



News agencies



The functions of a news agency are something of a mystery, even to other members of the journalism profession.

News agency people are the unsung heroes - and, of course, heroines of the media whose exploits are most often cloaked in obscurity.

It is a life of virtual anonymity. No comforting by-lines, except in certain newspapers. Just an attribution at the top or bottom of the story: Reuters, AFP, AP, UPI... familiar sights. We've all seen them. Sometimes you can read your own words under the name of someone else's by-line. It is an occupational hazard. But there are consolations. More and more newspapers are having to rely on agencies to fill the gaps as they downsize in the face of rising production costs and competition from television.

In the world of sport, the proliferation of events is making it increasingly difficult for editors to provide coverage through their own resources.

This is where international news agencies and the large national agencies can assist with their global networks. To be effective, international agencies must have at least 1,000-odd full-time journalists world-wide, with support from translation desks plus (although not necessarily) photographic, audio, and even TV services.

The international agencies have the necessary back-up resources to cater for the needs of newspapers and national agencies which cannot draw on the same resources.

Even when newspapers have their own staff to cover events, there is still a place for the international agencies. The constant trickle of information from all parts of the world can affect the entire structure of certain sports.

by Morley Myers

By their very nature, newspapers aim primarily to serve specific customers, whether it be nationally or locally. This means that their resources are concentrated on home territory, although most of the large newspapers and national agencies have a sprinkling of overseas correspondents. They rely on the international agencies mainly to be their eyes and ears to the world.

This is particularly true of affairs relating to the Olympic Movement; not necessarily the Olympic Games themselves, but the less eye-catching, non-headline-grabbing world of routine Olympic business.

Europe is the nerve centre of the Olympic Movement with the IOC headquarters being located in Lausanne, Switzerland. Although the 113 IOC members hail from all parts of the globe, the only time they all meet is at annual IOC Sessions, and it is in Lausanne that most of the future plans for the Olympic Movement are designed, by the IOC Executive Board under the chairmanship of IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch.

Geographical and financial considerations make it very difficult for newspapers or national news services to keep in touch with developments, particularly in developing countries.

But even when IOC Executive Board meetings or Sessions are held on other continents, you can be sure the international agencies will send their specialists or call upon a handily-located bureau from which local staffers can report on the discussions.

Many people, including journalists, believe the Olympic Movement is just about the Games and that the IOC goes into hibernation between these events,

emerging from its slumber just to stage the Summer and Winter showpieces and then returning to happy oblivion.

But Olympic business is a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week operation. Since meetings do not make good television, however, it falls on the written media to report on this less glamorous, but equally important aspect of the Olympic Movement.

At present, only a small cadre of journalists cover Olympic matters on a permanent basis and they always include representatives from the international agencies and the larger national agencies as well as a smattering of newspaper reporters.

Covering Executive Board meetings is not always very exciting, as they are often dominated by what Director General François Carrard delights in describing as "routine housekeeping". But fortunately there are enough contentious topics and items of importance to justify our presence.

The number of Executive Board meetings varies. Generally, we can expect about four a year, but this can increase rapidly in Olympic years or if any crises emerge. Yet, the Olympics is easily the biggest show in town - with more than 10,000 athletes from nearly 200 countries competing over 17 days.

The agencies receive special consideration regarding the number of media accreditations in view of our global needs. The major agencies invest over US \$1 million to cover the Games, sending upwards of 100 people to the Games of the Olympiad, although the figures are obviously lower for the Olympic Winter Games.

The growth of the Olympics in terms of actual different sports - 28 for Sydney in 2000 - is a problem for both the media and organizing committees.

More sports means more people needed to cover events and thus more costs on an already high outlay. There is obviously a real danger of the Olympic Games pricing themselves beyond the reach of ninny newspapers and agencies. Even the major agencies must dig deeply and ruefully into their diminishing pockets.

So this trend is a double-edged sword. If the newspapers cannot afford to send enough staffers and the international agencies are forced to cut back, it will leave a vacuum.

The international agencies have a demanding role to play. Not for us the luxury of focusing on the exploits of just one country: we have to serve the needs

of all our clients spread around the world.

Consequently, we have 'round-the-clock deadlines. Time is of the essence. It is no good accumulating information unless you can transmit it. This is a crucial area and the international agencies have been at the vanguard of technological advancement in communications.

Another area of major importance to us international agencies are the results - and I mean all of the results.

On the surface, a simple enough task. But, as IBM and its users found to their cost in Atlanta, it can go wrong. And that spells very big trouble.

But even when the system works - and we are keeping our fingers crossed for

Nagano and Sydney - it is a major headache to gather and disseminate a seemingly endless tickertape of data: its daily outpourings are bigger than your average telephone directory but infinitely more interesting. They contain only names and figures, but each one tells a story, the outcome of all the aspirations and dreams of the world's leading athletes and the merely hopeful.

The results are the life-blood of our Olympic reports. It is not feasible to write a story on each individual athlete. But given the result, the event, the competitor's name, the performance, etc.. it is possible to extract enough information to build flesh and muscle on to the skeleton.

The press centre at the Games in Atlanta.



When you consider the volume of results that must be processed during an edition of the Olympics, it is enough to make you shudder. In the bad old days before technology entered our world, the results had to be hand punched on teleprinters from hard-copy paper.

When computer-to-computer systems evolved, it still required at least four people to massage the main feed results into "agency style". Fortunately we have progressed beyond that point and it is now possible for each agency to have customized results.

But to reach this stage, there have to be months of planning, regular meetings between communication technicians from the agencies, the results supplier and the organizing committees. So even a simple looking item like a result constitutes a lot of work.

Covering an Olympic Games is rather like preparing for a military exercise: there must be no weak points and you need enough experienced troops to beat the opposition. Make no mistake about it, while the athletes are competing for medals in the arenas, the agencies are locked in battle to win the laurels for reporting the Games.

Individually, staffers from rival agencies are the best of friends. But en masse as part of a vast army, we are transformed into deadly enemies.

Battle lines are usually drawn up about one year before the Games, for it is then that the agencies concentrate on strategy for the coming campaign.

This usually triggers internal war within the agencies themselves. The first duty of a sports editor is to produce a projected budget based on staffing strengths.

We might plan on sending around 60 reporters, the majority to cover the sports themselves at the various venues and the remainder assigned to editing and news story duties. As a rough guide, it is usually a matter of doubling the number of sports with the addition of about 10 other bodies. We find it necessary to "double up" on several of the biggest sports, in

some cases with three people covering the same event because of different needs (to cater for our Spanish-language service for instance). Added to this are photographers, technicians and radio reporters.

A small group of technicians and journalists arrives at least two weeks before the start of the Games to set up communications and begin writing early material. The majority of staffers are usually on the scene about four to five days prior to the opening.

However, reams of preview material, profiles, etc., are filed on the wires during the final three-month run-up to the Olympics.

Of course, the special relationship between the international agencies and organizing committees extend beyond the Olympics and the various regional Games such as the Asian, Panamerican, Commonwealth, Mediterranean, African or Universiads Games. It also applies to the whole sporting infrastructure of major events such as the World Soccer Cup, the world athletics championships and the like - any event, really, which attracts a global following.

Unlike many newspapers, agency reporters have to be more than specialists but real all-rounders. If you only have three soccer reporters, what do you do if you have six matches at the same time?

I have had a long career, covering international sport for seven years with Reuters and then for 23 with UPI. I have covered 27 of the 28 sports on the Sydney programme either at world championships or the Olympics. I have reported on every one of the Winter Games events - yes, even curling.

I have covered eight Summer and six Winter Olympics, seven World Soccer Cup finals, five Asian Games, four Commonwealth, four world athletics championships, 25 Wimbledon championships, 9 French Open tennis championships, golf, badminton, boxing, table tennis, and, although I hate to admit it, even figure skating.

That's what being an international agency reporter is all about. You have the largest canvas in the world and no restrictive ties to country or sport. Of course, you can't become a household name, but that's a price many of us are happy to pay in return for the greater freedom of working for an agency.

Working for international news agencies also presents certain problems, unique to the field of journalism. There is the language barrier, for one thing. Our stories, translated at some stage, appear in foreign-language newspapers all over the world - Chinese, Japanese, French, Belgian, Spanish, German, Urdu - all manner of tongues. I write great articles in Chinese but my Spanish copy is not so good!

In truth, we cannot recognize the stories and can only hope the various sub-editors treat our copy fairly. The fact that much of it is translated means we have to be extra careful to use easily-understood English, avoiding colloquialisms. It is somewhat galling to spend ages writing sparkling, alliterative prose which then has to be thrown overboard when converted into Norwegian.

Working for news agencies is a good way of learning how to deal with sporting cultures and how they effect newspapers. For instance, the United States produces the world's top track and field athletes, but these stars are neglected by US newspapers. Athletic greats like Michael Johnson could walk down Main Street without being recognized, but if they were baseball stars, they would be mobbed.

The same is true of soccer. Even though the US staged the World Cup in 1994, the world's most popular game seldom appears in print there.

The US is obsessed with baseball, basketball, football and hockey to the virtual exclusion of everything else. Where else could you get a "World" Series restricted to only North American teams?

Although certain sports are universal, each country and region has its favour-

ites. For instance, badminton and table tennis seem to enjoy their biggest following in Asia and Scandinavia, while cricket is most popular in Commonwealth countries.

International news agencies have to be aware of these likes and dislikes in order to target the right area with the right stories. Contrary to popular belief, it is the reader who dictates what sells most in a newspaper, and international news agencies have to serve their masters. Fortunately, sporting taste is diverse and that diversity, and the hunger for

news about sporting achievements around the world, keeps us all in business.

Andy Warhol once said that everyone would enjoy 15 minutes of fame in their lifetime. Despite my earlier statements to the contrary, I too have had my share of time in the spotlight. When I arrived in Atlanta on July 4 for the Games, I was informed that my accommodation was not yet ready and that I would have to move temporarily into the Atlanta Mission - a building formerly designated for the city's homeless

down-and-outs. I must confess the building had been refurbished. But somehow, the news broke that the UPI international sports editor, a member of the IOC Press Commission, was reduced to living in the Mission. The story ran in the *Atlanta Constitution* and triggered a flurry of media activity. I was besieged by the written press and interviewed by international television and radio.

After 30 years in international journalism, I was an overnight celebrity... and I didn't have to write a word.

Journalists manning their PCs.

