

Safety in Indoor Aquatics: Summary of the Athens 2004 Olympics

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1: Swimming and Water Polo



2: Water Polo



3: Synchronised Swimming



4: Diving

Photos 1-4: Fields of play of the four pool sport events, of the Athens 2004 Olympic Games. The general expression was the facilities were excellent.

Introduction

Lifeguarding at the Athens 2004 Olympic Games and the Test Events that occurred previously was characterized by a poor organizational system. However the participation of some highly qualified volunteers to work as lifeguards, bringing their own expertise and equipment with them and displaying the goodwill that optimises the Olympic spirit helped to organize a successful games.

Aim

The aim of this article is to highlight the do's and don't that occurred in all the swimming pool aquatic events, as a guide for avoiding the same mistakes in future Olympics.

Do's & Don'ts of the Games from a Lifeguard Perspective

Facilities and Volunteers: The swimming pools of the OAKKA sport complex were excellent (photos 1-4). The previous belief that Greece was not going to even organize the games was proved wrong. The human resources were always keen in helping, smiling and exceeded the expectations of those that wondered if Greece would be able to provide enough volunteers. As part of the team, lifeguards had to play their role too.

Number of qualified lifeguards: There were only 1 or 2 lifeguards/duty; one in swimming, one in water polo, one in Synchronised Swimming and two in diving. This didn't allow the opportunity for frequent rotation, with few breaks for meal, to go to the toilet, or for replacement when someone was ill. Each aquatic event worked almost independently, and therefore the lifeguards could not swap over from one event to another. Having rotation would have enabled them to have more experience and less boredom symptoms.

Uniform: Lifeguards wore the same uniform as the other volunteers and therefore it was difficult to identify them. Only in the of Synchronised Swimming test event a lifeguard was allowed to wear his own red lifeguard uniform (photo 5). Lifeguards complained about the uniform but possibly due to budget restrictions they had to wear the official uniform that everybody else wore. At last lifeguards could have worn a brassard with the indication 'lifeguard' similar to those worn by doctors. During the test events lifeguards originally were asked to wear full clothing (photo 6). Upon request this was altered and swimwear was worn under clothes, as the risk manager accepted full clothing was inappropriate.



Photo 5: Two ELA GR lifeguards on duty in the Synchronised Swimming Test Event of Athens 2004 Olympics. Notice the difference; As a lifeguard which uniform would you prefer?

All lifeguards were volunteers although other Emergency Services were paid (e.g. doctors and policemen were not paid from the Olympic organizing committee but were paid by their employer). The comparison between those two categories of staff (paid and unpaid) didn't motivate the lifeguards. Lifeguards with such external motives as money, didn't always maintain a professional attitude while others with internal motives (e.g. desire to be and look good) were always vigilant and dedicated to their duty.

Lifeguard staff selection: Some lifeguards in water polo or swimming were short and not very strong (this caused doubts) to their ability to tow and initiate a successful rescue to the very bulky and tall athletes that they supervised. Considering the fact that not all the lifeguards had rescue tubes available, one can assume that it would be difficult if not impossible to bring someone out of the water if necessary. Except the lifeguards from ELA GR and those from Russia, UK, Canada, all the other Greek lifeguards that worked at the swimming pools were qualified from their Greek lifeguard agencies as Beach Lifeguards.

Names & Organizations of the Lifeguards

Lifeguards from USA (American Red Cross), Greece (ELA GR, ENAK, HLS, NSM, PASXNA, and YMCA), Russia (ELA GR), England (STA, RLSS UK) and Canada (Lifesaving Society) worked at the swimming pools as lifeguards. Most of the lifeguards in all swimming pool aquatic games of the Athens 2004 Olympic, Paralympics Games and test events were trained from the European Lifeguard Academy GR under NaRS standards (table 1).

Sport & Lifeguards
Diving: Avramidis Stathis ^{1,2} Avramidou Eleftheria ¹ Toutoutzi Marina ²
Water Polo : Avramidis Stathis ² Tobrou Matina ¹ Toutoutzi Marina ²
Synchronised Swimming: Avramidis Stathis ¹ Tzavara Popi ^{1,2} Marouli Maria ²
Swimming: Exarhopoulou Maria ² Koutsogiannoulis Asterios ² Verbina Julie ² Avramidis Stathis ³ Tzavara Popi ³
Table 1: ELA GR lifeguards that participated in Athens 2004. ¹ Test event, ² Olympics, ³ Para-Olympics

Head lifeguard didn't allow a good coordination of all lifeguards in all aquatic events. Unfortunately the responsible persons that coordinated the lifeguards were people without experience of lifeguarding. As a result this lead to situations where lifeguards were told such things as:

1. 'Why do you want 2 lifeguards for supervising a water polo game? One is enough! I think you want to just sit here to watch the games don't you?' This person didn't realize that although a water polo game is a controlled aquatic event with limited chances for accident, a frequent rotation among the lifeguard team enables a high level alertness and vigilance and also that in the rare case of spinal injury more than one lifeguard is required for immobilization.
2. 'Why do you stay longer to get trained in the swimming pool after the swimming events? You are not allowed to swim in the pool for training'. Staff training is highly recommended but one person responsible for volunteers didn't realize it in the swimming event.



Photo 6: ELA GR lifeguards in the Diving Test Event. They wear volunteer's clothes. Without the rescue tube, no-one knew that they were lifeguards.

Equipment: Lifeguards were asked to bring their own equipment but almost none of them had any. Only lifeguards of European Lifeguard Academy GR volunteered to bring some rescue tubes, pocket masks, spinal board and collar. On the other hand, doctors had all the necessary equipment (e.g. medications, spinal board, collars, defibrillator, etc). During the first days of some test events, there was no high chair or umbrella for the sun, but this problem was resolved later.

In-service training: Two days of in-service training took part in the month of the Olympic Games. Some people responsible for the aquatic events of diving were trained in spinal injury immobilization without being finally qualified. Lifeguards from different countries and organizations (USA, Canada, Greece, Russia, England) knowing different rescue techniques tried to bring their expertise in these training sessions. The only reference to the lifeguards in the training manuals was that 'they are responsible for bringing the athlete out of the water and then the doctor is responsible to take charge'. Spinal injury management training took part in the diving pool under the command of Mr Varvarousis MD who accepted the proposal of Avramidis and Seghers to use an adaptation of the STA 2-people spinal injury management technique (photo 7).



Photo 7: In-service training for spinal injuries. The lifeguard team decided to use an adaptation of the STA 2-person spinal injury management technique adapted to deep water.

Incidents

No major incidents took part during the games. This indicates that Olympic Games are a controlled and safe activity because of the high level of the participants. However, the following incidents occurred in diving, and swimming indicating that a lifeguard is always needed:

- ❑ In the test event of Synchronised Swimming during training, an athlete jumped on her team-mates backs scratching her eyebrow causing minor bleeding. She did not require to be rescued as she came out of the water unassisted.
- ❑ On August 24th, seven soggy Americans crawled out of the pool, their backs to the celebration that was making waves at the other end. One of the players, Ericka Lorenz had four scratches on her neck (one still bleeding), after a defeat in a women's water polo semi-final match she could not fathom (Hac, 2004).
- ❑ During swimming games, a piece of plastic was in the swimming pool. As there was not a pole to drag it out, the umpire ordered the lifeguard to jump into the pool and take it out.
- ❑ On August 17th, an unexpected event happened during the Men's Synchronized 3M Springboard Finals. The Chinese couple champions and the favourites got 0.0 points from all judges due to a very bad dive ending in a belly flop. This is an indication that everybody, regardless of the level and training, can have a bad day that might lead to bad result or even injury.

- In the same event, the Russian couple dove making a very noisy surfacing, as one of them bit the diving board his legs, making the entire crowd shout. They were high level athletes but this can happen to anybody. This and the previous incident occurred in a very stressful environment where most athletes could be calm due to the high level of the competition. The director of diving asked the lifeguard: 'Be ready and close to the water in case you should need to jump in'. Fortunately there was not any injury and the lifeguard or other medical assistance weren't required.

- The strangest incident of the Olympic Games from a lifeguard perspective, took part in the diving event. During the game, a spectator starts talking with the security guard that was in the field of play area near the fence. A friend of his, a stalker dressed in a tutu, clown shoes and a tattoo of an internet casino, jumped inside the field of play from behind the guard and climbed the diving platform. The man was Ron Bensimhon that had appeared at the world figure skating championships in Germany the past March (Golden Palace, 2004). He started posing and dancing for a short time and then jumped into the water (photo 8). He carried on waving to the spectators. The director of Diving, Mrs Gogo Firigou, ordered the lifeguard Stathis Avramidis to jump into the water to take him out. The lifeguard thought for some seconds whether it is more appropriate to jump or not. Finally leaving his rescue tube he dove in and approached the man (photo 9). In an effort to make the man to leave the pool the announcer, Mrs Helen Fokianou, said to the spectators: 'Let's clap to congratulate him for his entertaining show'. Every body started clapping. While the lifeguard is approaching the person he started moving towards the edge of the pool. A police man shouted to Stathis: 'It is OK; don't touch him!' The person left the water and later on was dragged away by safety officers at the back of the field of play (photo 10).



Photos 8-10: The only time that required a lifeguard to dive in the pool for pulling someone out was in Men's Synchronized 3M Springboard Finals of the Olympics 2004 (photos from Seghers, 2004).

Conclusion

The following are some conclusions for this unexpected event that is possibly the first case reported in the lifeguard literature:

1. A lifeguard should ALWAYS wear have a rescue tube on, not just have it near the chair or hold it. Trying to find the strap when it was needed to dive in, it was a waist of time when the Olympic Games were live on the TV. The same should happen in every lifeguard duty. In a near drowning incident that is in progress, it is not clever idea to try to find the strap at the last moment.
2. Lifeguards should ALWAYS have a rescue tube with them, for their safety and for the casualty's safety (photo 11). If this man was violent, the lifeguard would need to deal with this without the beneficial protection of the rescue tube.
3. Even in controlled and high level aquatic activities such as lifeguard cover for the Olympic events, a lifeguard is needed.

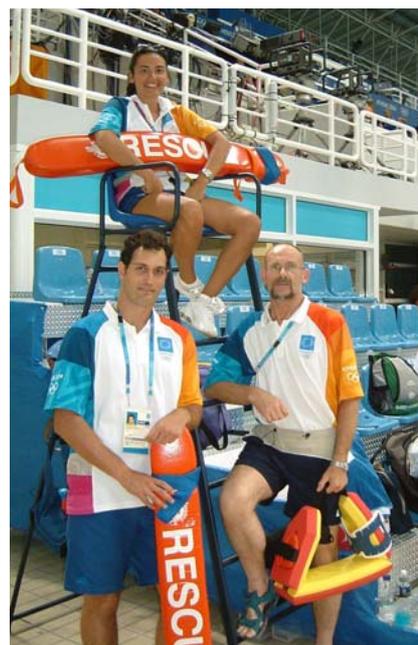


Photo 11: Popi Tzavara (top), Stathis Avramidis (left) and Garry Seghers (right) lifeguarding in the Athens 2004 Olympics.

Recommendations for future Olympic Games

The overall impression was that the games were very successful and safe. However, the following is a list of actions that should be taken in the future for organizing better Olympic Games or other major aquatic events:

1. Development of written operating procedures (emergency action plan and daily operating procedures) so each lifeguard will know what to do in any case.
2. Employment of enough lifeguards that will be paid staff and specialized in swimming pool emergencies.
3. Employment of a head lifeguard that will be responsible in coordinating the lifeguard team of all aquatic events, he will be responsible for linking lifeguards with the medical team, organizing a staff training and finally employing appropriately qualified lifeguards.
4. Proper and frequent in-service training with all the necessary equipment provided by the organizing committee.
5. Sport event organizers should ensure that among the spectators there is not anyone with records as stalker in previous games.

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