

# BORN OF THE USOC

The United States Olympic Committee is pressing ahead with plans for an Olympic sports channel on US television, despite resistance from the IOC and a dearth of live rights for its launch. **Barry Wilner** reports.

**NOW HERE'S A NOVEL IDEA:** Why not start an Olympic sports channel on US cable television AFTER the Vancouver Winter Games?

Some would use a different adjective to describe what the US Olympic Committee is doing: unwise, ill-timed, ludicrous...

The IOC isn't exactly a big fan of the US Olympic Network's existence at all.

The timing is strange because after the Vancouver Games interest in the Olympics will die down in the USA until the countdown for London more than two years on.

The obvious launch strategy would be to have the channel up and running for Vancouver, when people are paying attention to the Olympics and the USOC would have obvious and effective opportunities to publicise it.

The USOC opted for a 2010 launch rather than even later, in part because both American Olympic and television officials had grown impatient with a process that began in 2006.

The USOC also is well aware that network operator NBC's rights to US Olympic trials expire after the 2012 London Games, by which time the new network will be somewhat established.

"We firmly believe that what we're doing with this network is in the best interest of the Olympic movement," said USOC chief operating officer Norman Bellingham.

"This is something that's going to deliver great value to them. It speaks to the ideals of the movement. There's nothing out there that does that on a year-round basis."

Cable provider Comcast will partner with the USOC in launching the channel, which means it will appear on Comcast's basic tiers, providing a potential audience of more than 10 million homes. The USOC is modeling the network on MLB Network, which Major League Baseball got placed on several cable companies' basic tiers in exchange for partial ownership of the network.

"I think it's fair to say that we're intending for this network to have far greater distribution than only the Comcast 'Digital One' tier [it's cheapest tier of channels]," Bellingham said.

The whole idea worries the IOC, which fears upsetting NBC, whose rights essentially bankroll the committee's ventures.

Bidding for the 2016 Games, which could wind up in Chicago, won't be held until after the host city is announced in October. NBC plans to bid, and its offer for 2016 will be much higher if Chicago gets the Games.

NBC sports chairman Dick Ebersol has warned that continuing squabbles between the USOC and the IOC could hurt Chicago's bid to host the 2016 Games.

IOC television director Timo Lumme has written to the USOC, urging them to reconsider

the venture, and warning that programming for which his federation holds the rights could be withheld from the USOC Network.

The IOC was annoyed that the USOC acted "unilaterally" in establishing the new network, even though several USOC executives claimed the international organisation was aware of the USOC's plans.

"We were aware that the USOC had been considering a new 'Olympic broadcast network', but we have never been presented with a plan, and we had assumed that we would have an opportunity to discuss unresolved questions together before the project moved forward," the IOC said.

"It is for this reason that the IOC is disappointed that USOC acted unilaterally and, in our view, in haste by announcing their plans before we had had a chance to consider together the ramifications."

The USOC also negotiated with NBC and its sports channel Universal Sports, hoping they would help bring the Olympic network to air, but the talks never bore fruit.

Still, the 'USON' will debut sometime next year, with programming dominated by the smaller sports (badminton, anyone?) and the lesser competitions in the more mainstream Olympic sports (a variety of track, gymnastics and swim meets).

Eventually, it hopes to have events sponsored by National Governing Bodies and Pan American sports organisations, and Olympic trials after 2012. Other planned programming includes movies and documentaries, original series', instructional programming, news and talk shows, and coverage of Paralympic sports.

"We are excited to see this important development for the USOC," said Matt Van Houten, chairman of the USOC Athletes' Advisory Council. "It will do great things for America's athletes by bringing them and the Olympic movement into the public's awareness on a year-round basis, not just for a couple of weeks every two years."

That could be a critical element, because in the current economy nearly every potential US Olympian not named Phelps or Liukin, or not playing in the NBA or NHL, could use the exposure. Canada is now toying with the idea of an Olympic sports network too.

"I can't imagine that would be any concern for the IOC other than to say, 'Hey, this is great,'" Canadian IOC member Dick Pound, who once handled the IOC's negotiations for US television rights, told The Associated Press. "It's more exposure for the Olympic movement. Looking at it in utilitarian terms, it will probably enhance the value of the Olympic rights."