

Snowballing problems hurting Vancouver Games



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A snowballing list of problems is starting to hurt Vancouver's reputation as Winter Olympic organisers desperately try to put a positive spin on a Games they have been planning for seven years.

Several of the glitches have been unavoidable, with the heavy snowfall at Whistler that forced disruptions to the alpine skiing unforeseeable.

But there have been plenty more that should never have happened with billions of dollars and huge amounts of time ploughed into preparations.

Even the domestic press is starting to get restless.

"No point in circling the wagons and pretending otherwise, of pointing to every bus that arrives on time, every security checkpoint that works flawlessly, every smiling, polite volunteer," the Globe and Mail said in a comment piece.

"The locals tried that in Atlanta in 1996, and it only made things worse.

"Better to face up to the facts, and while pressing on to the finish, try to understand how a massive and massively expensive enterprise so long in the works might have avoided the worst of what's happened."

The problems began ahead of the Games with cost overruns in the lead-up, and then a tragic accident got them off to the worst possible start when Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili was killed on a training run on the eve of the opening ceremony.

An investigation effectively said it was his own fault and nothing to do with the track, touted beforehand as the fastest in the world. The conclusion rubbed some people up the wrong way, including Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili.

"One thing I know for sure is that no sports mistake is supposed to lead to a death. No sports mistake is supposed to be fatal," he said.

Then at the opening ceremony one of the four pillars that support the central flame failed to rise out of the floor, leaving Catriona Le May Doan with nothing to light.

Subsequently, there was criticism from French Canadians that there wasn't enough French language used in the ceremony.

Even the location of the Olympic flame in downtown Vancouver -- behind a wire fence -- has been a source of controversy.

Then there is the problem of the buses, with several dozen drivers quitting, complaining about the long hours and poor working conditions. Buses also started to break down, others got lost.

Some of the worst problems have been at venues specifically built for the Winter Olympics -- the Whistler Sliding Centre and the Richmond Oval.

While luge is a dangerous sport and accidents happen, the machinery breakdowns at Richmond were embarrassing.

Speedskating finals were delayed on Sunday and Monday due to malfunctioning ice machines creating uneven surfaces.

A replacement was rushed from Calgary, hundreds of miles away.

"It has been a couple of tough days. We've been working through it. We apologise for the delays," said chief ice-maker Mark Messer.

And then there is Cypress Mountain. Organisers were keen to use it as a venue due to its proximity to Vancouver, but it has proved a headache from day one.

It has been badly affected by the warm temperatures which prompted a round-the-clock operation to bring in snow from higher elevations to make it ready.

Even then, organisers were forced into an embarrassing cancellation of 28,000 tickets for events at the venue over safety fears with rain washing away snow that made the general admission standing room spectator area unsafe.

Capping it off were protests at the biathlon on Tuesday over timing errors.

"This is the worst day of my career," admitted Norbert Baier, technical delegate at the Games and an IBU official.

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