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Future lies in Salt Lake for 4 execs on the spot

RICK BURTON

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For four executives, the 2002 Winter Olympics will greatly influence the health of their organizations for years to come.

International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge presides over the first Games in the post-Juan Antonio Samaranch era. Samaranch was not always loved or fully understood by the world's media, but his management of the Olympic movement led to staggering increases in participation, rights fees and viewership as well as complaints of unethical IOC bidding procedures and athlete doping.

The Winter Games represent the first international sports event for new U.S. Olympic Committee CEO Lloyd Ward, who took over in October and joined a quest to see America win 20 competition medals at Salt Lake. Ward was recently named to the IOC's influential marketing commission and joins the Olympic movement at a time when the commercialism of sport is attacked regularly and the ratings for the Olympics have fallen for three consecutive Games.

For World Anti-Doping Agency chief Dick Pound, these are his second Games for catching drug cheats. Pound, who formerly ran the IOC's marketing and network negotiations, was a candidate for the IOC presidency but finished third in voting by IOC members. Rogge has asked the accomplished Montreal lawyer to continue with the IOC and investigate opportunities to limit the scope and costs associated with the Olympics.

Finally, this may be the most important Olympiad for NBC Sports czar Dick Ebersol, whose efforts in Sydney for the 2000 Games resulted in the lowest-rated Olympiad (in the United States) of all time. Much of that rating decline was due to time zone differences and the proliferation of cable and Internet options, but with NBC having lost the NFL, MLB and NBA in the last four years, General Electric's television network now finds the Olympics as its flagship sports event.

Collectively, these four men will play a huge role in shaping the health of amateur sports in America for a generation of children who increasingly find themselves overprogrammed with entertainment options. We know they love their Sony PlayStations, Microsoft Xboxes, AOL and Yahoo! e-mail accounts, but we should also know they are frequently misunderstood by networks and sport properties alike.

Here's the rub. The ancient Greeks loved sport for its physical ability to differentiate men based on honor, courage, strength, agility and commitment to higher ideals. For these four, their task may now stand to keep the "purity" of sport alive in a time when financial or commercial interests dominate.

Pound and Ebersol played a role in negotiating the richest broadcast rights fee ever and thus guaranteed the free, over-the-air transmission of the ideal. They must now combine to create the impression the Games are worthy. Ward, who previously ran Maytag, after stints at Procter & Gamble and PepsiCo, must, without appearing crass and commercial, secure sponsorships that can fund the winning of American medals.

And Rogge, the former Belgian surgeon, must save the very concept of Olympic sport. No mean task when the process starts in a city that may have bent the rules to host the Games and the sports featured are a mish-mash of snowboarding, skeleton racing, freestyle skiing and ice dancing.

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