

Athletes Left Lonely as Championships Fail to Draw Big Crowds

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Soldiers filing in to the Luzhniki Stadium for the World Athletics Championships as audience members look on. **Vladimir Filonov / MT**

A record number of delegations came out to compete at the World Athletic Championships in Moscow this week in what the organizers had hoped would be a veritable extravaganza of sport. But as the competition stretched on, there was a growing sense of unease that the 1,974 athletes were not going to be joined by equally impressive crowds.

Only a few sections of the 81,000-seat Luzhniki Stadium filled up for the championships' opening weekend, which featured remarks by President Vladimir Putin at the opening ceremony and the highly anticipated 100 meters race with Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt. The situation only got worse as the work week began.

"When you compete with a lot of people around the stadium, you have a very great feeling because the people support you. That's great for the mind," said Italian middle-distance

runner Margherita Magnani, who competed Sunday morning in front of a sparse audience.

Organizers have made visible efforts to fill the stands. Joining the sparse die-hard sports fans have been pensioners and students who received free tickets from their Moscow district administrations, young athletes from the regions, company employees in matching shirts and groups of grim-looking soldiers.

Ticket availability would not seem to be an issue for your average Muscovite either. Prices for sessions started at 100 rubles, and about 240,000 tickets were given out for free through the city district administrations. Another batch of tickets was sent to young athletes and coaches from outside the capital.

Despite these measures, the stands have usually remained noticeably empty in contrast to the billions of television viewers expected to watch the championships from a record number of territories where the events are being broadcast.

Some Russian athletes complained that track and field is not popular in the country, while foreign athletes like Magnani were left disappointed by the lack of energy in the stadium.

Magnani competed at the 27th Summer Universiade last month in Kazan and said there were always people in the stands there, regardless of the event or the time of day. She added, however, that while there were bigger audiences in Kazan, it was more exciting to compete at the World Championships because its awards are more meaningful.

Representatives of the International Association of Athletics Federation, the leading world track and field body, made subtle digs at local organizers for not doing enough to promote the event.

"I've seen a lot of references to the Universiade," said IAAF president Lamine Diack in April during a meeting with Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, RIA Novosti reported. "When I was at a sports forum in Kazan, President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev only talked about Kazan and Sochi."

Diack's words apparently spurred organizers to put up posters around Moscow advertising the event. The IAAF announced at the end of July that 80 percent of the tickets had been sold and that hardly any were left for the final competition days, though the lack of people in the stands during the actual events has suggested otherwise.

The event attendees, whether long-standing or casual sports fans, have seemed to make sincere attempts to lift the energy in the stadium. A group of elderly women from the city's southern Zuzino district came to Wednesday morning's qualifying sessions fully equipped, with newspapers to sit on, kisel to drink and the patience to figure out the rules of the various contests.

At first they strained to see the scoreboards and asked wide-ranging questions, including "Why is that man running in the opposite direction?" and "Why is there a net at the end of the field?" But by mid-morning, they were passionately shouting "Come on, darling! Come on, smarty!" at Yelena Nagovitsyna as the 5,000-meter runner made her laps around the track.

"I looked at Yelena Isinbayeva's [performance] on Tuesday. It was very impressive for me

because Russian people are very emotional and very close to the athlete," Magnani said of the Russian pole vaulter's gold medal night, which drew some of the week's largest crowds to Luzhniki.

But many Russians opted to direct their emotion at television screens while sitting at their dachas rather than go to the stadium in person.

Antonina Makhina, the 1980 Olympic silver medallist in the single sculls, did not attend the events at Luzhniki but watched some of them from her dacha in the Moscow region.

Locals prefer to spend their days in the cool and quiet comfort of their garden plots instead of in the sweltering heat at the stadium, Makhina said. Temperatures at the stadium reached 30 degrees Celsius on Sunday, creating problems for some race walkers, but have dropped noticeably since then.

Attendance levels were quite different during the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, despite the similar weather conditions.

"All the stadiums were full. The athletes' relatives alone filled up entire stands," Makhina said.

Russian Olympic Committee head Alexander Zhukov was quick to give assurances that there will not be any problems filling the venues in Sochi when the city hosts the Winter Olympics in February.

"I am confident that in Sochi there will be full stands for all the competitions," Zhukov said. "You can tell this already from the way people are buying tickets. The tickets are sold online now, and they are snatched up within the first hours that a new batch is posted."

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