

Four Cities Chasing Five Rings: The USOC Bidding for the 1998 Winter Olympics

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This paper examined the efforts of four Western United States cities to earn the host city designation of the United States Olympic Committee for the 1998 Winter Olympics, a prelude to the international round of bidding that was ultimately won by Nagano, Japan. Olympic organizers in each of the four cities—Anchorage, Denver, Reno, and Salt Lake City—viewed designation as the United States' nominee as a sure way to enhance their local economies and achieve international prestige. Indeed, promoters in each city maintained that economic development was their primary motivation for pursuing the Olympics. The USOC had sweetened the pot for the 1998 designee by declaring that the chosen city would become a national winter sports training center (a counterpart to Lake Placid, New York), and would automatically become the country's nominee for the 2002 Winter Games if not selected by the International Olympic Committee to host the 1998 Games.

The history of each city's bid was examined, along with an overview of recent trends in the Olympic movement. The essential topic here is the role of television revenue in transforming the Games from an economic liability to a potential bonanza, a recent phenomenon with far-reaching consequences for the future of the Games. The prevalence of politics throughout the bidding process is treated, and an additional subtheme is the urban rivalry that developed among the contending cities, a competition each city's proponents viewed as pivotal to the ongoing economic viability of their regions. With the stakes so high, boosters in each city were prepared to highlight their relative advantages, gloss over their shortcomings, and try to present necessity as a virtue.

The paper is largely based on primary sources; I was fortunate to have at my disposal the Denver organizing committee's records, part of a collection held by the Colorado Historical Society. I believe the theme of this paper—the relationship between sports and economics—is an important one, and based upon my research I feel that the internecine struggle within the U.S. for selection to host the Games has received scant attention.