NBC looks to give viewers apolitical Olympic coverage

Network adding new wrinkles as well

By DAVID BAUDER
AP Media Writer

NEW YORK — Fresh off the Super Bowl, NBC begins more than two weeks of Winter Olympics coverage on Thursday with a new host, some new wrinkles and the hope that its business model keeps pace with the different ways people experience events on television and online.

Some skiing and figure skating competition takes place Thursday in South Korea. NBC will stream the Olympic opening ceremony from Pyeongyang live early Friday in the United States, then repeat it that evening for television viewers with Mike Tirico and Katie Couric as hosts.

NBC parent Comcast Corp. placed a $963 million bet — the Pyeongchang rights fee — on Americans wanting to take a breather from arguments in Washington to watch athletes prospect for gold on snow or ice.

"This is a wonderful opportunity to be apolitical in a time when that's been very difficult to do," said Couric, who's making a return to NBC for the Olympics.

That may be a tough sell. There's always more attention paid to summer Olympics than the winter sports, and distant locations tend to depress interest, too. "It definitely feels like it's more quiet, more subdued, than previous Olympic seasons," said Ashwin Navin, CEO of Samba TV, an analytics firm that measures television viewing.

AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File

In this Feb. 6, 2018 file photo, a photographer walks down the steps underneath a large banner at the Gangneung Hockey Center ahead of the 2018 Winter Olympics in Gangneung, South Korea. Fresh off the Super Bowl, NBC begins more than two weeks of Winter Olympics coverage on Feb. 8 with a new host, some new wrinkles and the hope that its business model keeps pace with the different ways people experience events on television and online.

Adam Schwartz, an analyst for Horizon Media, said he's noticed a lack of enthusiasm among many advertisers, some related to curiosity over how the time zone difference will play out (Pyeongchang is 14 hours ahead of the eastern United States). NBC has already estimated it has booked more than $900 million in national advertising.

"Outside of (American skier) Lindsey Vonn, there hasn't been much buzz," Schwartz said.

Tirico, formerly of ESPN, replaces Bob Costas as host of NBC's prime-time coverage and already he's being asked to put in more hours. For the first time, NBC will air its evening coverage live across the country, meaning the broadcast that starts at 8 p.m. on the East Coast starts at 5 p.m. out West. With a half-hour break for local news, Tirico will stay on the air each evening until 2 a.m. Eastern time, coinciding with the end of prime-time out West.

NBC believes the time zone difference will serve the American audience well. Since prime evening viewing time coincides with daylight hours in South Korea, it means more live events than usual when most viewers are available.

NBC's coverage team is well stocked with veterans; essayist Jimmy Roberts is covering his 17th Olympics and Mary Carillo is on her 14th.

Yet there are some notable changes for Olympic followers. The colorful team of Tara Lipinski and Johnny Weir take over as lead analysts for the marquee sport of figure skating, replacing Scott Hamilton and Sandra Bezic. Hockey announcing legend Mike "Doc" Emrick, who doesn't want to make the long journey, will be missed. Former Olympic skier Bode Miller and speed skater Joey Cheek will be new analysts.

In addition to the return of Olympic enthusiast Leslie Jones of "Saturday Night Live," NBC will add a couple of left-field choices for cultural correspondents in race car driver Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Momofuku restaurant founder David Chang.

NBC's prime-time coverage is the window through which most Americans experience the Olympics, but it's only a fraction of what is offered. All the competition will be streamed online, and coverage is also available on the NBCSN sports cable network, CNBC, USA and the Olympic Channel. NBCSN even airs different Olympics coverage during prime time and, coupled with the online options, gives couch-bound viewers the chance for a multi-screen experience.

The options are great for consumers, but present a challenge to NBC.

Traditionally, the success of the Olympics from a business and public perception standpoint is measured by the ratings for NBC's prime-time broadcast. NBC is virtually certain to see a smaller audience than Sochi four years ago, simply because people are watching less live TV than they used to. To illustrate: a sampling of 10 current programs that were also on the air four years ago shows all have lost viewers, ranging from 5 percent (CBS' "Blue Bloods") to 59 percent (NBC's "Blacklist").

So NBC will try to change the story by releasing each day an estimate of how many people experienced the Olympics over all of its platforms, not just the prime-time ratings.

"A viewer is a viewer," said Dan Lovinger, NBC's executive vice president of sports advertising sales. "If they're passionate about the Olympics, it doesn't matter whether they're on NBCSN, on the broadcast network or digital. We just have to find ways to put it all together, and that narrative has definitely changed. It's changed drastically."

MLB

Players union head says rebuilding teams threaten integrity of game

By RONALD BLUM
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Players' union head Tony Clark claims the number of rebuilding teams and unsigned free agents in a historically slow market threatens the sport's integrity, an assertion immediately rejected by Major League Baseball.

In a statement and a telephone interview with The Associated Press on Tuesday, Clark voiced the frustration of the 100-plus free agents who remain unsigned with the start of spring training one week away.

"A record number of talented free agents remain unemployed in an industry where revenues and franchise values are at record highs," he said in a statement, eight days before the first formal workouts. "Spring training has always been associated with hope for a new season. This year a significant number of teams are engaged in a race to the bottom. This conduct is a fundamental breach of the trust between a team and its fans and threatens the very integrity of our game."

Just 61 of 166 players who exercised their free agency rights last November had announced agreements as of Tuesday, down from 99 of 158 at a similar time last year. J.D. Martinez, Jake Arrieta, Yu Darvish, Eric Hosmer and Mike Moustakas are among the stars still seeking a place to play.

While the players' association has shown no interest in agent Brodie Van Wagenen's suggestion that players consider boycotting spring training, the union could announce this week that it will open a training camp for free agents. It would be similar to the one that operated after the 7 ½-month strike in 1994-95.

Scott Boras, the sport's most well-known agent, has called the increased number of rebuilding teams a "noncompetitive cancer."

"We're finding ourselves asking questions that we never thought we would have to ask before, which is are there concerns about the competitive integrity of the game itself?" Clark told the AP. "When it turns to fans being able to see or wanting to see the best 750 players and those 750-plus players wanting to play against the best players, when that becomes part of the conversion it's just not beneficial to anybody."

AP Photo/Morry Gash, File

In this 2017 file photo, Tony Clark, executive director of the Major League Players Association, answers questions at a news conference in Phoenix.

MLB attributed the amount of unsigned players to a misreading of the marketplace. Just one free agent has agreed to a deal worth $50 million or more: first baseman Carlos Santana's $60 million, three-year contract with Cleveland. In addition, outfielder Justin Upton reached a $106 million, five-year contract to stay with the Los Angeles Angels rather than become a free agent.

"Our clubs are committed to putting a winning product on the field for their fans," the commissioner's office said in a statement. "Owners own teams for one reason: They want to win. In baseball, it has always been true that clubs go through cyclical, multiyear strategies directed at winning."

Many teams have concluded there are just two successful strategies: all-in or all-out. Either add veterans around a core group or jettison pricey players and start over.

That was reinforced when Chicago Cubs won the 2016 World Series four years after losing 101 games and Houston took last year's title four years after losing 111.

"It is common at this point in the calendar to have large numbers of free agents unsigned," MLB added. "What is uncommon is to have some of the best free agents sitting unsigned even though they have substantial offers, some in nine figures. It is the responsibility of player's agents to value their clients in a constantly changing free-agent market based on factors such as positional demand, advanced analytics and the impact of the new Basic Agreement. To lay responsibility on the clubs for the failure of some agents to accurately assess the market is unfair, unwarranted, and inflammatory."

Boras maintains the collective bargaining agreement's toughened luxury tax has combined with restraints on signing bonuses for amateur draft picks to cause teams to value young players even more than previously. jettison veterans and rebuild in an attempt to form a young core that can compete in future years. Boras, who represents Martinez, Arrieta, Hosmer and Moustakas, said marketplace dynamics were transformed by the increase in rebuilding teams under the five-year labor contract agreed to in November 2016.

"There is a number of teams, let's call it 10 or 12 in baseball, that are tearing down and rebuilding," Seattle general manager Jerry Dipoto said last month. "You could argue that you're going to compete with more clubs to try to get the first pick in the draft than you would to win the World Series."

For Clark, Dipoto's statement was an indictment of baseball's current state.

"OK, well, wait a minute, if that is the M.O. (modus operandi) now, then what are we really doing here?" Clark told the AP. "The entire backdrop of the CBA itself is grounded in competitive balance. That has been the focal point."

With players angered over the market, they have refused to accept any of MLB's proposals to speed pace of play, such as a pitch clock or limits on mound visits.

"This is where our focus is right now," Clark said.

Pro Basketball

Westbrook, George lead Thunder rout of Durant, Warriors in Oakland

By JANIE MCCAULEY
Associated Press

NBA

Oklahoma City	Golden State
125	105

OAKLAND, Calif. — Russell Westbrook had 34 points, nine rebounds and nine assists to get the better of old buddy and teammate Kevin Durant, Paul George scored 38 points, and the Oklahoma City Thunder embarrassed the defending champion Golden State Warriors 125-105 on Tuesday night to snap a four-game losing streak.

Durant scored 33 points but didn't get as much help from the cold-shooting Splash Brothers of Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson, who added 21 and 12 points, respectively. They combined to go 11 of 27 from the floor and 4 for 15 on 3-pointers as the Warriors lost for the third time in four games. They lost their tempers, too — as in five technicals total.

Draymond Green was ejected with 8:13 remaining after a second technical when he argued with the officials.

The sellout crowd went crazy when Durant was called for a foul with 1:35 remaining in the third and replays show that Westbrook had clearly slipped and no contact was made. Warriors owner Joe Lacob tossed his jacket in disgust.

By the 6:32 mark of the fourth quarter and the blowout still in force, fans began leaving the building.

Westbrook shot 13 for 26 and George went 11 of 23 with six 3-pointers.

Carmelo Anthony sprained his right ankle early in the game, but Oklahoma City never slowed down in ending a seven-game skid at Oracle Arena with its first win on the Warriors' home floor since a 116-97 victory on April 11, 2013.

Westbrook scored 21 points in the first quarter, making nine of his first 10 shots as the Thunder led 42-30. They never trailed.

SCOREBOARD

Local slate

PREP BOYS BASKETBALL
Thursday
Umatilla at Riverside, 7:30 p.m.
Friday
Hermiston at Pendleton, 7 p.m.
Echo at Wallowa, 7 p.m.
Joseph at Helix, 7 p.m.
Vale at Irrigon, 7:30 p.m.
Stanfield at Weston-McEwen, 7:30 p.m.
Pilot Rock at Heppner, 7:30 p.m.
Ione at Sherman, 7:30 p.m.
Horizon Christian at Condon/Wheeler, 7:30 p.m.
South Wasco at Arlington, 7:30 p.m.
Nixyaawii at Pine Eagle, 7:30 p.m.
Saturday
Weston-McEwen at Culver, 4 p.m.
Mitchell/Spray at Arlington, 4 p.m.
Mac-Hi at Ontario, 5:30 p.m.
Nixyaawii at Joseph, 5 p.m.
Pilot Rock at Stanfield, 5:30 p.m.
Nyssa at Riverside, 5:30 p.m.
Condon/Wheeler at Ione, 5:30 p.m.
Cove at Echo, 5:30 p.m.
Helix at Pine Eagle, 5:30 p.m.
Burns at Umatilla, 6:30 p.m.

PREP GIRLS BASKETBALL
Thursday
Umatilla at Riverside, 6 p.m.
Friday
Echo at Wallowa, 5 p.m.
Hermiston at Pendleton, 5:30 p.m.
Vale at Irrigon, 6 p.m.
Stanfield at Weston-McEwen, 6 p.m.
Pilot Rock at Heppner, 6 p.m.
Ione at Sherman, 6 p.m.
Horizon Christ. at Condon/Wheeler, 6 p.m.
South Wasco at Arlington, 6 p.m.
Joseph at Helix, 6 p.m.
Nixyaawii at Pine Eagle, 7 p.m.
Saturday
Weston-McEwen at Culver, 2:30 p.m.
Mitchell/Spray at Arlington, 2:30 p.m.
Mac-Hi at Ontario, 3 p.m.
Nixyaawii at Joseph, 3:30 p.m.
Cove at Echo, 3:30 p.m.
Helix at Pine Eagle, 4 p.m.
Pilot Rock at Stanfield, 4 p.m.
Nyssa at Riverside, 4 p.m.
Condon/Wheeler at Ione, 4 p.m.
Burns at Umatilla, 5 p.m.

PREP SWIMMING
Saturday
Pendleton, Hermiston at District Meet (at Hood River), 10 a.m.

PREP WRESTLING
Friday
Pendleton, Hermiston at Districts (at Redmond), 2 p.m.
Saturday
Pendleton, Hermiston at Districts (at Redmond), 9 a.m.
Mac-Hi at Districts (at La Grande), 10 a.m.

MEN'S COLLEGE BASKETBALL
Wednesday
BMCC at Yakima Valley, 8 p.m.
Friday
EOU at Warner Pacifc, 7:30 p.m.
Saturday
Columbia Basin at BMCC, 4 p.m.
EOU at Multnomah

WOMEN'S COLLEGE BASKETBALL
Wednesday
BMCC at Yakima Valley, 6 p.m.
Friday
EOU at Warner Pacifc, 5:30 p.m.
Saturday
Columbia Basin at BMCC, 2 p.m.
EOU at Multnomah, 5:30 p.m.

Basketball

NBA
EASTERN CONFERENCE
Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	39	16	.709	—
Toronto	37	16	.698	1
Philadelphia	26	25	.510	11
New York	23	32	.418	16
Brooklyn	19	36	.345	20

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Washington	31	23	.574	—
Miami	29	25	.537	2
Charlotte	23	30	.434	7½
Orlando	17	36	.321	13½
Atlanta	17	37	.315	14

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	30	22	.577	—
Milwaukee	30	23	.566	½
Indiana	30	25	.545	1½
Detroit	26	26	.500	4
Chicago	18	35	.340	12½

WESTERN CONFERENCE
Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	39	13	.750	—
San Antonio	34	21	.618	6½
New Orleans	28	25	.528	11½
Memphis	18	35	.340	21½
Dallas	17	37	.315	23

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	34	22	.607	—
Oklahoma City	31	24	.564	2½
Denver	29	25	.537	4
Portland	29	25	.537	4
Utah	25	28	.472	7½

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Golden State	41	13	.759	—
L.A. Clippers	27	25	.519	13
L.A. Lakers	22	31	.415	18½
Phoenix	18	37	.327	23½
Sacramento	17	36	.321	23½

Tuesday's Games
Orlando 116, Cleveland 98
Atlanta 108, Memphis 82
Houston 123, Brooklyn 113
Milwaukee 103, New York 89
Toronto 111, Boston 91
Philadelphia 115, Washington 102
L.A. Lakers 112, Phoenix 93
Oklahoma City 125, Golden State 105
Wednesday's Games
Brooklyn at Detroit, 4 p.m.
Houston at Miami, 4:30 p.m.
Indiana at New Orleans, 5 p.m.
Minnesota at Cleveland, 5 p.m.
Utah at Memphis, 5 p.m.
San Antonio at Phoenix, 9:30 p.m.

NCAA Men's Basketball
Top 25 Schedule
Tuesday
No. 5 Xavier 98, Butler 93
Northwestern 61, No. 20 Michigan 52
No. 15 Tennessee 61, No. 24 Kentucky 59
No. 6 Cincinnati 77, UCF 40
No. 4 Michigan St 96, Iowa 93
No. 10 Kansas 71, TCU 64
No. 22 Wichita St 85, Memphis 65
Wednesday
St. John's at No. 1 Villanova, 4 p.m. (CBSSN)
No. 2 Virginia at Florida St., 4 p.m.
Wake Forest at No. 25 Miami, 4 p.m. (ESPN2)
No. 14 Ohio St at No. 3 Purdue, 5:30 p.m.
Iowa St at No. 7 Texas Tech, 6 p.m. (ESPNU)
Texas A&M at No. 8 Auburn, 6 p.m. (ESPN2)
UNLV at No. 23 Nevada, 8 p.m. (CBSSN)

Pac-12 Schedule
Tuesday
No games scheduled.
Wednesday
Cal at Colorado, 8 p.m. (ESPNU)

NCAA Women's Basketball
Top 25 Schedule
Tuesday
No games scheduled.
Wednesday
No. 1 UConn at UCF, 4 p.m. (ESPN3)
Clemson at No. 4 Louisville, 4 p.m.
Wake Forest at No. 19 Duke, 4 p.m.
No. 22 Oklahoma St at No. 24 TCU, 4:30 p.m.

Hockey

NHL
EASTERN CONFERENCE
Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Tampa Bay	53	36	14	3	75	189	140
Boston	51	32	11	8	72	167	123
Toronto	55	31	19	5	67	179	154
Florida	51	23	22	6	52	146	164
Detroit	52	21	23	8	50	136	154
Montreal	53	22	25	6	50	139	164
Ottawa	52	18	25	9	45	137	179
Buffalo	53	14	29	10	38	120	175

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	53	31	17	5	67	165	154
Pittsburgh	55	30	22	3	63	169	166
New Jersey	52	27	17	8	62	157	156
Philadelphia	53	25	19	9	59	152	155
Columbus	53	27	22	4	58	139	150
N.Y. Islanders	54	26	22	6	58	181	197
Carolina	54	24	21	9	57	144	164
N.Y. Rangers	53	25	23	5	55	156	162

WESTERN CONFERENCE
Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	54	32	13	9	73	176	143
Nashville	51	32	12	7	71	161	131
St. Louis	55	32	20	3	67	155	140
Dallas	54	31	19	4	66	167	140
Minnesota	53	29	19	5	63	159	152
Colorado	52	29	19	4	62	167	150
Chicago	53	24	21	8	56	155	148

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	53	35	14	4	74	181	145
San Jose	53	28	17	8	64	153	145
Calgary	53	27	18	8	62	150	151
Anaheim	55	26	19	10	62	155	159
Los Angeles	52	28	19	5	61	148	126
Edmonton	51	23	24	4	50	144	163
Vancouver	53	21	26	6	48	138	171
Arizona	53	12	32	9	33	122	186

Tuesday's Games
Pittsburgh 5, Vegas 4
Anaheim 4, Buffalo 3, OT
Washington 3, Columbus 2
Philadelphia 2, Carolina 1, OT
Ottawa 5, New Jersey 3
Boston 3, Detroit 2
Florida 3, Vancouver 1
Minnesota 6, St. Louis 2
Winnipeg 4, Arizona 3
Calgary 3, Chicago 2
Colorado 3, San Jose 1
Wednesday's Games
Nashville at Toronto, 4:30 p.m.
Boston at N.Y. Rangers, 5 p.m.
Edmonton at Los Angeles, 7:30 p.m.

Olympics

PYEONGCHANG WINTER OLYMPICS
Television Schedule
Wednesday, Feb. 7
NBCSN
8-11 p.m. — Alpine Skiing: Men's Downhill Training; Mixed Doubles Curling: United States vs. Olympic Athletes from Russia

Thursday, Feb. 8
NBC
5-8:30 p.m. — Figure Skating: Team Event (LIVE), Men's Short Program, Pairs' Short Program; Freestyle Skiing: Men's & Women's Moguls
NBCSN
11 p.m.- 3 a.m. — Mixed Doubles Curling: Canada vs. Norway, China vs. Switzerland
3-7 a.m. — Mixed Doubles Curling: United States vs. Canada (LIVE), China vs. South Korea; Ski Jumping: Men's Individual Normal Hill
5-8:35 p.m. — Mixed Doubles Curling: United States vs. Switzerland; Alpine Skiing: Men's Downhill Training (LIVE); Luge: Men's Training
8:35-10:30 p.m. — Mixed Doubles Curling: United States vs. South Korea (LIVE)

Friday, Feb. 9
NBC
5-8 p.m. — Opening Ceremony

Golf

PGA TOUR
AT&T PEBBLE BEACH PRO-AM
Site: Pebble Beach, Calif.
Purse: $7.4 million. Winner's share: $1,332,000.
Television: Thursday-Friday, 12-3 p.m. (Golf Channel); Saturday, 11 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. (Golf Channel), 1-4 p.m. (CBS); Sunday, 10-11:45 a.m. (Golf Channel); 12-3 p.m. (CBS).