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Lifeguard Operations: Summary of Practices at the Athens 2004 Olympics

Stathis Avramidis

In open-water venues, the need for lifeguards is well appreciated around the world. Unfortunately, there are still people in countries with a less well-developed sense of safety who believe that swimming pools do not present risks and therefore that the lifeguards are unnecessary (Avramidis, 2003). For those believing that a swimming pool is merely a harmless "small sea" and therefore a safe place without the potential for injury or death, the answer to the question "Do we need lifeguards during the Olympic Games?" is often a resounding No!

As one means of refuting that attitude, one need only consider a remarkable incident that occurred on the ninth of Greg Louganis's 11 preliminary dives in the 3-m springboard competition during the Olympic Games of Seoul on September 19, 1988. Louganis lacerated his head on the diving board and hit the water with a great splash after attempting a reverse 2.5-somersault pike. Fortunately, the accident led only to a cut that required temporary sutures and five stitches. Recall, however, that several years later the incident took on added meaning when the world's best diver revealed that he had been HIV-positive during those Olympic Games. In his autobiography, he admitted that he was panicked that he might cause someone else harm. He had wanted to warn the doctor who treated his head injury without wearing gloves, but he did not. Fortunately, the physician tested negative for HIV in 1994. Everything was so mixed up at that point: the HIV, the shock and embarrassment of hitting his head, and an awful feeling that it was all over (Brown, 2007). From this single emergency incident that could have led to compression, concussion, spinal injury, bleeding, or an HIV infection, one should appreciate that even during Olympic Games, aquatic emergencies can and do occur.

Presumably each host country for an Olympic Games tries to learn the lessons of the past for organizing better and safer games. One would expect that 16 years after the Louganis incident in the Olympic Games of Athens 2004, safety precautions would dominate the aquatic venues.

There was a widely held belief that Greece was not going to even be able to organize the Games in time, much less attend to safety issues. Fortunately, this belief was proven misguided. All the aquatic facilities were ready on time (Figure 1). The many human resources were always keen to help, smiling, and exceeding the expectations of those who wondered if Greece would be able to provide enough volunteers for the Games to run smoothly. The question of whether the lifeguards who had to supervise the swimming pools of the Athens Olympic Athletic Center were equally ready was still in doubt, however.

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Figure 1 — Venues for the four pool-sport events of the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. (a) Swimming and water polo. (b) Water polo. (c) Synchronized swimming. (d) Diving.

Observations in Athens 2004

This report aims to provide a first-person account regarding all the swimming pool aquatic events at both the test events and the actual 2004 Athens Olympic Games from a safety perspective and to provide a potential guide to help promote optimal practices, as well as avoid similar mistakes, at future Olympic Games.

Lifeguard Staff Selection

The lifeguards for the Games were selected by the organizing committee of each aquatic sport (e.g., swimming, diving, synchronized swimming, water polo). Initially it was thought appropriate to employ lifeguards who were able to work at the test event of the specific sport, the training days before the Games, and during the actual Olympic Games. Later, it was found that some lifeguards were unwilling to work on all these occasions, so others had to be hired to provide lifeguard coverage. Some lifeguards who served the water polo or competitive swimming venues were not very strong and were much shorter than the athletes (e.g., several lifeguards were only 1.65 m [5 ft 5 in.] tall and some water polo players were 2 m [6 ft 7 in.] tall). Their lack of size and strength caused doubts by some spectators and organizers about their ability to tow and initiate a successful rescue of the bulky, tall athletes who they supervised. Considering the fact that not all the

lifeguards had rescue tubes available, one can assume that it would be difficult to tow very large athletes if it became necessary. Although as far as it is known there is not any scientific study relating the body sizes of the rescuer and the casualty with the outcome of the rescue, my practical experience has shown that thin and short lifeguards are likely to struggle while towing tall and heavy casualties, and therefore, what might initially sound discriminatory, in fact, is not.

Number of Qualified Lifeguards

There were only one or two lifeguards on duty at any aquatic venue during the Games (Figure 2). For example, there was one lifeguard for the competitive

Figure 2 — Lifeguards on duty at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games.

swimming events, one at the water polo pool, one at the synchronized swimming venue, and two at the diving well. This scarcity of lifeguard staff did not allow the opportunity for frequent enough guard rotations, with few breaks for meals, to use the toilet, or for staffing replacements when someone was ill. Each aquatic event worked almost independently from the other events, and the lifeguards were not allowed to change from one event to another. Having sufficient staff to allow breaks at least once an hour and guard rotations every 30 min (American National Red Cross, 1995) would have enabled guards to have more and varied experiences, to experience less boredom (Pia, 1984), be more vigilant, be more effective, be able to rectify the human factors that make vigilance difficult (Griffiths, 2003), and finally be able to apply the 10/20 protection rule (Ellis & White, 1994), the 5-min-scanning strategy (Griffiths), the RID factor (Pia), and the 4W model of drowning (Avramidis, Butterly, & Llewellyn, 2007).

Lifeguard Uniforms

Lifeguards wore the same uniform as the other volunteers. As a consequence, it was difficult to distinguish them from the rest of the staff (e.g., athletes and staff-services assistants, field-of-play staff, training-site staff). Only in the synchronized swimming test event was a lifeguard allowed to wear his own red lifeguard uniform. Lifeguards complained about the lack of a unique lifeguarding uniform, but they were required to wear the official uniform that other volunteers wore despite their unique and important role in safeguarding water venues. At least lifeguards could have worn a brassard with the indication "lifeguard" similar to those worn by doctors and other emergency-services personnel. During the test events lifeguards originally were asked to wear street clothing, not appropriate swimwear. On reconsideration, this requirement was altered and swimwear was worn under clothes, because the risk manager acknowledged that wearing only street clothing was inappropriate for the duties lifeguards had to perform.

Lifeguards as Volunteers

During the aquatic events, all lifeguards were volunteers, whereas other emergency-services staff members were paid (e.g., doctors and policemen were not paid by the local Olympic Organizing Committee but were paid by their governing employer). The comparison between those two categories of staff (paid and unpaid) did not sufficiently and equally motivate all lifeguards to perform well. Lifeguards with extrinsic motivation to make money did not always maintain a professional attitude, while others with more intrinsic motivation (e.g., desire to perform well) were more vigilant and dedicated to their duty.

Lifeguard Staff Qualifications

During the screening process for the indoor aquatic events the volunteers who would work as lifeguards had to meet a single criterion: to have any kind of lifeguard

qualification, regardless of whether it was for beach or pool lifeguarding. Aside from those from Canada, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, all the Greek lifeguards who worked at the aquatic venues were qualified by their Greek lifeguard agencies as beach lifeguards, not pool guards. In addition, although the lifeguards from other nations had qualifications with an expiration date, meaning that their training had to be updated at least every 2 years, the Greek lifeguard qualifications by law never expire (Decree law, 2000). This permanent certification raises concerns about the level of the training and the quality of the services that they can provide, given the fact that 6 months after the training, only 6.8% of people trained in CPR are able to perform it safely and effectively (Handley, 2007).

Lack of a Head Lifeguard

There was no officially established position of head lifeguard during the Games. Unfortunately, the responsible persons (i.e., supervisors of field of play) who coordinated the lifeguards at various venues had little or no experience or qualifications in aquatics or lifeguarding. As a result this led to situations in which lifeguards were told such things as follow:

- "Why do you want two 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 supervisor obviously did not realize that a frequent rotation among the lifeguard team enables a high-level alertness and vigilance (American National Red Cross, 1995). In the rare case of spinal injury at least two lifeguards are required for immobilization (Seghers, 2004). In some aquatic events the lifeguards were qualified to do spinal-injury immobilization and in others they were not.
- "Why are you staying 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 to be conducted in sessions that should be attended by managers, lifeguard supervisors, head lifeguards, experts in particular subject matters, risk managers, and human resources representatives (American National Red Cross, 2007). One supervisor responsible for volunteers did not realize the importance of in-service training at the competitive swimming venue.

Absence of Rescue Equipment

Lifeguards were asked to bring their own equipment, but almost none of them had things such as rescue tubes or spinal boards. Only a small number of lifeguards volunteered to bring some rescue tubes, pocket masks, spinal boards, and cervical collars. In contrast, doctors and medical personnel either were provided with all the necessary equipment or brought their own (e.g., medications, spinal board, cervical collars, defibrillator). During the first days of some test events, there was no elevated lifeguard chair or umbrella to provide shade from the sun. Pregame discussions should have addressed this matter. Fortunately, this problem was resolved in time for the actual Olympic Games.

In-Service Training

Two days of in-service training took place the month before the Olympic Games. Some supervisors responsible for the diving events were not fully certified in spinal-injury immobilization. Lifeguards from different countries and organizations (e.g., Canada, Greece, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States) who knew different rescue techniques tried to bring their unique expertise to these training sessions. The only reference to lifeguards in their Olympic Games training manuals was that "they should always be alert during the training and the games and that they were responsible for bringing the injured athlete out of the water when needed" (Organizing Committee of Athens 2004 Olympic Games, 2004, p. 58). Spinal-injury-management training took place in the diving pool under the command of a medical doctor who accepted the proposal from other lifeguard instructors to use a modification of the Swimming Teachers' Association's (U.K.) National Rescue Standard program for two-people spinal-injury-management technique in deep water. These techniques required one lifeguard to slide in the water, dive to the bottom of the pool and bring the injured athlete to the surface while maintaining in-line stability using a head splint. On reaching the surface, the lifeguard should apply a cervical collar and then, assisted by the second lifeguard, put the athlete on a spine board (Swimming Teachers' Association, 2004; Figure 3).

Figure 3 — In-service training for spinal injuries using a modification of the Swimming Teachers Association two-person spinal-injury-management technique adapted for deep water.

Incidents During the 2004 Athens Olympic Games

I observed the following minor incidents during the diving, water polo, synchronized swimming, and competitive swimming events at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, indicating that lifeguard supervision is always needed around aquatic environments, even during the Olympic Games.

- In the test event for synchronized swimming during training, an athlete jumped on her teammate's back, scratching her eyebrow and causing minor bleeding. She did not require rescuing and came out of the water unassisted.
- On August 24, seven soggy American water polo players crawled out of the pool, their backs to the celebration that was making waves at the other end of the pool. One of the players, Ericka Lorenz, had four scratches on her neck (one still bleeding), received during their defeat in the women's semifinal water polo match (Hac, 2004).
- During the competitive swimming events, a piece of plastic got into the swimming pool. Because there was no pole (e.g., shepherd's crook) to drag it out, the umpire ordered the lifeguard to jump into the pool and remove it.
- On August 17, a surprising event occurred during the men's synchronized 3-m springboard finals. The Chinese champion pair who were the favorites to win the event were awarded 0.0 points from all judges because of a deficient dive that ended in a belly flop. This indicates that anyone, regardless of level and training, occasionally can suffer an accident that might lead to an injury. Fortunately, in this case, only their pride was injured, not their physical bodies.
- In the same event, a Russian pair's dive ended with a very noisy water entry, as a result of one of them hitting the diving board with his legs, making the entire crowd gasp. The director of diving told the lifeguard, "Be ready and be close to the water in case you need to jump in." Fortunately the diver did not experience any serious injury and the lifeguard or other medical assistance was not required.
- The strangest incident of the Olympic Games from a lifeguard perspective took part during another diving event. During the game, a spectator distracted a security guard who was inside the pool area near the fence. Meanwhile, a friend who was a streaker, dressed only in a tutu, clown shoes, and a tattoo advertising an internet casino, jumped over the fence and into the pool area behind the guard and climbed the diving platform. The same man had appeared at the world figure skating championships in Germany the previous March (Golden Palace, 2004). He started posing and dancing for a short time before jumping into the water, after which he waved to the spectators. The director of diving ordered the lifeguard on duty to remove the streaker from the pool. The lifeguard hesitated for several seconds, considering whether it was appropriate to jump in or not and engage the intruder. Finally, leaving his rescue tube on the deck, he dove in and approached the man. In an effort to make the man to leave the pool the announcer told the spectators, "Let's clap to congratulate him for his entertaining show." When the spectators started clapping and as the lifeguard approached the intruder, he moved toward the side of the pool. A security officer directed the lifeguard, "It's OK. Don't touch him!" The intruder left the water and was escorted away by safety officers.

Recommendations for Future Olympic Games

The overall impression was that the 2004 Athens Olympic Games were very successful and safe. Based on my direct experiences at the Games, the following is a list of actions that should be taken in the future for proactively organizing Olympic Games or other major aquatic events:

- Develop written operating procedures including an emergency-action plan and daily operating procedures so that each lifeguard can anticipate in advance how to react to a variety of possible occurrences.
- Employ sufficiently experienced lifeguards, who should be paid by the local Olympic Organizing Committee (or designee) and who are certified and specialized in swimming pool emergencies. There should be backup staff scheduled to permit regular (30- to 60-min) rotations and to cover in the event of illness or absence.
- Purchase all necessary lifesaving equipment including rescue tubes, spinal boards, automated external defibrillators, and first-aid supplies from the budget of the local Olympic Organizing Committee or their designee.
- Employ a head lifeguard, who should be responsible for coordinating the entire lifeguard team for all aquatic events and at all water venues. A head lifeguard should have extensive experience hiring appropriately qualified lifeguards, organizing and conducting staff in-service training, and creating successful interactions among lifeguards, the risk manager, and emergency-medical personnel.
- Plan for and conduct proper and frequent in-service training with all the necessary lifesaving equipment provided by the organizing committee.
- Maintain appropriate security procedures and employ sufficient security staff to prevent intruders from disrupting any events.

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