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RUGBY

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EUROPEAN GAMES 2023

With AI-generated online audio commentary and a multi-city approach to hosting, this year's European Games broke the mould for organising major sports events. Richard W Orange in Krakow reports

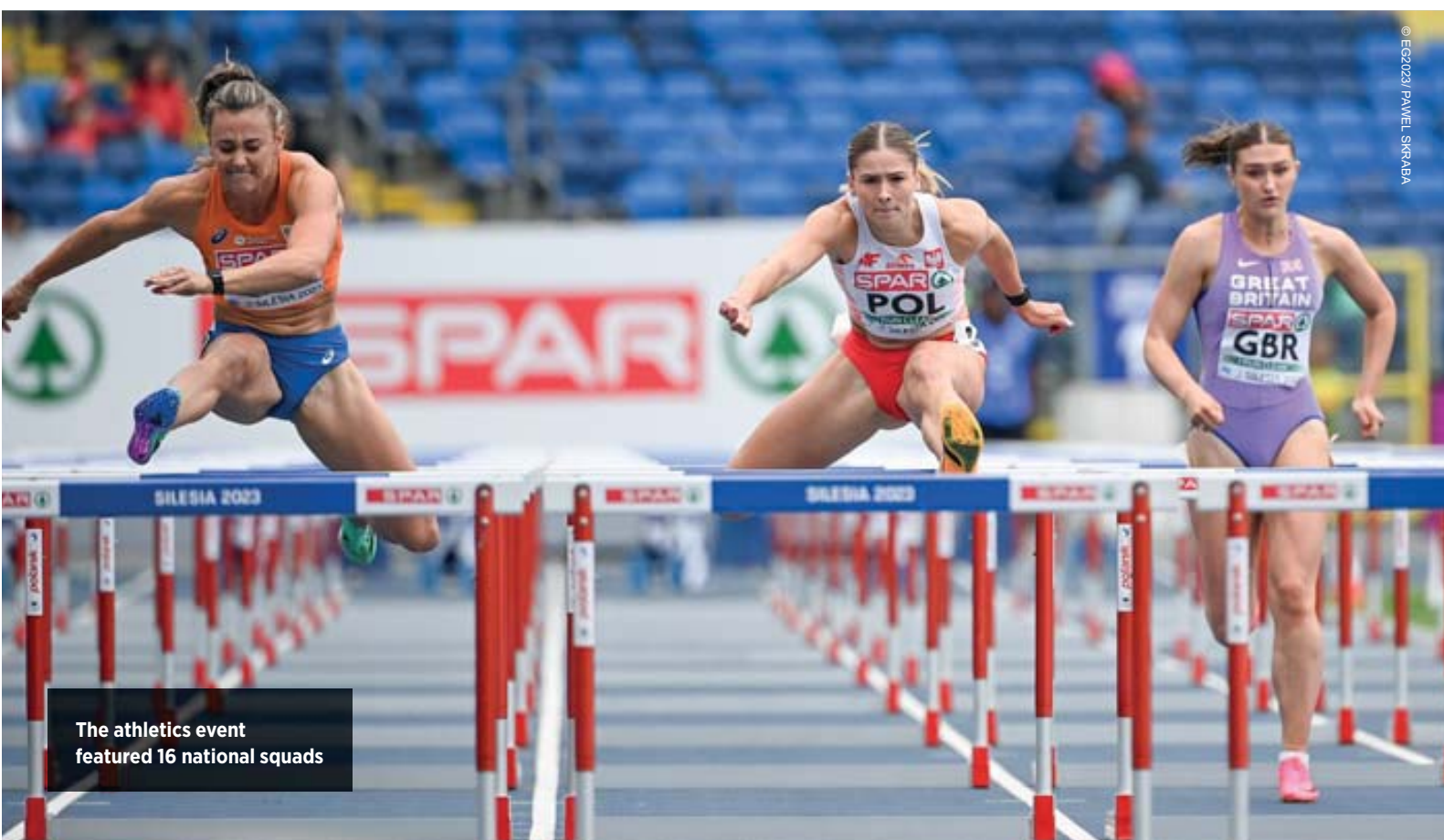
The third European Games, which were hosted in southern Poland in mid-summer, were heralded as the largest sporting event to be staged on the continent since London 2012 – and concluded with a call for organisers of future competitions to plan more events in urban centres.

In terms of numbers, 48 countries sent just short of 7,000 competitors to the EG2023 events held across Lesser Poland and the neighbouring Upper and Lower Silesia regions. The games took on an added significance

for teams, with direct qualification slots in 10 of 18 Olympic (non-athletic) sports on offer. Athletics is run alongside the games but as a separate team championship. A total of 1,700 athletes represented 16 national squads, also vying for a place at Paris 2024.

Third edition

The European Games, first held in Baku, Azerbaijan in 2015 and then in Minsk, Belarus in 2019, are proving to be somewhat experimental and have yet to seep into mainstream consciousness in terms of public awareness,



The athletics event featured 16 national squads

Team GB won the women's rugby 7s, which acted as a qualifier for the Olympic Games Paris 2024



familiarity with the format and (unfortunately in rather too many 2023 events) with spectator attendance. The fledgling rugby-7s competition – which saw GB's women's team triumph – and the showcase athletics events were played out in near-empty stadiums. However, organisers pointed to the popularity of the boxing tournament in Nowy Targ city, as well as emergent events staged in Krakow's picturesque main square, as examples of urban sports capable of attracting large crowds.

The low public turnout at major stadiums was possibly a consequence of the format of the Games and the associated athletics championship. Both are run as national team-based affairs, rather than a spectacle of individual sporting prowess in which household names vie for gold medal glory and attract the attention of fans and media alike. This posed a problem for promoters.

It is not the European version of the Olympics, although the European Olympic Committee plays a major oversight and support role in the event. Tickets for seats were modestly priced, roughly £15 to £30 per day. Other plausible explanations for poor spectator numbers have been postulated; that the games were transmitted live on

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We saw something very interesting; huge interest for urban sports, for new sports and for the sports that are for the youth
Spyros Capralos, EOC President

→ national TV, that the athletics clashed with a national volleyball tournament, that the publicity overly-focused on promoting the generic games rather than informing the public about venues for the particular competitions, and that social media marketing was not engaged as well as it might have been.

Competitions were live-streamed on YouTube, with artificial intelligence utilised to add audio commentary, plus broadcast feeds from EBU and various national channels across the continent. In a trackside conversation with *SportsNation* at the athletics stadium, EOC President Spyros Capralos said: “The games have been organised very well and the Polish authorities should be congratulated. [But] it is not very nice to have empty stands for the athletes. We have the best athletes from Europe competing here and they are performing at the top level, [so] they deserve better.”

Multi-city approach

The EG 2023 events, from which competitors representing Russia and 2019 hosts Belarus were barred, offered EOC officials an opportunity to trial eight new disciplines, including breaking (aka break dancing),



Ireland captain Harry McNulty in action against hosts Poland



teqball, padel, canoe slalom, plus exhibition events such as E-sports and chess. This being Poland, there was also a well-attended ski jumping competition at the popular Zakopane mountain station, with ‘aerial-thetes’ landing on a grass rather than snow covered slope.

But the most notable change from previous European Games competitions was an unashamedly cost-cutting switch from a single host city format to a multi-municipality approach. The EOC President described the move to a multi-city format as “a responsible and sustainable” approach at the opening media conference. In conversation with *SportsNation*, he further explained the thinking behind the decision to award the competition to Krakow and its neighbours: “It is difficult to organise events across so many cities, but it is going well.

“Our initial reaction was a lot of scepticism, because we are not used to having such widespread events, but we understand their thinking. Every city deserved to see the best

Bronze medalist Jessica Varley GB in the mixed event of the modern pentathlon

© EG2023



A total of 13 cities and towns, spread across the counties of southern and south western Poland, were selected to host tournaments



Olivia Green, riding Mosis in the women's final, modern pentathlon

© EG2023

European athletes and, even though it required a lot of travelling for everyone, the results are good. They used their facilities – they didn't need to spend money on new facilities.

"Secondly, and what is more important, they spent the money on refurbishing their existing facilities. This is something that will remain as a great legacy for the people living in those cities."

Facility strategy

A total of 13 cities and towns, spread across the counties of southern and south western Poland, were selected to host tournaments, with the hub of the organisation and a third of the events in the popular tourist destination of Krakow. Aside from erecting spectator stands, large video screens, PA systems and kitting out rooms at most venues with the necessary equipment, only two construction projects were necessary.


A new, permanent lakeside beach arena was built for the beach handball contest

near Tarnow city, which will be used to attract similar competitions in the future. A temporary BMX park was erected in Krzeszowice, a commuter town near Krakow. It proved a popular attraction for local younger fans and a boon for Team GB, which clinched a gold medal in the final.

It meant that existing, dual-use football and athletics stadiums, concert halls, festival arenas, university sports centres, outside running tracks, public swimming pools, leisure parks and water-sports venues were pressed into service for the 11-day programme from June 20 to July 2.

For example, organisers utilised the Henryk Reyman football stadium in Krakow for the opening and closing ceremonies and the rugby-7s. In conversation with *SportsNation*, victorious GB women's team captain Abigail Brown described the facilities as "amazing". Team-mate Amy Wilson-Hardy reflected on





Among the sports featured was a “summer version” of ski jumping, held at the famous Zakopane ski centre

→ the low spectator turnout: “At the World Sevens you’ve got huge crowds, and it adds to the excitement. But ultimately we come here to play rugby. Maybe there’s not as much chemistry from the crowds [here] in terms of feedback, but we see family and friends out there and that’s always important to us.”

Irish team captain Harry McNulty, whose squad’s final win against runners-up GB also meant direct Olympic qualification, cited the stadium’s proximity to the competitors’ village and practice pitches as positives but considered the multi-city format of the games might not be ideal for sports fans. “From a spectator point of view, it is a hindrance. Speaking to my parents before they came over, they wanted to watch the rugby but also have the opportunity to see other sports which might be an hour and a half away. That’s when it gets tough.”

The city’s Tauron concert arena was transformed into a fencing hall, the AWF

physical education university campus – including its 50-metre pool – was adapted for modern pentathlon and the nearby Kolna water-sports centre’s continental training centre facilities were an ideal venue for canoe slalom. In most cases, training facilities were alongside competition venues. All the pool in Oswiecim (aka Auschwitz) city required was a large video screen for the artistic swimming events, which is to remain in situ. Krakow’s AGH engineering and technology university made its student accommodation facilities available as a competitors’ village, with cafeteria and internet access alongside added security measures. Alternatively, national teams booked competitors, trainers and officials into hotels where they mixed with tourists and travelling supporters.

Travel issues

For some national teams, including Ireland, the decision to opt for hotel accommodation in Krakow meant that athletes and support staff faced an 80-minute coach journey each morning and evening along the invariably busy A4 motorway to the Silesian Stadium at Chorzow on the outskirts of



The budget for EG2023 was €88m, with half of the funding from the Polish Ministry of Sports and Tourism



The event's multi-city approach saw competitions being held in 26 sporting venues across southern Poland

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Katowice. Other national teams, including GB, opted to stay in local hotels.

Venues, such as the shooting range in the city of Wroclaw and the diving arena in the city of Rzeszow, were at least three hours' driving time from Krakow for those competitors to mix with their national compatriots in the village, which made for a somewhat isolated experience. However, teams were sanguine about the travelling, given their positive assessment of the facilities for the games.

Athletics Ireland team manager Teresa McDauid told *SportsNation*: "We were keen for our athletes to do the orientation a day before the competition, so they would be prepared for the 'wow' factor. It has really upped their game. We knew it would be 80 minutes each way for the journey and we allowed for anything going wrong and made sure everyone was hydrated before and after the competition. Our athletes have been through doping control and came back late, but the hotel kept food outside of hours which was really helpful."

Athletics excellence

The European Games are unlike the Olympics, because the athletics element falls under the

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The athletics competition was held at the Stadion Śląski in Chorzów

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We have top quality athletes here but also others who don't get the chance to compete in a place like this.

→ auspices of a different organisation, with its own structure. The six days of track and field events staged in the Silesian Stadium were the 2023 European Athletics Team Championships, which take place every two years.

The 54,000-seater Silesian Stadium had hosted the 2021 event, and in view of the EOC's decision to award the games to the Lesser Poland, the athletics body opted to return to Chorzow so that the 2023 championship could run as a 'companion' event alongside.

Another innovation was to bring all of the three divisions of competitive athletics into the same programme of events. Previously, national teams in each of divisions I, II or III competed separately, with the top and bottom three being promoted or relegated. Heats and finals took place in the same venue and, as with their European Games compatriots, participants in the 2023 events also had their sights firmly set on valuable qualification places for the Paris Olympics.

British middle-distance runner and 800m gold medallist in 2019, Isabelle Boffey, told *SportsNation*: "I hadn't realised the stadium is so amazing, [hosting] the diamond league and continental tours all year.

"The warm-up area, the food and the hotel have all been up to standard for a European meet, so I'm really happy to be here."

Athletics Ireland president John Cronin described facilities at Chorzow as "unbelievable ... well up there". High performance director Paul McNamara added: "It is superb. We have top quality athletes here but also others



The event was also a showcase for new events, such as teqball (below) and beach handball

© EG2023



© EG2023

who don't get the chance to compete in a place like this. It is top of the range."

Funding

The budget for EG2023 was set at €88m, with the City of Krakow and the Region of Malopolska's contributions capped at €22m each, with the remaining 50% coming from the Polish Ministry of Sports and Tourism. Additional funding came from sponsors, principally the PKN Orlen oil and gas corporation. Consequently, shortfalls in ticket sale income are likely to fall on central government coffers, rather than local taxpayers. The Minister for Sports and Tourism, Kamil Bortniczuk, responded to the issue of low spectator turnout for the stadium events in response to a question from *SportsNation* at the closing press conference.

He said: "We have set new standards for [the] promotion of sport. We believe that city centres should have sporting infrastructure [which enables] many people to see and enjoy sport. They can go to their city centre

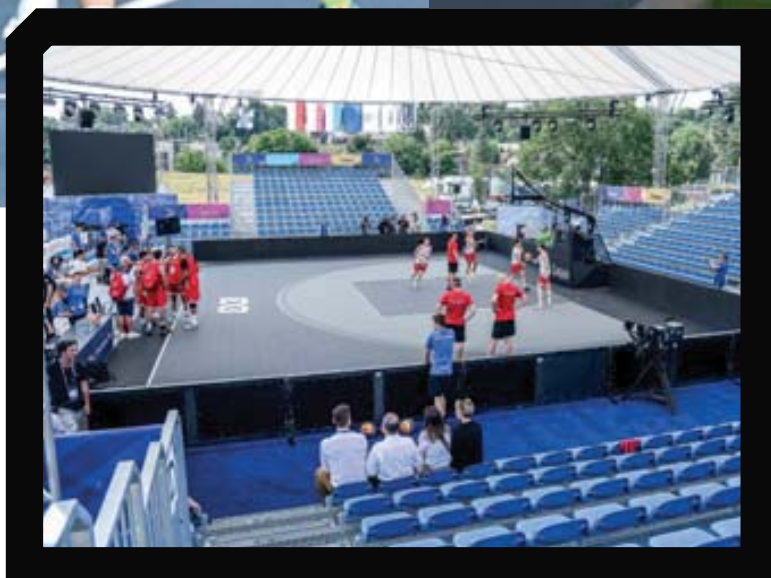


The athletics competition saw more than 1,700 athletes take part in 37 events

and see athletes taking part in Olympic-style events. If you have sporting facilities in city centres, [rather than] outside, and you can re-use these buildings and infrastructure in the future, [then] you won't have waste."

EOG President Spyros Capralos told *SportsNation*: "We saw something very interesting; huge interest for urban sports, for new sports and for the sports that are for the youth. We had big attendances for city centre sports – for teqball, padel, BMX and breaking. This gives us ideas about where we should be going in the future, not forgetting traditional sports, but by innovating. Since the beginning of the European Games we have tried new things, and these have been taken seriously by the IOC. Some are now in the Olympic programme. We have been successful and this is huge for development of these sports."

National Olympic Committee president Marcin Nowak told *SportsNation*: "The 21st century is presenting us with a number of challenges, and one of them is finding



new ways of communicating with younger people and showing them how sports can be attractive. That's a challenge we've had from the start and that's why we've chosen modern sites for these games. In the urban events, there were no empty seats. That is something for future organisers of the games [to consider]."

The EOC is negotiating with two, as yet unnamed, candidate cities to host the fourth European Games in 2027. An announcement is expected at its general assembly in Istanbul on October 6/7. ●