

Something very historic happened this year. Bridge was included as a sport at the Asian Games – the largest multi-sport event after the Olympics. Held every four years, the 2018 event took place in two cities in Indonesia – Jakarta and Palembang – with 11,720 athletes from 45 countries participating in 40 sports.

Intense lobbying by the host nation succeeded in bridge making its debut and six events were approved – Men's Pairs, Women's Pairs, Mixed Pairs, Men's Teams, Mixed Teams and Supermixed Teams. The last category is a new event having made its first appearance only very recently – a team comprises of a Men's Pair playing against a Women's Pair. Fourteen countries took part in the bridge programme, each limited to one team per category and up to three pairs for the pairs events, with an overall maximum of 24 players – known as athletes (*obviously*).

China topped the medal tally with three golds, one silver and two bronze, followed by Chinese Taipei (1-2-1) and India (1-0-2).

Playing in a multi-sport event is very different from the usual bridge championships. First, there were multiple regulatory bodies to report to. Besides the NBO there was the local Olympic Council, Sports Ministry and various departments within it. Multiple deadlines were imposed.

Second, as the World Bridge Federation is part of the IOC, and the Asian Games are organised by the Olympic Council of Asia, the anti-doping regulations are more precise. Athletes undergo medical examination and have to ensure they do not unwittingly consume any medication or health supplements which contain any of the prohibited substances (an extensive list). Athletes may be tested up to a month before and after the games and must say where they can be located during this period, as testing could be done by a number of related agencies both locally and internationally.

Third, one of the main differences is sponsorship. The main games sponsors have exclusive rights, so athletes were reminded that logos of other brands

must not exceed a certain size – on apparel, sporting equipment, and even worn accessories, such as scarves, headbands, shoulder bags.

Finally, for both privacy and security reasons, athletes were not permitted to post on social media and group photos without the written consent of others in the photos. Selfies and pictures of buildings were allowed provided the exact location is not identified. Exclusive broadcasting rights restricted competition pictures to still images only, so BBO could broadcast only at the venue but not worldwide. Many athletes were disappointed as their friends, or even regular BBO users could not follow the matches live.

Staying at the athletes' village (compulsory for most) was surprisingly relaxing, although we travelled to the venue under escort ('village' pictured). Bridge was lucky as the playing venue was just 1.5km away. Some had to travel more than 50km. Athletes were housed three to an apartment, which was comfortable. The food was nourishing (each item had the calorie, fat content and ingredients displayed for those interest in keeping count). The dining hall could seat 4,000 at any one time, but one could pre-plan meals to avoid the rush hour. There were plenty of social events organised in the evenings.

Staying at the village also provided a unique opportunity to meet athletes from other sports and other countries, and the exchange of sporting pins was a useful ice-breaker. We were also given the opportunity to watch other sports.

Opinion among other athletes was somewhat ambivalent about the inclusion of bridge – most were not familiar with it, although chess has been 'in' for a while. In Malaysia we garnered some publicity in newsprint and on television. After all, the oldest Malaysian athlete in the contingent, at 81 years old, was from bridge. Let us hope that the success of bridge at the Asian Games might translate into inclusion into an Olympic programme soon.

*David Law was the Malaysian Bridge Team Manager at the Asian Games, and one its athletes.*

