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# USOC network could join list of broadcast tipping points

RICK BURTON

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Ten years ago I wrote a column for The New York Times detailing many of the sports industry's most significant developments during the 20th century. Among those great achievements the following each held national broadcasting ramifications:

- Ford Motor Co. sponsoring network radio broadcasts of the 1934 World Series
- TV broadcasting various sports starting in 1939
- NFL Commissioner Bert Bell embracing TV timeouts in 1958
- Bell's successor, Pete Rozelle, authorizing (with help from ABC's Roone Arledge) "Monday Night Football" in 1970
- Bill Rasmussen conceiving the idea of a sports-only TV network in 1978 that would grow into ESPN by Sept. 7, 1979
- David Stern pushing in 1999 for the creation of NBA.com TV — making the NBA the first league to launch its own cable/satellite TV network

These tipping points resonate because history almost always teaches us something (that we often choose to ignore) and because in each of the above settings there were detractors predicting the end of civilization as we knew it.

Evil perpetrators would over-commercialize the game, kill the game at the gate, slow down the game, show the game too often, show too much of everything but the game (including Australian Rules Football) and cheapen the value of what existing broadcasters had purchased from the leagues because … well, what else were you going to throw at Stern when he was one step ahead of you?

That brings us to the recent announcement that the U.S. Olympic Committee would join with Comcast to launch an Olympic TV channel (with video-on-demand and a broadband platform) all while proposing to deliver human interest features, archival footage, movies, news shows, documentaries, coaching clinics, maybe some nutrition segments, and visibility for rarely seen sports that make up more than half of the Olympic movement sports.

"Hasty," cried the IOC, "and arrogant. We are dismayed."

"Disappointing," railed NBC, "and questionable. You may hurt Chicago 2016."

"We're surprised," shouted the National Governing Bodies Association (a group that represents the 45 NGB sports of the Olympic and Pan-American Games). "And you didn't ask for our input."

"How were you thinking about us?" Chicago 2016 reps might have asked. "And how will you work with the IOC on this?"

This move by the USOC and Comcast is bothersome to some, mistimed to others and quirky for many.

Now, some of you may recall that I was the chief marketing officer at the USOC and supported this concept publicly. I still do.

So I ask, what if this move is logical and beneficial to all?

What if a major sports property like the USOC, in trying to act more like MLB, the NFL, NBA, NASCAR, New York Yankees or even the Big Ten, sought to create more content moments and deliver them with a powerful distribution arm? Ten million basic digital-cable households counts for something, right?

Given that the USOC's announcement was made at the exclusive Allen & Co. conclave in Sun Valley, Idaho, one must imagine Comcast analysts crunched the numbers and ran the concept by Chairman and CEO Brian Roberts more than a few times. Someone somewhere must have projected pent-up Olympics demand (despite the presence of NBC's growing Universal Sports) or noted access to the Olympic intellectual property (gift-wrapped by the USOC) was too cost-efficient to ignore. Who knows? Maybe Roberts has his eye on bidding for the 2014 and 2016 Games when the IOC shops them in 2010.

Regardless, numerous reports suggest the USOC spent the last three years — since first announcing the concept in 2006 — signaling to the IOC, NBC and NGBA that America should see Olympic, Paralympic and Pan-American Games action more frequently than roughly 75 or so days every four years.

Even better, the USOC had to suppose, by creating more "eyeball" moments, the Colorado Springs-based organization would better uphold its various charters to support the IOC (possibly helping drive an increased bid from NBC, Fox, ESPN/ABC, CBS or Comcast for the next TV quad), better support NBC's coming telecast from London in 2012 (thus driving up advertising rates), better expose multiple national governing bodies (that are underfunded, understaffed and rarely seen on TV) and ultimately embrace the values of Chicago's 2016 comprehensive and superb bid by showing the struggles and achievements of the world's athletes.

That doesn't mean that the USOC did everything the right way, that its timing was optimal, that the end-game was fully thought out or that mistakes won't be made along the way. But in looking back on other "radical" moments in sport, the ideas that often elicited the greatest concern frequently served as the leading edge for incremental business growth and growing consumer engagement of sport.

In the Bible, the phrase from Psalms 118:22 is this: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone."

Is it possible the USOC did what had to be done in order to keep pace with a sports industry watching the disappearance of daily newspapers every month and the emergence of Twitter, Facebook and MySpace? Is it possible if the USOC didn't move in 2009 that this same column would need to accost the various executives who foretold of promotional and financial challenges facing America's Olympic movement from 2006 to 2009 yet never crossed the finish line?

In 2010 we may see a new TV network promoting Olympic and Paralympic sports and budding Olympians and Paralympians. My sense is the USOC network will suggest the Olympic Games are good and the greatest force for global peace in the world.

You tell me … is that a bad thing?

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