



GOLD MEDAL POSITION

Athlete LaShawn Merritt - Getty Images Sport

Through scandal, tragedy and recession, the US Olympic Committee moves on towards the next Olympics. That means Beijing 2008 and the USOC's marketing partners are right there with it. By **Barry Wilner**.

ITS SOMEWHAT STUNNING that in such a bleak US economy, with so many corporations downsizing or slashing their advertising and sponsorship budgets and with controversy dogging the torch relay, the US Olympic Committee has continued to take major steps forward.

The USOC's current roster of partners, sponsors and suppliers includes a virtual Who's Who of corporate America.

Nike recently extended its relationship with the Olympic Committee as an official outfitter of the US teams until the 2012 London Games. Under the deal, Nike will provide uniforms for American athletes who make the medals stands and ceremonies at Beijing, Vancouver in 2010 and in London. The company also will outfit US

athletes in archery, basketball, boxing, canoe/kayak, cycling, modern pentathlon, rowing, soccer, softball, team handball and track and field.

"The Olympic movement is at the core of Nike's DNA and has played a vital role in our company's rich history," said Joaquin Hidalgo, vice president of global marketing for Nike, which has been a USOC sponsor and licensee for three years, but has had some involvement in the movement since the 1972 Games. "We are proud to be able to support the accomplishments of US Olympians through our partnership with the USOC."

General Electric and the USOC have also announced two research programmes for health monitoring, injury prevention, enhanced health

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important that as a National Olympic Committee, we have the most innovative tools to help predict, diagnose, treat and monitor sports injuries earlier to ensure a quick return to play. It's my belief that G.E.'s ultrasound technology will become a standard tool in health care for athletes."

And that takes money through corporate support. Hilton Hotels renewed its sponsorship through 2012, including the 2011 Pan American Games in Mexico. Among its initiatives, Hilton will contribute to renovations at the Lakeshore Foundation Paralympic training site, in much the same way the company helped refurbish the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs in 2006; host US Olympic hopefuls in its hotels leading up to the Olympics, and host the USOC during the Games; provide discount hotel rates and hospitality to US Olympians and Paralympians, the USOC and various national governing bodies; and conduct consumer promotions.

The hotel chain also provides direct sponsorship support to USA Swimming, USA Soccer, USA Cycling and USA Volleyball.

"Hilton is long famous for providing unparalleled support to business travelers and will provide the same to our US athletes as they pursue their Olympic and Paralympic dreams," said USOC CEO Jim Scherr.

Other major companies with ongoing relationships with the USOC include marketing partners Home Depot, AT&T, Anheuser-Busch and Bank of America; sponsors Nike, Hilton, Allstate Insurance, Kellogg's Cereals, 24 Hour Fitness, Tyson Foods and United Airlines; suppliers Hershey's candy, Kimberly-Clark tissues, Orowheat bread products, Adecco career management services, and Highmark health insurance; and 35 licensees, including Getty Images photography, Footlocker.com, Roots apparel, QVC TV shopping channel, and the US Postal Service.

The USOC has lost General Motors as a corporate partner after the Beijing Games, but that was not an unexpected development. The automobile manufacturer has changed its marketing strategy and, with the exception of its multimillion dollar commitment to NASCAR, it is likely that it won't have a strong pro sports presence for a while. The USOC will

take the fact that GM is stepping down as an opportunity to look at the category and to see what other companies are interested and what opportunities there are.

CM of Canada, however, is a partner with VANOC, the organisers of the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver.

Still, considering how the USOC was ravaged by scandal and mismanagement at the beginning of this decade, and how it allowed New York to botch the 2012 Olympics bid, the loyal corporate support is impressive.

Perhaps an even more noteworthy sign that the US Olympic movement is relatively healthy and a good investment is how Colorado Springs came through with a \$53 million deal to keep the USOC's headquarters and main training centre there for the next 25 years. The committee will get a new home base and renovations will be made to existing facilities.

"The city of Colorado Springs took the lead in developing a proposal that reflects participation from both the public and private sectors," USOC chairman Peter Ueberroth said. "There has long been a special relationship between the United States Olympic Committee and the city of Colorado Springs, and ... the victors of this agreement are America's Olympic and Paralympic athletes, as well as the many-athletes from around the world we are pleased to welcome to Colorado Springs to train at these world-class facilities."

Now, if the USOC can keep its winning ways during and beyond the Beijing Games, it can market itself even more effectively in the lead up to the Vancouver and London Olympics.

The USOC named Rick Burton its new Chief Marketing Officer last year. A former commissioner at the National Basketball League, in Sydney, Australia, Burton brought international experience and says he will look beyond the traditional Olympic categories for new opportunities.

To this end, earlier this year, Burton and the US Olympic Committee aligned with 21 Sports and Entertainment Marketing Group, Inc. (21 Marketing) and its founder, Rob Prazmark, to review sponsorship opportunities for future Olympic quadrennial periods, beginning with 2009-2012, through a consultancy agreement.

Any more and new corporate support could help sway the IOC when it makes a decision next year on the site of the 2016 Olympics. Chicago is up against some tough competition, particularly from Madrid, Tokyo and Rio de Janeiro. The IOC will hold a special meeting in Lausanne next spring at which the 2012 finalists will present their bids to the membership. If Chicago's bid looks more like the 1984 Los Angeles presentation than the 1996 Atlanta bid, it would have a stronger chance of succeeding.

And the more corporate money within the USOC's reach, the better.

and competitive performances for athletes.

G.E, a worldwide partner of the IOC, will conduct a cardiac clinical research study of US men's rowing and weightlifting teams, and will monitor the musculoskeletal health of American athletes competing in weightlifting, boxing, wrestling and the women's soccer tournament.

At a time when securing financial backing for most projects is a dicey proposition, the USOC has got something very worthwhile out of G.E.'s support.

"Every day an Olympic athlete spends in rehab is a day lost in training, making earlier injury diagnosis and real-time recovery monitoring crucial for elite performance," said Dr. Michael Reed, the USOC's medical director, performance services division. "It is increasingly