Adventures in the ‘toy department’

Covering the Youth Olympic Games last month wasn’t child’s play, reports BHAVAN JAIPRAGAS

A FEW months ago, I read a trivia piece about sports journalism that I found most perplexing.

Apparently, the sports desks of many newspapers are mockingly called the “toy department”, because sports writers don’t handle the more serious issues in society like their counterparts in the political and economic beats.

Having grown up considering the Godfrey Roberts and Rehmi Brijnath of the world among the holy lights of journalism, I wondered if I had been fooled all this while. Were sports journalists lesser mortals than their number-crunching, election-watching peers?

The answer is a conclusive NO. Working on the sports beat or “toy department”, let alone an entire newspaper dedicated to sports news, is no mean feat, as I found out in the past month.

Along with more than 60 other Nanyang Technological University (NTU) undergraduates, I was presented with the opportunity to be part of the Young Olympian Daily, the official newspaper of the Youth Olympic Village.

A fully student-produced publication, the newspaper sought to reach out to the young athletes, officials and volunteers at the inaugural Youth Olympic Games (YOG).

It may be true that reporting on serious issues that deal with the inner workings of society may require a greater deal of analytical acumen, but my experience as a reporter during the two-week long Games has convinced me that the effort and improvisational skills required on the sports beat are of the highest level.

Tasked to cover the Boys 100 metres finals at Bishan Stadium, I found myself having to craft a 500-word front-page story on an event that lasted just under 11 seconds.

The entire experience was a haze, as I set out to gather quotes from the athletes at the interview zone and hustled back to the empty blanchers to file my story before press time. This was real pressure – failure on my part to submit my story in time could mean that the newspaper could go to print with an empty front page.

The sports reporters’ plight when filing stories from the field close to press time is one that I empathise with as a reporter and columnist for the newspaper; our editorial team in the newsroom also had its fair share of heart-stopping moments over the 13 days of production.

One copy editor manically came up with a headline story within an hour, when the original one fell through at the last minute.

This was the first time NTU was publishing a daily newspaper, and the paper’s editorial team betrayed no inexperience as they dealt with various newsroom “crises” with much aplomb throughout the Games.

If characterising the lightning-quick action in the sporting arenas and covering shy athletes to give more than monosyllabic responses to our questions were not daunting enough, my peers and I also had to deal with the challenges of being student journalists.

Reporters and photographers from “official media” like the Olympic Broadcast Service had it good during the Games. With bright media vests, large boom microphones and expensive looking cameras, these professional news gatherers rarely had to sweat to score interviews with athletes.

Our reporters, on the other hand, constantly found themselves having to convince the media management volunteers that we were indeed accredited reporters – as we did not have the same media passes as the professional pressmen.

Faced with the prospect of returning to the newsroom with no story or photographs due to lack of access, many of us found ourselves honing our sweet talking skills on the go.

One photographer who was denied access to the media vehicle during the first few days of the Youth Olympic flame’s journey in Singapore not only managed to get on the vehicle for exclusive shots on the last day, but was also spotted with the coveted media vest reserved for official photographers. Her trick: she managed to befriend the photographers and officials in charge.

The taste of success, as they say, is sweet. Having sacrificed a fortnight of proper sleep and any semblance of a social life during the Games, I must say we were heartened that the Young Olympian Daily received rave reviews from various stakeholders.

The Austrian delegation requested the full collection of our newspaper, to study and analyse as they prepare for the Winter Youth Olympics Games that will be held in Innsbruck in 2012.

The novelty of a fully student-run newspaper covering the YOG also attracted considerable attention from the local media.

For many in our team however, the best compliment to our efforts was the sight of athletes and volunteers picking up a copy of our newspaper and enjoying their morning read as they strolled along within the Youth Olympic Village.

It is easy to see why sports journalists disregard criticism of their craft. You must be on the inside to have a taste of what they do on a daily basis. The human drama, the pressure, the ecstasy of witnessing history being made. It is still early days for me, but the thought of joining their ranks is tempting.

Even if it means I may have to endure taunts about working in the “toy department”.

The writer was a columnist and sports reporter with the Young Olympian Daily last month.