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SPORTS EXTRA/OLYMPICS

Company Banks On Sponsorship

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When the 2006 Winter Olympics open 100 days from now in Turin, Italy, the spotlight will turn to the athletes there to compete, among them roughly 230 Americans.

For 1,200 of their friends and families, there will be an overgrown hospitality suite boasting free pizza, pasta, wide-screen TVs and Internet access — courtesy of one of America's largest companies.

Bank of America is betting that sponsoring the suite — and the U.S. Olympic program — will generate business for the company, an investment that underscores the creative ways corporate sponsors seek a return on the millions of dollars they spend on the Olympics.

"It's not the same accomplishing your dreams without your family," said softball star Jennie Finch, whose family made extensive use of the bank-sponsored center at the 2004 Olympics in Athens.

For all the Olympic scandals in recent years — the Salt Lake City corruption disclosures that led in 1999 to reform at the International Olympic Committee, the ethics irregularities in 2003 that sparked change at the U.S. Olympic Committee — the Olympics remain a unique and valuable property.

NBC is paying \$5.5 billion to televise the Games from 2000 to 2012.

Eleven corporations, most of them U.S.-based, are each paying about \$60 million over four years to be the IOC's top sponsors. These include such familiar names as Coca-Cola and McDonald's.

The USOC, meanwhile, maintains its own sponsor roster. Bank of America, along with Home Depot, General Motors, Anheuser-Busch and Johnson & Johnson, make up the USOC's leading backers. Each is paying about \$20 million over four years.

The bank also sponsors baseball, NASCAR and golf events. Even so, Cathy Bessant, the bank's chief marketing officer, said an Olympic sponsorship offers perhaps the most "pure platform" around, one that connotes athletic — and, by extension, business — excellence while also conveying such values as dedication, commitment and patriotism.

"It's about wrapping yourself in the flag," said David Carter, a sports business expert in Redondo Beach and

professor at the USC business school.

Marketing research conducted for the USOC last year showed that Olympic athletes consistently tested higher than pro baseball, basketball and football players and NASCAR drivers, for such values as achievement, patriotism and sportsmanship.

Asked about such characteristics as selfishness and arrogance, NBA players topped the charts — followed by athletes in the NFL, Major League Baseball, the NHL and NASCAR. Olympic athletes were well down the list.

According to further USOC research, the ability to say one is an "Olympic sponsor" rather than "supporting Olympic hopefuls' training" means consumers are 16% more likely to buy whatever it is the company is selling.

"This is why companies are involved with USOC properties," said Jim Grice, the USOC's chief marketing officer. "You have differentiation and positive good will from consumers."

The bank declined to provide figures detailing how its business has grown because of its Olympic affiliation, but it did offer some internal research.

Consumers aware of the bank's Olympic sponsorship are two times more likely to purchase its products and services than consumers who don't know about it. And consumers are 34% more likely to use Bank of America's product line if its sponsorship supports Olympic hopefuls.

The question with any Olympic sponsorship is always how to exploit it. Home Depot gives jobs to aspiring Olympians. Bank of America helps support athletes' families and friends at the Games. Both, said Carter, are savvy plays.

"Sports marketing is going in two different directions," Carter said. "It is going decidedly global and decidedly grass roots. What's more global than an Olympic affiliation? And what's more grass-roots than immersing [the company] in the families and friends of those representing our country and helping them get through the Games? It hits on both emotions."

The Turin Games will mark the bank's second go-around with a Games hospitality center. It sponsored a similar site in Athens, taking over from AT&T. The Turin center will be in the center of town, within a mile of the medals plaza.

Jim Scherr, the USOC's chief executive, wrestled in the 1988 Seoul Olympics and his parents had traveled from Mobridge, S.D., and used the center as a home away from home. "They thought it was one of the best experiences of their lives," he said.

Finch, who helped pitch the U.S. women's softball team to gold in Athens, said the center proved "extremely, extremely helpful" to her father, mother and others who used it as a meeting place before, during and after games and "just raved about how neat it was to meet other families, like [soccer star] Mia Hamm's grandmother."

About the only change from the Athens center will be the addition of more computers, 20 instead of eight, for web surfing and e-mail.

Lunch and dinner, like the computer access, remain free; the bank estimates it will, over the 17 days of the 2006 Games, serve 3,179 pounds of pasta and 2,040 pizzas, along with 5,950 servings of tiramisu, 11,900 bottles of soda, 5,100 cups of hot cocoa — and 4,250 glasses of Italian wine.

The bank also extends discounted accommodations to athletes' families and friends, making a visit to Italy more

affordable and, in some cases, possible. In all, the bank estimates, its help means a family of four can save about \$5,000 for a week's stay.

Without such aid, "I wouldn't even consider [the trip]. I couldn't do it," Nancy Powers, mother of Ross Powers, the 2002 gold medalist in the snowboarding halfpipe event, said in a telephone interview from her home in Londonberry, Vt.

Because Ross Powers won't know until a few weeks before the Games whether he has qualified for them, he said any help is welcome in finding and paying for hotels for his wife, daughter, brother and mother.

"There aren't tons of opportunities like this around ... ," he said, adding with a laugh: "Now, I just have to make the Olympics."

North and South Korea have agreed in principle to form a unified team for the 2008 Beijing Olympics and next year's Asian Games. The nations issued a joint, three-paragraph statement declaring their intention to field one team. The statement followed a three-hour meeting between North and South Korean Olympic officials in the Chinese territory of Macau, where their teams were competing in the East Asian Games.

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Associated Press contributed to this report.

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