

Facilities make early splash with Pan Am athletes

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Let the 2015 Pan American Games begin.

In Markham that is.

After years of planning and construction for the largest multi-sport event ever held on Canadian soil, with a cost pegged at \$2.5-billion, the 2015 Pan Am Games dipped its toe in the water at the Atos Markham Pan Am/Parapan Am Centre Tuesday morning.

While Friday's opening ceremonies mark the official start of Toronto2015, the first competition of the Games tipped off in a state-of-the-art pool, located off Kennedy Road and north of Hwy. 407 where Venezuela faced off against Puerto Rico in women's water polo and played to an 11-11 tie.

Following that match, the United States cruised to a 25-3 win over Mexico.

Canada then faced Brazil in a match that ended in a 7-7 draw to

conclude the early session.

Those in attendance were impressed with what they witnessed on the opening day of the Games and to see the multi-sport competition finally commence in the recently completed \$80-million facility that will also host the badminton and table tennis events.

"It's here, we're excited for this moment," said Mayor Frank Scarpitti.

"It's great to see the Pan Am Games get started here in Markham before the opening ceremonies. We're cheering for Canada. It's what it's all about, to build the Pan Am spirit.

"It's great to have this facility and to have it help in increasing the number of Canadian athletes in the future. We opened this facility last November and this is why we went after the Games. We're excited to be a host city."

Curt Harnett, former Canadian Olympic and Pan Am Games cyclist who is serving as the chef

de mission for Canada's contingent at the Pan Am Games, was in total agreement.

"It's one of the better ones in the world that I've been in and it ranks right up there with some of the best like the one when we were in Barcelona and used the one that they had during the Olympics."

"It's a great day to kick off 19 days of world class competition with what we saw today," he said. "It was great to see the Canadian women's team fighting right to the end. To watch water polo in person it can change people's minds of what it takes to be a great athlete."

As for the facility, Harnett said it

will serve the City of Markham well not just for the Pan Am Games but in years ahead.

"It's a significant asset for the City of Markham," he said. "Frank (Scarpitti) has done a great job with his leadership to have an Olympic-sized pool and an amazing field house accompanying it.

Also pleased with the facilities were the participants.

Many of whom had an early baptism with it when a test event was conducted earlier this year.

"It's an amazing facility," said Team Canada player Emma Wright, who scored a goal to put Canada ahead 7-6 before Brazil battled back to tie the game. "It's one of the better ones in the world that I've been in and it ranks right up there with some of the best like the one when we were in Barcelona and used the one that they had during the Olympics."

Patrick Oaten, Brazil's head women's team coach and a former high performance director of

the Canadian women's water polo program, gave the facility a thumbs up.

"It's fantastic," he said without any hesitation. "We did a test event in January and I wish there were more facilities like this one in Canada. I'm a sports-minded guy and when I was here (in Canada) I didn't like to be recognized as being a one-sport nation.

"When I saw the plans for the facility I said the people in Markham are lucky to have it."

"The pool is great," added Johanne Begin, Team Canada women's head coach.

The only concern she had was the absence of an adjacent dryland warmup area in the building.

"Most of the facilities have a gym part where we can do dryland training," she said. "To have that would be a plus."

See more water polo photos online at yorkregion.com

Simon Whitfield - four-time Olympic triathlete, Olympic gold and silver medalist and Pan Am Games bronze medalist.



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