? The one thing that galvanised both cities was sport.

I went looking to find ideas that could assist our urban youth. What agency would provide me with the answers? The Amateur Athletic Foundation did just that, a legacy of the 1984 LA Olympics. It was established in the heart of downtown LA to provide a platform and deliver sport to urban youth.

On the day of my visit, IOC executive member and former Olympic bronze medalist Anita Defrantz, who heads this remarkable Olympic urban legacy, hosted their monthly board meetings between the

business and sporting agencies responsible for the Foundation's overall development.

Anita told me: "We provide hope that LA Olympic legacy has provided events for these urban youths, social programmes as well as a key pivot point in liaising between business and other youth-related agencies."

### Gangs

But they don't kid themselves that sport is the only answer. The problems still exist in evidence — but how do they compare with our Mancunian youth peers?

I'm glad to say even with all the negative publicity this year, we are nowhere near in the same league. I do not want to promote the negatives or repeat the harrowing stories I heard from taxi drivers, youths I spoke to and a car park attendant but I will give one

instance where one of the leading gangs, in one of their initiatives, instructed potential new members to go on the freeway with their car headlights off — the first motorists to flash them as a reminder must be "blown away". (Thankfully, this was stopped by a last-minute police intelligence leak).

Crime, drugs and violence they all have in common, but as one of the Spirit of LA youth tour party, Tyrone, an ex-gang member, said on his visit to Moss Side: "Hell, you ain't nowhere near LA and you'd better pray you never get there!"

But in LA, where everyone seems to have stood back and allowed the youth culture to express itself in an unruly fashion, I saw many things to give me hope. A green initiative funded by the Federal Government provided an opportunity for 28 gang members to give up their guns and plant trees and shrubs.

Two businesses had been developed by former gang members — one a security company, would you believe — and the other a bakery. The Constitutional Rights Foundation youth task force — which incidentally provided our 20 young Angelinas who visited Britain this year — has year-round programmes where youth models are developed to influence their peers.

### Force

"People think we're stupid and we can't cope, but we're showing that we can take control of our lives and help our own generation. All we need are resources and guidance," said Samantha, one of the youth task force members.

Dennis Storer, executive director of the British American Chamber of Commerce, is one of the passionate believers in sport's ability to act as a social vehicle of change.

This remarkable British expatriate was responsible for developing the Spirit of LA youth tour initiative as part of the philosophy that has been his life as a former competitor, sports administrator, coach and lecturer, resulting in him playing a key role as Olympic attaché to Britain during the LA Games and currently a member of the World Cup 1994 host organising committee.

Quite simply, Dennis Storer has seen, delivered and proved sport as a social force of change and opportunity for our youth.

"The heroes of the inner city are our great football players, basketball players and baseball players."

The trouble in America, he said, is that there is no national sports system financed by the government. "Much of the monies that are ploughed down into sport here is done via private organisations."

As part of the Anglo-American youth culture initiative, 20 young Britons will travel to LA next year in a partnership between business on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as statutory agencies.

Positive youth sports projects will also be developed. As Jeremy White, another American Brit who successfully mixed his business, political, social and cultural commitment to the youth, stated: "Although the British American Chamber has not had any community sport involvement as yet, if you can get young people involved in things, committed to things and something where they can make meaningful contributions and an effort to participate, to keep them involved and on the right side of the law, then sport has to feature in helping our young citizens contribute to society."

### Empower

The youth gang problem is not just a cultural problem of the black young people, but a social youth experience. To sit back and ignore it in Britain could see us truly following in LA's footsteps — but I'd like to think that there's too much regional pride for all of that. We must empower our youth to help themselves. Our Olympic bid legacy of world-class facilities will require a programme allowing our youth accessibility — and every so often one of them just might reflect our rich north west sporting heritage.

No sport is not the only answer. But I would like to think of it more like a vaccine, while leaving those far more well positioned in authority to find the treatment.

The last word should go to Amina Lugman, one of the Spirit of LA youth tour participants. She wrote in the Los Angeles Times: "I returned home having experienced the unexpected. I have spoken to youths that I thought were worlds apart from me and found that our differences are small, our emotions the same."

"Most importantly, I have shared an experience with 19 youths from different corners of Los Angeles' social fabric. We not only discovered the British, but also one another."