

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Sport Management

David B. Falk College of Sport and Human
Dynamics

6-5-2000

USOC Head Draws the Line – And It's the Bottom Line

Rick Burton
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/sportmanagement>



Part of the [Sports Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burton, R. (2000), "USOC head draws the line – and it's the bottom line," *Sports Business Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 7, June 5-11, 42.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the David B. Falk College of Sport and Human Dynamics at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sport Management by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.



SBJ/June 5 - 11, 2000/No Topic Name

USOC head draws the line — and it's the bottom line

Published June 5, 2000

I got to thinking about the Sydney Olympics the other day. Well, more accurately, about the U.S. Olympic Committee. That's because I had just read an Associated Press story about the USOC's decision to potentially "slash the budgets of some 20 sports while enriching traditional powerhouses like swimming."

On the surface, that was OK with me because our oldest daughter is a competitive swimmer and we had just returned from the Phillips 66 USA Swimming National Championships in Federal Way, Wash. I was glad swimming still mattered.

But the more I thought about the USOC's announcement, the more I became concerned for America's National Governing Body (NGB) universe. Had I read that article correctly?

Did it suggest amateur sports like team handball, biathlon, field hockey, weightlifting, table tennis, badminton, curling, fencing, field hockey, judo, weightlifting, modern pentathlon, rowing, sailing, canoe/kayak, shooting and at least four others would probably soon see budget cuts? Say it ain't so.

"I employed sort of a portfolio management discipline," said Norm Blake, new CEO of the USOC. "There are certain sports that are not indigenous to the United States, so the available feedstock of potential athletes is limited. [Therefore] the amount of support available in the U.S. from a fund-raising standpoint is limited [and] we have to very seriously look at what level of support we give those particular sports."

From what I can gather, Blake decided to use a strategic approach to the business of winning medals. I'm told he started by establishing a cost analysis model that indicated how much funding the USOC currently had provided each NGB. When that amount was divided by the number of medals won in a fixed period of time, he could determine the cost per medal per sport (what I'll call CMPS).

In certain sports, like gymnastics, swimming, track and field, the traditional cost is relatively low. In other sports, the CMPS is staggeringly high. Some sports don't win any medals at all.

Thus, from this point on, we will fish only where the fish catch medals.

We will support the feedstocks that produce.

Of course, in our view of Western capitalism, we understand from Adam Smith that weak or inefficient suppliers fail. To the victor go the spoils. Only the strong survive. Eat the dead.

In other words, just win, baby.

It's admirable on certain levels. Many NGBs are poorly run and have lost contact with their grassroots participants.

But these are "amateur" athletes we're talking about. And America is — or at least was, last time I checked — the world's melting pot. You can come here from anywhere in the world and find someone in America playing your sport.

That's great for the USOC since the Olympic motto is "citius, altius, fortius." Swifter, higher, stronger. If America is a place where anyone can start off playing any sport, then we should have the biggest farm with the most livestock.

But listening to Blake, you begin to wonder if that will hold up over time.

"These are sports [the ones that will receive cuts] that, for all practical purposes, are not really a concern to the American public, and the level of athletic involvement at the grassroots level is relatively nominal. Do we want to throw money at a sport that, frankly, would not have the means to ever medal or to make America proud?"

Blake further indicated each governing body's CMPS would be evaluated much the way a parent company reviews the performances of its brands. "We're dealing with finite resources," he said.

Make no mistake, then, Blake will manage budgets. He is firing shots over the bows of 20 slow-moving ships.

So I called Skip Gilbert, managing director of the business development division at USA Swimming. "Skip," I said. "what's this all mean?"

"Well, I think it gives some sports the chance to control their destiny," he said. "NGBs need to make their sports relevant. In a lot of cases, it depends on the sport. At the athlete level, you may be up against the allure of extreme sports, pro sports or the allure of computer and cable TV activities. There are so many more options for kids today.

"Secondarily, you have to consider the parents. For our sport, swimming, it's difficult when you have households where both parents work. That makes it tougher to sit at a pool all weekend."

I could relate to that. We've had three-day swim weekends where our daughter's combined racing time in the water did not exceed 10 minutes. For me, three days of sitting on cement steps to watch 10 minutes of frantic splashing is not a big idea.

"Looking at USA Swimming's future," continued Gilbert, "we know we have barriers to overcome. We need to create better marketing. We need to look for advances in coaching that might require less training time. We need to make our events more entertaining for everybody including the athletes, the coaches, the parents and the casual fan. We need to add better lighting and special spotlights. We need video boards to showcase our athletes. We need sound systems that help get folks excited.

"Unless we take the bull by the horns, swimming will be thought of as only an Olympic sport. And for this organization, that isn't good enough."

Gilbert paused to let his statement sink in.

Why, I asked?

"Because for tomorrow's athletes there has to be incentive to compete in a sport or they'll go elsewhere. We have to be in people's faces because today's kids are different."

Looks like Norm Blake is different, too. Different from the folks who previously ran the USOC. In fact, if I had to guess, I'd say he'll be in a lot of faces between now and Sydney. It's smackdown time in Colorado Springs.

Rick Burton is director of the James H. Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon.

[Return to top](#)