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ATHENS
OLYMPICS

Delayed broadcast destroys the drama

By Andreas von Bubnoff

Watching the Olympics, or any sports for that matter, should be live.

Take Wednesday night's coverage of American gymnast Paul Hamm's quest for gold. It was only exciting if you didn't know the result beforehand. After Hamm's dramatic fall on the vault, he was in 12th place. Winning a gold medal, any medal, looked impossible. Who would have thought that he was going to come back and win gold?

Problem was, NBC didn't cover the event live.

Instead, the network holds the high-profile events like gymnastics until prime time to get as many viewers as possible. NBC, which bought the exclusive broadcasting rights for this year's Olympic games for \$793 million, does show some events live on some of its cable channels (more than 300 hours total), but mostly events that are expected to be less interesting for most viewers.

So people who had heard the results before Wednesday's coverage did think Hamm was going to make it, because they already knew.

How boring.

I've been trying to avoid knowing the results beforehand. Having grown up with public television in Germany, I am used to seeing things live.

But it hasn't been easy.

On most days during the past

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OLYMPICS: Spoiler alerts don't preserve Games' drama

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week, somehow the information got to me prematurely. I'll admit that the first time it happened, I was asking for it: I went to a newspaper Web site. Problem is, there are hundreds of sites that are not specifically newspaper sites and also post Olympic results.

At least NBC's own local news Web sites take care of the problem. They contain a warning that "clicking on stories will reveal results."

NBC's local news stations also warn viewers before announcing the results. Before they do, they turn on a siren—called "spoiler alert"—and warn the viewers that if they don't want to know the results, they should turn away.

Unfortunately, it didn't work for me when I was watching a local NBC news channel in Washington, D.C., one afternoon last week. The problem was that they only waited a few seconds before announcing the results, which was too short a time for me to leave the room, so I watched the announcement anyway.

It was interesting to see that the person presenting the results was actually not in the studio, but in front of a stadium somewhere in the area.

That was live.

The third time, there was no siren, no warning, no nothing: Last Tuesday afternoon, the two people sitting next to me on the plane told me that Michael Phelps had won two more gold medals.

I guess I now have to live in my basement, turn off the phone and tell everybody that I am on vacation, hoping that no one will accidentally visit me and tell me the results.

So what can you do to get actual live coverage of the main events?

In the U.S., I am told, I am pretty much stuck with NBC's coverage. Stations from other countries are not allowed to broadcast their live coverage to the U.S. This would be against the contract between NBC and the International Olympic Com-

mittee, which grants NBC the exclusive broadcasting rights for the Games.

Indeed, Robert Mercer, a spokesperson of the satellite TV provider DirecTV, says that his company does not offer broadcasts from countries that cover the main events live, such as Canada's CBC, Britain's BBC or Germany's ARD and ZDF.

But receiving CBC signals via antenna is apparently OK, since it more or less represents a leak of CBC signal into the U.S. NBC told me that only a deliberate attempt by the CBC to broadcast to the U.S. would be a problem.

So the easiest thing you could do to receive live coverage of main events would be to move closer to the Canadian border.

Alternatively, you could take a vacation in one of the countries that broadcast most of the Games live.

If you can speak German, the best country would be Germany. The two public TV channels in Germany, ARD and ZDF, broadcast a total of 1,400 hours of coverage, most of it live, said Thomas Hagedorn, a spokesperson of ZDF television.

Hagedorn points out that German television has the most extensive coverage of the Olympic Games worldwide.

If you don't speak German, go to the United Kingdom to watch the Games on BBC. The BBC broadcasts 1,250 hours, most of it live.

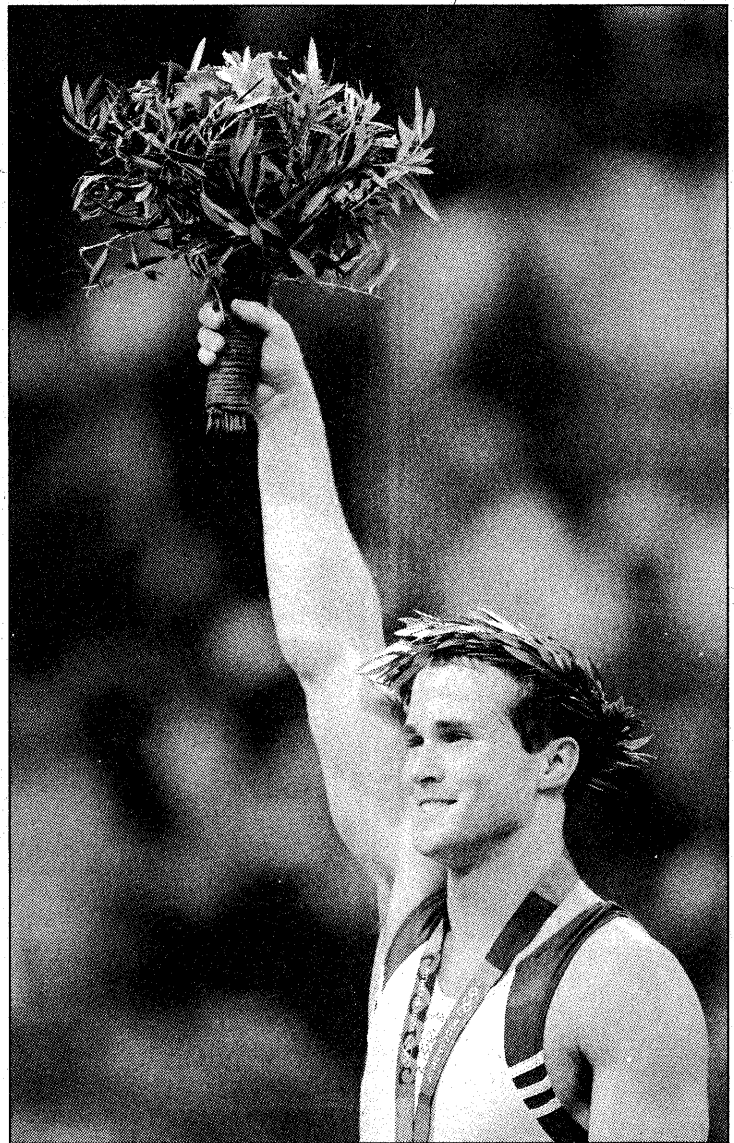
Actually, both the BBC and German television have live Internet broadcasts, but don't get excited yet. The BBC and German television broadcasting contracts with the IOC say that they have to make sure that nobody from outside their countries can access these broadcasts.

German television's Hagedorn said they check the IP addresses of the people trying to log in.

Oh, and then there is the issue of the oh-so-annoying commercials. ARD and ZDF run 20 minutes of them, per day, that is, and only before 8 p.m. The BBC runs no commercials at all.

NBC plans to run thousands of commercials during the Games, and selling them for the highest possible price is the main reason for the network to tape-delay its coverage of the main events until prime time. The network has sold these ads for about \$1 billion, more than making up for the money spent for the broadcast rights.

So who are the Olympics for? Here's NBC's answer.



Tribune photo by Scott Strazzante

American gymnast Paul Hamm tumbled into the judges table, but then went on to win a gold medal in a dramatic comeback. Television viewers in America didn't have a chance to see it live.

"We have over a billion dollars worth of revenue at stake here," Randy Falco, the president of NBC Universal Television Networks Group, was quoted as saying two weeks ago by the San Jose Mercury News.

"So that means we're not public television, for better or worse. We have three main constituency groups: the affiliates, the advertisers and our audience. To our affiliates and our advertisers, our responsibility is to aggregate the biggest audience that we can, and that means tape delay."

Sounds like the Games are more there to make money for the advertisers and broadcasters. It doesn't have much of a connection to the Olympic spirit or the interests of the audience.

In Britain, viewers pay 121 pounds—roughly \$222—a year

to receive the BBC, their publicly funded, commercial-free television.

It's that simple. If the people pay for their television directly, the television will serve their interests.

If companies pay, it'll serve the company's interests.

All we have to do is to make it our priority to strengthen the public television system in the U.S.

A dream? Perhaps. But if you've ever experienced good quality, commercial-free live coverage of the Olympic Games, you'll never want to go back.

For now, I have given up.

Yesterday, I gave away my TV set. And tomorrow, I'll take that vacation.

Not in Germany or England, but in Greece. I figured they would need some help filling those empty seats.