

# **Five Rings For Sale: The Commodification of the Olympic Symbol**

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In 1959, at age 98, three years before her death in 1962, the Baroness de Coubertin granted a fifteen minute interview to the then aspiring Olympic historian John Lucas. When asked by Lucas to reminisce about her husband, her first reflection was that although she had love her husband very much she could never totally forgive him for having spent all of his money on Olympic matters. What's more, the Baroness related, her husband had also spent for the very same purpose, the greater part of her own inherited estate, and her family's fortune, she bemoaned, was considerably greater than his.

This short vignette underscores a stark reality -- that the International Olympic Committee, indeed the Modern Olympic Movement, existed in precarious financial straits, in fact, an almost "hand to mouth" existence. for well over the first half century of its history. IOC presidents after Coubertin's time continually bemoaned the severe lack of funds to carry on the IOC's daily business, to say nothing of its mission to spread Olympism across the world. The rise of sports television in the 1950s and the industry's indelible link to the Olympic Games commencing in 1960, changed almost overnight the financial underpinning of the Modern Olympic Movement. By 1976 television income amounted to 98% of the quadrennium budget needed to carry out the IOC's Olympic initiatives. A formula was derived whereby the television revenue was split among Olympic family members, i.e., national Olympic committees in countries the world over, international Olympic sports federations, organizing committees charged with hosting the Games, and, of course, the IOC itself.

By the late 1970s, IOC officials were becoming increasingly concerned that almost their entire financial stability rode on the shirttails of one phenomenon -- television. Subsequently, the IOC struck a commission to investigate alternative methods of revenue production. Although revenue-producing plans allied to such initiatives as the sale of commemorative stamps, coins, educational videos, and IOC-published literature produced modest results, by far the most fruitful initiative was the marketing and sale of the Olympic five ring logo to global multi-national business and manufacturing firms. With the help of a Swiss licensing and marketing firm called ISL (International Sport Licensing), a new Olympic revenue production plan was born. It was called TOP (The Olympic Program). TOP I (1984-1988) generated 100 million

dollars, Top II (1988-1992) 170 million. TOP III (1992-1996) appears headed towards realizing a figure in excess of 370 million. By 1992 television income composed only 52% of the IOC's total income. TOP-generated monies comprised 45%. The percentage gain in revenue increase gained from television from 1960 to 1964, the first quadrennium of television rights fees sales, underscoring the fact that TOP presents a formidable possibility of rapidly outdistancing television as the major source of IOC income.

Be that as it may, the historical process by which TOP arrived is neither well known nor understood. This study, examining primary sources from IOC archives in Lausanne, attempts to trace the pathways along which various individuals trod and events transpired leading to the eventual commodification of what is perhaps the most widely known logo in the world, the Olympic five ring symbol.