

ORGANIZING THE GAMES, SEOUL SHOWS THE WAY



Gathering so many people from different backgrounds together, a tour de force carried out magnificently by the city of Seoul in 1988 and an experience that can teach us a lot.

By Lee Chang-Suk

Tackling what is probably the world's toughest organizing challenge, Korea succeeded admirably and now has much to teach the events industry while millions of viewers around the world were agog over the Olympic swimming prowess of South America's Suriname and millions of other were falling in love with the colourful Flo-Jo Griffith Joyner, a smaller but just as ready-for-action group of 'amateurs' was busy preparing meals, providing security and rolling in the awards. They helped ensure not only that the millions of viewers were not disappointed but that the Anthony Nestys and Flo-Jos of the events got to their starting marks as promptly as they did to the finish tapes.

It is an Olympian task just imagining how much effort and organization were needed for the Olympics. To take just one example, the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee (SLOOC) and the city government recruited some 18 000 volunteer workers to handle the cleaning-up and rearrangement of facilities. Total staff at the 1988 Olympics numbered 72 000 and there were actually more interpreters than delegates at even the largest of congresses.

The expertise necessary to organize such a gargantuan event does not come easily. Literally hundreds of SLOOC staff were sent to the 1984 Games in Los Angeles to study procedures while those earlier Olympics were ongoing. And, during the intervening four years, administrative and technical staff made half a dozen trips to both the LA site and to Munich, site of the 1972 Olympics, to study installations and facilities. But, according to a SLOOC spokesman, it was the hands-on experience with the 1986 Asian Games — involving 4800 athletes and 4500 press members from a total of 42 countries — that provided the most important lessons in handling events of this nature.

The results were generally and universally positive, according to the press, administrators and athletes alike. Says J.G. Kim, Coordinator of the Seoul Olympic Committee. “Just look at the facilities and procedures and you will readily understand the reasons for our success”. Kim further suggests that the Korean brand of dedication and workmanship had definitely contributed to the Seoul achievement — an achievement that involved the largest number of competing countries ever to take part in an Olympiad. “From youthful workers on the construction sites to the elderly who volunteered to help the athletes and tourists get to their scheduled places, there was an enthusiasm and spirit that could almost be tasted”.

It is true that one needed only to venture onto the grounds of the sprawling, 1.7 square kilometre Olympic Park to get an

idea of the effort the Korean capital city had put into preparing for the games. Designed with a twenty-first-century flair but with an eye to original Greek and Oriental subtlety, the park is truly a majestic architectural monument.

LARGE BUDGET LOCATION

Located in the southeast corner of Seoul in an area known, now, as “Olympic-chon” meaning Olympic town, the Park has two competition centers that were the homes for 17 different events such as cycling, weightlifting, fencing and tennis. It accommodated two major villages : Olympic Village, housing some 13 000 athletes and officials, and the adjacent Press Village, home, for the duration, of the 7000 press members covering the event. The park was one of the main zones for the traditional cultural exchange that usually accompanies the Games. The lion’s share of international press reportage on the 1988 Olympics originated from these locations, thus making the Park, in effect, the city’s face to the world.

COMMUNICATING THE EXPERIENCE



It was unlikely that the world was disappointed with what it saw. Korea invested some \$3.6 billion in Olympic Games - related developments — almost six times the budget of the previous 1984 Los Angeles Games and almost the same as those in 1976 in Montreal. According to the Ministry of Finance, the Seoul Olympic Organizing Committee, the private sector and the government invested roughly equal shares, the government spending \$1,3 billion and the city \$1.1 billion while private companies contributed the balance. Direct expenditure for constructing the main stadium and facilities was about \$1.4 billion while operations costs, such as maintenance, for all venue topped \$826 million.

Joseph Shane of America's NBC said, "The Olympic Park was impressive, unlike the city itself, where it is hard to move from one place to another. The place gave the athletes, the people and even the press some extra time to enjoy the environment".



TRAFFIC FLOW FLAWS

Even with such praiseworthy facilities, however, there can be flaws. But with the Olympic Park, the flaws showed up outside the gates more often than inside where nearly everything ran smoothly. For the ordinary citizens of Seoul, probably the greatest problem related to the Games was just getting to their jobs each day. City officials had rightfully considered and were prepared for the traffic problems in the vicinity of and within the park and at the main stadium but not, it seems, those that were actually taking place throughout Seoul's metropolitan area. Since the Olympic facility was designed to accommodate an unprecedented number of people over such a short period of time, the project developers miscalculated the expected traffic jams in neighbouring areas. As the Olympic Village is quite far from the main areas of the city, insufficient man-power and facilities were committed to handling traffic and preparing logistics related to events such as the marathon and cycling.

For audiences, the organizing committee had arranged a fleet of shuttle buses plying between the Olympic village and the downtown venues. However, due to foul-ups in the shuttle service schedules and, primarily, because of the normal traffic jams of a thriving city, there were some problems. For example, fans complained that, at times, it took more than an hour to reach the volleyball and soccer events and, in general, fighting normal work-a-day traffic was a continual problem due to the fact that these competitions were held mostly in traffic-congested downtown Seoul.

Many of these problems had been foreseen. Recognizing that the districts around the Olympic park would likely be jammed with parking cars and milling tourists, the city had located various festival and cultural events on the broad shores of the Han River. But, as Shane explains, due to the great distances to travel in this city of ten million, catching even a quick view of some of the different festival events was "very difficult" to "nearly impossible".

Seoul's road signs are mainly inscribed with Korean characters. Organizers relied, however, on the fact that most visitors would be using public transportation to reach the Games and their hotels. This assumption proved correct. According to visitors who used both the city's subway system — reportedly a clean and safe network which passed almost every main visitor destination — and the public bus routes, most of which are inscribed in romanized lettering, commuting by public transport was “not that bad”.

The country's notorious taxi drivers have been a national problem for a long time. Divining possible problems with wildly overcharging taxis, Seoul authorities posted warnings widely to both audiences and participants at the Games.



COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGE

Probably one of the most difficult problems at any Olympiad is that of getting competition information routed around to the many different officials, competitors and media in time to satisfy running news commentators, calculating team managers and anxious athletes. For this the SLOOC employed the latest communications technology incorporating, for the first time, some sophisticated new gear that set speed records itself. Advanced technology, such as the revolutionary WINS (Wide Information Network Service) and EPABX (Electronic Private Automatic Branch Exchange System) — was divided into two categories. One included the telecommunication systems for the games operation and was managed by the Korea Telecommunication Authority. The other was a computerized system designed to move the vast amounts of information to and among the committee, press, delegation and the public.

For the first time in Olympic history, electronic measurement equipment in five sports, including athletics, was directly connected with the main computer in order to eliminate error and minimize the time for inputting result data. The copied result

sheets were delivered to competition officials within five minutes, beating the speed at the LA Olympics, where it took ten minutes to do the same circuit. WINS provided some of the most versatile service, directly processing and transmitting billions of bytes of specific information, through 1000 WINS terminals and other individual PCs brought by users, on the competitions and individual athletes as well as general information on tourism, accommodation, shipping etc.

HIGH-TECH SECURITY

High technology also helped keep the summer games free of terrorism as advanced security equipment handled the massive job of identification and processing at Kimpo international Airport, the Olympic Village, all the stadia and even at hotels. Officials clamped tight security, in particular, at all entrances to the Olympic Village. Even official volunteers who held entrance cards had to go through various screening processes to get inside the area. And, despite some criticism that even then there were some areas of laxity at Kimpo,



the effectiveness of high security visibility helped ensure the games went off with no unfortunate attempts at derailment.

ENTHUSIASTIC RISK TAKING

Korea had taken some dicey risks in its desire to land the 1988 Games. Construction of the Olympic Sports Complex had begun about four years before the country learned about the International Olympic Committee's decision to locate the 1988 Summer Games in Seoul. The early start on the facilities was also motivated by the city's increasing need for competition sites large enough to accommodate the country's mushrooming sports explosion. The move was taken as a demonstration to the IOC that Korea was indeed ready and willing to assume the enormous responsibilities that goes with hosting of the Olympics. By 1981, the two stadia on the grounds had been completed and the three other facilities were well along in construction. The park opened in 1984 and two years later served as the central facility for the 1986 Asian Games.

The main venue of the complex is the stunning 70 000 seat Olympic Stadium, which reached its pinnacle of glory as the site of the extravagant opening and closing ceremonies, but also found use as the venue for many track and field events as well as the soccer final between Brazil and the Soviet Union. The size of the playing field is 105 metres by 67 metres and the stadium's architecture is nothing less than daring. Its sloped rim, curving up and down gracefully as it encircles the field, recalls the motifs of late Chosun Dynasty white porcelains. The stadium is one of the most completely functional modern sports arenas. The huge scoreboard was added for the Asian Games and the stadium's electronics feature some of the latest timing, lighting and broadcasting equipment one will find anywhere. There are two Chamsil Gymnasias which can seat 20 000 and 8000 spectators respectively, and a 30 000 seat baseball stadium in the area near the main stadium.

Just to show how anxious the Koreans were to get things right for the event, an official involved in the construction phase tells this story : the Chamshil Indoor Swimming Pool, located in the eastern part of the Seoul sports complex, occupies a total area of 22 500 square metres and is capable of seating a 5000 spectator crowd. It has a racing pool originally designed for the Olympics and a water polo pool. The shape of the indoor swimming pool resembles the "Gobukson", an iron-clad war ship that Admiral Yi Sun-shin invented at the end of the 16th century. The pool was completed at the end of 1980 and was the venue for diving and water polo during the 1988 Olympics, but it was also supposed to be the site of the dramatic and popular individual swimming competition until exacting IOC officials criticised the irregular design of the eight-lane pool. Stunned at the criticism, the SLOOC nevertheless went right ahead to construct yet another impressive swimming pool at the Olympic Park, this time increasing seating to 10 000 and winning the international committee's nod.

In addition to all the other concerns on its collective mind. SLOOC had to undertake extensive preparations to ensure that the athletes would be properly fed wherever they might be during the Games. The committee dictated that each competitor was to be provided with “6000 calories” of nourishment each day. The question was : how to get them to these young active people who were training, resting, sight-seeing and competing, seemingly, all at the same time.

In addition to the regular meals served at dining rooms and canteens located throughout the park, packed lunches were made available for athletes who had to eat in their apartments on specific days, Separate and different catering tasks, including official receptions, private V.I.P. dinners and the huge variety of orthodox

menu variations, challenged the committee’s army of chefs and cooks.

CLEAN-UP EFFICIENCY

No doubt, among the messiest tasks of any large public event is the cleaning-up. If the \$846 million price tag paid by the SLOOC, is not sufficiently indicative, then the numbers of staff put on to sweep the stadium and police the grounds should demonstrate Seoul’s concern with cleanliness. The SLOOC and the city government together recruited some 17 000 volunteers for the cleaning : 8500 assigned to the stadia and gymnasia and the balance working in the other facilities, including the main press centre and international broadcast centre. Except at the most important sites, work went on largely without the help of automatic cleaning machinery — a cost-saving



strategy of the organizers. However, in order to make this tactic most effective, good placement of trash receptacles and skilful reminders to participants and spectators — not to mention relatively tough regulations levied on the sale and service of food throughout the park — resulted in a high degree of self-policing and hence a fairly high level of cleanliness all around.

Of course, with some four years to plan and an army of volunteers and official staff to organize, as well as some 50 years of Olympiad experience from which to draw, it is reasonable that at least some success might come from such resources.

But the Olympics is politically and professionally a unique type of event and countries, like Korea, which aspire to grasp the eternal torch are, in many cases, doing so individually for the first time. For this reason all of them, and no less the SLOOC itself, have much to teach the events industry about our business. And, all of the organizers, workers and volunteers of the 1998 Olympics clearly deserve a great deal of esteem for what was, notably, a job well done.

L. C.-S.

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Some 17,000 volunteers for the cleaning operations, 8,500 of whom were assigned to the stadiums and sports halls.

