

Rockford artist helps Olympians keep a beat

By **CHRIS GREEN**
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ROCKFORD — A salute to American Indians during the Opening Ceremonies of the Winter Olympics will feature the handiwork of drum maker Gary Halbach.

Organizers recently bought four 24-inch ceremonial drums to be used in the worldwide televised festivities Feb. 8 in Salt Lake City.

"It's an honor," Halbach said. "There will be more than 100 Native Americans participating in the Opening Ceremonies. Some will have their own drums, some may use mine."

Nancy Volmer, a spokeswoman for the Winter Games, could not say how or when the deep bass sounding drums would be used. "They're keeping elements of the Opening Ceremonies a surprise."

Halbach learned that Olympic organizers sought original scores and instruments to honor the country's cultures.



Gary Halbach attaches a "Living Drums" tag to the four drums he will send to the Winter Olympics.

Nearly 3.5 billion people are expected to tune into the Opening Ceremonies, according to www.saltlake2002.com.

Halbach's Web site, www.livingdrums.com, is named for his home-based business in Rockford. Olympics officials probably learned of his craft through his Web site and word of mouth, he said.

"A friend of mine pur-

chased a drum in South Dakota," he said. "He apparently told someone with the Olympic committee."

Halbach declined to say how much he charged, but his drums run \$50 for a 10-inch hand drum to \$700 for a 24-inch ceremonial drum decorated with a hand-painted design. When placed in stands, the ceremonial drums are about knee high.

The set of four maple-framed drums shipped to Utah are the same size, but "no two drums sound the same," Halbach said. "Each hide has a different thickness producing a different tone."

The set sent to the Olympics is distinguishable by one drum: It has a hand-painted wild horse running in a field around the circumference of the maple frame.

Halbach, director of Big Brother Big Sisters of the YMCA of Rock River Valley, said he took up drumming in the late 1980s when he headed a drug-addiction program at

Rockford Memorial Hospital.

He organized a retreat to Santa Fe, N.M., in search of "spiritual healing" for the men in the program. "One of the requirements of the retreat was I had to bring a drum," he said. A friend talked him into making his own drum from a hollowed tree. Others at the retreat were impressed with his craftsmanship and asked him to make more.

Halbach, who majored in social work, said the retreat helped him realize that counseling can be effective without words. "The natives believe the drum speaks to all of us, and connects us to past generations."

Halbach returned to New Mexico to study drum making with an Objibwe native. Since that 1987 trip, Halbach and his wife, Carol, have made 8,000 drums in their three-car garage, one-third of which has been transformed into a heated workshop.

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