

**SPORTS**

On New Channel, Flame Would Never Dim

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TV Sports

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The Olympics command worldwide attention for two weeks every other year and then largely recede from public consciousness, their component sports left mainly to the devotions of hard-core fans.

The International Olympic Committee hopes to get some of that attention back by creating a digital network that would lift the profile of the Olympics after the caldrons are extinguished.

The channel has been championed by Thomas Bach, who was elected the I.O.C. president last year and has argued that the Olympics need daily nurturing when they are off the world stage.

“He said, ‘Look, as much as we rely on our partners, particularly broadcasters, we need to do something ourselves,’ ” said Timo Lumme, the committee’s managing director for TV and marketing services, referring to Bach.

Starting an Olympic network is one of 40 recommendations aimed at modernizing the I.O.C. that are to be voted on by the full membership in Monaco on Monday and Tuesday.

In proposing the channel, the Olympic committee is following a long-established path. Recognizing the value of their brands, leagues like the N.B.A., teams like the Yankees and conferences like the Pacific-12 have created their own channels. Unlike them, however, an Olympic channel would be, at

least to start, a broadband network, like the one recently announced by ESPN as part of its new deal with the N.B.A.

Over-the-top networks, as these Internet-based entities are known, are seen as a cushion against consumers cutting the cord on the pricey television subscriptions they have through cable, satellite and telephone companies.

“No question that technology is a huge enabler for us,” Lumme said by phone. “If you go back 15 or 20 years, the notion of launching an Olympic channel and going through the regulations of each country in the world to launch a network would have been a much different proposition than what’s available to launch an Internet digital channel across all territories to an addressable population.”

The network would begin with an endowment of 45,000 hours of digitized archival film and video, some of it dating to the first modern Games, in 1896, but most of more recent vintage.

The channel would not carry live Olympic events, so it would not compete against its global TV partners unless it could make arrangements with broadcasters in individual countries. Certainly, a media company that is spending heavily for Olympic rights would be wary of competition from the Olympics’ own channel.

The volume of live sports available apart from the Olympics seems similarly limited and will most likely depend on the network’s success in making deals with the existing media rights holders of regional, national and international events around the world. Lumme said the channel would not compete with other broadcasters to buy rights but would work with federations to “add value to their offerings.”

An Olympic network with a modest schedule of live events casts the channel in a different light from that of sports channels whose distribution and fees are based on carrying games. NFL Network is carrying 16 games in conjunction with CBS Sports; NBA TV has a 97-game schedule this season; and the ESPN-owned SEC Network shows hundreds of conference games.

The Olympic network is not likely to be available until about 2017, so the programming lineup is by no means locked in. But broadly, the goal is to

feature the old footage, much of it unseen since it was originally broadcast, and to produce new programming, including Olympic news and shows on I.O.C. pet issues such as education and environmentalism. It would also provide a platform for cities bidding to host the Winter and Summer Games and ostensibly help Olympic sponsors more directly reach their audience.

Ed Desser, a former N.B.A. executive who helped create NBA TV, wondered if an Olympic channel could survive without the kind of rich diet of live action enjoyed by networks affiliated with leagues, conferences and teams.

“If the idea is to promote the Olympic brand, you need large audiences to be meaningful,” Desser said. “I don’t know how you do it without live events.”

He added: “If you’re the Pac-12 networks, your *raison d’être* is not just to program basketball and football but to provide exposure for university programs and other sports. You wrap that up with high-visibility products, which fuels distribution.”

Bob Thompson, a former Fox Sports executive who oversaw its regional networks, said it was a “pretty good idea to have the Olympic rings out there every day instead of every two years.” Still, he wondered if a round-the-clock Olympic channel would undermine the special nature of the Games.

This is not the first time an Olympic channel has been proposed. The United States Olympic Committee developed a plan for years to start a network and hoped, by 2009, to merge it with Universal Sports, a network partly owned by NBC that carried an array of world and national championships. But the plan fell apart amid opposition from the I.O.C., and it died in 2010. The Olympic committee questioned the viability of the network and how it would affect its relationship with NBC — and suggested that the venture might not be able to use the Olympic name or archival footage.

Now the I.O.C. faces the task of taking its digital network, if its members approve it, to a world that is crowded with sports networks packed with games delivered by various media and an ever-widening selection of entertainment options.

Lumme said the channel would initially launch in English, and possibly in Spanish and Chinese, with other languages added later.

Its prime-time programming, he added, would be common everywhere, but the network would look to tailor programming to regions, countries and national tastes.

“This is a way that people across all geographies and demographics can touch the Olympic brand at any time of year,” Lumme said.

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