

# Vietnam-hosted Asian Beach Games faces disinterest from teams, spectators

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**Sports of the ongoing 2016 Asian Beach Games Da Nang City, located in central Vietnam, are being played with a few to no spectators watching, while athletes and teams also show little interest in the Games.**

It has been three days since Da Nang kicked off the 5<sup>th</sup> season of the Asian Beach Games (ABG5) on Saturday, the event still receives lukewarm attention from local and tourist spectators despite being open to the public.

Apart from a few sports competed by Vietnamese teams such as Muay Thai, beach soccer, and beach handball that are spectated by a large audience in the late afternoons, most other sports at the ABG5, including beach volleyball and athletics, are being played with a few or even no spectators at all.

One reason for the lack of interest could be the organizers' failure to run communication campaigns to attract public attention to the event.

Along the beaches of My Khe, Son Thuy, Phuong Trang, and Bien Dong Park, where the Games' 14 sports are played, no signs or promotion banners with information on the venues and times of the ABG5 matches could be seen.

Nguyen Van Cu, a local near My Khe Beach, said he had seen people erecting tents along the beach every afternoon when he took a dip into the ocean, but "had no clue what sports were going to be played there."

“The organizers should have put up a sign on the sidewalk near the beach entrance with information on which sports are going to be played in the area and at what time. Sometimes spectators didn’t even know the rules, or even the names, of the sports they were watching,” Cu said.

Meanwhile, some sports at the ABG5 are being given the cold shoulder even by the participating teams, such as in the case of athletics.

Despite significant media attention for the sport, only a total of 200 athletes from ten teams, out of 41 teams, signed up for 14 athletic events at the ABG5.

Instead of running along the beach, as the name of the Games suggests, athletes were made to run on an abandoned piece of land nearby, the soil of which had been mixed with sand to form a running track.

In response to questions about why running events were not held on the beach, head of the ABG5 athletic event organizing committee Hoang Manh Cuong said the sand there was too soft and penetrable for the sports.

Cuong added that all venues for the sports had been approved by the technical subcommittee of the Asian Athletics Association prior to the commencement of the ABG5.

According to a member of the ABG5 organizing committee, the actual number of participating athletes at the Games is far lower than previously published estimates by the organizers.

Only 2,195 athletes from 41 teams are officially taking part in the 14 sports of the ABG5, compared to pre-Games estimates by the organizers of 3,000 to 4,000 athletes.

The number is not final, however, as four participating teams already withdrew from the ABG5 right before the opening ceremony.

The disinterest of fans and national teams in the Asian Beach Games has made it difficult for the Olympic Council of Asia to look for a country that agrees to host the event.

Tran Van Manh, general secretary of the Vietnam Olympic Committee, said on Monday that the next host country for the ABG has not been officially selected despite the conclusion of the ABG5 drawing near.

Manh added that the Vietnamese organizers still have no idea which country would receive the host flag for the 2018 Asian Beach Games at the closing ceremony next Monday.

# Host Vietnam tops 5th Asian Beach Games medal tally by a mile

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**Vietnam has taken the top spot at the fifth Asian Beach Games that concluded on Monday in Da Nang, however local experts are more concerned than thrilled as it gave little indication about the development of the country's high performance sports stars.**

Vietnamese athletes bagged 52 gold, 44 silver, and 43 bronze medals at the fifth edition of the Asian Beach Games (ABG5), held from September 24 until this morning.

In comparison, all-time ABG medal count champion Thailand was the runner-up with 36 gold medals, while sports giant China ranked third with 12 golds.

The unprecedented achievement of Vietnam's team at the event was not a cause for celebration however, as many believed it did not necessarily reflect an advancement in the country's high performance sports.

## **Medal 'indigestion'**

Vietnam sent a total of 320 athletes to compete in 14 sports at ABG5, setting an initial goal of claiming between 18 and 22 gold medals and making it to the top five in terms of medal count.

From day one until the last competition day of the Games on Sunday, Vietnam was consistently on top of the medal table with the number of gold medals increasing at an unexpected rate.

In athletics, for example, Vietnam exceeded its goal by a huge margin after snatching six gold medals having initially only aimed for one, while the host

country also dominated wrestling by collecting all seven gold medals available for the sport.

Nguyen Hong Minh, former director at the Department of High Performance Sports, attributed the team's over-achievement to the fact that Vietnam included too many indoor sports in a beach sports event, while scrapping other more popular beach sports like sailing, surfing, and parasailing.

**"It's a shame Vietnam doesn't have the capacity to organize such sports due to a lack of finance and athletes... Instead, we included in the schedule many indoor sports to our advantage such as wrestling, shuttlecock, vovinam, and traditional martial arts. It's no surprise that we ranked first," Minh explained.**

In addition, he said, most participating countries, except for a few such as Thailand, did not send many athletes to the Games since ABG5 was of little interest to them.

Tran Duc Phan, deputy general director of the Vietnam Directorate of Sports, added that not only did countries not send many athletes to Vietnam, participating athletes were not always the best representatives from their respective countries. "As a host nation, Vietnam picked our best athletes for the Games. However, it soon became apparent after ABG5 commenced that other countries did not respond accordingly... Even for beach volleyball, for example, the strongest teams in Asia did not compete," Phan said.

**A senior sports official described Vietnam's first place at ABG5 "unanticipated."**

### **Asian Beach Games given cold shoulder by sports giants**

ABG5 was not the first time an Asian Beach Games edition had been met with disinterest from sports giants. It is a fact that has been noticed since the first ABG in Bali, Indonesia, in 2008, according to Nguyen Hong Minh and Tran Duc Phan. At the 2016 ABG in Vietnam, Japan sent a team of 54 athletes, while the numbers for South Korea and China were 62 and 152 respectively, a far cry from Vietnam's 320 athletes and Thailand's 291 athletes to the same event.

Coach Tapsvi Karan Singh Panwar of India's sepak takraw (kick volleyball) team to ABG5 said he only brought his second formation to Vietnam since their best athletes are saving energy for the upcoming sepak takraw world tournament in Thailand.

The Indian coach said beach sports in his country could not compete in popularity with traditional sports, and that the majority of beach athletes in India were taken from indoor sports or school teams.

Similarly, most Japanese athletes to Da Nang were either young or substitutes that had not qualified for the Olympics or Asian Games. In fact, while Japan won four gold, three silver, and four bronze medals in wrestling at the 2014 Asian Games, the country's wrestling team to ABG5 fell far behind on the medal table compared to Vietnam.

Minoru Tsuitsui, a member of the Japanese Olympic Committee, said beach sports in Japan were more recreational than competitive, and that the country only focused on sports such as beach volleyball, beach soccer, and beach handball, or sports that are actually played on the beach.