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Navajo Nation Gears Up for Historic Olympic Torch Relay

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MONUMENT VALLEY TRIBAL PARK-- "The Early Bird Catches the Worm"that's a common phrase that will ring true here on February 4, 2002....that's when a once-in-a-lifetime historical event - the 2002 Winter Olympic Torch Relay will occur within the northern part of the Navajo Nation.

The event is expected to begin at approximately 11 a.m. from the Totem Pole rock formation within the valley and conclude with an acknowledgement ceremony at the Monument Valley Visitor Center about 2 p.m. Various dignitaries from throughout region are expected to speak including a special appearance by 1964 Olympic Gold Medal Champion Billy Mills who was the first and only American and Native American even to win a gold medal in the 10,000 meter race in the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games.

In true tradition fashion, Navajo people from within the four sacred mountains and beyond will travel many miles just to catch a glimpse of the world-famous Olympic torch as it makes its journey through Navajoland enroute to the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Because of the vast size of the Navajo Nation, which covers more than 27,000 square miles, many Navajo people will wake up before the crack of dawn including many students who plan on making this an educational adventure.

Offering corn pollen to the Creator during the early morning dawn and running toward the east before the sun rises are traditional Navajo practices that have been carried on for centuries....traditional Navajo elders say that is when one is blessed with good health and good fortune in the early morning dawn. In fact, it is a tradition that is still adhered to today. And no where on the Navajo Nation is Navajo tradition more prevalent than at Monument Valley.

"It is indeed a incredible honor to have the Olympic torch relay pass through the Navajo Nation here at Monument Valley," said Kelsey Begaye, President of the Navajo Nation. "For as long as I can remember, Monument Valley has served as a doorway to the western world. Although it is an incredible magnet to film and television producers from all over the world, the Navajo people here are able to maintain a traditional way of life.

"And on traditional Navajo custom is to pray and to run early in the morning. I am therefore, encouraging everyone to join us at Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park on February 4th to cheer on the Olympic torch runners and show our support of the 2002 Winter Olympics. Lets celebrate the joy of funning and showcase our cultural beauty to the world."

In the sprint of 2001, more than 30 runners including seven Navajo individuals were nominated by family and friends and the ultimately selected by Olympic officials to carry the torch here against the majestic backdrop of towering red rock formations. These Navajo individuals are: Brandon Leslie; Virginia Yazzie-Ballenger; Kathy Holtsoi; Elmer Yazzie; Jack Anderson; Wilfred Billie; Clara Maryboy; Rosie Daisy; and Lucas Lucio.

Entrance into the park for the general public will open at 7 a.m. School buses will be allowed into the valley - all private vehicles will have to park at various designated parking areas for a nominal fee. Navajo Transit System buses will provide free transportation from designated parking areas to the Monument Valley Visitor Center. For visitors who want to watch the torch relay in the valley, shuttle buses provided by Navajo tour operators will provide transportation into the valley for a nominal fee. Return service will commence at approximately 1:30 p.m. until all visitors have been transported back to the Visitor Center. Navajo Transit System buses will then provide transportation back to designated parking areas from the Visitor Center.

From 9 a.m. to 12 noon, entertainment will be provided for visitors near the Visitor Center. Visitors are encouraged to dress warmly in case of adverse weather conditions and to bring their own food and drinks - limited quantities of food can be purchased from local Navajo vendors and the Visitor Center parking lot. Immediately adjacent to the Visitor Center, there will be an outdoor tradeshow promoting various business.

Visitors are encouraged to arrive before 10:30 a.m., which is when all access into the valley will be closed. For more information, call (928) 871-7373 or email robertajpress@lycos.com