

CATCHING UP WITH REALITY (TV)

It was long considered a *"marriage made in heaven"*: sports and television. Sports provide the content for television to sweep up huge audiences; television is the main source for revenue to sports. Since 1990 the couple meets in the principality of Monaco – during the annual SPORTEL, the International Sports Television Convention – to review and adjust the nuptial agreement and to reaffirm the vows.

SPORTEL is two things at once: a place to do business between buyers and sellers of television rights and programming – the *"Market"* – and a conference – the *"Symposium"* – for both to reflect upon tendencies prevalent in the marketplace.

If in the nineties it was opportunity and growth which marked the conference topics, for two years running the range of issues discussed by supremely competent panels extend from the economic downswing's impact on sports rights to the most fundamental of all questions: *"Sport and Television: Still A Good Marriage?"*

Whatever happens on the floor of the SPORTEL Market – the number of exhibitors, the volume of rights, programming and services on offer, and the intensity of the wheeling and dealing – seems to reflect the state of health in the relationship between sport and television.

2003 was no exception. This year's SPORTEL Monaco certainly looked a few exhibitors down from 2002, some of the biggest names in the industry were renouncing their booth spaces and the pace of trading appeared not quite as hectic as in the past. Very appropriately, the French communicator Roland Faure, president of the Symposium, asked: *"Is sport 'with it' enough for today's television?"*

Here are but a few replies by some

of the 2003 Symposium panellists:

David Hill, Chairman and CEO of Fox Sports Television (AUS):

"Sport is part of the fabric of society, it's the ultimate reality show, and it's the only form of programming guaranteed to attract huge audiences." ... "98% of American fans had their football experience through television." ... "We become genuine partners with the sports, our aim is to turn the games into advertisements for the sports – using all the production and directorial tricks we can to keep our coverage fresh, exciting, educational and engaging." ... "I don't want to sound altruistic, because it's obviously in our interest to attract a wider and younger audience on a year to year basis ..." ... "I've always maintained that with the right crew (producer, director, play-by-play commentator and analyst) you can make a toe nail clipping competition riveting television. With the wrong crew you can make an FA Cup boring." ... "Sports are interwoven with the fabric of society – in much crasser terms – they are the ultimate in reality television. The guy in the white hat isn't always going to get the girl." ... "I think dedicated sports channels add to the excitement, fuel the passion and attract new viewers. I think sports channels are the way of the future." ...

"If sport is not working on TV, is not attracting an audience, is languishing, the problem lies with the people controlling that sport. They have either failed to keep that sport vital and alive, through laziness or mismanagement, or they have allowed people presenting their sport to the public through television to get away with sloppy, lazy or inattentive production."



David Hill got started as a sports producer for Channel 9 in Australia. In 1988, he was recruited by Rupert Murdoch to launch – in succession, through 1993 – Eurosport, Sky News, Sky Sports and Fox Sports in Europe and the USA. He has also introduced channels dedicated to motor sports (SPEED) and extreme sports (FUEL) and oversees some of News Corp.'s most recent start-ups such as Sky Sport Italia.

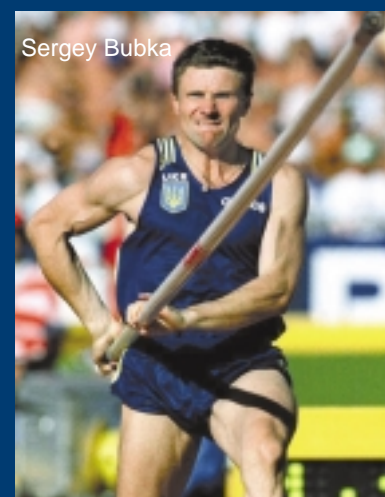
Ottavio Cinquanta, President of the International Skating Union (ITA):

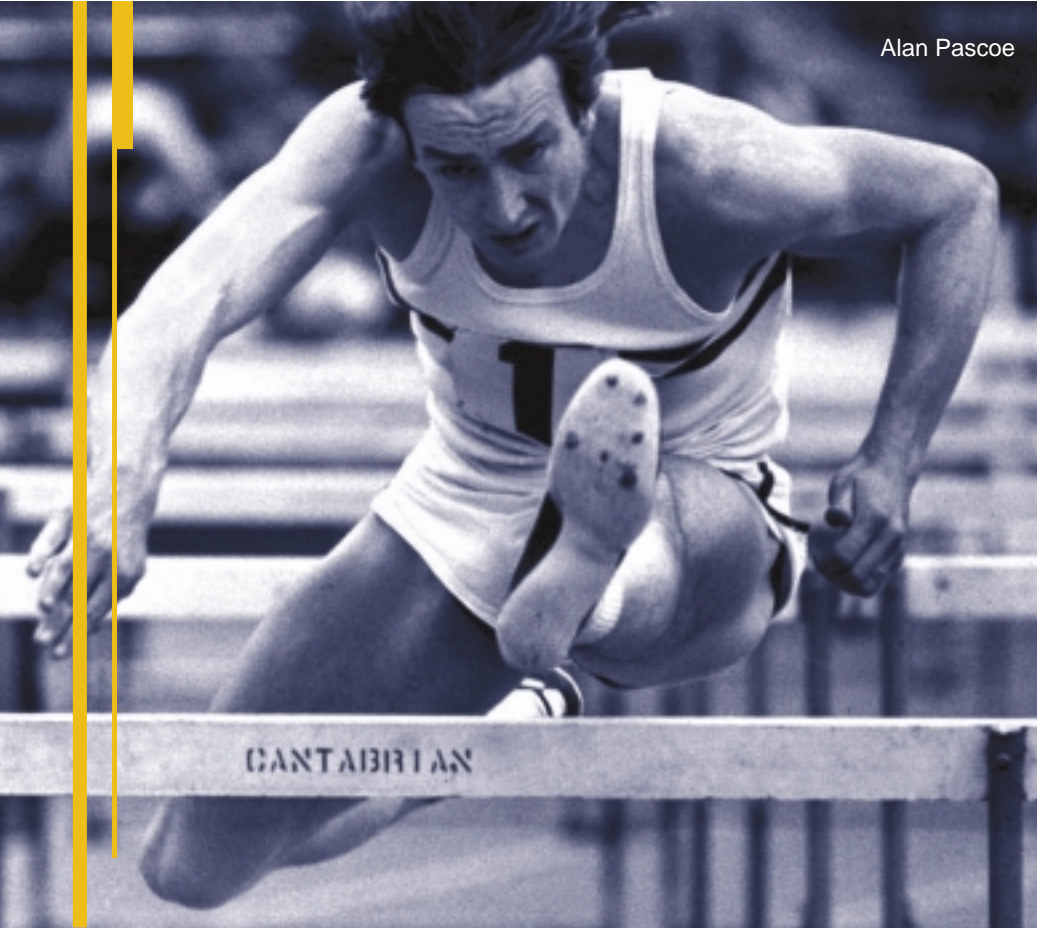
"In terms of the effects of its physical demands, skating has caught up with other sports. The general level is now so high that you cannot expect stars to appear so easily." ... **"In the broadcasting of skating, everything has to improve, especially the presenters. The sport needs and deserves specialists."**



Ottavio Cinquanta is an attorney and a member of the IOC Executive Board. As president of the International Skating Union he was faced with the Salt Lake City 2002 judging scandal and forced to fundamentally revise the way figure skating is scored.

Sergey Bubka, President Bubka SC, World and Olympic Champion in the pole vault (UKR):





Alan Pascoe, Managing Director of Fast Track (GBR):

"If Britain is anything to go by, the trend is worrying: over the past 20 years children are doing a lot less physical activity at school – a mere fraction compared to previous generations. To make it worse: they are doing less in and around their homes thanks to television, computer games and the problem of safety and security on the streets, where past generations of kids would run around and play informal sport most evenings and weekends. This is a time bomb for sport and the television world." ... "The alarming scenario is that there will be far fewer children taking up sport, less talent will emerge, there will be fewer participants in national championships and ultimately lower performances." ... "The crunch, therefore, is that there will be fewer competitors from major European TV markets in the line-up for the finals. So how will the broadcasters justify giving as much, if any, coverage to events, if their country has no representative in final after final? And how much – or how little – will television pay for this?" ...

"Sport is the original reality television." ... "Sport cannot be making enough of its personalities and heroes or the pressures, challenges, highs and lows of their preparation. We are obviously spending too much time covering the line-up, the race and the results, rather than the emotions of the competitors and taking the viewer behind the scene." ... "Whilst some sports and some sections within individual sport are 'with it' enough, there will be major casualties among those that have not moved fast enough to recognize that the god television rules."

Alan Pascoe was a silver medalist in the 4 x 400 m relay at the 1972 Olympics. He spent the last three decades in sports marketing, converting his very first company – API – into a major player before merging it with Octagon, then selling his shares off and launching Fast Track. Besides taking on British Athletics as a client, Pascoe's Fast Track was chiefly involved in drawing up the marketing and television concepts for the Commonwealth Games. His company will again be marketing the international broadcast rights to Melbourne 2006.

Important:

Some of the panelists obviously refer to the relationship between "major" sports (American football, Olympic sports) and "big time" television (U.S. networks, generalist terrestrial channels) in their replies. However, the different kernels of truth contained therein apply to all sports – big or small – aspiring to get exposure – on a free-to-air or a revenue generating basis – wherever people tune in, log on or whatever they do in the future to watch the "original reality television": sports.

"I do also think it is important for athletes to understand that the more effort they make to be extrovert, to show an interesting personality, to be entertaining, and to have a relationship with their fans, the more likely they are to be remembered." ... "If I didn't perform well, then I just thought it should be my problem and no one else's. But later, as I became more experienced, I realized that I had more responsibilities than that. I began to realize that there were many people who expected and who deserved to see a top performance: the spectators who had paid to come into the stadium, TV viewers all over the world, the organizers who had invited me to their meeting, my sponsors." ... "While athletes need to appreciate that they are performers in a great show, the best of all acts is not when they play the clown – but when they create a moment of athletic magic."

Sergey Bubka created many moments of pole vaulting magic: he was first to clear the height of six meters and set 35 world records in all. Even after his retirement, the outspoken athlete turned entrepreneur and sports official. He is a member of the IOC and IAAF executive and chairman of the IOC Athletes Commission.

Craig Masback, CEO of USA Track & Field (USA):
"In an area of economic challenge, changing technologies, and changing

lifestyles and habits of consumers, television and sport must make major adjustments. The most important adjustment must come in the nature of the relationship between the television network and the sports property. Client-supplied programming, which can take a variety of forms, needs to be explored as an option to the traditional rights fee structure for the non-major events. Sports can deliver events to networks with advertising support attached to it and that can deliver decent ratings will find programming opportunities expanding. Sports that come to the table demanding rights fees may spend a lot of time watching other sports on television."



Craig Masback practiced communications and sports law in Washington D.C. prior to his appointment as CEO of USATF. A top-level miler as an athlete – one of 30 sub-four-minute miles ranked him as the history's sixth fastest in 1979 – he became a commentator for track and field for NBC, CBS, ABC and ESPN. Since taking over at USATF, Masback has doubled the organization's revenues and quadrupled sponsor income.