

ACADEMICS TAKE UP THE GAMES...

by DENIS ECHARD

The conference on the "Olympic Movement and the Media : Past, Present and Future" which took place in Calgary last February brought together practitioners of the Olympics, athletes, academics and professionals. The meeting was at times quite volatile, and showed that the Games are a subject of current interest, an aspect of civilization ; the reasons for its success and the driving forces behind it are analysed and its future is scrutinized with intense interest.

A sun as bright as it was unexpected lent a springtime atmosphere to the quiet campus of the University of Calgary. The chinook, the wind from the Rockies, was at work. It blew away the snow and left a clear blue sky which often gives an "overexposed" look to the scenery surrounding the Olympic city. The University departments, a perfect example of solid, functional architecture, in their staid orderliness have the typical look of North American schools, both studious and dynamic.

The University of Calgary has played a major part in organizing the Winter Games. Its campus will become the main village for the athletes. That commitment goes hand in hand with an infrastructure development program which will benefit the students, particularly those of the physical education department. Evidence of that is the amazing "oval", the "Turtle" as it is commonly called here, which, with its concave roof in the final stage of construction, will be the world's first covered speed skating track. We will return to the involvement of the University later ; for the moment suffice it to recall the guiding role played by Roger Jackson, who has spared no effort to promote the Olympic Movement at the University since he became head of the physical education department in 1978. An attitude which is understandable, considering that he is a former

rowing champion of the Games in Tokyo and chairman of the Canadian Olympic Association (NOC). He has served as an effective link between the OGOC and the University. The conference on the Olympic Movement and the Media, which he organized under the auspices of the IOC and OCO'88, together with Thomas McPhail, director of the University's communications study program, has clearly shown how sports and university research are interconnected.

Probably more than a simple encounter with representatives of the media, which when all is said and done, would not be the first on this subject, since the SISMO is not so far away, and especially since journalists by nature like to report on the difficulties they encounter in their work, the most memorable event of these few days will remain the, in many ways, bold encounter between university figures and the forces behind the "making" of the Games as we know them today. These forces include, first of all, the athletes, journalists, commentators and other video or audio image makers, sponsors and marketing specialists.

Beginning with the images of "The Games in Question" and "Going for Gold", the conference quickly found its wavelength. The excitement and action-packed images of the films by Taylor Downing (GBR) give us a fresh and lively view of the



A group of absorbed students.

Olympic machine. The intellectuals presented themselves, so to speak, as specialized spectators and well informed media users. As critical observers, they use every method to approach the audience and analyse the content of press, radio and television reports. It became quickly evident that most of the studios concerned North American society. Perhaps one regrettable aspect of the conference is that there was no opportunity to hear from some specialists of the hispanic world, whose conclusions on the themes of the programme would have been interesting to hear.

Audience studies give rise to sociological and psychological approaches. They enable us to get a better idea of certain phenomena, such as the development of sports practice among adolescents (boys' and girls' attitudes differ considerably). They also show how difficult it sometimes is for athletes to exist in their own country when that country is located next door to a producer of superchampions. In this regard athletes, like the poet, dream aloud of the day when every sport will enjoy equal time on the air. But these people are not naive, and several of them gave excellent analyses of the conditions imposed on them by the media. As one presentation followed another, the image of the champion evolved. The hero has become the dominant force. The spectacular nature of athletic feats has changed considerably over the last 50 years. Today, it is important first to make clear whether athletes are genuine heroes of our time or mere celebrities, "famous for being famous".

HEROES OR CELEBRITIES ?

The answer, like a hit parade, leads to a classification of athletes into gods, demi-gods and other minor divinities. An activity which is nevertheless supported by the idea, as defined by the American sociologist Boorstin, that because of the incorruptible authenticity of the efforts mad sports are indeed real and therefore they generate genuine heroes. The media, however, tend to transform the winning athlete into a fantasy creature, the symbol of a whole society, which reduces him to the position of an ordinary celebrity.

In studying the role of the media in broadcasting the Games, i.e. in making the sports event, the communications researchers have found an inexhaustible mine to work proved by the studies presented. Often brutally frank, they rest more on intuitive than on deductive considerations, and for that reason led to critical and sometimes vehement and scathing discussions. Nevertheless, they yielded some useful ideas as well as the indignant but predictable reactions from representatives of the television networks. The tremendous success of the Los Angeles Games in 1984, with their "Californian excesses", gave rise to a lot of sharp criticism of the Hollywood aspect of the opening and closing ceremonies and the choice of images made by ABC, which owned the broadcasting rights.

WHAT DOES AFRICA READ?

Compared with the enormous opportunities for study offered by American society, which never stops talking about itself, the statement made by Fekrou Kidane of Ethiopia, editor-in-chief of the African sports magazine *Continental Sport*, was particularly well-timed to remind us that, faced with the northern hemisphere's, plethora of information, African delegations which come to participate in the Games often return home without so much as a souvenir photo. In that respect one can appreciate how ridiculous the concepts of promotion and setting an example are. Fekrou Kidane touched a sensitive spot: to support a diversified sports movement in the African countries, it is essential to create a system for covering sports competitions, of which there are many, which can counter the one-way flow of information from the North ; a new world information order for sports. The question of media underdevelopment led to the question of the sports reporter, most often just a football specialist, and

in American football at that. Unfortunately, the development of diversified sports activities requires broader coverage of so-called minority sports, which are too often limited to, and followed by, a small group of enthusiasts. This is clearly shown by the visible efforts of federations to adapt the form of their competitions to the requirements of television.

The attention given to women athletes in the press, as well as the political angle, were also dealt with. An analysis of the German press demonstrated the continuing difficulty for women athletes to be viewed apart from by the same old clichés. A comparison of articles from the American and Soviet press highlighted the use of similar rhetoric.

The variety of topics gave a fairly clear picture of research under way. The way the Games have been represented by films, television and the press brought in an ideological perspective, and an attempt to interpret it through the historical context was made. Cooper Graham's study of "Olympia", Leni Riefenstahl's film on the 1936 Games, and Alan Tomlinson's study of the opening ceremonies in Los Angeles, recalled how the Games are influenced by the world situation. And as they represent a tremendous promotional springboard for the country and city which host them, the Games are dangerously dependent on the country and city, in spite of the precautions taken by the IOC to guarantee their independence and internationality.

Ideas were not the only subject dealt with at the conference. The great strides made by communications technology over the last 20 years were also on the agenda. The television networks, the official broadcasters for the Games, ABC for Los Angeles, CBC for Calgary, and KBS for Seoul, came to present and explain what had been, or was being, done to ensure effective, high quality broadcasts. Techniques have changed considerably, becoming more streamlined, but also more demanding. The universal use of electronics, the invention of slow-motion, picture quality, the need for live broadcasts, the development of satellites, all these factors are so many stages in the history of the Games and their broadcasting. Although it may be an exaggeration to say that the Games, through their international character and their regular recurrence, have led to the invention of these new techniques, it can legitimately be said

that the Games have played a significant role in this technological modernization.

FINANCES

The discussion came back down to earth when marketing specialists and sponsors took up the financial aspect of relations between the Olympic Movement and the media. They gave a clearcut definition of what is commonly called the marketing of the Games.

The representatives of ISL Marketing presented their projects and their approach to the question.

The lengthy series of arguments presented was well summarized in the "Essay on the Sponsors' Perspective on the Olympic Games" presented by Christopher Lang, a specialist from Toronto. That outstanding presentation advanced the theory of evolution based on the tremendous success of the Los Angeles Games, in light of the financially negative experience of Montreal in 1976. The origin of the participants and the underlying subject, financing the Games, highlighted the importance of these two Games. Thus, beginning in 1984, concepts in the area of sponsorship have abandoned all emotional or philanthropic forms and adopted more creative forms, more open to offers of participation. This is a new attitude which makes possible integration into an overall communications plan. In addition, the profits made at Los Angeles clearly showed the enterprising spirit, tremendous community involvement, an enormous number of sponsors and, ultimately, the major interest which every modern city has in hosting the Games (as witnessed by the number of candidate cities). This new momentum brings to light some questions which must be faced. One heavy legacy is the need to define the role of the sponsor, who appears as the devil incarnate, a negative image whose corollary is a total lack of scruples. Moreover, the organizers have every imaginable difficulty in limiting the opportunities or pseudo-opportunities for intervention by sponsors who are ever on the look out for a way to make money. The list of ways to become a sponsor of the Games these days is quite long. The possibilities range from being an official supplier of some product to an advertising agent in charge of creating souvenirs, and include the sponsors who are best known and probably the most accepted,



The sub-commission of press with Dr. Roger Jackson (in the background). From left to right, Messrs. John Rodda, Albert Riethausen, Matti Salmenkilä, Miss Michèle Verdier, Messrs. Tsuyoshi Miyakawa, Morley Meyers.

since they are the oldest ones, i.e. the television networks, which hold exclusive broadcasting rights.

DRACONIAN CONDITIONS

To be tamed, the devil must show restraint. But the IOC and the OGOC have means at their disposal of making conditions for access to official recognition downright draconian. The Gates of Paradise are indeed smaller than the eye of a needle. Completely exclusive rights are never offered. Thus there is no possibility of controlling all the lucrative operations related to the Games. Moreover, the use of "Olympic imagery", the strictly circumscribed symbolism of the Games, does not allow exploitation for the exclusive sake of profit.

In the future, the IOC and the OGOC, inseparable partners, will control as many rights as possible. In that case, people will ask, why

should business submit to such rules when it is so much easier to team up with less scrupulous partners? The recurrent nature of the Games is certainly the best answer. Given the fact that they take place every four years (every two years alternating between the Winter and Summer Games), this permanence guarantees the continuity of a sponsorship program which is necessary for establishing an image which will yield a return. Coca-Cola has accompanied the Games since 1928, as its vice-president, Gary Hits, never tires of recalling with satisfaction and pride.

Christopher Lang concluded his excellent presentation with a truism which serves as a cornerstone to the entire edifice: the IOC will defend its ideals by granting rights only to those sponsors who are willing to give strong support to the Olympic Movement.

All these factors taken into consideration, the main question posed by this fruitful encounter remains open. Will the IOC, without fundamental structural changes and without rejecting its quest for excellence and the principle of non-professional performance, be able to breath new life into the economy on which its present and future prosperity is based?

John Rodda spoke with members of the press committee on their role as mediators between the requirements of journalists and the possibilities offered by the OCOC, and recalled the turbulent history of the Games. The delays regretted by the audience are not due to accumulated ill will, conservatism or incompetence; no, it is simply that these problems take time to solve, especially these effected by the geopolitical situation. Lack of money has not made work any easier.

Today the increasing interdependence of the world and the popularity of sports are changing the situation, and forcing people to adapt to new circumstances. This cannot be done against the Olympic Movement.

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