

What Sports Can Learn from Hurricanes

Contributed by Joe Slowinski
 Sunday, 15 October 2006
 Last Updated Sunday, 15 October 2006

Article from USOC Olympian E-Magazine, Winter 2005, by Cathy Sellers, Manager of Coaching, for USOC. What Sports Can Learn from Hurricanes explores begin prepared for the unexpected. A great article for coaches to have a back-up plan or two.

WHAT SPORTS CAN LEARN FROM HURRICANES?

By Cathy Sellers, Manager of Coaching

After reading articles and watching with dismay what was happening in the South as a result of Hurricane Katrina, I came to the realization that the crisis management of a hurricane was very similar to preparing for an athletic competition. One article in USA Today (October 10, 2005) by Dennis Cauchon told the story of how one power company, Mississippi Power, restored power within 12 days to the landfall target area. Amidst the debacle of New Orleans, this company got it right. Their story applies to sport management more than ever. Everything that could go wrong, went wrong: their headquarter was destroyed, the disaster center flooded, all 195,000 customers were without power, they had low fuel supplies and finding housing, food and showers for more than expected relief help.

Let's think of our athletes as the good people of Mississippi and Louisiana. They depend on our actions to help them through the stress of competition. They expect us to have answers and to be able to solve problems immediately, if necessary. We have to have plans in place designed for flexibility and decision making. We saw the consequences of not having plans and waiting too long to make decisions and acting on those decisions in Louisiana, and I don't think any of us want that to happen to ourselves or our athletes.

Eight Key Lessons

1. Adopt a can-do… “git-r-done” attitude. Try to be proactive and visionary in your planning—look at each step that an athlete would take and what’s needed and have a plan.
2. Develop clear lines of responsibility. Finger pointing after the fact does not accomplish the task, so know who is responsible for what and give them the ability to get the job done. If you have financial parameters, give them the number that they can’t go over, and then let them do their jobs.
3. Be flexible and creative. If your team needs something and it’s not readily available, figure out how to modify something you can get your hands on. The most valuable document to Mississippi Power was not the emergency manual but a phone directory with the names and numbers of people who could get things done.
4. Think ahead and have an idea of what resources you might have. For example, you shipped all the uniforms to an overseas location: a) the shipment was broken into and all the larges were taken, b) customs is holding you hostage for a large sum of money to get your uniforms c) the boxes are too large to transfer to your housing. All of this has, will happen again and all can happen at the same time.
5. Be prepared; and back up your back up plans. Mississippi Power had a radio function on their cell phones; otherwise they would have been without communication. They figured out a way to bypass the over worked switches of their area code by using 1.800 numbers, when the cell phones did begin to work. They didn’t have a crane to set-up a microwave tower, so they used tackle and ropes.
6. Know the strengths of your staff. Develop a team concept with the staff. It’s not all about you, but it is all about the athletes. Who can work well in a crisis? Who can communicate calmly to the already stressed out athletes? Who knows the city the best?
7. Be clever—What do you have that can be used to get what you need? Pins, T-shirts, Sweatshirts—remember it doesn’t always have to be money.
8. Set your goals and expectations high. Have daily meetings with the staff to make sure things are going smoothly. Make it a challenge to eliminate anything that may cause a problem for an athlete-- before it happens. Share the responsibilities and the expectations with the staff. Give praise when it happens.Unlike a disastrous hurricane, sports have the option to practice their “management game plan” at other events— local competitions, National Championships, World Championships, etc. It is important for the staff of other competitions to share how the “management game plan” can be improved.

We all saw a better response to Hurricane Rita than Katrina, because the agencies involved had a better idea of what

potentially can happen, what the needs could and might be, the issue of transportation and fuel needs. We need to think of our events in the same manner and be more like Mississippi Power.