Saluting Our Olympic-Class Housekeepers

Over the next two weeks, Outrigger and OHANA will honor our Housekeepers across the Pacific. We will proudly recognize our Housekeeping staff and thank them for everything they do to keep our rooms and public areas looking as great as they do.

Although they work quietly, far from the limelight, our Housekeepers do a magnificent job. They perform their duties flawlessly around the clock, every day of the week, throughout the year, even on Christmas Day. Using the slang of today’s Internet world, we can count on them “24/7/365” – and they always turn in a champion performance.

Regular readers of Saturday Briefing are probably aware that I have a special place in my heart for the Housekeeping staff. My first job in the hospitality industry was washing and folding towels in the housekeeping shed behind Roy and Estelle Kelley’s Islander Hotel on Seaside Avenue in Waikiki.

Readers probably also know that during Housekeepers Week, I often seek a metaphor to describe and capture the unique role that Housekeepers play in the success of our hotels.

This year, I had a couple of choices. In this election season in the U.S., I briefly thought about comparing them to politicians. There’s a lot of talk about “change” in politics today. And yes, our Housekeepers change the linen in our rooms, and they will always get my vote. However, a political metaphor did not seem quite right.

Then with the Beijing Olympics fresh in our memories, I turned to athletics as a good way to portray the accomplishments of our gold-medal Housekeeping team.

Last month, it was inspiring to see the top athletes from 203 nations enter Beijing’s “Bird’s Nest” Stadium in the opening ceremonies of the Olympics. In the days that followed, we were amazed by their displays of endurance, skill, and grace.

To me, the most incredible performance was that of Michael Phelps, the American swimmer who broke the record for the most gold medals in a single Olympics and for the most career Olympic gold medals. That is not to overlook many other inspirational stories of both teams and individual athletes from around the world, including Hawaii’s own Brian Clay, “the world’s greatest athlete” by virtue of his gold medal in the decathlon. In all, 37 world records were broken in this year’s games, but for me, Michael Phelps was most amazing of all.

The qualities of today’s Olympic champions are strikingly similar to those I find in the members of the Outrigger and OHANA Housekeeping teams. Let’s look at some of these attributes:

**Dedication and Strong Work Ethic.** No less than Olympic athletes, Outrigger and OHANA’s Housekeepers are dedicated, with a work ethic that drives them to accomplish their goals. An Olympian’s life is no walk in the park. They are constantly training, building their strength, and honing their skills to perform flawlessly. If they let up, even for a minute, the competition is ready to overtake them.

That sounds a lot like the hotel business. The challenges are never-ending. You must constantly be on the alert and can never relax. Each day brings a new set of problems to be met and overcome. If we don’t keep up the pace, the competition is ready to sprint past us.

The Housekeeping department is the core of any hotel, and just like Olympians, our Housekeepers can never relax. They must be willing to work hard every day. It takes a great deal of strength and stamina to tackle up to 16 rooms a day and make them look spic and span.

**World-Class Skills.** Olympians sharpen their skills to an astonishing degree, and so do our Housekeepers. If anyone doubts this, I challenge him or her to put on a Housekeeper’s uniform, organize a Housekeeping cart, go up to the floors, and make-up rooms for an entire day. Unless you are in top shape, efficient, and highly skilled, you will not get past lunch, let alone make it through the day.

**Willingness to Help Others.** USOC chief communications officer Darryl Seibel was recently quoted in USA Today as saying, “For most Olympic and Paralympic athletes, giving back is a part of their DNA. They recognize the sacrifices that others have made to help them pursue and achieve their dreams, and many feel a strong desire to give back.”

I see those same qualities in our Housekeepers. They are always there to assist others, and at the annual Visitor Industry Charity Walk, I typically see hundreds of our Housekeepers leading the pack and walking the extra mile to help Hawaii’s charitable organizations.
Honesty & Integrity. We expect the highest honesty and integrity of a person in the spotlight like an Olympic athlete. Similarly, we hold Housekeepers to an equally high standard. Every day, Outrigger and OHANA’s guests leave their rooms, valuables, and personal effects in the care of our Housekeepers. In my 61 years in the hotel business, I have hardly ever seen that trust violated.

Sense of Humor. While Olympians are deadly serious during competition, they have a humorous side as well. Take Michael Phelps for example. Just before starting a race, he was as focused and serious as anyone can be. However, in later interviews, he showed remarkable relaxation and humor, as he deftly handled comments about the body-hugging Speedo suits swimmers wear these days, as well as jokes about his size-14 feet, double-jointed ankles, and sudden status as one of the most eligible bachelors in the nation. Tonight, you can see more of Michael Phelps’ humorous side when he hosts the season premier of NBC’s Saturday Night Live.

Laughter and humor are also abundant in the Outrigger and OHANA Housekeeping departments, which is one of the reasons I like visiting there. Just as on the playing field, in the hotel business, things often do not go exactly as planned. Arrivals and departures can be unexpectedly early or late. Sometimes the laundry delivers stained towels (or does not deliver at all). Occasionally the plumbing stops up just before the end of a shift. Whenever something like this happens, our Housekeepers, like true leaders, approach the situation with patience – and a large dose of humor. They know that no one lasts long in the hotel industry without the ability to look at the bright and funny side of everything that comes their way.

So when I think of Olympians and our Housekeepers, I see champions with remarkably similar characteristics. But when it comes to our Housekeepers, I don’t need a stopwatch or a team of judges holding up scorecards to know they’re winners.

By any measure, the Outrigger and OHANA Housekeepers are always champions, and in my book, they win gold medals every day of the year.