

# The trials of Olympic broadcasting

Errors and omissions, big and small, in state media ERT's efforts to cover the Games' events

BY MARIANNA TZIANTZI  
KATHIMERINI

When International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge visited the International Broadcasting Center in Maroussi last Thursday, he praised coverage of the Games by the state media: "I always watch ERT," he said.

Not all viewers share Rogge's enthusiasm. In fact, the more viewers know about sports, the more they complain. Pointing out mistakes is not, however, an indication of an incurable penchant for grumbling, but a measure of the high standards view-

ers demand from Olympic media coverage.

Let us not forget mistakes are part of the game. Leading athletes make childish mistakes, false starts, they trip themselves up. Within the 1,100 hours of viewing time on ERT (of which 650 are live), it is only natural that there are mistakes, omissions and gaffes, verbal and technical mistakes, programming errors and mistakes in coordination between the three state television channels. Some are disappointing, others comic and others unacceptable, such as a temporary loss of image.

Responsibility for radio and television coverage lies mainly with the Athens

Olympic Broadcasting firm, headed by the experienced Manolo Romero. However, the choice of event to be broadcast among the dozens going on at the same time lies with ERT's "zappers," who first have to abide by the Olympic broadcasting program announced a year ago, then be flexible enough to move focus onto the successes of Greek athletes and, finally, to satisfy the average person's preferences, since some sports are just not as interesting to us here in Greece, or in the realm of the exotic.

Generally, ERT has risen to the occasion. The program is comprehensive, images

spectacular. This, along with fact the opening ceremony was broadcast again last Thursday, without commentary but with a clearer sound, shows the state media has an elementary sensitivity and can admit its mistakes (whether indirectly and symbolically, or directly, as with the resignations of its officials after broadcasting breakdowns).

The private channels, of course, have a disadvantage. They do not have the rights to live broadcasts and run only brief excerpts, and have had their share of tragicomic (to downright outrageous) moments.

**The shot put event held at Ancient Olympia was another golden opportunity for sports journalists to wax lyrical about the virtues of ancient Greece.**



\* Last Wednesday afternoon outside the Hilton, Costas Kenteris, surrounded by dozens of TV crews and journalists, calmly announced his withdrawal from the Athens Olympics and end of his collaboration with his coach. Among the pushing and shoving in what was an electric atmosphere, a loud voice screamed out, drowning out all other sounds, the vital question: "Costas, Costas! How do you feel, Costas?"

No wonder the humorous commentaries in the foreign press go on about Greeks' penchant for tragedy and view of coach Christos Tzekos as a Medea who slaughters her children.

— It is all very well to talk about "ancient, immortal spirit" but that does not mean the Olympian gods are still among us or that "Poseidon is preparing to crown our two sailors with the gold medal." Athletes who mark successive victories are "drinking the nectar of happiness gulp by gulp." It is true we still haven't heard about athletes drinking the "black broth" or "hemlock" of defeat.

— "The country was immersed in moral self-satisfaction," observed a NET commentator when Greece won its first gold medals (a gem drawn to our attention by Maria Petroutsou in her column in the daily Elef-

## Commentator turns pool race into a 'sea battle'

terotypia). At last the sport of self-satisfaction has been de-criminalized!

— Several viewers have noted the names of foreign athletes are being pronounced according to the phonetics of the English language, irrespective of whether the athletes are German, French or African, and that frequently the Greek journalists' standard of English is at "junior" level. These observations might indicate a degree of snobbery on the part of those who know better. After all, a sports commentator

might be very good at his or her job without being proficient in English or other languages. However, sport broadcasts require a degree of preparation, not so as to be able to pronounce athletes' names with a perfect accent, but at least so as not to massacre them, out of respect for the athletes themselves as well as their countries' cultures.

— Other viewers disagree with the Greek translations of technical terms, maintaining that "crosse" and "direct" are more expressive than their Greek

equivalents. They also note that in boxing, the participants do not "beat each other up," as one presenter claimed, but are competing according to very strict rules. The purpose of the sport is not to "thrash" one's opponent, but defeat him. There is a difference.

Meanwhile, the dramatic 200-meter freestyle swimming race was characterized as a "sea battle." Until then, swimmers had been compared to dolphins or torpedoes.

The reference to ancient Greek

ships might be one to avoid, since in the report of the Olympic Flame relay, the phrase "Piraeus will receive the flame from the ancient trireme" was heard.

— Outraged, an Alter channel cameraman found the parents of Katerina Thanou chasing Costas Kenteris's father in Mytilene.

The latter did not want to comment, but this minor obstacle was overcome when the reporter, obviously with the assistance of a clairvoyant, remarked, "He will always be my hero," the embittered father must have wanted to shout!

All of the above incidents are minor misdemeanors, often due to fatigue or anxiety rather than ignorance or arrogance. However, besieging parents shows an abject lack of professionalism.

### Viewers' complaints about program choices and cuts

The most serious complaints concerned the choice of events being broadcast, commercial breaks or temporary loss of image (a problem that has become less frequent over the past few days). Last Monday, August 16, a live broadcast by NET of the tennis match between Greece's Lena Daniilidou and Catalina Castano, was interrupted for the regular program "Sports Date." On Thursday, the camera was showing the handball court, but the commentary was from a basketball match going on concurrently.

Frequently, victory ceremonies are sacri-

ficed for commercial breaks, the reason viewers missed the final two points scored in a Greek victory in volleyball.

On Tuesday of last week, there were more disappointments. While ET-1 was showing the women's gymnastics, ET3 was showing a repeat of Daniilidou's first tennis match, and NET a live broadcast of her second match. This meant viewers missed a very important basketball game between Greece and the US, scheduled in the same time slot.

What could have been left out — or at least rescheduled — was the recorded tennis match on ET3, not only to satisfy basket-

ball fans, but because the match was of great local and international interest.

ERT's radio broadcasters have also been accused of gross inaccuracies, or stating the obvious.

A reporter commenting on the equestrian events during the first week interrupted her guest, a former champion, to give us "important information about the terminology of the jumps and the name of X's horse."

Having said that, and despite the banalities and rhetoric, ERT's commentators do provide a wealth of useful information, such as explaining rules during baseball games.

## Games raise ratings for all three state media channels

According to AGB surveys for the first week of the Games, viewers are turning more and more to ERT, sending the state channels' ratings soaring. Its weekly ratings guide showed the opening ceremony at the top of viewer preferences, particularly on ET-1, where it had a rating of 13.2 percent (percentage of total population) and a 40.5 percent share (of the viewing public), and on NET (rating 12.7 percent, viewer share 38.9 percent).

On all three state channels — ET-1, NET and ET3 — at any given minute 2,431,000 people were watching, a rating of 26.3 percent. This latter figure does not include those

watching the ceremony on screens in village squares, cafes and cinemas. These are high figures given that August is the "silly season" for television.

Thursday's replay of the ceremony prologued by its creator Dimitris Papaioannou, and without the accompanying commentary, was seen by 617,000 people between 11.34 p.m. and 1.51 a.m. (rating 6.7 percent, share 34.5 percent).

Greece's first medals, won on the first Monday of the Games during the synchronized diving event, kept 929,000 viewers glued to ET-1 (rating 10.1 percent, viewer share 36.6 percent) during the victory cere-

### Opening ceremony replay 'even better'

The first, live broadcast of the Olympic Games opening ceremony failed on several levels. The commentary was over the top, in length and content, and the sound was frequently poor.

ERT made up for these failings in its replay last Thursday, showing the ceremony without the commentary and with an improved sound quality, a partial compensation to both viewers and creators of the event who had seen the hard work of three years spoiled by confused sound and a flood of chatter.

The second version, briefer than the live broadcast as it cut the amount of time given to the athletes' parade, was more than satisfactory to viewers who felt they were "inside the stadium" with the 70,000 spectators. So we were spared comments such as the fact the girls carrying the signs bearing the countries' names were "dressed as vases." However, we were treated to lengthy footage of Athens 2004 President Gi-

anna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki on the videowall in the "pre-show," first as a torchbearer in the flame relay, then getting off an airplane and finally making statements about the effectiveness of the organization, right after an appearance by pop singer Anna Vissi.

Little Areti with her santouri was a moving sight, but Yianis Kotsiras singing "Pass the Flame" did not have the impact it was supposed to.

The fact that Greeks do everything at the last minute was presented as somewhat of a metaphysical virtue, which, although a fact, smacked of self-congratulation.

For example, there was "fast-forward" footage of bulldozers, cranes and excavators, and of an olive tree being planted (still in its pot) in some public place in the blink of an eye.

Let us not forget that the "last-minute drive," the overtime and "superhuman efforts" all came at a price, not only in cash.



The Games' opening ceremony broke all ratings records. The lucky ones who saw last Thursday's replay were spared the poor sound and the commentary.

mony for Thomas Bimis and Nikos Siranidis.

Earlier, Leonidas Sampanis's attempt in the weightlifting was viewed by 868,000 people (9.4 and 40.3 percent) and another 715,000 watched the victory ceremony (7.7 and 29.5 percent).

The next day, NET's broadcast of the Greece-USA basketball game was seen by 1.02 million people, a rating of 11 percent (share of viewing public 39.1 percent). The replay of Ilias Iliadis's victory ceremony after the judo event was seen on ET-1 by 758,000 viewers (8.2 percent and 42.9 percent), Lena Daniilidou's struggle against Bulgaria's Magdalena Maleeva drew 847,000 viewers to NET (9.2 and 29.9 percent).

The Athens Olympics are drawing 2 percent more US viewers than the Sydney Games did, helped by the fact that NBC's coverage is lasting 1,210 hours on seven channels, although the Washington Post attacked the coverage of the opening ceremony, claiming that only 25.4 million saw it. In Britain, 9.5 million people watched the ceremony on BBC1. According to the Guardian, the number was three times higher than for the Sydney Games (3.2 million).

The International Olympic Committee forecasts the Athens Games will break all ratings records, with 3.9 billion viewers over 3.7 billion for Sydney.

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