

RIO OLYMPICS: Q&A WITH AN OLYMPICS OFFICIAL

BY JAY THOMAS - RIO OLYMPICS OFFICIAL

[HTTP://WWW.USASWIMMING.ORG/DESKTOPDEFAULT.ASPX?TABID=2557&ALIAS=RAINBOW&LANG=EN](http://www.usaswimming.org/desktopdefault.aspx?tabid=2557&alias=rainbow&lang=en)

Fellow USA Swimming officials. First – I am honored to represent you at the 2016 – Rio Olympic Games. It was an experience of a lifetime. It was an experience that buckles your knees, causes your eyes to well up at the most unexpected times. At times it was surreal. I sincerely appreciate the opportunity you gave me to serve.

Over the 8 days of competition, I received many direct and indirect questions about various aspects of this Olympic experience. I will do my best to try and answer some of those questions as well as give some insight to some of the behind the scenes scoop from an official's perspective.

I will try to give you a realistic understanding of what and why of the way things happen. In NO WAY should any of these comments be construed as criticisms or complaints. We all participate or run events and realize that at times we must adapt and overcome. Call an audible sometimes – that happens at every level of meet – The Olympic Games is no different

Q. How long have you been officiating?

A. Became a USA Swimming official in 1995. (The only reason I remember that is that I still have that rule book.)

Q. What other big meets have you worked?

A. I have had the honor of serving in various roles in meets like: LSC Championships, Sectionals, Junior Nationals, Senior Nationals, World Championship Trials, Olympic Team Trials, Pan American Games, Pan Pacific Championship, World Championships, NCAA Championships, YMCA Nationals, USMS Nationals.

Q. What was the travel like to Rio?

A. My routing was from Fort Lauderdale-Atlanta-Rio de Janeiro. Due to summer thunderstorms in both Fort Lauderdale and Atlanta, I misconnected on the Atlanta to Rio flight and was delayed by 24 hours in ATL. Most travel to international competitions has a 24 hour buffer built into the itinerary for account for situations like these. I arrived in Rio 24 hours late, but still in time for our first evolution – uniform issue. Yes – I was a zombie for the 7 hour uniform issue process – it was all a blur.

Q. Why did uniform issue take so long?

A. There are several unique things about the Olympic Games. First is the scale – it is a huge event. 28 sports over 19 days. Each sport has officials and volunteers and they all need uniforms. Start doing the math and it is an amazing undertaking. About 3 hours of the process was travel to and from the uniform center. The uniform issue center was in a warehouse district that is used to store and construct the famous Rio de Janeiro Carnival floats.





Q. Speaking of volunteers – how many were there?

A. The Olympic movement transcends borders. The Olympics are magnetic – they draw the best out of people. At the uniform center they published that they would be serving 50,000 volunteers uniforms. Rio2016 Organizing Committee said they received 242,757 applications from 191 countries to volunteer. @ 60% of the volunteer applications came from Brazilians the other 40% came from every corner of the world. Everywhere you look around the city were volunteers in Yellow tops, Khaki pants, and the famous Green shoes – they were amazing and were a major reason the games are a success.

Q. What was the daily routine like?

A. A little bit of background, all of the officials who were selected to work RIO2016 attended a three-day FINA World Officials Clinic in Rio last April. It was like recertification clinic. It included the Olympic specific protocol and procedures that were unique to this event and this pool. It was a like a combination recertification and formal pre-meet briefing. For this reason, the daily pre-session meetings were very short. Typically 5-10 min. in length. The briefings were conducted by the two Referees working that day. The meetings were scheduled 30 min. prior to each session.

The daily routine looked like this:

Bus pickup – Prelims – 11:00am, Finals – 8:00pm.

Briefing – 12:30PM/9:30pm

Prelims – 1:00pm / Finals 10:00pm

Arrival back at hotel – Prelims – 3:30-4:30pm, Finals 1:15-2:00am



Q: What were your assignments?

A: Day 1 – Chief Inspector of Turns (Chief Judge Equivalent) – Start End – Opposite Referee
 Day 2 – Stroke Judge – Referee’s Side

Day 3 – Turn End - Lane 4
Day 4 – Turn End - Lane 4
Day 5 – Turn End - Lane 4
Day 6 – Start End – Lane 5
Day 7 – Turn End – Lane 3
Day 8 – Turn End – Lane 6

Q: What was the assigned jurisdiction?

A: Start End and Turn End Turn Judges – after the starts and after the turns – until the head breaks the surface of the water. Prior to the turns and the finish – the last 5m of strokes and kicks prior and the touch.

Stroke Judges – Wall-to-Wall – from the start to the finish.

Q: What was the Protocol for a Turn Judge – Start End.

1. All Turn Judges stand at the short whistles.
2. All Turn Judges move to just behind the bulkhead at the long whistle.
3. At the start signal – step up on and to the front bulkhead and observe. When the swimmer is out of your jurisdiction – the judge steps to the back of the bulkhead unless a violation is observed.
4. As the swimmer approaches the 15m mark on the return lap, the judge steps forward to be in a position to judge the last 5m of the stroke and the final touch.
5. At the finish of the race, immediately after the touch, the official steps down off the bulkhead and returns to their chairs unless a violation is observed.

Q: As a Turn Judge at the start end, what is different for a backstroke start?

A: At this event, the Turn Judges are responsible for the installation and removal of the backstroke starting ledges. At the beginning of the first heat of a backstroke event, the turn judge installs the backstroke ledge with the ledge set to the “0” position (at water level). An Omega Timing technician would check and verify the correct installation and setting of the device every heat. Here is the protocol we used.

1. All Turn Judges stand at the short whistles.
2. All Turn Judges move to just behind the bulkhead at the first long whistle.
3. At the second long whistle, the turn judges step up and move to the front of the bulkhead to observe that at least a toe of each foot is in contact with the touchpad (not completely on the ledge). If that observation is made – the judge immediately moves to the back of the bulkhead – this is the signal to the starter that the swimmers are in a legal starting positions.
4. At the start signal – step to the front bulkhead and observe. When the swimmer is out of the assigned jurisdiction – the judge steps to the back of the bulkhead unless a violation is observed.
5. After a short pause – the backstroke starting ledge was completely removed and placed on the bulkhead behind the block.
6. When all of that is completed – the judge repositions at the back of the bulkhead to be ready for the next observation.
7. At the final observation at the finish of the race – the judge steps down and returns to the seat.
8. When the swimmers have cleared the pool (to the sides) – the judge returns to reinstall the backstroke start ledge, then returns to the seat.

Q: What was the protocol for a Turn Judge at the turn end of the pool.

1. All Turn Judges stand at the short whistles.
2. All Turn Judges move to just behind the bulkhead at the long whistle.
3. As the swimmer approaches the 15m mark, the judge steps up and forward to be in a position to judge the last 5m of the and the turn.
4. After the observation is made the judge moves to the back of the bulkhead.
5. After the final observation – and after the last swimmer has passed the 15m mark outbound – the judges step off the bulkhead and return to their seats.

Q: How about disqualifications? I didn't see any hands raised?

A: In FINA, hands are not raised to signal a violation. Remember that judges move to the front of the bulkhead to make an observation. If a violation is observed, the judge making the observation remains at the front of the bulkhead and makes eye contact with the Chief Inspector of Turns (Literally the ONLY time you look at this individual while a race is underway or has just finished).

The Chief Inspector will radio the Referee that there is a potential disqualification to report. The Chief Inspector will send a Reserve Official (Spare) to relieve the official making the call. The Chief Inspector will send the official directly to the Referee to make their report. The main reason for the radio call is to prevent the scoreboard from being ranked and the results announced as official until the potential disqualification is reported and confirmed by the Referee.

Q: What type of DQ forms are used?

A: In FINA, we use a simple form where the Judge making the call writes out in longhand (no check-boxes here) what violation of the rules was observed. There is a place for the event number, heat number, lane number and for the judge to sign. An example of what an infraction might look like:

- At the 50m turn, the swimmer only touched the pad with one hand. (one hand touch in BR or FL)

- At finish of the race, the swimmer did not recover the arms over the water on the final stroke. (underwater recovery in FL).

Very short and concise with no elaboration necessary.

Q. Did you make any calls?

A. No – while swimmers were in my jurisdiction, the swimming was very clean and I did not observe any violations of the rules.

Q: How did you get on and off the deck – do you just show up at the chairs?

A: At high level FINA meets, officials parade on – and off the deck, usually to appropriate music. At this meet we paraded on deck to Coldplay's "Viva la Vida" – "I want to rule the world....." yes – the Olympic Games has a sense of humor too! I have paraded in to music from the Pink Panther and Get Smart at other high level meets.

After the officials all in position at their chairs, the Referees, Starters and "Commission" are introduced. At the end of the introductions, the Turn Judges are seated. At the end of the session, the announcer thanks the officials, and we parade off deck.

Q: I noticed Judges using heat sheets on while on deck. At our national level meets, we don't use heat sheets. What's up with that?

A: I think the primary reason is so that officials know exactly where we are in the program from a protocol standpoint. It is a pretty complex "Dance" and when all of the Judges are executing it correctly, their presence is not a distraction to the event and allows the crowd in the venue, and the Billions (what a crazy number) watching around the world to keep the focus on the swimming and the swimmers – not the Judge who just walked in front of a camera. I frequently

make reminder notes on my heat sheet – things like where the Victory Ceremonies fall in finals, reminder of what number the lap counter should be set to (FINA counts down - and officials do the counting.), other protocol notes that might be different to what we typically use at USA Swimming meets.

This venue only had one score board and it was located way up in the rafters at the turn end of the pool. Turn end judges can have difficulty keeping track of where they in the meet without a heat sheet, Judges would have been constantly turning around in our chairs to keep track of the session and even then, it would be difficult to know where they were in the meet.

Q: In prelims, it seemed like there were variations in the uniform and how it was worn.

A: Although the venue probably looked like an enclosed facility, it actually was a semi-open-air building. The exterior walls were actually a screen material. The grand stands had 8” holes under each seat to allow air flow. We were in Winter in the Southern Hemisphere. Rio de Janeiro is normally very temperate this time of year however we did experience several days of atypical weather. The first two days were very warm with the venue temperatures reaching the mid-to upper 80’s. We also had three days where storm systems dropped the overnight temperatures into the upper 50’s. Along with our uniform shirts, we were issued a matching windbreaker. On the cool days, we were given the option to wear the windbreaker which put some officials in short sleeves and some in long sleeves. As the afternoon wore on and it warmed up, some officials unzipped the windbreaker and some took them off.

Q: Did you march in the Opening Ceremony?

A: No – officials do not march in the Opening Ceremony. We did get to go to the famous Maracana stadium and watch the ceremony – it was amazing. The Maracana is located @1 1/2 hour from Barra de Tijuca (where we were housed). The first couple of days we were in Rio, there were some concerns with the transportation schedule for the games (see the Q&A regarding the scale of the Games). Transportation to the Maracana included a one hour bus ride to a Metro Station where we connected to dedicated trains to the Maracana. I will admit to some skepticism regarding the schedule – but the Rio2016 Committee pulled this one off to perfection. 70,000+ people arrived on time and without issue. At the conclusion of the Ceremony we returned to Barra arriving @2am.



Q: Where did you stay? How was the Village?

A: Technical Official’s do not stay in the Village. We were housed at the Americas Barra Hotel (pronounced Baha). The hotel is located about 8km from the pool across the lagoon.

Q: Did you get to see other events?

A: Our schedule was such that to catch a bus to Olympic Park, catch event and make it back to the hotel and change in time to make our bus to prelims would not have been practical. There

were several days where some officials stayed after the prelim session and caught some events in the late afternoon.

Our credentials permitted our access to any aquatic event – meaning that we could attend Water Polo and Diving competition. On occasion we were admitted to other venues – trading pins and smiles went a long way to gaining access. There is a variety of reserved seating for Federation and other personnel. With the exception of the medal round of certain events, if you could get in a venue, seating was never an issue. I was able to catch a couple of Team USA Water Polo matches, two diving sessions, and part of a Tennis session. Of course I got to see 15 sessions of swimming – so I saw plenty!

Q: How was hospitality?

A: We received breakfast at the hotel as part of our accommodation. At the pool, we were provided bag lunches and bag dinner – the bags for both were identical. The included a sandwich, fruit cup, salad and a dessert cup. I will say that the Chocolate Mousse cup was amazing.



Q: Underwater Lap Counters?

A: Omega Timing has designed an underwater lap counter system which is integrated with the timing system. Due to its relatively recent development, and that the rules still state that the Turn Judges signal the number of laps remaining to the swimmers, we used conventional lap counters concurrently. They operated perfectly for the competition.



Q: Whistle Starts Procedure

A: At these Olympics and other World Championship events I have attended, there is some variation to the whistle start procedures we are normally accustomed to. The reasons are two-fold. 1. Television, 2. crowd noise.

Prelims: All of the athletes exit the tunnel at the same time – report to their lanes and prepare to swim. There is music and announcement of the heat at this time. Finals: The athletes exit the tunnel one at a time and are introduced by name and country. Both sessions - No whistles are blown until the music comes down and that announcer – announces the heat number/or heat name – this signifies that TV is prepared for the heat. Based on the level of crowd noise –

which depending on which countries had representation in the heat (particularly Brazil!) – when the venue was sufficiently quiet – the Referee would blow the short whistles. If the venue remained quiet, the Referee would give the long whistle and begin the final portion of the start sequence. If the venue was not quiet, the Referee would instruct the announcer to ask for quiet in both English and Portuguese.

Q: Who was the Meet Referee?

A: There is no Meet Referee in a FINA Olympic or World Championship competition. There is a “Commission”. The Commission is a panel of three people who are charged with the oversight of the competition. They collectively take actions to keep the competition running smoothly and ensure the rules of FINA and the procedures stated in the Technical Manual (meet announcement equivalent) are adhered to.

For this competition the Commission members were:

Carol Zaleski – Chair of the FINA Technical Swimming Committee

Soren Korbo – Secretary of the FINA Technical Swimming Committee

Dale Neuberger – FINA Vice President and Technical Swimming Committee Bureau Liaison