

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier University



Contact: Barry Ries
WLU Information Officer
(519) 884-0710, Ext. 3070

June 4, 1996
34-96

Dr. Stephen Wenn
Dept. of Physical Education
(519) 884-0710, Ext. 4160

Sixty years of Television and The Olympic Games: **the transition from curiosity to co-dependence**

Think of the Olympics and you think of images, from Ben Johnson's incredible (although drug-enhanced) sprint, to Victor Davis's arm surging out of the pool to punch the air in triumph, to David Letterman's mom live from Lillehammer.

The images come to us via television, the medium that is at once shallow, vital, powerful, childish, demanding, ultra-nationalistic, vulnerable and rich.

It has not always been this way. The 60 years that have passed since the first live television coverage of the Olympics has seen the medium move from passive observer to partner, promoter and participant - if not a participant in the actual events, at least in how, where and when the events will take place.

The reason is money. This year NBC is paying \$456 million (U.S.) to broadcast the Atlanta Olympics in the United States, the European Broadcasting Union is paying another \$250 million (U.S.), a Japanese consortium is paying \$99.5 million (U.S.), and CBC is paying \$20.75 million (Cdn).

In 1948, by comparison, the BBC paid £1,500 for the right to telecast the Games to a domestic audience, the first time a TV network paid the Organizing Committee for the privilege. In 1960, the Winter Olympics from Squaw Valley yielded \$50,000 in television revenue; the Rome Olympics fetched \$1,178,257.

"The IOC (International Olympic Committee) started looking at TV as an issue in the 1950s," says Dr. Stephen Wenn, an assistant professor of physical education at Wilfrid Laurier University. "The question then was, 'Do we really want to make money? And what will the effect be on the Olympics? Will TV promote Olympic values?'. "

(more)

"Money brought conflict to the relationship between the IOC and members of the Olympic community - the local organizing committees, international sports federations and national Olympic communities - who debated how it was distributed," says Wenn.

The IOC "thought the Olympics could operate in a vacuum, but politics affects the Olympics and so does money. The core Olympic values remain, but politics and commercialism have combined to remove some of the lustre."

The money also affects the coverage itself. It's no accident that North America has hosted so many Olympic Games. The potential television revenue from the U.S. as a result of staging the games in a location where events are easily accessible to U.S. networks for prime time telecasting has been attractive to the IOC in past.

"The U.S. networks pay a lot of money," says Wenn. "They need advertisers, so they need people watching." U.S. coverage has been considered overly nationalistic and jingoistic and gets into extraneous things, like the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan saga. Still, "NBC's stranglehold on U.S. Olympic TV rights through 2008 provides the network with an opportunity to re-visit past practices, and perhaps provide a new path for Olympic television coverage in the U.S.," says Wenn.

And, lest we single out nationalistic U.S. television coverage for criticism, Wenn adds that "We haven't been immune to it here in Canada. I defy you to watch Canadian coverage and not see a bias towards Canadian athletes. After all, Americans want to see Americans, Canadians want to see Canadians, and Europeans want to see Europeans. But I think the Canadian networks have done a better job of giving viewers a feel for the internationalism of the Olympics.

Wenn began his research into Olympic history as an undergraduate at the University of Western Ontario, focused on the link between sports and politics for his Master's thesis, and examined the link between the Olympics and television for his doctoral studies at Pennsylvania State University. His research has taken him several times to the International Olympic Committee's headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he was granted complete access to the archives.

His research indicates that, until recently, the television fees collected by the IOC were split thus: 60 per cent to the organizing committee (in Calgary or Barcelona or wherever), with the balance split between the IOC (which keeps seven or eight per cent) and international sport federations like the International Amateur Athletics Federation and FIFA, soccer's governing world body, and the various National Olympic Committees.

Beginning with the 2004 Summer Games, that split will be changed to 50-50. The reduction of 10 percentage points to organizing committees is a reflection of the growing importance of corporate sponsorships.

A Short History of Television and the Olympics

Televised Olympic coverage had its roots in 1936. The Berlin Summer Games were televised live on a closed-circuit basis to "television rooms" (Fernsehnstuben) in Berlin, Potsdam and Leipzig, with about 162,000 people paying to watch 175 competitions in 138 hours of coverage over a two-week period.

In 1964, the Innsbruck Olympics have television revenue of \$936,667. The Tokyo Olympics realize \$1,577,778, but the Japanese are annoyed when NBC decides to air Johnny Carson's Tonight Show instead of providing live coverage of the opening ceremonies.

In 1968, the Grenoble Winter Olympics fetch \$2,612,822; the Mexico City Summer Olympics realize \$9,750,000. In 1972, with a television audience estimated at one billion people, the Munich Games realize television revenue of \$17.8 million. Retiring International Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage, disenchanted with the infighting for television money and the impact of commercialism on the Olympic movement, calls for the IOC to have "nothing to do with money" but the IOC executive board ignores his advice.

Television revenues for Winter Olympics grew quickly: Innsbruck, 1976, \$11.6 million; Lake Placid, 1980, \$20.7 million; Sarajevo, 1984, \$102.7 million; Calgary, 1988, \$324.9 million; Albertville, 1992, \$291.9 million; Lillehammer, 1994, \$352.7 million.

The numbers are much higher for the Summer Olympics. Montreal, 1976, \$34.9 million; Moscow, 1980, \$88 million; Los Angeles, 1984, \$286.9 million; Seoul, 1988, \$402.6 million; Barcelona, 1992, \$636 million; Atlanta, 1996, more than \$900 million.

NBC has agreed to pay \$1.27 billion for the 2000 Summer and 2002 Winter Games, and \$2.3 billion for U.S. TV rights for the 2004 and 2008 Summer Games and the 2006 Winter Games.

News Corp. will pay \$2 billion for the European broadcasting rights for the three Summer and two Winter Games from 2000 through 2008.