
What Happens When It Goes Wrong?: Notes on the IOC's Trial Under Fire, 1998-1999

Richard W. Pound*

There are some days when you wish you had stayed in bed.
My organization, the International Olympic Committee, had almost a whole year of that.

In December 1998, the Salt Lake Organizing Committee for the 2000 Olympic Winter Games came forward with evidence that some of its members and some members of the IOC had behaved improperly in the context of the bid by Salt Lake City to obtain the Games for 2002. A few IOC members had accepted and, in some cases, had asked for financial benefits for themselves or members of their families. Certain members of the bidding committee pushed favours and gifts toward IOC members. Some were refused, but some were also accepted. There were guidelines that prohibited such actions, known to the IOC members and the bidders alike. These were, on too many occasions, ignored.

Thus began a firestorm in the media and amongst members of the public that is, in my experience, unprecedented in any Olympic context. It far surpassed the media attention given to the efforts by the United States in 1980 to destroy the Olympic Games in Moscow. The volume of media attention was far beyond the ability of the IOC to cope with in any meaningful way. Left unchecked, the crush of media attention might well have put the existence of the IOC at risk.

Although the crisis has steadily diminished over the past year and a half, for some of the reasons I will discuss, it is not entirely behind us. Even when it is behind us, the repercussions on the IOC will likely last for some time. I thought that what I might do on this occasion is to review, with some benefit of hindsight, the lessons drawn from this experience by the IOC.

Lesson 1: It is far preferable to avoid a problem than to solve it.

- Our problem was essentially one of governance, not the structure of the IOC.
- There were enough rumors of improper conduct circulating that, even though we had no direct evidence upon which to discipline members (or candidate cities), we should have been more vigilant in following up on our guidelines.
- There probably were some additional steps we could have taken, that would have prevented all but the most flagrant conduct.
- There may well have been a few IOC members that would have acted inappropriately, no matter what the rules were and however well they may have been enforced; but we could have avoided some of the stereotypes that emerged, such as a "culture of corruption" within the IOC.

Lesson 2: If a problem erupts, acknowledge it. Don't try to sweep it under the carpet.

- We did do one thing right, which was that, immediately upon learning of the problem, we established a Commission to investigate and report to the IOC Executive Board.
- Ours was the first investigatory Commission to be established and the first to report.
- Unlike that of some others, our work was thorough and included the opportunity for those concerned to provide their explanations of their conduct.
- The sanctions recommended were severe - in some cases, the maximum possible within our scope to act.
- From the beginning of the situation, the IOC acknowledged that the problem was serious, apologized for its part in it, and pledged to bring about reforms to address the problem. I cannot say that this is true for all the others involved.

* Richard Pound is IOC Vice President

Lesson 3: The higher your pedestal, the more savage will be the reaction to improper conduct.

The Olympics deliberately try to differentiate themselves from other sport events and have been very successful in doing so.

- The Olympics embrace higher standards of ethical conduct than other sports organizations.
- People expect more from the Olympics in consequence.
- They are inordinately disappointed and deceived when something goes wrong with the Olympics.
- The IOC, as the leader of the Olympic Movement, even though not many people know much about it, is held to equally high standards.
- The IOC was perceived as having failed to uphold those standards and became the primary focus of public outrage. Very little criticism focused upon the candidate cities; only the IOC's "pull" was emphasized, not the bid cities' "push."
- The personal and institutional abuse heaped upon the IOC and its members as a whole, not just the wrongdoers, was remarkable.
- In addition, it seemed that nothing the IOC did or had ever done was acceptable, whether or not connected with the selection of host cities.

Lesson 4: Do not rely on the media to get all the facts.

- The media have developed superficiality to an art form. This, while I wholeheartedly share the thought, is not my line. I heard it from the editor of the *Vancouver Sun*.
- There is a pack mentality within the media and many rely on the work of others as the factual basis for their own stories.
- Bad news travels farther and faster than good news.
- Corrections of errors rarely have the effect of the original misstatements and are not as freely made.
- There are some agendas in play that are not always disclosed and that may affect the coverage that is given.

Lesson 5: You have to get your own story out there.

- It is up to *you* to get your own message out there.
- You also have to find a way to get "higher up" in the story and not be relegated to the final paragraph for purposes of what is referred to as "journalistic balance."
- You may need others to help you tell your story.
- Keep saying it.
- Learn to use media efficiently.
- Meet with editorial boards.
- Develop your credibility with the media.

Lesson 6: Take the actions necessary to address the problem and take them seriously.

- We very quickly took action on several fronts to address issues that seemed to be of importance to the public.
- We released audited financial statements.
- We established an independent Ethics Commission.
- We canceled all visits of IOC members to the candidate cities for the Olympic Winter Games in 2006.
- We streamlined the process by which the host city was selected.
- We established a special Commission called IOC 2000, the executive committee of which had equal numbers of outsiders and IOC members.
- We reported regularly on the progress of the three working groups of IOC 2000.
- We established a schedule to have all reforms in place by the end of 1999, and this was accomplished.

Lesson 7: Be consistent with your actions and messages.

- When things have gone wrong, it is essential that everyone in the organization be on the same page.
- Inconsistent or conflicting messages merely add to the confusion and can exacerbate the underlying problem.
- Remember that the media thrive upon and feed upon conflict.

Lesson 9: Do not throw out the baby with the bath water.

- It is the nature of things to over-react to crises and the IOC has been no exception.
- We have undertaken, in response to the crisis, far more reform than was necessary to deal with the issues that led to it in the first place.

- Some of these steps are not bad and the crisis has been helpful in making them possible long before they might have been done in the ordinary course.
- Others risk changing the organization in ways that may weaken its ability to be apolitical and independent, which was the foundation of a healthy Olympic Movement in the first place.
- The ability to act independently of the political flavours of the month is an essential element of the success of the Olympic Movement and has enabled it to become universal. It was the Olympic Movement that solved the two Chinas problem and managed the difficult problem of the Korean peninsula. It was the Olympic Movement that first expelled South Africa for its apartheid regime and which first readmitted it when the regime was dismantled. The hands of the political authorities were tied.
- I am particularly concerned that the manner in which active Olympic athletes are selected as members on the occasion of the Olympic Games may expose them to political pressures that are unprecedented and not experienced by the so-called “ordinary” members.
- On the issue of a single term for the IOC President, stability of the leadership within the Olympic Movement has been a successful hallmark of the Movement. It may be argued that the pace of change in today’s world is such that this no longer holds true, but the jury is still out on the matter.

The past two years have been busy for us, but, it is ill wind that blows no good and we have had a crash course in self-examination, albeit with more scrutiny than we might have wished. I believe we have emerged from the experience with a generally better organization and are better positioned to continue to lead the Olympic Movement in the next Millennium.

From your own perspectives, remember that this can happen to any organization if you are not vigilant as to the standards of your own conduct.

