

1998 Asian Games in Bangkok, Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

The Asian Games are held every four years half-way between the four-year Olympic Games calendar. They were first held in 1951 in New Delhi, India when 46 Asian nations sent athletes to compete in 44 different Olympic sports. Thailand hosted the games in 1998 making it the fourth time they had hosted after 1966, 1970, and 1978.

Four years earlier, in 1994, the Games were held in Hiroshima, Japan and Thailand garnered a modest number of 24 total medals with four of them being gold. With the intention to improve their medal successes for the 1998 Games, the Thai Sports Federation contracted with the United States Sports Academy (USSA) of Mobile, Alabama to present a series of coaching seminars for Thai Olympic Coaches.

The author was invited to conduct one of these ten-day sessions and instruct Thai coaches on "Sport Coaching Methodology." At the time of the invitation, Dr. Shollenberger was Associate Director of Distance Education at The University of Alabama but had recently retired from a 30-year coaching career at the high school and major college level.

The flight from Tuscaloosa, AL to Bangkok took 33 hours from take-off to landing with stops in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Hong Kong. The flight across the Pacific Ocean included a crossing of the International Date Line and a complete day was lost (it would be gained back on the return trip). The taxi ride from the Bangkok Airport to lodging accommodations was eye opening to say the least. The preponderance of motor scooters and some acrobatic maneuvers by the drivers was hard to ignore.

The seminar began the next morning and would last for two weeks (10 business days). The site was Srinakharinwirot University (SWU) which the author found out later was a public

institution of higher learning and the first university in Thailand to concentrate solely on teacher training. USSA prepared me for a total of 25 Thai Olympic coaches and that they all spoke some English. Imagine the surprise the first morning when the number was 75 and very few spoke English.

Three bi-lingual professors from the university were quickly recruited to translate, but the process of delivering my lectures was painfully slow as I had to speak and then pause for the translation to be relayed to the audience in the Thai language. It was a strange feeling to deliver what I thought was a humorous comment only to elicit some laughter quite some time later. The professors worked hard, and it was assumed that the students were getting the gist of the presented information. The translators often changed (sometimes in mid-sentence) and it appeared to be almost like a "tag-team" transfer of information.

On the flight from the United States, there was plenty of time to inspect all the materials provided by USSA for the seminar and to perfect the coaching information delivery. The materials included 25 final exam packets and 25 certificates for those who would successfully complete the program. Representatives from the university quickly set about making enough copies of the exam and certificates for the attendees.

The written exam consisted of 100 multiple-choice questions and a quick reading revealed how difficult the final might be for the coaches. This became doubly important after the first three-hour session that first day considering the language barrier. At the first lunch break, I informed the president of the university of my concerns about some coaches not being able to score 80 on the exam for certificate verification. He quickly reassured me that with all the resources at our disposal, we would make it happen. The pressure began to build and every

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effort would have to be expended to make sure the information was delivered in a manner that would ensure success for the coaches.

As the seminar continued for the length of the stay, everyone became accustomed to the unique delivery process and I was able to meet with and interact with members of the university and the coaches. During each session, excellent questions were raised and answered and there were many successful teachable moments. It became clear that all 75 of the coaches were capable of passing the exam.

One item of interest that I brought with me to the seminar was the movie, "Hoosiers." This classic sports movie starring Gene Hackman contained some excellent coaching attributes that fit perfectly with the tenets being explained. There were concerns about the language (there were no Thai captions for the audience), but they were quickly erased when it was observed how much the coaches enjoyed the showing. They enjoyed the movie so much that it was re-run for a second time and enjoyed as well as the first.

Finally, the last day of the seminar was at hand and consisted of a review session in the morning and the final exam that afternoon. Over lunch, the faculty and I again expressed concern about the difficulty of the exam questions and the language gap. All that remained was to complete the test, score it, and prepare the certificates accordingly.

It did not take long after the test distribution to realize the concern on the faces of the students/coaches. As mentioned, the questions were comprehensive and some quite detailed. A major hush descended over the testing area and it was apparent that all 75 of the coaches were deep in thought and determined to give the exam their best efforts. The last student finally completed their test and I set about (with much help from the university faculty) to score the completed exams and analyze the results.

As it turned out, the president was correct in his assessment and all 75 coaches passed the exam

with all of them making the grade with room to spare. The certificate award ceremony was accompanied by much hugging and handshakes as the coaches convinced me that they enjoyed the two weeks and that they would miss the daily sessions. The positive result of the seminar would never have been possible without the help and encouragement of the faculty and staff at SWU who worked tirelessly to ensure its success.

When the 1998 Asian Games were being contested, there was surprisingly little media coverage outside of the Asian countries involved. I was unable to learn very much about any results involving Thai athletes. Several weeks after the conclusion of the Games the final medal count was released. Compared to the 24 total medals won in 1994, the 1998 Games saw Thai athletes win a national record of 90 medals with 24 of these gold medals. This total was quite an improvement in four-year's time. No one will ever know for sure if the USSA seminars (including mine) made that much difference but I will leave it up to the reader to decide.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Barry Shollenberger is an Associate Professor in the Sports Management program at APU. He holds a B.A. in General Studies from Moravian College, an M.A. in Education from Western Kentucky University, and an Ed.D. in Health, Physical Education and Recreation from The University of Alabama.

Dr. Shollenberger played five seasons of professional baseball in the Cincinnati Reds and Boston Red Sox organizations. After his professional career, he served as the head baseball coach at the University of Alabama from 1979–1994. Dr. Shollenberger is currently ranked 10th among all Southeastern Conference Baseball Coaches in all-time victories with 487. He was selected as the NCAA National Coach of the Year by Baseball America in 1983.

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