

PERSONAL GROWTH THROUGH VOLUNTEERING AT AN INTERNATIONAL SPORTING EVENT – REFLECTIONS ON PARTICIPATION IN THE PYEONGCHANG WINTER GAMES

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The summer Olympics are the most watched and anticipated sporting events in the world. With the next summer games coming to Tokyo in 2 years time, and the Rugby World Cup in one year, as well as the World Masters in Kansai in 2021, many international sporting events are being held in Asia, and specifically Japan. In preparation for Japan's leading role, the 2018 PyeongChang winter Olympic and Paralympic games were held in South Korea earlier this year in February and March respectively. Through participation in as an NOC/NPC Assistant through both games, personal growth and perceptions on volunteering for international sporting events were measured, and its potential and expectations for students and the general Japanese population from here forward are discussed.

Key Words : volunteering, international exchange, PyeongChang, Olympics, Paralympics

1. BACKGROUND

In 2002, Japan and South Korea were joint hosts for the FIFA World Cup. The two countries have a history of conflict and disarrays but were able to cooperate for a successful tournament that is still talked about to this day. In Japan, the next big international sporting events include the Rugby World Cup in 2019, but the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games are most looked forward to.

Research shows that there are many influences for wanting to participate as a volunteer for these international mega-events, from the ability to travel, meet new people, and also language practice. However it seems that intrinsic motivation is one of the most significant aspects. A study by Lee et al. (2014) in response to the Yeosu Expo in 2012 showed that patriotism had the greatest impact. Although South Korea is different from Japan, similarities should be expected for Japanese citizens for these upcoming events.

However, recent news reports show that interest is as low as only 15% in some regions in Japan, with the organization committee often being criticized in the news and online for some of their controversial

decisions. These include not providing any residence for the volunteers (although this is common practice for Summer Games), nor having any significant transportation costs covered (currently reported as 1000¥ a day being expected).

For these events to be a success, it is often said that volunteers are the most important asset. However with the current state of affairs, how can these upcoming international sporting events be guaranteed to be a success and increase patriotism and intrinsic motivation for a greater amount of volunteers? To ensure deeper understanding, the researcher volunteered to participate in the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in preparation for these future events.

Applications began approximately a year before the event, with a Skype interview, and online language and technical training continuing for months. After an early arrival to assist in teams preparation at the athletes villages, work as an National Olympic Committee (NOC) and National Paralympic Committee (NPC) were conducted.

Although it is understood that Winter Games are significantly smaller in scale to Summer Games, comparisons and analysis are expected to be found.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before going into detail about the personal experiences from the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Olympic and Paralympic games, it is crucial to include background information about volunteering at major international sporting events, like the Olympics, and the conclusions of research already conducted. These will later be cross-examined.

In 2016, Koutrou et al. conducted an analytical study on sustainable volunteer management after the 2012 London Summer Games. Their feedback from volunteers included positive aspects such as being part of a once in a lifetime event, to the negative, such as not being used to their fullest potentials (Koutrou et al., 2016). The research included the unavoidable point of many volunteers also being declined participation through the application and interview process ruining the image of these Games and of volunteering for mega-events in general.

At the same time, volunteers that are accepted and experience all go through unique journeys and often continue volunteering at major sporting events in the future thanks to their experiences (Tomazos & Luke, 2015). Some long-term volunteers even see each other again at other events around the world, which was also noticed with some PyeongChang 2018 volunteers, especially for those who had volunteered for Vancouver 2010 and London 2012.

Research shows that, specifically for PyeongChang 2018 volunteers, albeit have various reasons for their motivation, are highest rated egotistically by wanting to challenge their abilities and improve their various skills throughout their assigned tasks (Ahn, 2018). Volunteer satisfaction and the feeling of them being used to their fullest potential and making the most of their personal skills is crucial to having a positive experience. Lack of motivation and even disappointment in the event as a whole are seen when these volunteer ideals are not met, as detailed in research by Noordegraaf & Celebi (2015).

By matching volunteers with tasks that are in their field, it was seen that not only volunteer satisfaction and motivation increased, but also the effectiveness of their work and their autonomy had positive influences all around (Guntert et al, 2014). Even if not assigned to tasks that are in the specific fields wanted by the volunteers, Ahn's study (2018) showed that intrinsic motivation improved during training periods with rewards and recognition given to those who excel in educational preparation, and also leading to other volunteers wanting to obtain these same goals as well.

3. PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

(1) Pre-departure Online Training

After a successful online interview through Skype which lasted but 10 minutes, the position was confirmed about a month after the fact through the online application site. Online training would continue after in which not just language training, but also basic Olympic and Paralympic organizational terms and facts were tested as well. Full completion and a passing mark on these tests were necessary to be officially accepted for the positions assigned.

There were some technical difficulties among some volunteers, which were reported to the organizing committee and appropriate actions were taken to ensure that all successful applicants were able to complete their necessary training. Regardless of how thorough volunteers completed their technical training, on-site sessions were also included upon arrival to ensure comprehension.

Although there are a multitude of roles for volunteers, the responsibilities given at this time were of a National Olympic/Paralympic Committee Assistant, abbreviated as NOC/NPC Assistant. These are said to be the most difficult and highly demanding positions, in which volunteers are assigned to specific countries and are to support the committees and their athletes in whatever they deem necessary to stay in peak condition and obtain their intended results.



Fig.1 Official Olympic and Paralympic mascots Soohorang and Bandai at the entrance of the Daegwallyeong (formerly Hoenggye) Interchange

(2) Duties as a NOC/NPC Assistant



Fig.2 Itinerary check and installation of flags in the in the PyeongChang Athletes' Village

As previously mentioned, NOC/NPC Assistants are assigned to a specific country/team and are expected to do anything necessary for the team and their athletes and coaches to have an easy adaptation to their new temporary homes, assist in their daily lives to ensure successful results, and to help consolidate all loose ends when leaving the villages and returning to their home countries.

At first, since most of the volunteers were university students or recent graduates, with no previous experience at games of these scale, many participants were confused and sometimes frustrated with the gap between their intrinsic expectations and what was expected of them from their NOC/NPCs.

Initially, volunteers gathered with the officials of their teams a week or so before the delegation arrival, to check all of the rooms and install all that was necessary. Most volunteers were shocked that there was so much mundane work assigned to them, and motivation started low. Furthermore, once the athletes arrived, luggage was also distributed to the assistants to help sort and move, and even appliances and specified equipment as well, which meant a significant amount of hard, physical labor. Given that not all volunteers were in ideal physical condition, and some were retired former company employees, some physical injuries like sprains and bruising had occurred from the beginning of the games, which had a negative impact on the intrinsic motivational aspects of volunteers for the team.

Once the volunteers and their respective committees reached a common ground after extensive debate and understanding, motivations seemed to increase although not all individuals were satisfied with their roles. Some were restricted to mostly driving to and from venues with athletes, coaches, or even dignitaries. Those who were dissatisfied with their designation claimed they wanted to work more proactively for their teams and communicate with the athletes more directly, whereas on the other side some similarly designated individuals were more understanding, stating that their roles, although not their ideal, knew that they were doing what was needed of them to ensure a balance among the team and volunteers as a whole.

Some concerns that were shared among volunteers on various teams, specifically to driving, was that the one day of driving training was not enough to remember the ways to the venues, and that even using smartphone navigation applications did not always work with sudden road closures happening, often without warning. This led to initial frustrations, however over time and getting used to the 'norms' of these games, a more accepting and flexible way of thinking grew within the volunteers.

However, similarly to the initial responsibilities, checking out and assisting with luggage was also necessary, yet this time volunteers were more comfortable and less negative about helping because they knew what was expected of them at this time. Even if the end seemed abrupt and without a full sense of closure, a vast majority of participants felt more than expected levels of satisfaction in the end.

Although the games finish within a 3-week period, it was seen that teamwork and connections between the volunteers themselves and their committees grew more positive throughout the games, and when the end drew near a sense of deep sadness came to all, regardless of their varied roles and experiences over the entire time together. Even to this day, most volunteers on this specific team do keep in touch and meet regularly and have even continued on to apply for the Tokyo 2020 games.

Disappointingly, it has often been recently reported in Japanese domestic news outlets that the interest of the general public, especially targeted university students is very low, due to lack of subsidies and residences being available. However, it is assumed that Japanese who volunteered for PyeongChang in 2018 will also continue on and try again for the Tokyo 2020 games to recreate the once in a lifetime experiences they have just obtained, even if it is a different season and country.

(3) Variants in Olympic and Paralympic Games



Fig.3 Paralympic Agitos outside Gangneung Station

Often overlooked is the Paralympic Games, which is held directly after the Olympics with about a week time in between to make all the necessary shifts from one to the other. Volunteer roles did change in some cases, and even for NOC turning into NPC assistants, their assigned teams changed as well. Some volunteers were not happy with changing teams after becoming attached to their Olympic assignment, which was one reason for some of the volunteers to withdraw from volunteering for the Paralympic Games. Unfortunately for the Korean academic year calendar, March is the start of the school year and seeing as most volunteers were students, there were much less available volunteers to help for the Paralympics compared to the Olympic Games.

Even though the responsibilities stayed the same, the main focus of Paralympic Games assistance was to ensure accessibility and to not go over what is necessary in terms of assisting the athletes. Many volunteers initially expected they would be pushing wheelchairs or helping athletes physically, but during the pre-games training, it was reinforced to the volunteers to only help when necessary or asked, as they are world class athletes that have lived with their specific disabilities for years and do not need to be babied or felt sorry for.

One memorable experience occurred when speaking to an athlete from a European country who was told by a spectator after a less than satisfactory

result that they should be happy for just finishing in one piece. The athlete was enraged by the comment, stating that they came to win the gold medal and not just to participate or finish. The athlete even further mentioned their desire to compete with Olympic athletes on an even level, which took the volunteers around at that moment by surprise.

The greatest thing learned by volunteering for the Paralympic Games was that most people underestimate the capabilities of para athletes. Albeit the period of these games is less than half of the Olympics, the amount of personal growth and deeper understanding of impairments was life changing. However, the greatest education in this respect was given to the volunteers by the athletes themselves, who are used to adapting to various backgrounds of people and situations.

As for the volunteering tasks in general, NOC and NPC assistants are identical, so the volunteers felt more confident in their tasks and abilities during the Paralympic Games due to already having experience in the just-finished Olympics. Some volunteers who came just for Paralympics were very confused and apprehensive, which is understandable given their lack of experience with the preceding games and roles. Even driving and navigating became second nature, although the number of athletes and teams were drastically smaller than during the Olympic Games.

Finally, due to the disappointing lack of general knowledge and common understanding by the public in regards to the Paralympic Games, many logos and installations around the PyeongChang and Gangneung areas continued to display the Olympic rings instead of the Paralympic Agitos – a three curve logo of red, blue, and green as seen in Fig.3, which was only installed days after the Paralympic Games had already begun after constant reminding of the changes necessary especially for logos between games. Even some volunteers, distributed with a ‘conversion kit’ to replace their rings logos with agitos, hesitated to do so and were reprimanded thereof because of it.

The Olympics and Paralympics are held together for a reason – the participating teams, countries, and athletes all have the same goal of being the best in their sport on the world stage for a competition held only once every four years. However, with the lacking of media attention and coverage, this also leads to a lower interest from the general public towards para sport, and it is hoped that Paralympic interest can one day achieve if not go beyond that of Olympics, hopefully in time for the next games in Tokyo or the winter of 2022.

4. REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION FOR FUTURE VOLUNTEER HOPEFULS

Although there is much research on the motivational aspects and satisfaction ideals of volunteers at major international events, details on the benefits and potential of cross-cultural understanding was discussed in research by Qi et al. (2018). Especially in the case of the event happening outside of the volunteers home country and more so when in a foreign language, there are understandable barriers and hesitations for satisfactory volunteer participation. Although these are expected bumps in the road of any volunteer at an international event, once overcome they are highly remembered and treasured by participants.

In terms of Kosen students, a vast majority are expected to go into the work force after the minimum mandatory five years of study. In recent years, most of them graduate with the understanding that they will have to be able to communicate in English at some point in their careers, be it to work overseas, or communicate with non-Japanese people about their products or research. By participating in these major international events, it would be an ideal experience for the students to have to test their abilities and break down any barriers and hesitations they may have in cross-cultural exchanges.

The biggest concern is the timing of these events, which often coincides with test periods and important events, cooperation and understanding from the institutional side is essential. This is also seen in recent efforts by the Ministry of Education in Japan towards university students interested in applying to volunteer for the Tokyo 2020 games.



Fig.4 Olympic Rings in the Gangneung Village

5. CONCLUSION

Although the researcher was given special permission to volunteer for the full time of both the Olympic and Paralympic games at PyeongChang, the intent to continue for Tokyo 2020 is high. It is also strongly recommended for students all around the world, especially for Kosen students in Japan to challenge themselves and also try to participate. A multitude of apprehensions may make potential volunteers afraid of applying in the first place, but a vast majority of previously experienced volunteers can reassure that taking the leap and going forward with this experience will surely change their lives.

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