

Skills tested in Olympic events for the workers

By Ian MacKinnon

THE National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham has been converted into a shop floor for three days as 400 competitors from 21 nations take part in the thirtieth international Skill Olympics.

As one might expect with a team of top athletes, all the competitors are honed to a peak of physical and mental perfection.

Most of the UK "athletes", one for each of the 34 skills, ranging from hairdressing to automotive engineering, have been training hard in the three months since securing a place on the squad.

The British team of 19- to 23-year-olds were brought together at a training camp in Norfolk at the end of June to be briefed on what to expect from the opposition. They were given a programme of physical training to ensure that they arrived in top condition for the three-day strain. A psychologist also gave lectures on getting in the right frame of mind. "They were taught how to concentrate on the piece of work in hand, not their competitors, or the public milling around them," said one team official.

Out in the factory arena yesterday all the competitors appeared entirely engrossed in the task in hand.

In the gentlemen's hairdressing competition, the model's head, supported by a steel shaft, was given a jacket and tie by some of the competitors. Later, when the live models were brought on, a minor international incident almost ensued, as the Korean candidate discovered that his had a beard, absent on his artificial



Competitors taking part in the men's hairdressing event yesterday during the International Skill Olympics at the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham

model. But after a chat with one of the judges, he seemed satisfied by her ruling.

In the other hall, the bricklayers were hard at work building a strange construction which seemed to bear very little relation to anything they might be required to do in real life.

The jewellery makers had to do their bit behind bars because of the £2,000-worth of gold necessary for the competition. "It's just a precaution to stop any snatch-and-run," said David Humphries, deputy chief executive of the Olympics.

Last night, as the British team

trudged back to their "dry" Olympic village (Warwick University halls), their team manager, Archie Sharkie knew he would be in for a difficult evening cheering up the team members who felt they had put in a poor performance.

Mr Sharkie, a veteran of 17 competitions, said: "I'm like a mother and fa-

ther to the team. I have to help them sort out all their little problems and give them the confidence to go on."

Martin Jones, a former British brick-laying team member, now a lecturer, said: "Companies want top people like these but they are simply not prepared to pay a lot of money for them."