

FILIPINO WORLD CHAMPS IN PRAGUE

By Judith Pagsuyuin-Hakim

Secretary General, Philippine Dragon Boat Federation

Having traveled with the Philippine National Team for past 3 world championships, I am still no expert. Each of the events brought new experiences and knowledge. Every championship gave opportunity for the athletes to seek new frontiers of the sport and to surmount every obstacle.

The recent edition in Prague, Czech Republic, ours and my 4th world championships, will be forever etched in my heart. We had the shortest possible time to prepare for it, in terms of logistics and finances. I now attribute it to destiny. We were meant to be there.

The back to back gold medal victory in both 200-meters of the Premier Open and Premier Mixed events gave us a feeling of being proud to be a Filipino. Initially, we dreamt of singing our National Anthem at least once. We couldn't be more proud to sing it again at the awarding ceremonies.

Truly, we took the world by storm as fellow athletes from various countries began trooping to where we are to be able up to trade with our uniforms or whatever item that has a Philippine flag on it. Exchanging uniforms after the Games is one of the fond traditions of our sport.

We also brought along with us some extra uniforms and souvenir shirts which we sold to raise additional needed funds. Printed in our shirts is our battle cry, "What can you do in 00:41.91" This is actually our world record time from the 2007 Sydney world championships in 200m.

As records would have it, the 200-meter event truly belongs to the Philippines. We broke our own record by clocking 00:40.02 in the Premier Open through a heart-stopping race against the great China team.

What's more, we set a new record in the Premier Mixed with a time of 00:43.50. Our Mixed Team had 9 outstanding female athletes who competed for the first time in the world championships.

We capped our journey in Prague with a medal tally of 2 Gold and 1 Silver medal. We bested our previous tally in Sydney of 1 Gold, 1 Silver and 2 Bronze. It was a tough challenge for everyone.

SURVIVING PRAGUE

Good thing the heavens was literally on our side. It was hot and sunny during the competition days and the Organizers even reminded everyone to drink lots of water or fluids and pre cautioned us regarding heat stroke.

At the University where the male athletes are billeted had several apple trees where they could harvest for free. Accommodation at the campus comes with free breakfast, while the Organizers offered lunch packages. Our athletes took turns in cooking our dinner.

Again, it was a big help for our delegation that we brought with us a 50-cup rice cooker, 1 sack of rice and canned goods. We did minimal marketing of chicken, beef and vegetables.

However, our women athletes had a bigger sacrifice in terms of logistics and finances.

The support from the Philippine Sports Commission could only cover for 25 pax. And because our

journey was primarily to defend the world title, it was the Men's Team that had priority. The Federation and the athletes had to find measures in its quest to set a milestone and give equal opportunity to its female athletes who are deserving of a slot in the world championships.

Female National Athletes cannot afford to avail the package offered by the Organizing Committee amounting to \$70/day per pax.

They stayed in a hostel and needed to commute to get to the nearest accredited hotel in order to join the Men's team bus going to the Racice Regatta Course located 45 minutes away from the city. However, the bus spells paying \$18/day per pax for everyone.

Hence, our women's team prepared for their breakfast, lunch and dinner.

HEROES RESCUED

Prior to the trip, communications had been made with our Philippine Embassy in Prague through the Department of Tourism. Endorsements for processing of visas were also obtained.

Logistical support was then requested from our Embassy to support our delegation.

They were there from the time we arrived at the airport to welcome us. They cheered, waved flags and brought food during the racing days. They hugged and waved us goodbye at the airport. If only for that, I am truly proud that I am a Filipino. For all the support extended, I will forever be grateful. Thank you to Sir Mersole , Sir Adrian, Bong, Ryan and everyone.

Our delegation had the distinction of having no less than our Ambassador, H.E. Regina Irene Sarmiento, rallying behind our athletes at the world championships. We thank Her Excellency for her great support.

The fluctuation in the foreign currency conversion rate has further shrunk our financial resources. As the Organizers would only accept Czech Round, Iris our Federation treasurer and I went to the Embassy to request to be referred to a reliable money exchanger. We had in tow a fellow delegate from Japan, Mr. Makoto Shobu, who was impressed by the idea of getting in touch and support of the Embassy.

And since there was no event for our female athletes in the 1000-meter event, this gave them a day to visit our Embassy in Prague where they were treated to a sumptuous lunch. The office is located just a few steps into the famous Prague landmark which is Old Town Square leading up to the Charles Bridge. What a magnificent place! And we thank Sir Ryan for being our tour guide.

I was more than happy to see the delighted faces of our female athletes. All the ordeals they had to go through seemed to have gone with the wind.

We highlighted our short city tour with our visit to the Infant Jesus of Prague Shrine.

Together, we prayed for our team's victory and we thank God for bringing us to Prague.

LOCAL SUPPORT

Our dragon boat community has great belief in our National Team.

For the first time, a Send-Off party was organized at the Rowers Den located at CCP Complex as a show of support for our bid in the world championships.

During the local regatta, club team members also purchased the souvenir shirts intended to inspire our athletes. UNILAB gave multi-vitamins.

We sought financial assistance and found benefactors, supporters and friends along the way. Fellow athletes and colleagues also gave monetary support. No support is too little.

Our women's team made a courtesy call to Senator Manny Villar just 2 days before the team's travel to Prague. He promised to give support once we report back to him after the competition. Yet before we left his office, he gave 50,000 that helped us settle the bill for the travel health insurance.

Fortunately, a long time supporter, Ms. Jane Co from Pacific Star Travel also provided loaned air tickets for our women athletes through a deal with PDBF President Marcia Cristobal.

Looking back, it took Sports Unlimited show of ABS-CBN Channel 2, during their coverage of the dragon boat racing event in Camarines Sur hosted by Governor LRay Villafuerte in May of this year, to call the attention of the Philippine Sports Commission and the public regarding the world record of our Philippine Dragon Boat Team. PSC Chairman Harry Angping responded positively and gave the go-signal for our trip.

With barely 3 months, our team also made a sacrifice with the support of the Administration of La Mesa Dam that enabled them to train two to three times a day for the month of July, unaffected by constant rains that hit the country during that period.

Members of the team is immensely thankful to a long-time supporter, Ms. Loida Valenzuela, their food caterer in La Mesa Dam. Thank you for taking care of our athletes each time at the peak of their training.

SENTIMENTS OF A DRAGON

While in Prague, I was team manager for the Men's Team while Ms. Marcia Cristobal and Ms. Annabelle Tario took care of the Women's. Even without them telling me, I knew they were shelling out some personal money for the expenses.

My regular solitary 1 kilometer walk to the metro station to buy some food, attend the Congress or visit the Embassy filled my mind with so many thoughts for our National Team.

Much as I hate to romanticize it, I could not help but feel like one of the generals who is sending a troop to a battle. Our athletes are world class and they deserve all the support they could get. They should only prepare and think about the competition.

Hence, all efforts are to remove politics in the sport. We aspire to uphold the ideals of Olympianism by fostering excellence, discipline, friendship and peace through sports.

So many emails and text messages have been sent before, during and after the Games.

We lack the time to be more prepared. We do not have the fancy competition uniforms, the latest edition of technology enhanced paddles. What we lack in material things, we probably had more in

spirit. The federation officials and coaches did everything it could.

Foreign athletes mistook us as a junior team. They could not believe we are competing in the Premiere events. We did not have the height.

We had a debatable lost in the Premier Mixed 500m, yet we found comfort in the claps and handshakes of foreign teams who knew we fought a good fight.

Even the 5th ranking in the 1000m was something to be proud of.

Comparatively, I knew this was by far the most difficult world championships. We did last minute efforts in raising the funds. I am grateful the Organizers trusted us. I am grateful our Embassy donated additional funds. Our women's team also came up with proceeds of their shirt sales. I exchanged the remaining \$50 dollar bill I have in my pocket. I cried after stepping out of their office when I finally settled our outstanding balance. It was while the final ceremony was taking place on the final racing day. And I was their last customer, so to speak.

Figuratively and literally, our delegation took their hats off to our Ambassador and the rest of our kababayans, we gave them our uniform caps with embroidered Philippine flag.

There are no regrets. What remains is the great intention we carried for Dragon Boat sport. We all have great memories of the world championships that will last for a lifetime.

Nothing is truly impossible.

Amid all the texted and emailed messages sent across the globe, one statement was clear and witnessed by fellow athletes from various nations, we have the heart of the champion.