

Olympic Notebook

Our correspondents
21 September 2000

Records crash in swimming

World swimming records have fallen like ninepins since the Games opened last Saturday: five world records in four events on the first day, and another three slashed on the next, doubling the tally for the whole of the Atlanta Games in 1996. Swimmers from Australia, the United States, the Netherlands, Italy, Rumania and the Ukraine have broken 12 world records with more expected by the time swimming events conclude on September 23.

A contributing factor in this extraordinary achievement is the advance in swimming pool design and engineering. Over a 100 years ago, when the Games began, swimming was something of a novelty event, with competitors racing in the sea or rivers. By contrast, the Sydney Olympic swimming venue is one of the most sophisticated pools in the world. Two and half metres deep, with textured floor and walls and a special overflow wet-deck, the pool rapidly absorbs all turbulence, and the water, which has a different mineral content to that normally used in Olympic pools, is double-filtered, first through sand, carbon and then through ozone, thus eliminating the distracting taste and smell of chlorine.

Yana Klochkova, from the Ukraine, broke the first world record in the women's 400 metres individual medley with a time of four minutes 33.59 seconds—a second faster than the previous world-best. Other records were smashed by Inge de Bruijn from the Netherlands, in the 100-metre women's butterfly and 100-metre freestyle; Tom Dolan, from the USA, in the men's 400-metre individual medley; and US women swimmers in the 4x100-metre freestyle recorded a new world time of three minutes 36.61 seconds.

Australia's Ian Thorpe set a new world record in the 400-metre freestyle, and an hour later Thorpe, Michael Klim, Chris Fydler and Ashley Callus set another world record in the 4x100-metre freestyle relay, with a time of 3:13.67. Klim also broke the 100-metre freestyle world record in the leadoff leg of the relay, slicing 0.03 seconds off Aleksandr Popov's six-year-old 100-metre record. Pieter van den Hoogenband from the Netherlands then broke Klim's record, when he cut 0.34 seconds off the new mark with a time of 47.84 seconds in the 100-metre freestyle semi-final. Van den Hoogenband went on to swim a new world record

of 1 minute 45.35 seconds in the 200-metre freestyle.

Australian swimmers also set a new international benchmark for the 4 x 200-metre men's freestyle relay, finishing the race in seven minutes 7.15 seconds. This was the first time a US men's relay team has been defeated in an Olympic swimming event.

More leave Sydney than arrive

Expected overseas and interstate visitors to Sydney have fallen far short of original estimates. A year ago, calculations were that 700,000 people would visit Sydney during the Games, a figure later revised to 400,000. Recent reports, however, show that the number of people departing Sydney in the leadup to the Games has overtaken arrivals. From September 1-17, 189,510 passengers left Sydney for overseas destinations, 2,653 more than the number of arrivals, according to an international airport public affairs officer. The airport's busiest day was September 11, the first day of the school holidays, when 18,337 passengers left, 3,866 more than those who arrived.

A survey by Ansett Airlines in July found that nearly 500,000 of Sydney's four million residents planned to leave the city during the Games. One travel agent noted, "You can't get a seat on an aircraft going out of Sydney in early September, it's Sydneysiders escaping from the Olympics."

Organisers and government officials in the period prior to the Games tried to encourage as many Sydneysiders as possible to leave the city, or failing that to keep off the roads, in order to streamline transport to Olympic events.

Many businesses across the city closed down in the expectation that staff would be unable to get to work. Deliveries during daylight hours have been banned to free up the roads for Olympic traffic. But businesses, especially those located away from Olympic venues, have complained that the event has not produced the financial bonanza anticipated. Hotels, charter boats, restaurants and chauffeur drivers have drastically reduced their estimates with bookings at lower than expected levels. This has also affected the housing rental market. In 1997 it was estimated that 4,000 furnished homes would be rented out and astronomical returns were promised. By early September, only 500 homes had been rented.

Olympic bus drivers walk off the job

Olympic authorities were forced to call in the military and the State Transit Authority (STA) last week to provide 400 additional bus drivers for Games transport. The drivers were needed to make up a suddenly discovered shortage and to replace the 110 who walked off the job within three days over the poor quality of food and accommodation.

The request followed a series of problems with drivers getting lost on their way to Olympic venues, failing to arrive to transport teams to training sessions, or dropping athletes at the wrong locations. The Government Co-ordination Group demanded retraining for drivers, and asked for 600 local volunteer “tour leaders” to help out-of-town drivers to find venues.

Normal commuter bus services were supposed to be maintained in Sydney over the Olympic period, but at least 16 bus routes have been suspended until after the Games, in order to transfer 200 STA drivers to Olympic duties. Areas outside Sydney have also been affected by the driver shortage, with some services temporarily cut.

Twenty STA managers have been bought in to oversee the running of Olympic buses. They have taken over from the private consortium Bus 2000, which was awarded a multi-million dollar contract to provide up to 3,800 buses and 5,000 drivers. Bus 2000, a partnership between private bus owners and the Olympic Roads and Traffic Authority, provided drivers with only four days' training for the Games.

STA drivers were informed two years ago that they would not be required to drive Olympic buses because a private company could do the job more efficiently, but now many are working 12-hour shifts to keep the Olympic timetable operating.

According to the Transport Workers Union, many of the drivers who walked off the job last week have agreed to return after they were granted a \$4-an-hour pay rise and assured that problems would be rectified immediately. The drivers complained that they were working 12-hour shifts without breaks, sleeping dormitories were overcrowded, with up to eight people in a room, meals were inadequate and the shuttle service back to the dormitories was unreliable. Big screen televisions and ice-cream vending machines have been provided in an attempt to bring drivers back, and encourage more to sign up. Another 150 drivers were accredited last Friday.

Australian government could be sued for banning Olympic officials

Less than two weeks ago, the Australian government made the unprecedented decision to deny entry to two Olympic officials, claiming that they jeopardised “the safety and security of the Australian community”. The two officials are Gafur Rakhimov from the National Olympic Committee of

Uzbekistan, who is also the vice-president of the Olympics Council of Asia, and Carl Ching, the International Basketball Federation vice-president and the president of the Asian Basketball Confederation.

Although neither has been convicted, Rakhimov and Ching were accused of having criminal links—Rakhimov with the Russian mafia and Ching to Asian triad gangs. Josip Ma, Ching's lawyer, has demanded the Howard government produce evidence to justify its decision. Ching has threatened to sue the government and has also offered a \$US1 million reward to anyone able to prove he is linked to triad gangs.

International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch wrote to Australian Prime Minister John Howard declaring: “The election of Sydney as host city of the Games of the XXVII Olympiad was conditional upon the following commitment by the federal Government of Australia... to respect fully the requirements of the Olympic Charter as they relate to entry in Australia by accredited members of the Olympic Family.”

IOC Director-General Francois Carrard said that he “could not recall a situation when a host country had refused entry to members of the ‘family’, including athletes and officials.” IOC vice president Dick Pound added, “In general, you are supposed to let everyone in. We had the Games in Atlanta in 1996 and the US had to let the Libyan team in. It's part of the deal.”

But the IOC, after discussions with the Howard government, backed away and accepted the decision.

The Howard government has admitted that files on up to 40 members of the “Olympic Family” were sent to the Immigration Department for further investigation. According to a media report, immigration officials allegedly decided that “Low-level criminal elements were allowed entry because they did not pose a threat to security.” The 40 are being monitored electronically and visually by the Olympic Intelligence Centre—their limited visas also restrict their movements inside the country.

The possibility that Rakhimov and Ching are involved, or are major players, in organised crime cannot be excluded. But the Australian government's arbitrary immigration decisions, and its presumption of guilt without trial, set a dangerous precedent.



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