

From Copa to Korea: Winter Games in Pyeongchang next up

By Stephen Wade and Kim Tong-Hyung
The Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO — Organizers of the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, set up a virtual-reality ski simulator — complete with fake, blowing snow — on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro.

“Having sun and sand is normal here, but not snow,” said local Danieli Evangelista, stepping off the make-believe ski slope after waiting in line for 30 minutes for a taste of winter during the Summer Olympics. “Hardly anyone here ever sees snow. It’s very cool, a very real effect.”

It’s also about to get very real for the next hosts of the Olympic Games.

“We’re not ready to go today, but we’re getting ready,” Kim Jaeyoul, vice president of the Pyeongchang organizing committee, told The Associated Press.

South Korea’s games will be the first of three straight held in Asia, joining the Tokyo Summer Games in 2020 and the Beijing Winter Games in 2022. These come after a run of difficult games in Sochi, Russia, and now Rio de Janeiro, with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) looking for “a safe pair of hands,” as Tokyo labelled its winning bid three years ago.

Yet organizers in Pyeongchang have struggled with construction delays, local conflicts over venues, and a slow pace in attracting domestic sponsorship. This contrasts with the smoother run-ups to the 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 2002 World Cup that South Korea co-hosted with Japan.

“Unlike the 1988 Olympics and the 2002 World Cup, it was not the central government, but a province, that led the efforts to bring the Olympics,” said Heejoon Chung, who teaches sports science at South Korea’s Dong-A University. “There is a sentiment that the Winter Games are more about Pyeongchang than the nation as a whole.”

The Pyeongchang organizing committee named Lee Hee-beom its new president three months ago. It was the second leadership change in two years, and that’s worried the IOC.

Lee bowed to IOC president Thomas Bach, and then to almost 100 IOC members, before addressing the full membership just days before the Rio Olympics opened.

“I’d like to assure you that our preparations are fully on track,” Lee told them.

In introducing him, Bach called Lee a “very dynamic and reliable leader,” and joked that he “promised he will be with us” until the games take place.

Organizers say that after a rocky start, 90 percent of the sponsorship target of \$760 million will be met at the end of the year. Sponsorship will provide about one-third of the 2.2 trillion won, or \$2 billion, operating budget. Kim said the budget would be adjusted in the next few weeks, compensating for inflation.

Six new competition venues are about 80 percent complete, and a new high-speed rail line will be finished in June of 2017 and in operation the following January. The line will link Incheon airport to Pyeongchang and reduce travel time to 90 minutes from almost twice that much.

Pyeongchang is also building a controversial sliding center for bobsled, luge, and skeleton, after rejecting an IOC suggestion that it use a complex previously constructed for the games in Nagano, Japan, to save money. The cost is 124 billion won (\$112 million) for a venue that could be a white elephant if not managed properly.

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Fiji, Singapore celebrate Olympic firsts

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during a qualifying heat that sponsor restrictions meant he couldn’t race in his cap and goggles. This seemed to throw him off, and he swam poorly, failing to qualify for either event.

By 2016, Schooling had become such a star that his country’s president travelled to Brazil to cheer him on. In the 100-meter butterfly, Schooling posted the top time in both the preliminary and semifinal heats. This put him in the driver’s seat in the final, facing not only Phelps, but also László Cseh of Hungary, who swam the best time in the world this year, and South Africa’s Chad le Clos, the 2012 silver medallist in the event.

In the 2016 final, Schooling led the formidable field the entire way, finishing in an Olympic record time of 50.39 seconds, breaking the record Phelps set in Beijing. Phelps himself finished a whopping three-quarters of a second behind Schooling, in a three-way silver-medal tie with le Clos and Cseh.

After the race, Schooling said humbly, “I don’t think I’m anywhere close to these three guys right next to me, I just had a good day today.” He went on to say he hoped he could show “that even people from the smallest countries in the world can achieve a lot of things.” For his part, Phelps said, “I’m proud of Joe [Schooling] ... I wanted to change the sport of swimming. With the people we have in the sport now, I think you are seeing it.”

As in Fiji, Singapore celebrated Schooling’s medal across the country and online. The prime minister said on Facebook: “It is an incredible feat, to compete among the world’s best, stay focused, and emerge victorious.” Lottery tickets with Schooling’s winning time quickly sold out, and social media exploded with congratulatory posts.

Asian athletes continue to make inroads in international sports, and the Olympics provide the perfect stage for them to show off their advancement. Fiji’s performance was largely expected, but Japan and Singapore broke new ground in rugby and swimming. With the 2020 Olympics scheduled to take place in Tokyo, Asian sports fans already have plenty to look forward to. These breakthrough performances in Rio will raise that anticipation another notch.

□

Cup Craze: Souvenir Olympic cups were a hot item

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Maybe he wouldn’t mind serving as a true arm rest for the cups at the next Olympic bash.

While stuffed trash bags and overflowing bins of Skol aluminum beer cans were a sore sight at the games, there was not a plastic cup around to recycle.

“It has been a good way to keep litter down,” Rodriguez said.

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SELFIES WITH SCHOOLING. Singaporean swimmer Joseph Schooling, top photo, won a gold medal in the men’s 100-meter butterfly and made history by winning the country’s first gold medal at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In the bottom photo, Schooling, right, poses for a selfie after his arrival at Singapore Changi Airport in Singapore.

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