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Olympics, Aussie-style: Business as blood sport

RICK BURTON

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I happened to be strolling around Australia the other day. Had some meetings at SOCOG (Sydney Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games) and wanted to look at some of its more recent press releases. SOCOG had just passed the 200-day mark and as of March 15 had less than six months until showtime. To say the least, things were getting pretty interesting.

Depending on which newspaper you read, the Games are in dire straits or rolling along just fine. It seems every media outlet is an official sponsor or partner for the Games, and each paper slags whatever was released to its competitor first.

The morning I was there, Jeff Wells of the Daily Telegraph was writing that Stadium Australia, the 120,000-seat site of the opening ceremonies, was "a dud, a white elephant waiting to happen." His concern was that the headwinds and tailwinds will whip the athletes "like eggs in an omelette" and September, when the Games will take place, is the worst wind month of the year. I think he was suggesting they rebuild the stadium.

Ahhh, the joy of staging big events. Six months out, everyone thinks you're an idiot. Your ticketing system stinks, your transportation plan is flawed, your airport is inadequate, your security plan is dubious and your organization is deplorable. In short, just what the hell were you thinking when you bid for these Games?

What's been interesting to me is that in Australia (and perhaps in other parts of the world), the business of the Games is a blood sport. People trying to present the Games are knocked about regularly. Careers are held up to the microscope and, in some cases, the employees and their performances are reviewed more closely than any athlete running a wind-aided 100.

Some of that comes with state or national governments running the show. In the United States (where Olympiads must run essentially on private funds), you can hide certain facts or issues from the press. Not so in other places.

But then, we get Olympiads all the time. Since 1980, the United States is averaging an Olympic Games every 51

years. We've had Lake Placid, Los Angeles, Atlanta and, in 2002, Salt Lake City.

Most other places get Olympiads about once a century (yes, I know the Japanese have had three in 36 years, and this is Australia's second in 44 years). Anyway, in this day and age, you'd really have to enjoy public floggings if you were going to stage this circus.

And this opinion I offer is based on visiting a beautiful city where, in my opinion, the Games will be a huge success. Why? Well, with six months to go, all but two venues have been officially opened and all have been built with minor cost overruns. Most of them, like the Olympic Aquatic Center, are spectacular.

Transportation and general convenience likely will be a major issue, but that's an issue folks at home won't see on their TV or computer. For ticket holders it will be a hassle, but most of those folks either live locally, can afford to travel to Australia (and thus figure out the buses and trains) or are an official partner (and getting all kinds of special privileges).

Speaking of sponsors, this is one area where it may get really ugly. SOCOG has been notably public about its projected financial shortages, so a lot of sponsorship and hospitality packages have been sold. They've cut this pie pretty thin.

In fact, while I was there, SOCOG announced it had signed the "Official Provider of Materials Handling Equipment" of the Olympic Games.

For those of you who don't watch reruns of "Tool Time," that sponsorship covers the rough-terrain fork lifts and 12-ton trucks that will be used to handle big containers and things that come on pallets. Let me tell you, when you're selling sponsorships for the vehicles that run only between midnight and 6 a.m., you're scraping the bottom of the barrel.

Still, I think these Games are on the right track. They will have a paid work force of approximately 65,000 trying to help people holding more than 7 million tickets. That means the worst place could be the Olympic Park after the big events let out. On those nights, you might find 500,000 of your closest friends waiting to catch the train.

If that thought bothers you, here's my tip for the day: Two days before the Olympic opening ceremony in Sydney (Sept. 15), preliminary rounds of the Olympic soccer tournament will be played in Brisbane. With hotel space available (probably at half the cost of what they're going to be charging in Sydney) and Surfer's Paradise and the Great Barrier Reef just down the road, this could be the answer. Fly to Brisbane on Qantas, go to a soccer match at the Gabba, send postcards home saying you went to the Olympics and watch the Games for the next week from a great Aussie bar with a cold VB (Victoria Bitter) or two. It will be plenty authentic with no headwinds. And the fork lifts can cart you home unsponsored.

Rick Burton is director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business.

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