

The hospitality athlete

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After years as an Executive Chef and hotel manager, Harald Buerkle (right) enrolled in the Glion Online MBA program so he could to take his “knowledge and critical thinking abilities to the next level,” as he puts it. Soon after enrolling in February 2011, however, he was offered an incredible job opportunity: to open two hotels near Sochi before the 2014 Winter Olympics.

“After a short conversation with my wife, I said of course, yes.” Buerkle laughs. “But I didn’t think about the fact that I had also signed up for the Glion Online MBA program. And then I thought, whoops, there’s something else you have to do.”

Despite the certain obstacles ahead, Buerkle did not consider dropping out of the program. “That would be like an athlete who would quit his or her participation due to adversities that are solvable,” he says. “I like to be challenged and I strongly believe that with commitment and a focus on time management, everything is possible to achieve.”

Buerkle and his wife arrived in Rosa Khutor in August 2011, and he immediately began the MBA program. Rosa Khutor is the mountain cluster where all the ski events would take place, a 40-minute ride from the Olympic Stadium in Sochi. Buerkle would serve as General Manager of two hotels located right at the bottom of the ski lifts: The Park Inn by Radisson Rosa Khutor, a four-star hotel with 211 rooms, and the Radisson Hotel, Rosa Khutor, a five-star hotel with 181 rooms.

Buerkle’s experience made him a natural choice for this opportunity. He has worked with Radisson since 2005, when he was part of the opening team (as Executive Chef) for the Radisson SAS Hotel Kiev in Ukraine. Before that, he was with Kempinski for nine years, including one year in Moscow.

His deadline for opening the Park Inn was six months after his arrival, in time for the resort to host the Alpine Ski World Cup in January 2012. Opening in that short time frame would not be easy, because the entire destination of Rosa Khutor was being built from scratch. The Park Inn was just a “gray nutshell” with no pipework or electricity; the basement concrete had not been poured.

“In Russia, supply is very fragile,” Buerkle says. “Getting operating equipment in time is a big challenge. Everything has to be documented with special papers and stamped and signed five times. To get things done, I had to build a large network, and use that network.” The Park Inn opened just three days before the World Cup.

“We had so much snow that winter that the entire resort looked completely ready,” he remembers. “But when the snow melted, we were back to reality—there was still a lot of construction needed for the Olympics.”

Burning the midnight oil

In the meantime, Buerkle was studying evenings and weekends. “The MBA was a tough schedule, exactly like the openings of my hotels,” Buerkle says. “Delegating a lot of tasks inside the organization made it possible for me to do both at the same time—developing trust in the people, and using the time wisely. With the Online MBA, you have class postings and clear deadlines with your assignments—three, four, five each week. So you can’t fall behind. I always downloaded the material two days ahead of schedule. But I still went to the swimming pool.” He smiles. “I took my iPad and did my readings and enjoyed life a little bit.” He adds, “Glion’s global reputation and the enormous flexibility the Online MBA program offers made Glion my preferred choice.”

The second hotel opened in January 2013 to host the pre-Olympic test events, but its opening was delayed two days when the basement flooded due to a sewer line blocked by construction dust from other hotels. Soon after the opening, the hotel’s main power line was cut by a crane working down the road, so they had to run on the emergency generator. They had to use bottled water several times when the water was shut off.



Radisson Rosa Khutor

“Our first guests had a few surprises,” Buerkle acknowledges. “But they were very supportive because everybody understood we had just opened. For me, to see how negative the media globally were about Russia and the Winter Games before the events began was sometimes very disappointing. They couldn’t see with how much effort it took to build everything from scratch, and how proud the people are to have it.”

Another challenge: recruiting

The local pool of employees was very limited, so Buerkle’s team had to recruit from Siberia to St. Petersburg. Although the Olympics were a big draw for applicants, it was difficult to find trained workers, especially English speakers who could communicate with international guests. Hiring foreigners was not an option due to visa restrictions.

Buerkle had more than 200 employees on board for the first opening. He planned to put half those trained employees into the second hotel and then fill up both properties with newcomers. But when competing companies built several hotels at another resort 5 km away, “everybody started to come shopping in the mountains for trained employees,” he says.

Many employees were lured away. “Now with our competitors, we have an agreement that we do not recruit anymore from each other—or if we do, we go through the HR department. So we all don’t waste our resources and time and steal from each other, which doesn’t make sense in the end.”

The glory of the Games

Buerkle attended the opening ceremony with his department heads and other employees, and he passed along many event tickets to employees as a reward for their long days of work. Buerkle watched a few alpine ski and slalom events. Hailing from south of Munich, close to the Alps, Buerkle enjoys skiing the intermediate slopes. “I did not manage yet to train enough to target the black ones, but maybe it is time now after completion of the MBA program,” he laughs.

“The Austrian and German houses were very close, so you go there in the evening and you have all the gold medal winners around you. It’s an amazing party for these 18 days. One of my hotels is on Rosa Khutor’s square, where big parties happened every night with live bands and fireworks. And there were parties until midnight in the village.”

Dissertation: the financial effects of the Games

Buerkle submitted his MBA dissertation two months early so he could focus on preparing for the Games. For his dissertation, Buerkle researched the financial effects of hosting the Winter Olympics on hotels and destinations. Comparing Vancouver (which hosted the 2010 Games) to Bern (which withdrew its bid for those Games), he found that although Vancouver hotels’ average house rates were higher during the Games, they were lower in the preceding months and higher the following summer due to increased conference business. He concluded that the Games’ financial benefits to hotels is very limited—more important is the PR effect on the entire destination.

He says this phenomenon is similar to what they are experiencing now in Rosa Khutor, with a high demand from skiers and corporate conferences post-Olympics.

Buerkle attributes much of his success to his wife. “She really kept my back free. Without her, I wouldn’t have been able to do everything. Mentally, she did not get much back from me for those two and a half years.” As soon as the Paralympic Games finished at the end of March, the couple took a well-deserved vacation on the beaches and golf courses of a warmer climate—Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

“For both the MBA and the Olympics, I had a lot of emotions involved, somehow,” Buerkle says. “And I would do both again. The MBA helped me to think differently. Learning from my colleagues in the industry was always very inspiring. It doesn’t matter what subject—whether it was Intro to Marketing or HR, it’s fun to apply the new ideas while you are working on a project.”

Source: [Glion Institute of Higher Education](#)

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