

Beijing Air Pollution Will Kill A Few Olympic Athletes; Alarmed US Training Expert Takes Precautions

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Harsh prediction on consequences of China's air pollution; Olympic officials appear oblivious, but training experts codesign masks for athletes to wear around town, so they won't keel over from the smog in foul Beijing air, the worst in the world

China has ghastly pollution: the air, the water, and the very food it consumes and exports. Regattas for sailing in the Olympics are supposed to take place in waterways that are now choked with algae resulting from massive chemical pollution; thousands have been conscripted into algae cleaning efforts. No pet owner has forgotten the Chinese fake glycerine-in-actuality-ethylene-glycol that made its way into American pet food. I predict that several Olympians will die from plain old air pollution, especially in runners and cyclists.

[Thanks to the Wharton School]...Runners gagged as they limbered up and smog engulfed Hong Kong's Tsing Ma Bridge. Pollution index readings in February 2006 were at 149, and any over 100 is unhealthy, yet 40,000 runners in China's Hong Kong Standard Chartered Marathon, were unaware of the coming tragedy. Tsang Kam-yin, 53, 3-time marathoner, collapsed and died; 20 runners would be hospitalized, many for respiratory ailments and asthma attacks.

Wharton's professor John Zhang has called the Beijing Olympics a "coming-out" party for the world's most populous nation. Governments are investing billions in sports venues like the Bird's Nest stadium under construction and subway-line extensions, etc., to make the games a world-class spectacle. Indeed, China has cause to worry about its image.

Sun Weide, deputy director of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games, recently described the effort to bring Beijing's air pollution into line with global standards. The city has relocated more than 100 chemical, steel and pharmaceutical factories outside the city and replace 300,000 polluting taxis and buses with less-polluting vehicles and to replace coal furnaces with natural gas, rushing builders to finish construction before games so that dust from the building projects has a chance to settle, plus four new subway lines.

In 1998, Beijing recorded only 100 Blue Sky days with acceptable pollution and by 2005, the capital had 244 Blue Sky days. "We will meet air quality standards of the Chinese government and most cities of the world," he said. A cleaner capital could be the legacy of the 2008 event, but at the expense of the athletes' health? I don't think so! China needs much, much more than a quick-fix for its broader environmental crisis stemming from its weak legal system, corruption, poverty, two decades of industrial growth putting job growth ahead of the environment.

Factories spew toxins and particulates into the air; rivers are choked with sewage. Acidification has spread to 30% of China's cropland; the Georgia Institute of Technology reports that the range of ozone exposure in agricultural regions in the Yangtze River Delta is enough to reduce yields by 10%. 16 cities with the world's worst air pollution are located in China (World Bank). The Ministry of Science and Technology estimates 50,000 babies a year die from the effects of air pollution! Thousands of factories in the Pearl River Delta (like WalMart's) pollute Hong Kong. Chemical spills have flowed into eastern Russia, contaminating Russian drinking water.

Pan Yue, Vice Minister of China's State Environmental Protection, wrote: "China is dangerously near a crisis point" with its environment. A third of China's people drink substandard water and a third breathe badly polluted air, according to Pan. "True, China has made the kind of economic advances in three decades that required 100 years in Western countries, but China has also suffered a century's worth of environmental damage in 30 years."

Dr. Zhang is more forgiving. He says China is climbing out of deep poverty, and environmental damage is one price it has had to pay for new prosperity. He says the Chinese will present a modern city focused on environmental practices, a monumental sales pitch to other Chinese cities and the world, showing what great strides the country is making. (In this author's opinion, Beijing in reality will be little more than a short-term Environmental Potemkin Village!)

Even the United Nations Environment Programme is concerned: their recent report has findings about particulate matter, yet Du Shaozhong, Beijing's head of environmental protection, said in August 2007: "I am sure we will be able to ensure good air quality during Olympic Games."

The U.S. Olympic Committee's lead exercise physiologist, Randy Wilber, described questions from athletes in a discussion with Juliet Macur of the International Herald Tribune: "Should I run behind a bus and breathe in the exhaust? Should I train on the highway during rush hour? Is there any way to acclimate to pollution?"

"We have to be extremely careful and steer them in the right direction because if they thought locking themselves in the garage with the car running would help them win a gold medal, I'm sure they would do it. Our job, obviously, is to prevent that." Wilber has spent two years devising safe ways for athletes to face the air in Beijing. International Olympic Committee's president, Jacques Rogge, said he was confident the air would be clean because Chinese officials "are not going to let down the world." (This is delusional pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking). Rogge recalled that pollution was a concern before the Summer Games in 1984 in Los Angeles. Personally, I remember in 1984 visiting my alma mater, Occidental College (also one of Barack Obama's alma maters), and ran a mile on an Olympic Training track. Sadly, the carbon monoxide caused me to vomit at the end of the mile-classic carbon monoxide poisoning!

Wilber's research shows pollutants as "significantly higher" than they were at Athens or Los Angeles; he encourages athletes to arrive in Beijing at the last moment; he tests athletes for an exemption to use an asthma inhaler. He urges all to wear masks over their noses and mouths from the minute they step foot in Beijing until they begin competing! This runs the risk of offending the host country, creating political tension. I say, "So what? Why worry about offending the Chinese?"

Pollution levels in Beijing are five times above WHO standards for safety. Marathon world-record holder Gebrselassie has allergies; top women's tennis player Justine Henin has asthma; both have reservations re: Beijing's pollution.

Colby Pearce, Colorado track cyclist, saw smog floating inside Beijing's velodrome. "When you cough up black mucus, you say: 'O.K., I get it. This is a really bad problem we're looking at.' "

George Thurston, Professor of Environmental Medicine, said pollution's reactions are immediate. "For athletes, that means they will go into oxygen debt and cramps. Disastrous at the Olympics!" Heart attack risk rises with ozone and particulate matter, two of five pollutants affecting athletes (Carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide are the other three) "Ozone affects the lungs, and at high enough levels, it would cause fluid to come into the lungs. Particulate matter is breathed in, and particles deposit on the

lungs and pass through the lungs and into the bloodstream," deadly to marathoners, triathletes and cyclists. Wilber's lab co-designed an activated carbon filtration mask with 750 to 1,000 masks costing \$25 are part of Olympic gear. Do they block Carbon Monoxide? Doubtful...

Sandrine Tonge for the International Olympic Committee said each sport makes rules on what athletes wear in competition. Some athletes may wear masks during Olympic events, but Wilber said no Americans would do so. "It would be an embarrassment to the Chinese people if American athletes wore masks in the event. If that image were beamed around the world, it would cause problems."

This describes what Athletes will be breathing in Beijing. What will they be eating? More ethylene glycol mixed in with their Kung Pao Chicken? The best financed nations will be bring their own food and caterers, but nothing will prevent probable several deaths in Olympic athletes from air pollution.

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