

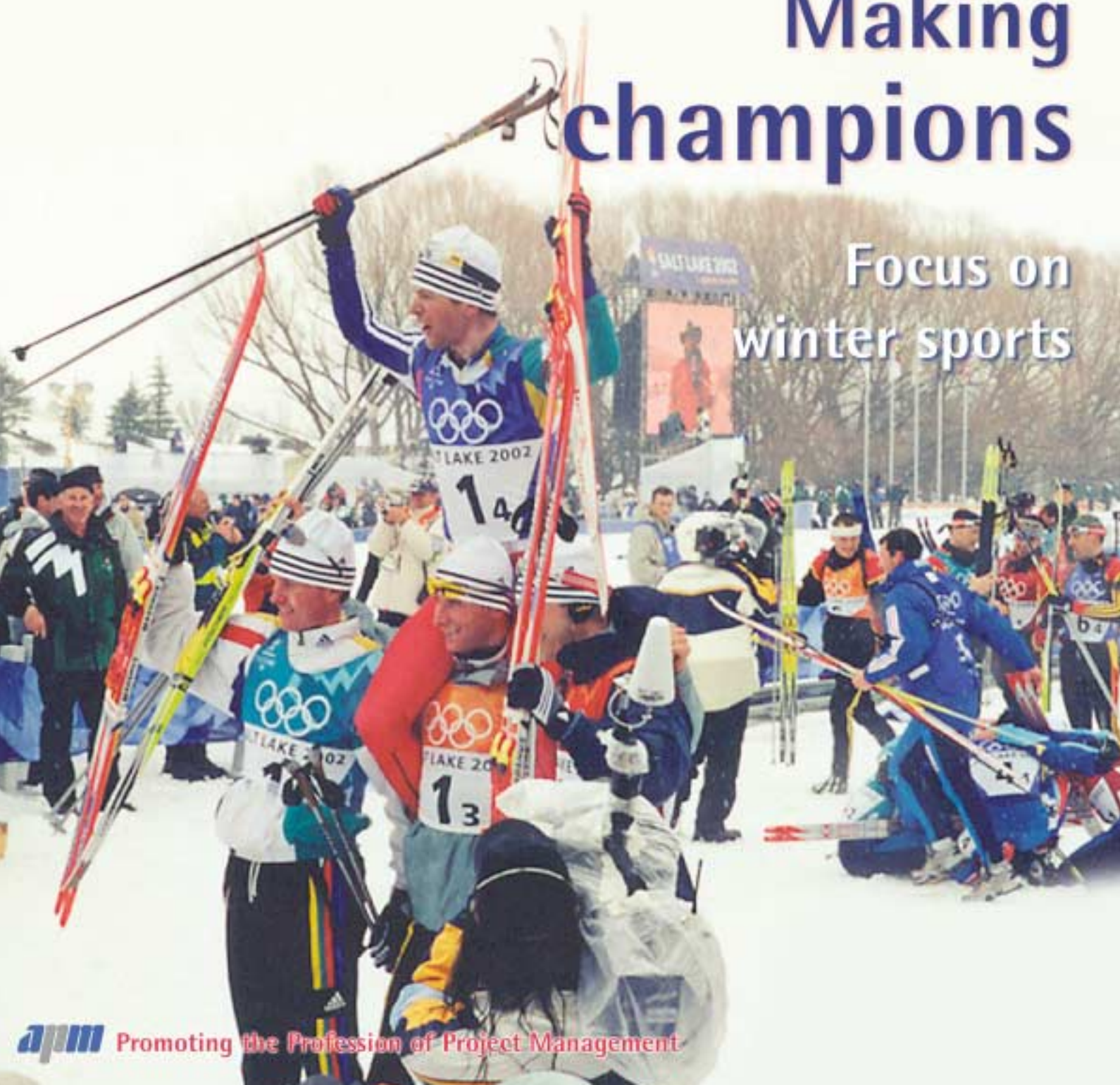
# Project

Magazine of the Association for Project Management

October 2002 • Volume 15 Issue 5 • £3.60

## Making champions

Focus on  
winter sports





# ICON OF THE GAMES



**GOING ALL OUT:** The biathlon is said to be the most 'Zen' of sports, alternating between accurate shooting and demanding cross-country skiing,



Staging one of the most demanding Winter Olympic events that will be televised to millions across the world calls for exceptional project management. **Charlie Kellogg** looks at the staging of the skiing and shooting biathlon competitions during the 2002 Winter Olympics.

**A**S A four-time Winter Olympic biathlete and president of the US Biathlon Association, Lyle Nelson fully understood the challenges facing competitors at the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City. "The air is thinner and the hills are tough here. During the Olympics you've gotta go all out on every uphill," he said.

Although he was referring to the Olympic athletes, 'going all out' was just what he did when he set out to make the biathlon the icon of the Games. With a potential 20,000 spectators and a support team of some 1,400 people at a venue where a third of all the Olympic medals would be determined, he had a big 'uphill' to surmount in his role as sports manager at the Soldier Hollow venue.

With multiple goals and at least a dozen stakeholders, Lyle had to use project management techniques to stay on track, to ensure thorough preparation and to minimise budget problems. He also had to employ leadership skills during the two-and-a-half years leading up to the 19th Winter Games.

He needed to establish a clear vision, to hire people who could and would adopt that vision and, to resell that vision during the life of the project. Without a clear view of where they were going and a balanced perspective of how to deal with multiple audiences, owners and interested parties, the biathlon events would have faltered, creating local and international recriminations.

The biathlon requires two contrasting skills and is said to be the most 'Zen' of all sports as the competitor has to alternate easily between a rock – to shoot perfectly – and a rabbit – to race rapidly on cross-country skis over demanding trails. Lyle's experience in this sport gave him the flexibility to handle the various challenges of managing the venue, as he transformed repeatedly from rock to rabbit.

## Creating a shared vision

An early challenge was to define the encompassing vision that focused everyone's thinking on the multiple goals of the Salt Lake City Winter Games. Not only was it to be a

world-spotlight athletic event, but one that brought people from around the world to share and learn about art, music and lifestyles. The games were also a celebration of world peace and humanity. As a project leader, Lyle had to merge these diverse missions and convince his management team that they could be met.

Effectively communicating the value of his vision, the benefits to the community and his enthusiasm for the end result, he utilised his project management skills – especially those of developing consensus and keeping everyone informed – to obtain success.

## Establishing objectives

Juggling the concerns and priorities of the different stakeholders was a continual challenge. The International Olympic Committee, the US Olympic Committee, the International Biathlon Union, the United States Biathlon Association, the Salt Lake Olympic Organising Committee, a small army of volunteers, all the sponsors, the media, the athletes, the ticket-holding public and the local Heber Valley community had huge stakes in what was being developed.

Because there were so many stakeholders with multiple – and often conflicting – interests, setting objectives was a monumental task requiring continual review and debate. Decisions that seemed straightforward often took three times the energy anticipated because Lyle had to use patient reasoning and negotiation to resolve potential disagreements. Though most of the stakeholders were not going to be writing a report card on the events and the venue, it was imperative that each understood and accepted the importance of the multiple needs of all stakeholders or the vision would not be met.

## Sharing and communicating

A primary preoccupation was that of handling day-to-day conflicts arising from multiple, communication and management styles. For Soldier Hollow, he conveyed the vision, John Aalberg designed the facility and focused on the operations and Phil Jordan took over the

spectator preparations. Since responsibility for the Olympic site was shared among the three, each tried to ensure that all areas of concern were covered. Filling in for each other was inevitable and overlaps in responsibilities were frequent. This often entailed having to re-cast plans to ensure that they were on track.

The lesson learned from this exercise was that continual communication is absolutely essential, even when one leader believes that he has the sole authority to make a particular decision. As Max Cobb, Lyle's Chief of Biathlon Competition, pointed out:

"It is a mistake to micro-manage subordinates or to make decisions for them, because it only diminishes their commitment to the project and reduces their feeling of satisfaction for a job well done."

The three managers were allowed to operate in a manner best suited to their styles and personalities, while ensuring that the team was fully synchronised – at one stage working shoulder-to-shoulder in adjoining office bays. This helped where differences of opinion surfaced which, had the managers been isolated, could have derailed part of the project.

## Delegating

A small army of volunteers was responsible for executing the events, highlighting the fact that peoples' sensitivities are often the linchpin of getting things done. They brought the expertise and manpower, but had to be treated very fairly to ensure no decay in their motivation and morale, which could have jeopardised the success of the games. Lyle invested a great deal of time with the volunteers and the local community leaders to ensure that they would support the activities, the venue design and aspects such as the transportation plans, which entailed a busy shuttle bus route around a local town.

## Managing volunteer resources

Staffing to the worst-case scenario entailed having many people available for inevitable situations, such as re-scheduling events due to poor weather, shovelling new snow from bleachers and courses, coping with electronic breakdowns or unexpected demands from country delegations. Re-assigning under-utilised volunteers to meaningful roles on a daily basis, to make them feel motivated and essential, was a formidable management problem. The lesson learned was to plan ahead for many types of contingencies while properly dealing with the needs of individual team members by anticipating their reactions to the changes.

## Managing risk

To keep this massive project on track, the team used an activity-planning vehicle that broke down every task into sub-tasks with anticipated starting and ending dates. The chart was wall-mounted for easy communication and review. A separate project



**"Continual communication is absolutely essential, even when one leader believes that he has the sole authority to make a particular decision"**

management office made updates to the charts and red-flagged problem areas. The management team focused on minimising exposure to risk by carefully reviewing where mistakes could appear.

To ensure quality, rehearsing every part of the event was essential. It was necessary to uncover potential problems early on in the process rather than wait too long to test. A technique of incremental integration was used to build the final script, testing a stage at a time. To prepare for testing and for the Games themselves, the most experienced Biathlon event producer was hired as a consultant so that his recommendations could be included at an early stage and be used to settle potential disagreements.

To accomplish a complete systems test with result reporting, announcing and television, Nelson scheduled a fully integrated dress rehearsal four days before the first event. This was analogous to a business pilot run or plant shakedown, where the entire organisation is devoted to finding holes in the processes.

## Results

Enabling the events required creating the new venue and developing systems that would work perfectly during five days of events as

well as function as an Olympic legacy for future athletes and recreational visitors to the Wasatch Mountain State Park in Heber/Midway, Utah. In spite of the challenges, Soldier Hollow shone.

Soldier Hollow had more to offer culturally than any other Olympic site, given its Western Heritage areas that entertained visitors with music, hay rides and pioneer exhibits throughout the day. It scored, too, with the tight management that kept the cost very close to budget.

For the athletes, it provided outstanding tests for cross-country skiing and rifle marksmanship and the spectators were enthralled by the view they had of all the ski tracks. (Up to 20,000 people were able to see an entire race develop, a far cry from what spectators often encounter at outdoor winter sports events). The media was delighted with the live result reporting and event coverage around the world. This could never have occurred without concerted, technical project planning to link the varied hardware and software systems provided by multiple international companies.

The stakeholders were also pleased and the success was a tribute to good project management, 16-hour days by Lyle and many others, and a leadership style that fostered cooperation and accommodation. As Lyle said: "A three-year project that would be watched by 100,000,000 people can still be broken down into increments. The biggest challenge was identifying their priority and arranging them in the right time-line for testing and competition, while remembering that all contingencies must be planned and tested, too. Last minute scrambling is poor event management."

## Application

The Soldier Hollow experience was due to creating a plan with five essential elements: what is to be done (Work Breakdown Structure), who is to do it (Organisation Chart), how it will be done (Task Responsibility Matrix), when it will be done (Project Schedule) and how much it will cost (Budget). It is a formula for success that can work whatever the size of the project.

\* Charlie Kellogg is a principal with Global Partners Inc of Boston, Massachusetts, where he specialises in sales strategies and project management. A former Olympic skier in the 1968 Winter Games, he was the first US national biathlon champion and a world masters cross-country skiing champion. He serves on the board of directors of the US Biathlon Association.