

Referee Column: Australasian Taekwondo magazine.

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Referee Selection training camp for the Beijing 2008 Olympics.

The WTF is serious about implementing one of its greatest reforms which is to have fair competitions through objective and clear refereeing and judging systems. It is high on the agenda as goal #2 in its Strategic Plan.

Taekwondo sport was a popular subject for discussion after the Athens Olympics and the officiating was targeted as an area that required scrutiny. From 2005, the WTF embarked on a mission to develop an electronics scoring system with a focus to eliminate errors made by human judges. For many, this is not a good step forward as in any sport played by humans, it is the human touch and the human involvement and human judging that brings "life and excitement" to a match being contested by human players. Sports such as tennis, cricket, football, soccer, gymnastics and others do not have electronic scoring judges do they? They have human referees and human judges that make the final rulings, make the final points scores. They only use electronic devices and instruments to aid their final judgment where required, just like hawk eye for tennis, the 3rd umpire for deciding leg before wicket of catches for cricket, video replay to determine if a player grounded the ball to decide tries in rugby matches.

The WTF trialed the electronic scoring body protectors and there is still much work to be done in its development for acceptance by all involved in the sport, players, coaches, referees and spectators. The original plan was to introduce the electronic scoring body protectors at the World Championships in China as a pre-cursor for the Beijing 2008 Olympics. This plan is now postponed for the 2009 World Championships in Denmark.

So this leaves the only option for the WTF to select the best 29 referees to be fit and ready to officiate at the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Leading up to this, in efforts to ensure fair judgment, the most experienced and capable referees were used at the WTF world events such as the World juniors, World Cup and recently the World Championships. Each of these competitions rewarded 5 best referee awards as a start to identifying the best referees around. At the same time, the WTF also sanctioned underperforming or unfair referees with 4 from the world juniors and 2 from the world championships.

And how will the WTF select the best 29 referees for the Olympics? In July-August 2007 the WTF invited more than 200 International Referees from across the world to a training camp held in Korea with the sole purpose to identify and rank the referees for pre-selection to officiate at the Olympic qualification events during the later half of 2007 and the beginning of 2008. The best 29 referees will be named in February 2008 for the Beijing 2008 Olympics.

Every international referee who had ambitions to referee in the Olympics applied. The wait was very testing as time got closer and closer to the published date for the training camp. Three weeks crept by and still no news for the applicants, and then 18 days before the start of the training camp, 232 referees were advised of their selections for the camp. Due to late notice and logistics, just under 200 fronted up, with 10 coming from Australia. That was the first test, that of patience and the ability to pack up and go with short notice. It must be a test of each referee's patience. And to test the referees further transportation arrangements were only finalized and advised 3 days before the start of the training camp.

The training camp was held in Woosuk University in Jeong-ju province which is more than 3 hours drive by bus from Seoul. I arrived into Seoul Incheon international airport and the bus ride took 4 hours to Jeong-ju city and then another half hour by shuttle bus to the training venue at Woosuk University. We were allocated our twin share dormitory rooms and I shared with another Australian referee. At check-in we were given a program of our 8 day training camp and many were taken aback when we saw the fitness testing requirements; that of a 50m sprint, the 1,200 metre run and the standing broad jump. Not that we were worried about having to test for them, it is the times that worried some, in particular the older referees who happened to be the most experienced referees. We found out later that the time and distance limits were those of a healthy physically fit 35 to 40 year old. Nowadays, a match fit taekwondo player is still active right up to 35 years old, so the time and distance limits did worry most of the older referees.

This is one of the very few occasions of a training camp, most had been involved in. So there is anxiety and at the same time excitement. Referees came from 57 countries with Korea providing the biggest contingent of some 40 referees, USA next with more than 15 and followed by Australia, Canada and Iran with 10 each. Some countries sent only one referee, but in Australia we have a policy of giving our referees the best opportunity and the 10 that went were as good as any.

Breakfast was open from 7:30 am and the last dinner at 8 pm. The cafeteria was a good 15 to 20 minutes walk from the dormitories, and the summer weather was very hot and humid. Each day's program started from 9:30 am and scheduled for completion by 6 pm. The scene would have been a sea of white taekwondo doboks every day. The oldest attendee was 69 year old Simon Ysrael from Guam and the youngest was 25 year old Anne Koo from USA.

The 1st day was welcoming speeches and orientation on the selection criteria to be used. There were lectures on competition rules and interpretations and practice of referee hand signals. An easy day to kick off a long training camp. Some referees decided to test out their fitness skills on the running track after the end of the first day and tested their 50m sprinting skills and 1,200m runs. Some walked the course to get a taste of what to expect while some took it seriously and ran the distances, with a few injuries being reported.

The 2nd day was all practice of scoring matches. We started from first principles of scoring with red or blue gloves depicting the chung (blue) or hong (red) player scoring the points either on the body or the face, but by nature of the movements, the scoring had to be done very quickly. One referee would be going through these motions slowly at first and then picking up speed and simulating multiple points alternating between body and head shots. Typically this would yield the same scores. This was a test for excellent eye and hand co-ordination at speed. During a 2 minute "round" more than 60 points would have been scored making it an average of a point for every 2 second interval. All referees went through their paces and generally there were similarity of scores amongst all 16 referees at a time.

Then 16 judging referees were grouped at any one time to practice their scoring using real players from the taekwondo department students of Woosuk University. They were young and brave and fearless. They kicked their sparring partners like in a real match and did not hold back in their kicks or punches. Scoring these matches was like the real matches in a competition. 16 referees were stationed in the 4 judging positions in groups of 4. Two rounds of matches were played out each time. It was interesting to note that most of the 4 groups returned slightly different scores at the end of the matches. But generally the match winner was almost always the same chung or hong player each time. The conclusion is that while there are variations in the scores, the winner is almost always in total agreement. The conclusion is also that irrespective of who the judges are, the 4 judges in each match determines the scores as they see it during the match play. Each referee judge in each corner has their viewing angle of the match and one must understand that each corner has a different viewing angle. The basic principle of a scoring point is accuracy and power and of course 3 judges must agree with the point score and the button pressed within one second of

each other for the point to be valid. So focus and concentration is very important throughout the match play.

The 3rd day was a stressful day for most referees. The morning was medical tests for each referee one at a time. Each referee was tested for their hearing, eyesight vision, blood pressure and colour blindness testing. It is essential each referee must have good hearing, in particular in those matches where external noises from the crowd may drown out the noise generated from successful hits by each player during match play. I have experienced, in particular in the final of a match in the world championships between the home crowd favourite and top nation Korea, where one has to have total concentration to judge or referee a match as you virtually cannot hear much other than the home crowd cheering. Fortunately, we have gifts of concentration and we can cut out any unwanted noises and merely concentrate on the match alone.

Good eyesight vision is essential as referees need to “see the point” and the action and determine accuracy. It was stressed that arm kicks are not points scoring shots, so good eyesight is essential. A minimum of 6-6 vision or in Korean measure 1.0 acuity is required. Each eye was tested separately.

Blood pressure was measured and a measure of less than 160 was required. Some referees went above 170 and they had to be tested a second time. It is the view that if a referee has high blood pressure then he is at risk with himself.

Colour blindness testing was conducted, essentially that they must be able to distinguish between shades of red or shades of blue. The Ishikawa test plates were used.

In the afternoon, the referees were tested for their physical fitness. Half the group were alternated between the running tests and the broad jumping test. The 50 m sprint had to be completed in less than 8.5 seconds (for the male) and (10.6 seconds (for the female) in groups of two at a time. There were quite a few injuries with referees pulling hammies, groin muscles and calf muscles, and bung knees proved to be a problem for some. The worst injury was a complete hamstring tear to one Australian referee. It is interesting to note some difference in medical treatment of injuries where the Korean way is to drain the bleeding and then use acupuncture to stop or ease the pain and continue action. The Australian and western way is to ice the injury and rest the injured area.

In the broad jumping tests, referees had to clear 2.1 metres (male) or 1.5 metres (female). The invigilators were the students of Woosuk University and they did not give any favours. Even the slightest of touch on the line or crossing the lines in the jump were counted out. The camaraderie amongst the referees were great as we all cheered for each other and to give each other encouragement to clear the jumps or the sprints. The summer weather was very hot and the 1,200 meter run was scrapped to the joys of some but also to the disappointments of some.

By the end of the day, there were many sore referees and each had a story to tell, some were convincing themselves they could have done better if better prepared, while others passed with flying colours and did not seem bothered. It was interesting to note that those older referees were at a disadvantage to the younger ones. There should have been different limits set for different age groups like the different weight categories for players.

On the dreaded 4th day, the referees had to do practical hand signals and organizational courtside procedures. What was so dreadful about the 4th day is that most had sore muscles from the previous day's physical efforts. Bending down to practice the knock-down counts were a challenge, including those swifty cross leg movements to the sides. The maestro referee chairman of Korea taekwondo Association, Mr Sim Myong Goo was on hand to go through these paces with all the referees. Standardization was being sought, but nonetheless, each referee still had their individual style and flare to showcase themselves. The Aussies group stayed together in this practice phase and camaraderie was evident.

During the court procedural practices, each continental group showcased their particular style and was refreshing. In my mind the mix of African-Oceania group did very well as compared to the European group or the Pan American group.

The 5th day was reviewing feedback of previous matches in video format to highlight the penalty actions of players. The WTF wanted to ensure prohibited acts must be punished and there must be consistency amongst all referees from all regions. This was a very good learning tool and there should have been more discussions on these. Video analyses were shown of prohibited acts such as falling down, holding, grabbing, evading and stepping out of boundary line. More referee practical scoring continued, only this time we practiced on scoring watching matches on video. There should be more consistency on this as everybody had only just the one view – that of the cameraman's view. All scoring scenes were collated into a montage of movements and the flurry of actions and points scoring was very fast indeed and not like a normal match situation. The lectures on competition rules continued as also psychological aspects of refereeing.

The 6th day was testing day for match scoring. Referees were paired in groups of 4 in 4 different stations comprising a total of 16 referees. I was paired with the African and some Pan American referees. It would have been better to be paired with referees from one's own country or from one's own continental region as scoring profiles is expected to be more consistent. Anyhow I was happy in the test as my score was almost identical to my grouping station from Africa and Pan America.

The referee hand signals were tested in groups of 5 at a time. The test itself was simple, but because there were 6 evaluators, and everyone watching your every move, nobody wanted to make any mistakes. It was not an ideal situation and any mishap or every delay in action was quickly noticed.

The 7th day was the last day and by this time everybody was looking forward to finishing. Each referee was tested for their English oral speaking and understanding capability. The Aussies had no worries, but those from non English speaking countries did not favour this session. English is considered the universal language to be used by the International Referee, hence the English speaking test.

Referees who did not pass their initial 50 metre sprinting test or the broad jump were allowed one more try, and there were grinders after this second chance. Some did not do well and those injured from the initial test were unable to take up the second chance.

The written and theory test was last, and 4 separate rooms were used. I was in a room that did not have the best air-conditioning and obviously sweated (as in hot conditions) through the test period.

The closing ceremony was the penultimate with well wishes from the organizers such as Mr Jin Suk Yang, the WTF Secretary General, Mr Soo Nam Park, WTF Vice President, Mr Eui Min Ko, Technical Director, Mr Kyong Mong Lee, Education Chairman, Mr Hong Ki Kim, Referee Chairman, Mr Sim Myong Goo, Technical Committee Vice Chairman, Professor Jeong from Kyung Hee University, Professor Steve, special assistant to the Secretary General.

All well that ends well, and everybody wished each other best of luck for the 1st phase selections, until we meet in the Olympic qualifications for the 2nd phase selections or miss out – Sayonara, until next Olympics.

Kim Seng
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