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**“Timing was Everything”: Dick Pound, ABC, and
U.S. Television Negotiations for the 1988 Calgary
Olympic Winter Games**

Dick Pound, former IOC First Vice-President, chair of the IOC Marketing Commission and the organization’s point person for negotiations with the world’s television networks, has a penchant for making headlines. In 1995, Pound and the President of NBC Sports, Dick Ebersol, signed a \$1.25 billion U.S. television rights deal for the 2000 Sydney Olympics and the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympic Winter Games. Within three months, the two collaborated again with the consummation of a \$3.5 billion contract for the 2004 and 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2006 Olympic Winter Games. As chair of the IOC's Atlanta Coordination Commission, Pound clashed with Atlanta municipal officials in 1996 concerning the tawdry commercialism that plagued the festival. Deemed by IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch to be one of the IOC’s more credible representatives with the world’s media, Pound was assigned the duty of heading

the IOC's investigation of the Salt Lake City scandal. Pound has also been given the leadership of the IOC-sponsored World Anti-Doping Agency, the first significant initiative on the part of Olympic leaders to address the doping problem in sport. Most pundits believe that the impending vote for Samaranch's presidential successor in 2001 is a two-horse race between Pound and Belgium's Jacques Rogge.

Eighteen years ago, Dick Pound was a minor player on the Olympic stage. However, the situation changed rapidly in 1983 as a result of Samaranch's ongoing power struggle with the IOC's Director, Monique Berlioux. A former Olympian (Swimming, Rome, 1960), and an IOC member to Canada with some five years of service behind him, Pound was handed control of the IOC's interests in television rights negotiations by Samaranch. He sought to diminish Berlioux's power base constructed through her ever-expanding managerial portfolio in the 1970s, one that included managing the IOC's television file. Calgary negotiations for U.S. television rights represented Pound's first major test. Within two years of Samaranch's decision, Pound, on the basis of demonstrated business acumen and negotiating success, was the IOC's "voice" in television matters and played a prominent role in discussions concerning the establishment of the IOC's corporate sponsorship initiative, The Olympic Program (TOP).

IOC archival material provides the research base for this investigation of Pounds first negotiating effort – U.S. television rights negotiations for the 1988 Calgary Olympic Winter Games. Responding to charges from ABC's competitors (NBC and CBS) that Roone Arledge and his ABC colleagues enjoyed "inside" information during past negotiating sessions for Olympic television rights, Pound established a "sealed bid" process. All three U.S. negotiating teams submitted a series of sealed bids at or above a set minimum price. Playing on the emotions of U.S. television executives who had sugarplum dreams of the ratings possible if the 1980 Lake Placid "Miracle on Ice" could be repeated in a North American market in 1988, Pound and Samaranch scheduled the negotiations mere weeks before the opening of the 1984 Sarajevo Olympic Winter Games. The timing of negotiations protected the IOC and Calgary organizers in the event that the U.S. Olympic contingent, and especially its hockey team, underachieved in Sarajevo. It was a wise decision as a U.S.

Olympian did not repeat Eric Heiden's magic, and the hockey team finished out of the medals. Pound achieved a \$309 million contract with ABC in January 1984. It marked the first, and last, time that the Winter rights fee exceeded the Summer rights fee in the U.S. market for Olympic festivals staged in the same year. ABC's disastrous ratings for its Sarajevo coverage, its earlier decision to exceed its maximum planned bid for the Calgary rights by \$34 million, and the anticipated \$50-60 million loss on the Calgary project contributed to ABC's decision to play a minor role in future Olympic television rights negotiations.

For Olympic historians, and those interested in the nexus of U.S. television and sport, Pound's approach and the resulting \$309 million ABC contract merit attention. First, the Calgary project marked the last time that ABC, "America's Olympic Network" of the 1970s and 1980s covered the Olympic Games due to its financial loss, ownership changes, as well as embittered executives who resented the "sealed" bid process. NBC and CBS moved with haste to fill this void in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Second, the results elevated expectations in Seoul concerning the value of a U.S. television contract for the 1988 Summer Olympics. Pound's job to conclude financial terms with Korean officials and U.S. television executives grew increasingly tedious and complicated. Third, and perhaps most important from a historical perspective, even though Pound's negotiating success touched off celebrations in Lausanne and Calgary, it raised concerns in the United States regarding the growing disparity in rights fees paid by American television networks and networks in other major world markets. This concern translated into an approach from the United States Olympic Committee for a new method of distributing U.S. television revenue among members of the Olympic family and a new set of problems for Dick Pound.
