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Opportunity now for Paralympics to grab N. American spotlight

RICK BURTON & NORM O'REILLY

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RICK BURTON

So here's a question for you ... how come no one really seems to care about the Paralympics even though they are amazingly great?

And we mean that sincerely. Why doesn't anyone, or more than a few select folks, really talk these Games up?



NORM O'REILLY

Because, truly, the Vancouver 2010 Paralympics, which began Friday and run through next Sunday, will feature some of the greatest sports performances of this decade-old millennium, and yet we fear very little coverage will seep out of the frigid North and make waves on our respective wire services, blogs, Internets and Twitters. Certainly, the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing, with 100,000 strong crowds at the Bird's Nest, were special. But that was most likely a blip, and we could find ourselves back to sparse crowds of family, friends and a few true spectators in Vancouver and Whistler.

Why is that?

At the risk of sounding like Dana Carvey's infamous "Saturday Night Live" Church Lady ... could it be money? Ratings? An absence of athletic stereotypes? Or is it Satan?

What about the fact that sports around the world are trying to better promote links to health and be socially responsible? Is this not an ideal vehicle and platform to do that? Isn't it possible that an athlete who uses a wheelchair represents at least one epitome of working to overcome the evils of obesity (even when unable to stand unassisted)?

"This is definitely the 'coming out' for Paralympic Sport in Canada and the USA, and will bring us up to speed with the leaders in Paralympic coverage and support — U.K., Australia, Germany, France, Brazil, Korea where consumer awareness is much higher and there has long been historical TV coverage," said Anna Parisi, chief of communications for the Canadian Paralympic Committee. "The challenge for Canada and the USA is to use this opportunity to create a nation of fans and to sustain interest when the Paralympic Games isn't quite so close to home."

Imagine that: Six hundred athletes, from 45 countries, all of them overcoming tremendous physical odds competing for 64 gold medals in 20 events spread over 10 days in five sports (alpine skiing, cross country skiing, wheelchair curling, ice sled hockey and biathlon) and we are only now in North America, in 2010, getting to the tipping point that other countries reached long ago. How is it possible America and Canada, two bastions of sports, actually trail in this debate?

“The Vancouver Paralympic Games are bringing energy and awareness to our movement,” said Charlie Huebner, chief of Paralympics for the USOC. “It is allowing the U.S. Olympic Committee to significantly enhance Paralympic programming available to kids with physical disabilities and injured service members at the community level throughout the United States.”

Huebner’s counterpart at the Canadian Paralympic Committee feels the same way and has worked to ensure that CTV’s Olympic broadcast consortium will feature more than 50 hours of television programming of the Paralympics, including plans to show the sled hockey gold medal game live. This is by far the most TV coverage ever for the Paralympics in Canada.

“Operating in the shadow of the Olympics, while a challenge, may also end up being a blessing given the commercialism around the Olympics and Olympians compared to the more family friendly and warmth of the Paralympic Games,” said Henry Storgaard, the CPC’s chief executive officer. “So I agree that this is a unique opportunity to shine a light on North American Paralympians.”

As professors at Syracuse, we don’t need that spotlight to shine very far. Goose Perez (East Syracuse), Jim Pierce (North Syracuse) and James “Jimmy Jam” Joseph (New Hartford) give us local heroes. Those three made the U.S. wheelchair curling team. And then we have three more players from the Buffalo area in Brad Emmerson (Amherst, N.Y.), Mike Blabac (Buffalo) and Alexi Salamone (Grand Island, N.Y.) to cheer for in sled hockey.

One other thing. Make no mistake in thinking these are Johnny-come-lately Paralympics. Vancouver represents the 10th Paralympic Winter Games and it’s the second time Canada will have hosted Paralympians (Toronto held the 1976 Summer Paralympics). Given that Salt Lake hosted the Paralympic Games in 2002 and Atlanta the 1996 Summer Paralympics, we all should be substantially aware of disability sport.

But are we?

We argue that we’re actually where many organizations are when they move from introduction to growth in their life cycle. This may sound overly academic, but it is true. We have a product with tremendous potential and a track record. We have a market that should be supportive but likely is not fully aware of what our product offers. We have limited direct competition but many substitutes exist. So, what is the strategy?

Simple really: establish your distinction (done!), build awareness of it (starting) and generate resources (key). In some countries, the resources come from the government. In others, it arrives via a blend of sponsorship, private giving and national Olympic committee commitment.

Whatever the source, the U.S. and Canada sports communities should see the Vancouver Paralympic Games as a place to fully press the inclusivity buttons that motivate greater awareness, athlete identification, coaching and marketing/communications leverage of our collective (and amazing) Paralympians.

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