

What can we learn from former Olympic volunteers? Interviews with 1988 Olympic Game volunteers

May Kim, University of Florida

Chul Won Lee, Yonsei University

Tae Jun Chon, Yonsei University

Byung Joo Song, Yonsei University

Ji Hoon Chae, Yonsei University

Cha Cha Nam, Seoul Olympic Sports Promotion Foundation

**Management/Leadership
Session 21**

**Saturday, May 31, 2008
9:30 AM - 9:55 AM**

**Presentation (25-minute)
Abstract 146**

Volunteer involvement of the Olympic Games started in early 1900s and has been an indispensable component of the Olympic Games ever since (Kennett, 2005). Since Los Angeles in 1984, twenty to sixty thousand volunteers have worked in each Olympic Games (Kennett). Recently, Olympic researchers have focused on the long-term effect of the Olympic Games and called it the "Olympic legacy". The majority of their studies focus on tangible aspects of Olympic legacies (e.g., architecture, public and sport infrastructures, urban planning, economic impact, and tourism development); however, intangible Olympic legacies are not also indispensable, which include production ideas and cultural values, popular memory, education, experiences, and voluntarism (International Olympic Committee, 2002). It is very notable that volunteering in mega sporting events has changed the perception of volunteerism and increased numbers of volunteers in various areas of host countries. Indeed, Koreans' general understanding of volunteerism has improved and actual volunteer participation has also increased dramatically in last two decades after Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. Also, Athens Olympic organizers believed that volunteerism in Athens Olympic Games was the first positive trend in volunteerism in Greece (Fryar, 2004). The United Nations agreed to help out volunteering training for 2008 Beijing Olympic Games because UN believes volunteerism of Beijing Olympic Games can be a great opportunity to promote volunteerism in China (the United Nations, 2007).

Korean researchers have pointed out a spirit of mutual help, interdependence with neighbors, as the origin of volunteering (i.e., joint-cultivation, neighborhood crime watch, and religious and cultural meetings, Kim, 1999) and many of these traditions has continued since then. However, the modern concept of volunteering has started in 1900s when Christianity and democracy came from western countries. Since then, except for a few international volunteer organizations (e.g., YMCA, Red Cross, Bokji.net, N.A.), the traditional format of volunteering was not pervasive in Korean society until 1980s. Despite the situation above, the official volunteer council for 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Olympic Games was established in 1985. 27,221 people worked as official volunteers of 1988 Olympic Games. Koreans have learned the meaning, necessity, and importance of volunteering through 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Olympic Games. According to IOC's (2000) report on volunteerism, not only social volunteering can help the Olympic volunteer activities but also the Olympic Games can facilitate the volunteer movement through well-planning and managing volunteering experiences. The situation of Korea after 1988 Olympic Games would be a very good example of the latter cases. Since then, the social perception of volunteering or volunteerism has changed in Korea and many individuals have actually participated in various volunteer works including special events, local communities, non-profit organizations, and international NGOs (Bokji.net, N.A.). Also, the word, "[Ja Won Bong Sa Ja]" which means "volunteer" is widespread and now became a very commonly used word. Also in last two decades, several volunteer organizations, volunteer organizing events, and corporate volunteer programs started and spread out. Also, volunteering/service learning became the mandatory course in the secondary school system (Hyun, 1996). According to Korean National Statistical Office (2006), only 5% of Koreans have volunteered in 1991 but now about 15% of Koreans have volunteered in 2006. Also, Korean government budgeted approximately \$125 millions in next five years to support volunteerism in Korea and expected to increase the volunteer rate up to 30% which is the similar to other developed countries (Park, 2007).

In spite of this uniqueness and significance, there are not enough studies to examine the impact of mega sport events on volunteerism of the host country. Especially, the micro perspective of the changes in volunteerism after the mega event has never been explored. Due to this need, the current study has focused on the micro perspective of this change through interviewing with 1988 Olympic volunteers. As the first stage of this study, five board members of Seoul Olympic Volunteer Association were interviewed extensively. Each interview took place at the location of each interviewee's preference and lasted approximately two hours. Four of five interviewees volunteered for both 1986 Asian Games and 1988 Olympic Games and all of them have been involved in Seoul Olympic Volunteer Association for last twenty years. Two of them were females. The interviewees were between 55 years old and 73 years old. That is, they were 35 years old and 53 years old in 1988. The interview consisted of the questions such as positive and negative memories during Olympic volunteering, volunteer experiences before and after 1988 Olympic Games, volunteer management issues, and perspective toward volunteering in Korea.

2008 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2008)

In general, the memories of interviewees regarding Olympic volunteering were very positive. They expressed strong commitment toward Olympic Games and patriotism. They were extremely proud about themselves as volunteers of 1988 Olympic Games which was the biggest international event in Korean history. Only the negative memories of them were the attitudes and behaviors of governmental employees who were less committed and responsible but were paid and received more benefits. Two of interviewees did some levels of volunteering (e.g., hospice volunteers) prior to Asian or Olympic Games. After the Olympic Games, everyone has participated in some levels of volunteering including both event volunteering and community volunteering and has encouraged others to volunteer. However, only a couple of them have actively participated in other volunteering opportunities since 1988 Olympic Games. Most of individual volunteering activities were done in international events while community volunteering activities were done through religious organizations. They possessed clearly different perceptions toward mega international event volunteering and community volunteering. Commonly, they pointed out the lack of event management experiences of Korean Olympic Committee (KOC) before and during 1988 Olympic Games as a problem. However, the more significant problems they mentioned were the poor support by Korean government and Seoul Olympic Sports Promotion Foundation (SOSPO) after the Olympic Games and low participation levels of younger volunteers in Seoul Olympic Volunteer Association, which results from Korean traditional culture. Unexpectedly, some of the interviewees did not see the current popularity of volunteerism in Korea as the positive trend because some volunteering activities were done not based on true altruism.

The opinions of these few former volunteers cannot represent the opinions of other 1988 Olympic volunteers because the current study interviewees are relatively older than many others and are a few who have been highly involved with Seoul Olympic Volunteer Organization. Thus, more interviews are necessary and are actually being conducted now. However, this kind of longitudinal research is needed for volunteer managers of the mega event (e.g., Beijing Olympic Committee) because it helps to set the long-term plan for volunteer management in the community and nation as well as the event. The detail interview results and applications of the study results will be discussed in the presentation.

References will be provided upon request.