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FOCUS Over the Finish Line

A true spectacular, the Asian Winter Games went off without a hitch in Kazakhstan in 2011, not only putting the country on the sporting map, but also bringing prestige to the national team, which triumphed at the games to enormous fanfare.

As the largest sporting event ever hosted by Kazakhstan, the Seventh Asian Winter Games were held in Astana and Almaty between January 30 and February 6, 2011. A total of 843 athletes competing for 69 medals from 27 countries participated in events held at 11 different venues.

In preparation for the games, the government created the Organizing Committee of the Games (AWAGOC), as well as two administration bodies from the host cities. The AWAGOC employed a paid staff of 500 in addition to 3,500 volunteers. Between 2006 and 2011 the government allocated \$1.4 billion for construction and improvements. A 15,000-person sports complex was constructed in Astana, in addition to the renovation of Central Stadium, Baluan Sholak Sports Palace, Medeo Skating Rink, and Shymbulak Ski Resort. Astana Arena, which is used for international soccer matches during the year, was completed in 2009 at a cost of \$185 million.

A significant level of funding was also allocated to the upgrade of transportation facilities, and Almaty Airport was renovated, with a second runway constructed in 2008. Other investments included the expansion of the nation's road system and the construction of a light rail network between venue locations. Further funds were set aside to increase the capacity of Kazakhstan's power network. The athletes' village, on the other hand, was financed by the private sector. Many national and international companies became sponsors of the games, including Air Astana, Nokia, Kcell, Halyk Bank, and Longines.

The games were broadcast on two national television channels and in 99 other countries around the world. The government recouped \$232 million alone from the sale of broadcast rights. The motto of the games was "Unity of Purpose, Unity of Spirit", a saying chosen to highlight the spirit of friendship and cooperation between the participating nations. The logo of the competition resembled a nomadic cartwheel, a symbol of motion and progress. The snow leopard was chosen from among Kazakhstan's fauna as the mascot of the games for its strength, speed, and endurance. For three weeks a torch relay took place through each region of the country, culminating in its arrival during the opening ceremony.

The opening ceremony was held in Astana Arena before a crowd of 30,000. President Nazarbayev declared the games open with officials from the IOC looking on. Local opera singer Nurzhamal Usenbaeva sang "Flames of the Asiad", a piece selected after a nationwide competition in which 105 artists participated and people voted by SMS. The athletes of each participating nation paraded around the stadium, followed by the Kazakhstani national team, which received a loud ovation from the local crowd.

The Kazakhstan national team enjoyed an unprecedented level of success throughout the games, and overall the team won 32 gold, 21 silver, and 17 bronze medals. By comparison, Kazakhstan had won 18 total medals and six gold medals at the 2007 games. Japan and South Korea tied for second, earning 13 gold medals each, with China taking fourth spot on 11 gold. The Kazakhstani team won gold medals in both men's and women's ice hockey. The home team also took home gold medals in figure skating, alpine skiing, and several other events. The national team closed out the games by winning four gold medals on the last day of competition.

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Over the Finish Line

REVIEW

Work & Play

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