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Rick Burton

Syracuse University

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Recommended Citation

Burton, R (2001), "What's in the cards for the 2008 Olympic site?" *Sports Business Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 3, May 7-13, 33.

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SBJ/May 7 - 13, 2001/This Weeks Issue

What's in the cards for 2008 Olympic site?

RICK BURTON

Published May 7, 2001

I was in Beijing the other day and started wondering about China's chances of winning the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. And then I asked myself, if Beijing wins this bid (the voting takes place July 13 in Moscow), what will it mean to global sports marketers?

So I said to myself, how about we decide this the way we used to settle things on hot summer days back in the alley.

We get out the cards. First, though, shuffle the deck. Dealer's choice.

Five big ones, no draw. Plenty of wild cards but you won't know what they are until you're in the game. Dealer (in this case, the International Olympics Committee) makes the rules as we play. You in?

Solid.

And by the way, on the subject of money, this isn't penny ante. We're talking billions in sports marketing investments.

Deal 'em.

OK, what'd you get?

Beijing, Istanbul, Osaka, Paris, Toronto.

Hmmm, pretty phat cards. First question is how you want to peg those bad boys.

Remember, when we start throwing down, you gotta get 50 percent of the IOC votes to win the bid and we lose one card on each round of bidding.

I'll handicap them for you.

Beijing is your leading favorite. The trump card. Should have gotten the 2000 Games but the Australian card sharks cut some side action with the African players and Beijing lost by the slimmest of margins.

On the plus side, there's never been an Olympiad in China and these would be government-supported Games. Lots of Olympic marketers go to bed dreaming of selling their products to 1.26 billion folks.

On the downside, China's never held the Games before and some Westerners have never gone that far East. Plus, there was that U.S. spy plane incident this spring. But this is a sports business story.

Istanbul. The long shot. Currently playing up its role as the place where Asia and Europe meet. Question is whether anyone wants to go down to that crossroads and make a deal.

Osaka. Japan. We're talking technology with a capital T. IOC needs to modernize the Games and Osaka, home of top sponsor Panasonic, could help bring the digital revolution worldwide by '08. Issue is, the Japan card has been played three times previously in Tokyo (1964), Sapporo ('72) and Nagano ('98).

Paris. Pretty face card. Kind of like the Queen of Diamonds. Swiss IOC members would find themselves in their own back yard and enjoy the luxury of having their favorite restaurants, cafés and wines known by all the concierges and maître d's in the City of Lights.

Problem with Paris is that it would mean Europe gets three straight Olympics (Athens in 2004, Turin, Italy, in 2006 and Paris for 2008). That would normally be a problem, but the IOC has drawn to the inside European straight before and gone with Albertville (1992), Barcelona (1992) and Lillehammer (1994).

As we like to say, if you believe in the card you need, you can draw it.

All right, flip that last card over.

Toronto. Hmm, that's good for Dick Ebersol and NBC Sports. Right time zone for U.S. ratings and, with one of Canada's prettiest cities serving as a distant suburb of Buffalo and Detroit, the production costs could be held down. Weather that time of year would be pretty attractive, and no one is ever mad at Canada.

Downside is that Toronto is in North America (a continent not favored by some IOC members) and the boys up north have had Games in Montreal and Calgary previously. Come to think of it, the betting on Montreal left some folks in debt when they doubled down. I think they're still paying that loan off.

Okay, show time.

The Swami says Istanbul goes out first. It's too wild in Turkey and there aren't enough IOC influences to drive this bid.

Four cities left.

Okay, first wild card. Bid city decision gets made on July 13 with IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch still in control. But, on July 16, five contenders to Juan's throne stage their equivalent of the rumble in the Jungle Room.

Think of it as a WWF Steel Cage match. Five corners, five nominees. Front-running Canadian Dick Pound, Korean Un-yong Kim, American Anita De Frantz, Belgian Jacques Rogge and Hungarian Pal Schmitt. Each will have been campaigning heavily across April, May and June. Each will have been whispering in the projects.

Two North Americans, two Europeans, one Asian. At this point, we've got to think about who covered the four aces: Asia, Africa, (South) America and Australia.

Early action has the money on Pound, Rogge and Kim. If that's right, they'll protect Toronto, Paris and Beijing. So, much as the IOC needs Japanese efficiency and technology, Osaka goes out next.

Two down, three left.

Now, it's time for the anti-North American sentiment to kick in and, as "South Park" showed us, you can blame things on Canada. Like not having very many IOC votes (only four). Toronto would be a great choice, but no one wants to be a suburb of Buffalo. Look what happened to the Love Canal. Sayonara, Toronto.

Now we're down to two.

Next wild card is that Korea's scandal-plagued Kim, at age 70, suddenly agrees to step aside in return for more votes to support Beijing and the elevation of his favorite sports (tae kwon do, boxing).

That leaves Pound and Rogge, Beijing and Paris. A European pair (a city and a candidate), an Asian ace (city) and a North American face card (candidate). Logic here says the pair beats the jumble but only once.

Since Pound, arguably the best man for the IOC's digital future, has potentially lost votes for pushing the drug testing agenda and for having served as the front man on the Salt Lake City clean-up, the guess here is Rogge, who uses his European influence to win the presidency.

If that's right, I see Rogge, behind closed doors, sacrificing Paris (holding it for 2012) in return for the presidency.

Thus, Beijing wins 2008.

And now, as the cops come by and we scatter back down the alley, all you sport industrialists have to ask yourselves one question.

If those projected outcomes came to pass, how would it influence your global marketing investments and your projections on the future of sports?

If you're not sure, you've got until July 16 to get ready.

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

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