

# Chen unfazed by Olympic-sized challenges

■ Taiwan's sports czar blends realism with support for 2020 Games dream

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You could forgive the head of Taiwan's National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (行政院體育委員會) if he questioned the sanity of the country's politicians. President Chen Shui-bian declared soon after the 2004 Athens Olympic Games Taiwan's goal for 2008 in Beijing would be seven gold medals.

Then former Premier Frank Hsieh declared last July that Taiwan would mount a bid to host the 2020 Olympics, adding that anybody who lacked confidence in the initiative was possessed by a virus that needed to be purged.

Never mind that Taiwan has won a total of two gold medals in its entire Olympic history, both of them in taekwondo at Athens in the 2004 Summer Games. Or that it has never hosted a major international multi-event competition and is woefully lacking in sports facilities.

Yet the man largely responsible to make these dreams come true, Council Chairman Chen Chuan-show (陳全壽), remains optimistic that the goals are worthy of pursuing, while being realistic enough to acknowledge that they are not likely to be achieved.

"For us, 2020 is just a target. I personally believe it will be extremely difficult to get the bid," said Chen, whose Cabinet-level council is charged with promoting participation in sports at all levels and developing elite athletes to rep-

boost in terms of building up our sports facilities and more aggressively developing our athletes," Chen said.

National prestige is also clearly on the line.

"With Taiwan's current situation, especially its entanglement with China, if we could hold an Olympics, it would raise our international status. We are an IOC national Olympic committee, so we have the right and are qualified to hold an Olympic Games," argued Chen, who may feel so strongly about the Olympics because he himself was a participant, representing Taiwan at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics in the decathlon and 100 meters.

Chen gained some optimism from a trip to Turin prior to this year's Winter Olympics, when Taipei finished fourth among seven cities to hold the 2009 IOC session that will choose the host of the 2016 Games.

Considering it was Taiwan's first-ever attempt at holding the meeting, the finish—ahead of Singapore, Riga, Latvia, and Athens but behind eventual winner Copenhagen, Cairo and Busan, South Korea—Chen felt the result was a pleasant surprise. He added that many delegates expressed favorable impressions of Taiwan.

But making a full-scale Olympic bid is a much tougher task. Just to earn consideration, Taiwan will need to fork out US\$650,000 to file an application and then meet certain IOC criteria, such as having adequate sports facilities and experience in holding international events, weaknesses that Taiwan is addressing after securing the right to host the 2009 World Games.

In truth, the World Games, with such offbeat events as korfbal, tug of war, fin swimming and ultimate Frisbee, is unlikely to capture much of the world's attention, but Chen believes they will serve a broader purpose.

"To be honest, I had thought for a long time that there was really nothing to the World Games. But I don't feel that way anymore after seeing them in Germany last year," Chen said.

"They will serve as a stepping-stone to hosting the 2011 World University Games and lead to greater social integration," Chen argued. "To the U.S., the event would be too small to have an impact, but because we've never run a large-scale competition, it will be a great challenge for us."

And one involving more than 4,000 athletes from over 100 countries that if handled well will boost Taiwan's credentials for more prominent competitions. It also has provided a reason—or an excuse—depending on your viewpoint—to build an NT\$5.3 billion 40,000-seat stadium in Kaohsiung (for the Games' opening and closing ceremonies) that Chen said could be expanded to a 70,000-capacity if the need arose.

## Facing down Goliath

In pursuing the 2011 World University Games, which will be awarded in January 2007, Taiwan will directly confront the behemoth that overshadows any talk of hosting international events: China.

Even for a competition as low profile as the World Games, tensions between China and Taiwan drew out the process of awarding the Games to Kaohsiung, according to the association charged with administering the event.

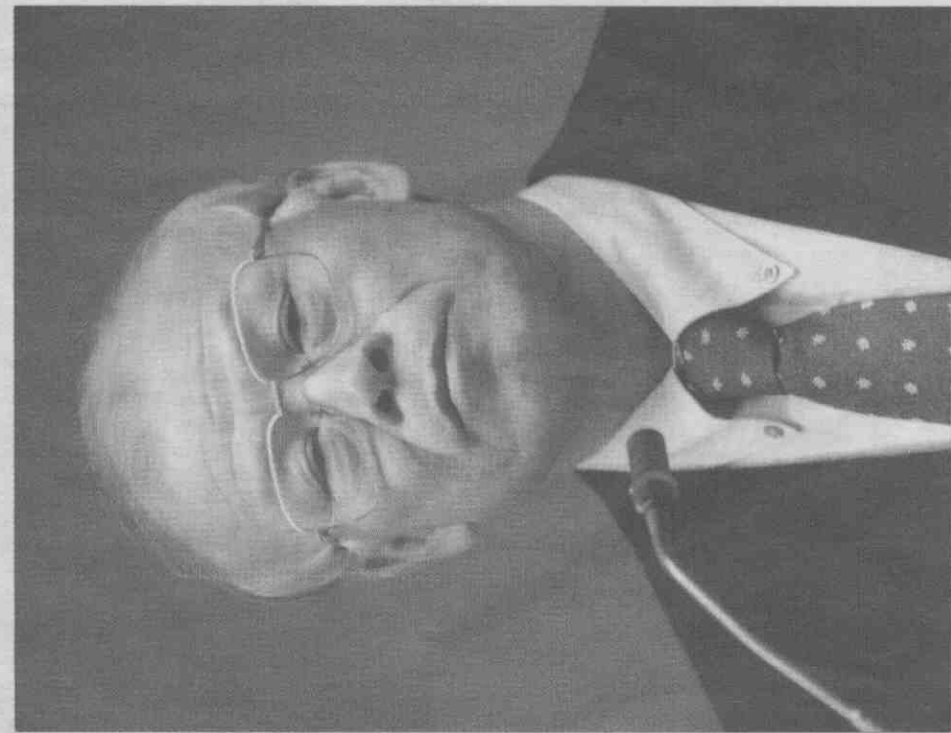
Taiwan lost out on the 2007 World University Games by one vote to Bangkok, which had China's support. And it was widely believed that Kaohsiung would win the right to host the 2002 Asian Games in 1995 before losing to Busan, South Korea because of the PRC's intervention.

Now Kaohsiung is expected to meet Shenzhen, China head on, along with a Canadian city for the right to host the 2011 University Games, an interesting gauge of how much pull China really has as a player on the international sports scene.

"I believe the chances of getting the bid are quite high, but we face a lot of competition," said Chen, remaining confident that Taiwan can rise above China's behind-the-scenes political maneuvering.

He's not quite as confident when it comes to another target set by a political leader: winning seven golds in Beijing in 2008.

"As the host country in 2004, Greece only won seven golds, so you can see it's a tough target. And



Chen Chuan-show, head of the National Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, has a tough task trying to put Taiwan on the international sports map.

Japan had high hopes for the Winter Olympics in Turin in 2006, and nearly ended up without even one gold," Chen explained.

The council is subsidizing the training of 21 elite athletes in the Olympic events of taekwondo (3), archery (8), badminton (1), table tennis (4), badminton (1), gymnastics (1), tennis (2) and weightlifting (1) to push for the seven golds.

"What the president expressed was his hope and expectation, so we can't say that's impossible. Since we got two golds in Athens, and came close in other events, I think we just have to wait and see. I'm not that pessimistic," Chen said.

Of course, the funding needs to be in place if there's any hope that giant strides can be made in the local sports arena. The council should feel fortunate with a budget of NT\$4.5 billion this year, nearly 70 percent more than the NT\$2.6 to NT\$2.8 it has worked with in recent years.

Chen made no bones that "it's not enough," and feels a target of 1 percent of the government budget—about NT\$16 billion—would be more in line with what's needed. At least on the budget issue, Chen feels he has an edge over other agencies.

"Sports is the one thing politicians of all colors seem to agree on and like to support," he said.

But that's not necessarily the case when it comes to chasing gold or bidding to host international competitions, when issues of Taiwanese identity and nationalism are bound to arise because of the "Chinese Taipei" moniker Taiwan competes under.

Chen has a very simple message: politicking doesn't help Taiwan's cause.

"It's impossible to completely separate sports from politics, but sports should be free of that. We will respect the IOC regulations, that is using the name Chinese Taipei and use the Olympic marking on the flag. I think that's the only way to do it."

Flyers embark on key stretch with close win

KNIGHT RIDDER

PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

It was typical Flyers-Devils. It was playoff hockey. And it was the start of 10 do-or-die Atlantic Division battles for the Flyers over the next several weeks aimed at catching the New York Rangers.

Simon Gagne's 40th goal and Antero Niittymaki's 21-save performance carried the Flyers

to a tense 2-1 victory over the New Jersey Devils Tuesday night at the Wachovia Center.

"Winning close games is hard against quality opponents who need the points as badly as we do," Flyers coach Ken Hitchcock said. "Our special teams did a good job. We played very well with the lead. That is a big sign. Our tank is starting to fill up."

Next up: the Rangers. New York has a two-point lead in the division race. This marks the first of three must-win games for the Flyers against the Rangers.

"Every game is important and tonight was big," Gagne said after the win. "Tomorrow is the Rangers and that is the goal: To go first in the division.... We have to focus and play smart."

Gagne is the 12th Flyer to reach 40 goals in a season. The last to do it was John LeClair (40) in 1999-2000.

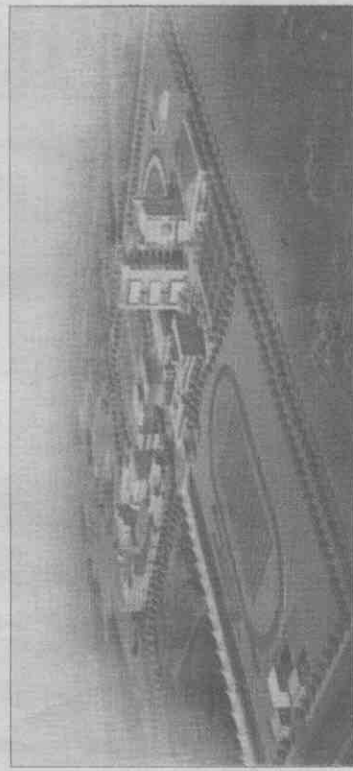
"It was pretty fun," Gagne said of his milestone. "I was waiting for the last three games, and I had a couple of chances."

He admitted he was pressing to get 40.

"Maybe a little bit," he said. "Getting 40, that is a big number. You don't want to think about it, but in the back of your mind, you think about it.... Now I can turn the page. I won't say I was focusing on the game, but it will be easier to focus now."

Niittymaki lost a 2-0 shutout at 3 minutes, 55 seconds of the third period when the Devils' Brian Gionta took Derian Hatcher one-on-one up the right side, then shot the puck between his legs and subsequently beat Niittymaki between his as well.

**In other NHL action:** NY Islanders 3, Montreal 1; Toronto 3, Carolina 2; Phoenix 5, Columbus 2; Ottawa 5, Pittsburgh 2; Minnesota 3, Calgary 1; Atlanta 5, Boston 4 (SO); Nashville 3, Detroit 2 (SO); San Jose 6, St. Louis 0; Vancouver 4, Edmonton 1;



An artist's rendition of what the National Training Center in Zuoying, Kaohsiung County will look like after an NT\$2.7 billion remodeling project is completed in 2009-2010. Chen Chuan-show hopes it will provide an improved launching pad for Taiwan's Olympic and other elite athletes, who currently are hampered by poor facilities. The World Games stadium will be built adjacent to this facility.