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Ciao to the Winter Games

Officials Defend U.S. Results, Look Ahead to China

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TURIN, Italy, Feb. 26 -- After a stirring 2002 Winter Games on home soil just months after the Sept. 11 attacks, the 2006 Olympics have suffered in the United States from a dearth of inspirational moments and a lack of interest among television viewers.

But with the 2008 Summer Games in China next on the Olympic horizon, there was no sense of panic as the Turin Olympics concluded with Sunday night's Closing Ceremonies.

Olympic officials and marketing experts dismiss the notion that the product in which NBC has invested billions can no longer compete in the modern American entertainment market or that the U.S. Olympic team had a disappointing Games when, in fact, it collected 25 medals -- a U.S. record for a Winter Olympics not contested on American soil.

Though U.S. television ratings plunged at least in part because of the competition on other networks and cable channels, media experts say that could turn around in Beijing, which in 2001 was a controversial choice to hold the Olympics because of China's communist government and checkered human rights record.

Draped in mystique, China will open its doors in a way it never has before. Eager to make a global splash, organizers of the Beijing Games figure to counter the glut of programming options and the 13-hour time difference with rich story lines, a stunning Chinese team and, of course, a Games of historical significance. The fact that the Olympics will take place in August, a dead time for U.S. television programming, doesn't hurt.

"The good news for NBC is that China is a bigger story than any athlete," said Paul Swangard, managing director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon. "The significance of those Games will draw the casual viewer because it's China. . . . You are talking about 1.3 billion people and a country that is using the Games as a statement of its place in the global economy."

U.S. Olympic Committee officials, meantime, vow to more vigorously promote the Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver, B.C., while avoiding the trap of pre-selling a handful of stars who might not pan out.

"These Games went largely unnoticed by the American public" in the weeks before they began, USOC chief executive Jim Scherr said. He said the goal is to "build greater interest. . . . Even just the nature of those two Games will make that job easier for us. There is tremendous interest in China, in the Chinese people and government, and the growing rivalry between the U.S. and China, and that really will drive that interest."

Olympic historian David Wallechinsky said the decision of NBC and Olympic sponsors to single out a few big names - namely, Michelle Kwan, who left the Games with an injury, and Bode Miller, who didn't win a single medal in five events -- in their run-up to these Games ultimately resulted in a suppression of interest when their stories flopped. NBC had much better luck at the 2004 Athens Games with swimmer Michael Phelps, whose multi-medal quest held interest from the beginning to the end.

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"The lesson learned heading into Beijing and on to Vancouver is you have to strike a balance such that you are not too reliant on the personalities of these people or on their athletic performances," said David Carter, a professor at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business.

Though frustrated at what they consider an erroneous notion that U.S. athletes have underperformed here, U.S. Olympic officials consider the Summer Olympics the United States' athletic domain and look forward to escaping the snares of ice and snow sports, even while wary of China as a growing sports rival. Of course, there also is a significant benefit of facing a loaded Chinese team: The competition should provide great daily drama -- something lacking at these Olympics.

"While it won't be an 'us-versus-them' story line like the Cold War Olympics, there will be an America-China competition for the medal count," Swangard said. "The Chinese have said they want to win the medal count in Beijing. That will tap the national pride in America to cheer for the home team and as a result, marketers will find a passionate consumer base."

It was telling this week when the International Olympic Committee announced the signing of Johnson & Johnson to one of 12 major sponsorship slots, but only on a two-year -- rather than the typical four-year -- basis. A longtime Olympic supporter, Johnson & Johnson jumped in on the deal halfway to Beijing because it didn't want to miss out. Brian Perkins, the company's vice president of corporate affairs, called the 2008 Games a social, political and economic event that would be unmatched in this generation.

"I think you will see absolutely incredible interest in the Games," Perkins said during a news conference last week. "It will be so beyond a sporting event."

But purely as a sporting event, it will allow the United States to get back onto comfortable ground -- the track, the pool and ice-free arenas. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States has won more Summer Olympic gold medals than any other nation. In the Winter Games, by contrast, the U.S. team only began to step up as a power in 1998 with the phasing in of a number of extreme sports that originated in the United States.

Even so, Olympic officials say the overhyped failures of a few here created the impression that the United States performed and behaved poorly, when in fact it did extremely well for a Winter Olympics on foreign soil and shouldn't be measured against the 34 medals the U.S. team won at the 2002 Olympics. That tally more than doubled the previous U.S. Winter Games record of 13 in 1998 and 1994.

Wallechinsky, author of numerous books on the Winter and Summer Olympics, called this year's performance by the United States the best on foreign soil since the 1976 Games in Innsbruck -- which actually were moved from Denver after voters refused to support it. The U.S. team won 10 medals in a much smaller Games.

"This has been a very successful Games for the U.S. if you look at it purely statistically," Wallechinsky said.

It also has been successful for China, which posted its highest medal count here -- 11 -- after winning its first gold medal four years ago. The Chinese have been methodically moving up the gold medal tables over the last four Summer Games. In Barcelona in 1992 and Atlanta in 1996, the Chinese finished fourth. They were third in Sydney in 2000 and second in Athens.

Even before winning the right to host the 2008 Games, China invested phenomenal resources in bolstering athletic teams once distinguished only by drug scandals. After a series of busts involving Chinese swimmers in the mid-1990s, the scandals have dissipated, and China claims to be cracking down on its own. Before the Sydney Games, it cited results from its own tests to yank a handful of athletes from its Olympic roster. It occasionally releases information about local athletes it has caught using drugs. However, skepticism remains, and Olympic officials are eager to shoot it

down.

"If they did it with doping," U.S. IOC member Jim Easton said, "I think it would destroy all of the efforts going on now to make China shine."

Staff writer Thomas Heath contributed to this report from Washington.

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