Feeding the Beijing Olympics:  
An Interview With Jillian Wanik

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The eyes of the world were on Beijing at 8 minutes past 8 p.m. on 8/8/08, as the Opening Ceremony for the Olympic Games commenced. Over the next 15 days, spectators and the television audience remained agog at the spectacle created by a country of more than 1 billion people. In the Athletes Village, coaches, athletes, and support staff from 200 countries were treated to the best Olympic community life yet. Many had come to Beijing with media-fueled fears of encountering steroid-laden chicken breasts and a contaminated water supply. The article in this issue by Fiona Pelly and co-authors reports on aspects of the catering for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, making recommendations for a variety of features that should be built into the nutrition services offered to athletes during the most important competition of their lives. In this Practical Sports Nutrition column, we talk to Jillian Wanik, MS, RD, Certified Nutrition Support Clinician, Certified Specialist Sports Dietitian, and lead dietitian for the 2008 Beijing Olympics Catering Services Project, about her role in feeding the champions in Beijing.

Jillian, your usual practice is with ARAMARK Higher Education, the Hospital of Central Connecticut, and your own sports nutrition activities. Can you give us a quick summary of the career path that led to these activities?

I have always been passionate about sports, nutrition, and education. One of the benefits of a degree in nutrition sciences is the wide variety of career options in the field. Starting with a bachelor’s degree in clinical nutrition from Cornell University, my career has encompassed university dining/catering services and college athletes, clinical fieldwork, teaching, and individual and team counseling. My experiences with large-scale menu planning and development, product marketing and integration, and working with college athletes have been invaluable in helping with my Olympic work. Feeding college students and student athletes involves nourishing mind, body, and soul for the present and the future. Nutrition is important on so many levels. It affects academic and athletic performance and is one of the foundations of personal health. I have always enjoyed the clinical aspects of nutrition, and my work in critical care allows me to keep current with the latest nutrition support protocols, many that have crossover application in the world of sports nutrition and injury rehabilitation. My work teaching and providing counseling to a variety of ages and sports helps keep me humble and allows me to practice my passion for optimizing health and athletic performance.
Connecticut is a long way logistically and culturally from Beijing. How did you get involved with ARAMARK and its catering role in the Beijing Olympic Games? How many Games have you been involved with? And ARAMARK?

Over the course of a 20-year career, ARAMARK has provided me with a wealth of experience in culinary operations management, human resources, marketing, and catering. My nutrition experiences led me to become part of a global interdisciplinary team that defines and sets standards and policies for elite athlete fueling. The Olympics is the pinnacle of competition for the elite athlete. The development and implementation of an international sports-performance-based menu provides a key link to sports performance. However, catering for Olympic athletes is a challenging task due to the diversity of cultures, sporting requirements, and ages and special dietary needs. It is at once a challenging and rewarding experience to bring world experts in food together to work toward a common goal.

The 2008 Games in Beijing marked 40 years of ARAMARK Olympic history. Beijing was the 14th time ARAMARK was chosen to serve the world’s Olympic athletes. Beijing was my second opportunity to serve as the lead dietitian, the first being Athens, Greece, in 2004.

How do the catering rights for an Olympic Games get awarded? How were you involved in the ARAMARK bid? What was the timeline of your work and ARAMARK’s activities once the bid was announced?

The catering rights follow an international competitive bid process and, for Beijing, involved working with the IOC and the Beijing Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games (BOCOG). In addition to meeting current performance-based practices, menus had to meet world cultural food preferences. Special menu needs, including vegetarian, halal, and kosher, were outlined in the bid, and menus needed to identify top allergens. My involvement in the bid proposal was to help set parameters for these specifications, as well as outline nutritional composition and balance of the overall menu. After the catering contract was awarded, I started working on the project in the summer of 2007, supporting the culinary team. I reviewed menu items and recipe ingredients and provided nutritional analysis and allergen identification. I helped select and review products with supply-chain coordinators. All production was through an automated computer system in which we set up custom Olympic nutrition reports. Finally, I provided recommendations for defining the nutritional kiosk.

What were the main learnings from the catering operations at previous Olympic Games? What aspects did you want to repeat? What common problems did you want to avoid?

Communication, flexibility, and knowledge of IOC and host-country expectations are all incorporated into the development of an international
sports-performance-based menu. Menu concept development was designed to meet world cultural food preferences and highlight the cuisines of China. Beijing repeats include a high-quality finished product, which obtained flavor profiles that mirrored the country of origin and appropriately represented the host country. Sourcing local and sustainable food to appease worldwide palates was a challenge. We worked to lower carbon footprints associated with our food supply whenever possible.

**What were the special challenges that you identified for the Beijing Games? What strategies did you put in place in the preparation for the games to counteract these problems?**

Providing superior food safety was one challenge. We worked with BOCOG, Chinese government agencies, and local partners in China to ensure that the food served at the Olympic Games was safe and of the highest quality. China’s State Food and Drug Administration created new controls and procedures, including a global-positioning satellite system to track food, and food-safety inspection systems. In addition to the efforts of the Chinese government and BOCOG, ARAMARK had its own culinary, risk-management, supply-chain, and food-safety experts on site, including an on-site HACCP laboratory. There were rigorous safety procedures in place at each step.

**Can you give us a quick overview of the food services provided for the athletes living in the Beijing Olympic Village? What was your role in organizing and implementing these services? How many dietitians were involved during the period of the Games with your activities?**

The athletes had several dining options in the Village, but the main dining hall was the primary facility. At the peak, we served about 28,000 athletes, coaches, and staff a day. It operated 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for the entire Games. The 2008 “Olympic World Menu” was an 8-day cycle menu comprising over 1,500 items.

I worked alongside two other dieticians—Ka Yee (Phoebe) Ho and Roxanna Gomez—to provide nutritional information, guidance, and assistance to the athletes, teams, and coaches. We worked side by side with the chefs and culinary support teams. During the Games we held daily meetings with the head chef and front-of-the-house manager. Together we reviewed the next day’s projected athlete count, menu items, recipe ingredients, and nutritional analysis. Nutrition information (including serving sizes, nutrient analysis, and allergen labeling) for each dish was finalized and made available at point of service, for each meal period, in the three official languages of the 2008 Olympics—English, French, and Mandarin—to make sure athletes could maintain their diet regimens.

Because athletes have individual training schedules and dietary needs, the self-service style of the dining halls, as well as specific nutrition labeling on each item, enabled athletes to eat the variety and amount they needed to achieve
maximum performance at every step of competition. In addition, when athletes came to the nutrition kiosk with guidelines (for example, looking for an item that has a specific number of grams of protein or calories) we were able to recommend a specific dish. With our computerized database, athletes could request nutritional information on the overall daily menu or provide us with the items they planned to eat, and we could run a customized nutrition analysis.

Tell us more about the nutrition kiosk. What kind of activities did it host? What was an average day like in the life of the dietitians who worked in the kiosk?

A centralized nutritional services kiosk was a popular addition in the main dining hall. It was open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily and staffed from 5:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. from July 27 through the Paralympics. A typical day included the following:

- Providing daily and weekly menu cycle information with serving size, calories, and macronutrients to team leaders: medical directors, dietitians, physiotherapists, coaches, and individuals
- Issuing sport-specific nutrition calculations to individuals by meal and day as requested
- Reviewing daily menu selections and providing a daily list of gluten- and dairy-free options
- Coordinating and providing front- and back-of-the-house operations tours, as well as tours focused on food safety, to all who requested
- Counseling gluten-free athletes and their coaches from the United States, Canada, Australia, Denmark, Spain, Finland, and New Zealand
- Supplying and distributing special precompetition-diet meal requests in coordination with the chef of catering and special menus team
- Ensuring that every menu item at every meal was labeled with correct nutritional and allergy information in the three official languages
- Providing education on general nutrition and sport nutrition programs available in the United States

Now that you have had time to reflect, what were the great success stories from the Beijing catering? What were the problems you anticipated that did not occur? What were the unexpected challenges? Was there a particular menu item or activity that you would have awarded your own gold medal to?

During the Games we survey athletes to evaluate how key aspects of our services, from food to customer service, meet their needs and expectations. In Beijing we used an online (paperless) survey. I am proud to say we received our highest rating in Beijing. Ongoing challenges involved ensuring that
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athletes with special diets, including gluten free, had appropriate options. Although there was a chef of special menus, logistically coordinating with the athlete and team dietitians was challenging at times. There was great interest in current sports nutrition best practices, and many athletes requested information handouts. There was a wide range of topics requested, from specific amino acids in protein sources to improved whole-body rehydration to improving muscle and liver glycogen resynthesis.

One memorable moment took place during the closing ceremonies celebration party in the main dining hall. The athletes called all the chefs, managers, and student workers to come out for a thank you cheer and applause. The main dining hall was packed with athletes, and many were standing on the tables and chairs applauding for about 10 min as a thank you for all the hard work. That was a fabulous accolade for all!

_Finally, what were the special memories you took home from your Beijing experience? Did you get to see much of the actual Games? Did you feel that you played an important role in all the personal bests, gold medals, and world records—or even just the wonderful memories that we all took home from this fabulous event?_

Personal memorable moments run the gamut from watching Michael Phelps win his eighth gold medal to enjoying daily interactions with my “Chinese neighbors” during my 2 months in country. Beijing is a city rich in culture and history, too monumental to see in such a short time. To know that we were fueling the 2008 athletes for the “performance of a lifetime” was a wonderful honor. I am proud to have played a part in Olympic history.

Louise Burke is the head of the Department of Sports Nutrition at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra, Australia. Jillian Wanik is working on her doctorate, attempting her own triathlon, and enjoying a quiet summer!