

THE LOS ANGELES GAMES

Derelicts Lose the Precious Little in Sweep by City Crew

By KEVIN RODERICK, Times Staff Writer

To Los Angeles police intent on keeping downtown clean during the Olympics, the brown sacks and duffel bags looked like trash.

But to the destitute men and women who spend their nights in the small park on Gladys Avenue, the bags were everything.

The police won. A city crew moved in Wednesday morning, escorted by officers who cleared the Skid Row-area park, and tossed the belongings of perhaps a dozen transients into a truck bound for the dump.

Gone were wallets, identification papers and the possessions that seem trivial to most people, but which often serve as the only links to another life for the downtown homeless.

Kathleen Paris managed to get one bag back but said she chased the city truck in tears and pleaded unsuccessfully with the driver, trying to retrieve another bag with soap, shampoo, a steam iron she hoped to use soon and photos of her grandchildren.

"They don't know I'm out here," Paris, 40, said of her relatives, who live in Hollywood and Huntington Park. "I go visit them, but they don't know I'm down and out. They have their own problems. What do they need with an old lady?"

Several people said they lost sleeping bags, which may be replaced by local missions that help the Skid Row homeless. But many also lost their precious stockpiles of clothing and were left with only what they wore.

Lionel Thomas, 22, said he went to a nearby mission to shower and returned to find his belongings gone. He said his pack contained all he owns—blankets, four pairs of pants and five shirts, a pair of shoes, his wallet and personal papers and a Bible. The clothes, some cologne and other toiletries were for job interviews.

"I broke down and cried," Thomas said. "Now I've got to start all over again."

Some who were in the park said the police and city cleanup crew had a particularly nasty demeanor Wednesday.

Perry Fisher, a former city parks maintenance worker who graduated from Crenshaw High School and now lives in the park, said the city workers ignored people who were yelling about their property "and

then they just drove around the corner with smiles on their faces."

"It came to me as a big shock," Fisher said. "Everything I had in that bag I bought. It hurt. But I don't mind living down here."

Most of the lost belongings were collected from the roof of the park's toilet structure, where park regulars say they stash their property for safekeeping.

Police said the cleanup Wednesday was not related to the Summer Games, although law enforcement in the Skid Row area has been stepped up during the Olympics.

Thirty officers on horseback have been added downtown, waking up sleeping drunks and other homeless and asking them to move away from areas frequented by Olympic visitors. They also have conducted sweeps against drug users in the Skid Row area.

City crews schedule maintenance at the park three times a week to clean up old furniture and trash, and they said they are often attacked. Police sometimes clear the park



ANDREW INNERARITY / Los Angeles Times

Kathleen Paris explains how her meager possessions were carted away by city crew.

on cleanup mornings.

Officer Chuck Oskierko, who was on the scene, said police asked the parks crew Wednesday to dump the transients' belongings, believing they were abandoned. He said the only people who lost property were transients who had left their belongings behind.

"If they had been there, they would have been more than welcome to take their stuff," he said. "When no one is there to claim it, we can't leave it. It becomes a health hazard."

"They could have stacked it there five minutes before. But we have no way of knowing."

But witnesses said police have never before gathered up personal belongings from the top of the toilet building. Some said it seemed part of a campaign to harass the homeless during the Olympics. "There's more people down in the park now and more harassment now," Paris said. "Before the Olympics it wasn't so bad. Now they really treat us like dirt."

Nancy Mintie, a lawyer at the Inner City Law Center, where several of the victims went to lodge complaints, said that "police were called in to forcibly separate people from their belongings. They just have

Please see DERELICTS, Page 17

DERELICTS

Continued from Page 3

no business ordering people out of a public park and stealing their belongings. In effect, they're being told it's against the law to be homeless."

In daylight the park is usually crowded with more than 100 drifters, drug users, drunks and the mentally disturbed who make up the homeless population, which has been estimated as high as 30,000 in Los Angeles. At midday Wednesday a group from the Hare Krishna sect had set up their regular weekly chow line serving a vegetarian stew.

At night the park population drops to a few dozen regulars. They often stay for several months, and have come to trust each other enough to leave their belongings behind when they go out to hunt food and day labor jobs.

"I stay in the park all day," Paris said. "I don't go anywhere else—it's too dangerous. I've been beaten and raped. We watch out for each other here and nobody steals."