

# OLYMPIC STUDIES

## *Merry Christmas Mr, Samaranch:* **The IOC, ISL, and the Origins of TOP**

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It is well known that the sale of Olympic television rights, particularly to American networks, solved the most persistent problem faced by the IOC since its establishment in 1894, that being, continually operating in financial deficit. The sale of Olympic television rights, beginning in 1960, provided a substantial though somewhat precarious solution. By the 1970s, the IOC's income from television underwrote 98% of its quadrennial budget associated with its administrative function carried out in Switzerland and allocations to its tripartite family members: host cities of winter and summer Olympic festivals; National Olympic Committees world-wide; and, International Sports Federations. An increasing level of anxiety permeated IOC chambers of deliberation over the fact that virtually all of its revenue was dependent on a single source. Such anxiety led the IOC to consider attempts at securing alternative sources of finance. One possibility explored a relationship between the Olympic Movement and international corporate entities. Such an initiative was not altogether new; there had been modest Olympic affiliations with commercial advertisers dating from the very first Games in Athens in 1896. By the 1970s, however, the need to fuel an Olympic economic flame of immense dimensions required revolutionary measures in Olympic commercial thinking.

In mid-December 1982 Juan Antonio Samaranch, President of the International Olympic Committee, received a salutary letter from one Klaus Hempel, executive director of ISL, a Swiss sports marketing firm with account portfolios representing several international sports organizations in marketing relationships with multi-international corporations. In his letter to Samaranch, Hempel introduced himself and his company, International Sports-Culture-Leisure Marketing AG of Lucerne,

Switzerland. Hempel also sent the IOC President a Christmas gift, a limited edition lithograph of the celebrated Italian artist, Franz Borghese. Almost as an afterthought, Hempel broached the possibility of IOC/ISL dialogue on "matters beneficial" to each. What followed over the next three years on "matters beneficial" was the evolution of TOP (The Olympic Program), an initiative that exhibited every bit as much revenue generation prospectus in its "first decade" experience as had television in the 1960s.

The micro-history of TOP's origin and early evolution is unknown, except perhaps in the inner sanctums of the IOC and ISL. This study is the first to address this important Olympic commercialism episode on the basis of primary source examination, that is, a review of archival material located in the archives of the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne. What the sources show is that the pathway leading to the germination of TOP was lengthy, arduous, often frustrating, and generally beset by self-serving personalities and agendas. To Olympic zealots, the end result of the TOP program has been to move to International Olympic Committee towards being regarded as a player of supreme significance in global sport economics. On the other hand, to Olympic disillusionists, TOP has been the straw that broke the camel's back in the quest to preserve the Modern Olympic Movement from being simply one other world phenomenon whose noble ideal has been warped beyond recognition by commercial motifs.