

PRESS FACILITIES AT ALBERTVILLE AND BARCELONA

by Phil Hersh
The Chicago Tribune

The technological revolution arrived for the media in the Olympic year of 1992. Information networking, interactive satellite press conferences, and touch-operated video terminals transformed the way the press - especially the print media - did its job at the Games of Albertville and Barcelona.

For the generation of fortysomething (and older) reported who grew up cursing balky VDTs that ate their finely-tuned prose, the changes in Olympic media services were just another future shock.

Yet the technology in France and Spain was so user-friendly that even the most hidebound of reporters learned quickly to take advantage of its possibilities.

The U.S. Press had an extra asset: the information network established by the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), whose media operation has gone from the 19th century to the 21st century in the past 15 years.

The USOC provided local access numbers to its network, which is free of charge, in both Albertville and Barcelona. Once logged on, a user could get every bit of information about the U.S. Olympic teams, including results, quotes, schedules, press conference updates, and history.

I used the network after midnight each day to check on any events or interviews I had missed. It was a convenient way to avoid being surprised by an editor's call a few hours later.

In Albertville, because of venue dispersion, everyone's purview was necessarily limited. The Albertville Olympic Organizing Committee ingeniously overcame those limitations with interactive satellite press conferences, which allowed, for example, a reporter in Val d'Isere to both audit and ask questions of an athlete in La Plaigne.

The only drawback in those press conferences was their scheduling which was determined by the availability of satellite time. That meant, for instance, that figure skating press conferences routinely began at midnight, about 90 minutes after the events ended and well beyond the deadlines of anyone who was in the same time zone.

From my perspective, which was skating sports at the Olympic Winter Games and primarily athletics at the Olympic Games, press conferences were well-organized and well-balanced between formal and informal atmosphere. Sometimes, though, so many hangers-on (agents, friends, etc.) managed to get into press conferences that asking questions was nearly impossible.

Computerized biographical data bases were available at both Olympics. Their value, of course, was wholly dependant on the cooperation of the National Olympic Committees supplying necessary information on their athletes.

For the U.S. press, with no deadlines to consider because of the time difference to Europe, results distribution was good. Barcelona took this matter a step forward with its touch-activated terminals that provided laser-printed results and start lists in a very timely manner relative to completion of events.

These computers were available at every venue and were supplements to the computer system that provided results as well as a much broader range of information, including IOC bulletins, COJO bulletins, NOC bulletins, biographical information, cultural information, and more.

The next step in this direction would seem to be something that was tried by the organizers of the 1990 World Cup in Italy. There, reporters could access the general

information network via modem from any phone as well as via direct contact in one of the press centers.

The Main Press Centers in Albertville and Barcelona were more than adequate, in terms of work areas, TVs, computer terminals, videotape viewing machines, restaurants, and the like. (The free coffee machines on almost every corner of Barcelona's multi-level MPC were a delightfully hellish temptation to a caffeine addict.) Satellite press centers - at least those I used - were also sufficient.

In short, despite a profession where grumbling is *de rigueur*, there was little to complain about concerning media services at the 1992 Olympic Games. Both Albertville and Barcelona established a level of technological efficiency that should be the minimum standard so there will be no shock in Games of the future.

[Phil Hersh, the international sports specialist for *The Chicago Tribune*, has covered the Olympics since 1980.]