

A Reporter's Guide to Sports and Olympics Reporting



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Preface

During the ancient Olympics, there was a moratorium on wars to allow people across the region to attend the Games. While it is probably too much to expect this to happen today, the ability of sport in general and the Olympic Games in particular to bring countries peacefully together is beyond question.

After Cold War boycotts led by Soviet and U.S. teams during the 1980s, the Games have been largely free of political protests since 1988. And in Beijing in 2008, North and South Korea are due to field a joint team for the first time since the peninsula was divided 60 years ago.

For journalists covering the Olympics, the task of following their home athletes through 302 different events in 28 sports is challenging enough. But another, perhaps greater challenge is to get across to their readers and listeners something of the wider picture, of this unifying effect that sport can often provide. I hope that this handbook can go some small way to help them meet this challenge.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Richard Kevan Gosper', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Richard Kevan Gosper AO
Chairman, IOC Press Commission



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Introduction

Every four years, one major city in the world goes mad for three weeks as some **10,500 athletes and 21,000 journalists** from all over the world arrive for the Summer Olympic Games.

The Winter Olympics produces a somewhat smaller version of these.

Reporting the Olympics, even for an experienced journalist, can be exhausting, often frustrating, but exhilarating. For a newcomer, it can be a nightmare.

The following guide is intended to offer some tips on sports reporting in general – for general news journalists who suddenly find themselves drafted in by their organisation to cover the Games – and on covering the big event itself.

It aims to demonstrate that sports reporting is similar in most ways to general news reporting – both require a Who?, What?, When?, Where?, Why? and How? – but that there are also marked differences between the two. While news reporters need to be detached, sports reporters can, indeed should be involved, though never biased. News reporters are always required to seek a balancing view if someone is cast in a bad light. An experienced sports reporter however can tell it as he sees it, even if what is unfolding before him is a shambles, without fear of legal action. Like news writing, sports writing is driven by events. But it is also, ultimately, about people and personalities.

This guide has been put together from the combined experience of Reuters journalists past and present who between them have covered most of the world's sports, and dozens of Olympics.

Writing about sport

Sport is an integral part of the social fabric for most countries. It also serves as a global language promoting international dialogue.

Sport is also big business, so you don't need to like it but as journalists you need to understand it. You also need to understand why it's so popular – why nearly two-thirds of the entire population of the planet watch at least some of the Summer Olympics on TV every four years. Sport is entertainment, it's theatre, it's soap opera, it's escapism.

For a journalist, sport brings an additional bonus because it allows you to try out writing styles which would be unsuitable in reporting other types of news – financial, economic, political, general news. This is because sports writing has one essential ingredient that is present to a much lower degree in other forms of news i.e. **It must entertain as well as inform.**

So, if you're covering an event that is dull and boring, is it ok to say so? Of course, it is. Like any other journalism, sports reporting must aim to be truthful. But the skill is in writing about a dull and dreary event in a bright and entertaining way – which makes it one of the most effective means I know of developing your descriptive writing skills.

It obliges you to become more receptive, to keep your eyes and ears at full stretch in order to feel the excitement – or the fury – that's going on around you.

And never ever forget that sport is essentially about people. Some sports such as swimming or speed skating may appear rather robotic to the untutored eye. If you don't know any of the personalities involved, you only have the statistics to draw on, which will almost certainly result in a dull report.

So sports writing needs to be colourful and entertaining. But we have to distinguish between quality writing which gets to the heart of the story, and flamboyant hype aimed at bringing a cosmetic sheen to an essentially thin story.

Which brings me to a second area in which sports reporting differs from most other forms of news coverage – subjectivity. Sports writing requires a degree of subjectivity which would be inappropriate for most other types of news coverage.

This doesn't mean that you should write with bias or prejudice, but it does oblige you to make full use of your critical faculties. However, valid criticism can only be offered by the well-informed observer. The reporter must know what he or she is talking about or risk ridicule from those who do.

The immediacy of TV provides a little complication. The days when readers needed to rely on the written report for a basic understanding of the event are long gone. By the time they read your report they'll have long since digested the instant coverage provided by TV. Which means that you need to dig deeper to find the story behind the story.

But understanding the technicalities of the sport is not enough. Statistics are ok, but they only summarise the human endeavour that lies at the heart of the story.

As we've said, sport is essentially about people, and knowing the personalities involved will help you bring the story to life.

(By Steve Parry, Reuters Sports Editor for 18 years, 19 Olympic Games, 25 years on IOC Press Commission)



Melbourne



Accuracy

The most important of all. If you can't get the statistics right, nobody will trust anything else you write. Check, check, and check again.

The intro

As in a news story, the first one or two paragraphs of a sports story should reflect the essence, the outstanding details of what you have witnessed.

If you are working for a news agency, radio or TV station or a paper with an edition due to come out shortly, the report will need to be fairly straight and informative.

However it should offer more than just 'team A beat team B by N goals to N goals in a ... quarter-final match in ... today.'

A rule of thumb at Reuters sports desk is to try to get a name into the intro, for a stronger start.

Thus: A hat-trick by Wayne Rooney gave Manchester United a 3-0 lead over Real Madrid in the European Champions League semi-finals on Wednesday.

Straight intros such as these should try to get the high points of the match or the race, which might not necessarily be scores, into the first couple of paragraphs.

However the first paragraph should ideally contain no more than three or four elements. Others can move to the second paragraph.

Thus: An injury-time goal by Joe Blow edged Hastings United to a 4-3 win over Dunmow Rovers despite playing with only 10 men for most of their Second Division match on Tuesday.

It was a remarkable come-back for Hastings after trailing 3-1 at half-time.

Sometimes events off the field become part of the main story:

Teenage substitute Daniel Darrow's deciding goal lifted Borough Rovers clear of the relegation zone with a 3-2 win over Hamble United in a match marred by crowd trouble.

Sometimes a crucial element of a person's background can be included in the intro, adding an extra layer to the story with very few words.

Shooter Nancy Johnson of the United States claimed the first gold medal of the Sydney Games on Saturday, winning the 10-metre air rifle event to cap a dramatic battle back from serious illness.

If possible try to include background in the intro that broadens the picture and underlines the importance of the result.

[Ian Thorpe powered Australia to a world record victory in the 4x100m freestyle relay and ended American Olympic domination of the event since it was first held 36 years ago in Tokyo.](#)

Multiple element leads – when two events come together, and one cannot be dropped for the other.

Manchukistan suspended its national football coach and banned three players on Monday 24 hours after police investigated suspected match fixing by an international betting syndicate.

Newspapers reporting an event the next day, after the public has had time to digest and discuss the result, will need something more than the basic story. You will need to add colour, background, atmosphere and context.



Some examples:

Spurs 0 Aston Villa 0

Not by any means a classic encounter. Indeed, in the unlikely event of Tottenham Hotspur goalkeeper Paul Robinson remembering yesterday's scoreless draw with Aston Villa at all, he will recall an afternoon where he was not called upon in anger.

His counterpart, Thomas Sorenson, however, had a game that is unlikely to slip from his memory. Backed by a gritty defence and aided by prodigal Spurs finishing, the Dane offered a masterclass in siege-conditions goalkeeping.

Middlesbrough 2 Wigan 3

They booed at the interval and at full-time they bolted for the exits. Steve McClaren promised Middlesbrough supporters the slump had 'bottomed out' during last weekend's 7-0 debacle at Highbury but his team fell further through the trap door with this defeat.

Ipswich Town 1 Sheffield United 1

Sheffield United's ever-controversial manager Neil Warnock can generally be relied upon to liven up the duller of occasions, and he was duly towed away by security guards after gesturing at Ipswich fans following this gentle draw at Portman Road.

The match/race report

Try to keep the chronological, blow-by-blow report of a match or race to a minimum, particularly in long events such as football, badminton, tennis and hockey.

You need to give the highlights, an idea of the flow of the event, the tactics and strengths and weaknesses of the teams or individuals, the outstanding players, if a team event, quotes, and prospects for advancement.



Quotes and interviews

There is relentless pressure from sports editors on reporters to get quotes, either immediately after the event, or as part of an in-depth profile of an athlete.

In events which can be over in less than 10 seconds, or involve little more than the lifting of large amounts of metal over the head for a couple of seconds, the need to add some colour and human dimension to what would otherwise be a dry report is obvious. And a good quote can enliven even the dullest story.

However getting quotes, in a one-on-one interview or at a news conference, can be a difficult and frustrating experience. Very often athletes who have spent the large part of their young lives churning up and down a pool or hitting balls over a net, to the exclusion of almost all else, have not much to say, or are too overcome with emotion or exhaustion to say anything relevant.

During the Olympics there is a news service that provides quotes for journalists. This will be dealt with in the following section on reporting the Games.





'When I score goals I am great,
when I don't I am fat'

Real Madrid's Brazilian striker Ronaldo discussing
his treatment by the Spanish press.

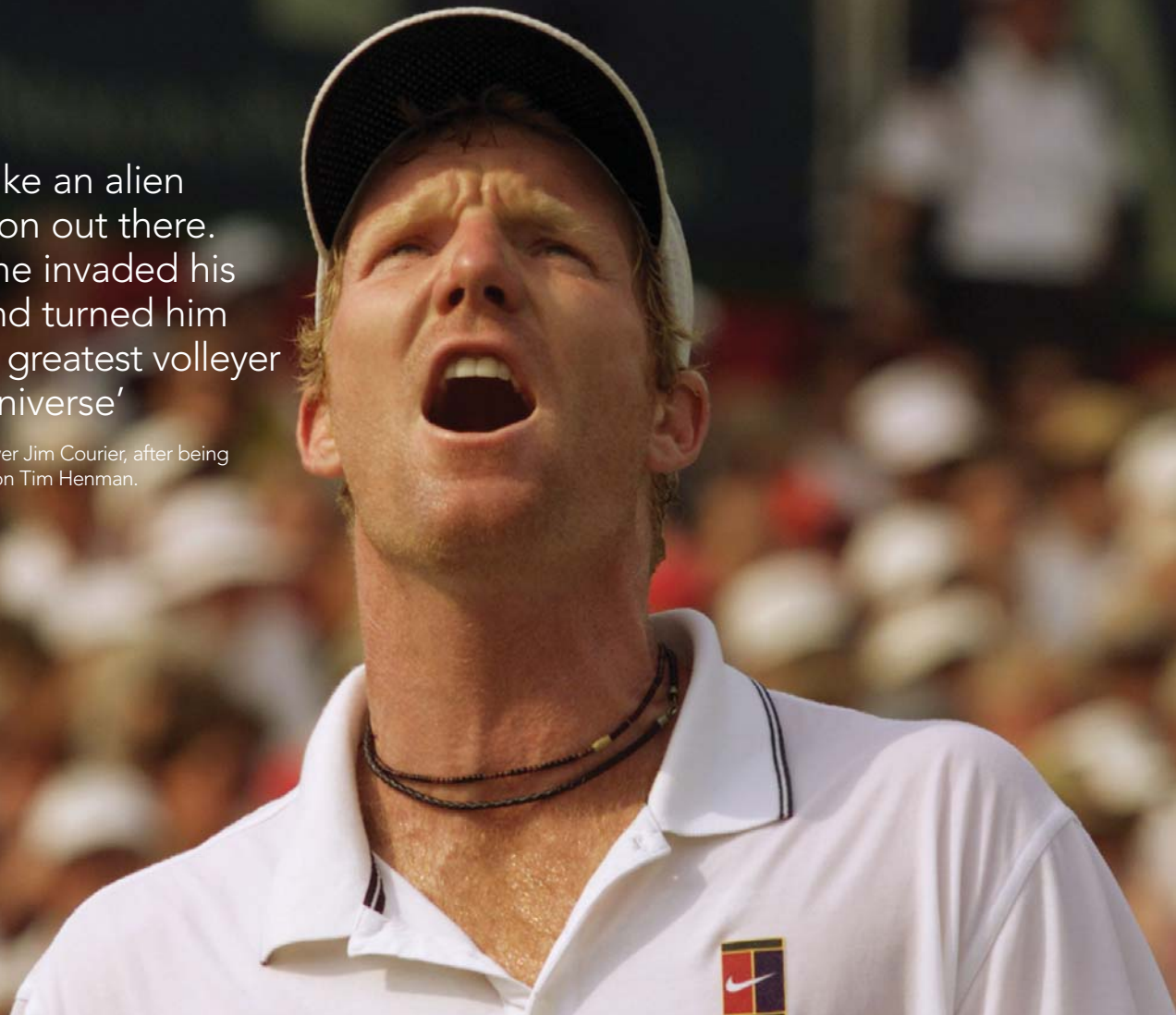
'I got to party and socialise
at an Olympic level'

Alpine skier Bode Miller, the 2005 overall World Cup champion,
on his Winter Olympic achievements after arriving in Turin as
the great American hope but leaving without a medal.



'It was like an alien abduction out there. Someone invaded his body and turned him into the greatest volleyer in the universe'

U.S. tennis player Jim Courier, after being beaten by Briton Tim Henman.





Some tips on interviewing:

- **Do your homework.** You may not have much time to ask questions, you do not want to waste any of it seeking answers on biographical details that can be found by routine research. Try to gain some advance sense of the subject's personality, the issues that he or she is likely to be concerned with. This will help gain the subject's confidence.
- **You hear it all the time**, avoid it. 'How do you feel?' – the inevitable answer is 'wonderful' or 'awful'. And that's it.
- **Avoid closed questions** that are likely to get a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Closed questions usually start with a verb – 'have you?', 'will you?', 'are you?'. Ask open questions that require a response – 'how much faster/higher can you achieve?', 'what did you think of your team's performance?', 'what happens next?'
- **Leave difficult and awkward questions till near the end.** If the interview is brusquely terminated, at least you have some material. But DO ask the question. You could lead into it with something like 'some of your critics suggest...'
- **Avoid multiple questions.** The interviewee will pick the easiest one and ignore the other.
- **Do NOT ask for autographs** and signed photos during the interview/news conference. It can, and usually does, upset the professional relationship between reporter and athlete.
- **Show respect, but not hero-worship.** You are a professional, doing a job.
- **Be sympathetic.** Losing an event for which one has trained for years is a bitter disappointment.
- **Be punctual.** Ensure you are on time for a one-on-one interview with an athlete or coach. They will probably have several other interviews lined up, your time will be limited, so every second counts.
- **Seek clarification** if you do not understand something.
- **If the subject does not produce interesting quotes**, try their coach/psychologist/nutritionist for any insight into their character, personality or training routine.
- **If looking to arrange an interview, try to make contact with the subject during training.** They are likely to be more relaxed, and accessible, one can obtain vital background material and arrange another meeting after their event.
- **Try to find out which athletes provide good quotes.** One may admire the clinical efficiency and self-control of great champions, but it is often the exuberant outsider who provides the colour and the quotes.

Adding human interest

Human interest angles are even more important than quotes as a way of bringing life to what could otherwise be a dry report on a highly technical sport. What motivates an athlete to give up his or her youth for the slim prospects of winning a small piece of metal?

What adversities – poverty, war, illness – did he or she have to overcome? What sort of training regime, and what sacrifices, have they had to endure to get where they are?

Is there a long-standing rivalry with a competitor (though be careful about artificially created rivalry hyped by event organisers to maximise attendance).

The Olympics provide fertile ground for such stories, with athletes coming from a wide variety of countries, backgrounds and cultures. However any good reporter will always look for new material on his or her home patch to add depth and distinction to their reports.

Features

Sport lends itself admirably to feature writing, giving the reporter an opportunity to go behind the bare statistics and fashion in-depth and colourful profiles of personalities, clubs, and obscure sports. One-on-one interviews are often available on request at major tournaments, and these can provide the basis for a fresh look at a sport or a particular individual.

The politics and, increasingly, the financing of sport as big business also offer rich opportunities for a keen reporter prepared to dig.

Good reporters should keep an eye open for the unusual and off-beat angles of sport. They are out there in abundance.

Once again, the Olympics provides a potential treasure-trove of features, particularly the exotic and the off-beat, and some of these will be dealt with later.

Some examples of recent sports features put out by Reuters:

NFL – Four kickers from China, having been put through a rigorous training programme, are competing in American football's most exclusive audition. The Chinese are vying to join the squads for August's China Bowl pre-season game between the New England Patriots and Seattle Seahawks – the first NFL game to be played in China.

Cricket – A West Indian opens the bowling for a Canada side captained by an Australian, three Australians and a South African have enjoyed success with Ireland and the best Dutch player comes from South Africa.

Sumo – Sumo is hot. Ssirum is not. South Korea's traditional brand of wrestling, called ssirum, has a lot in common with Japan's national sport sumo. Both are centuries old, steeped in tradition and feature jumbo-sized wrestlers battling in a small circle.

Athletics – Mental strength, relaxed running and respect for women have allowed Ethiopia to surpass neighbours Kenya as the world's premier distance-running nation, leading manager Jos Hermens says.

Baseball – Japanese pitcher Daisuke Matsuzaka created the biggest buzz of the North American spring when he joined the Boston Red Sox in a deal worth \$103 million.

There is, however, a far less publicised development in the story of the growing Asian influence on Major League Baseball (MLB) which may have a great impact on the sport's future.



There are many ways of leading a feature.
Here are just a few of them.

Straight – Don't be afraid to tell a story in the most straightforward way, like a news story, provided the subject is interesting enough.

“Rwandan soccer has struggled to bridge the gap left by a lost generation but young players are now coming through to fill the void in the national team”, says coach Michael Nees.

Hard-hitting – Where you grab the reader's attention early with a startling or dramatic detail.

Ivan Ivanovich, known as the father of Russian golf, remembers a time when he was unable to even talk about his sport.

‘Forget about playing it, it was forbidden even to mention such a word.’

Or:

Fate dictated that Adrian Sutil should become a Formula One driver rather than a concert pianist.



Delayed – Where the real story is saved up for a few paragraphs. Can be effective, but don't wait too long to get to the point.

Alexei Nemov spent more than 20 years striving for perfection. Like all other top gymnasts, the muscular Russian spent day after day polishing his complex programmes in training. He hoped his hard work would earn him not only a gold medal but also a perfect 10.

With his final routine on the international stage, however, the four-times Olympic champion sparked a chain of events at the 2004 Athens Games which led to the abolishment of the iconic 10 score.

When the 2006 gymnastics world championships open in Aarhus, Denmark on Friday, a new accumulative points scoring system – awarded for content and execution – will make its debut at a major global competition.

Historical – Opening the story by going back in history.

It was Peter the Great who in the early 18th century first invited Dutch craftsmen to help him build the city which still bears his name.

Three centuries later another Dutch master, by the name of Dick Advocaat, has been brought to the city on the shores of the Baltic Sea to revive the sagging hopes of local soccer side Zenit.

Or:

Deep in the days of apartheid, Italian yacht captain Salvatore Sarno started teaching a small group of black children to sail off the coast of South Africa and was laughed at for trying to cross the race barrier.

Sixteen years later he is leading Shosholoza, Africa's first America's cup challenger, proudly presenting a multi-race team to show how far his adopted country has come.





Narrative – This tells the story in a chronological way, from the beginning. It can draw the reader in – but like the delayed lead, it should get to the point before the reader loses interest.

Midway through extra time in the soccer World Cup final Zinedine Zidane rose majestically to head the goal designed to claim the trophy for France.

Instead the consistently excellent Italian keeper Gianluigi Buffon arched high to tip the ball one-handed over the bar and preserve the 1-1 scoreline.

What subsequently passed through Zidane's mind in the dying moments of a career that had taken him from the back streets of Marseille to the glamorous European club giants Juventus and Real Madrid?

Certainly something snapped 10 minutes before the final whistle at the Berlin Olympic stadium. After a brief altercation the French captain suddenly head-butted Marco Materazzi in the chest and was sent off. His demoralised team then succumbed 5-3 in the penalty shootout.

Or:

A few hours before an England friendly international in Denmark last year, four fans sat drinking quietly in a local pub before leaving for the stadium.

To their dismay, a nervous-looking local man approached and begged them not to start trouble.

The incident served as a reminder that despite England fans' good behaviour in the last two international tournaments, bad reputations take a long time to shake off.

Humorous – Not easy to bring off, but can work well in a feature lead.

Even if most coaching jobs are not made in heaven, Jürgen Klinsmann knows they sometimes do fall out of the sky – as he learned with his first assignment in 2004.

Or:

In Raleigh, fans wear their hockey jerseys to games. In Edmonton they wear them to work, to bed and to weddings.

Anecdotal – Particularly useful when writing features about personalities. You set the scene by introducing something from their past.

Kenya's three-time Boston Marathon champion Robert Cheruiyot has come a long way to claim his place among the elite.

At one time he was homeless and worked in a friend's barber shop to eke out a living. He even contemplated suicide because life had become so unbearable.

Or:

Former Paraguay forward, Jose Parodi, fondly remembers the days when players rode to matches on horseback and cleared the cows from the field before kickoff.

While travelling to a match in Chile, he recalls, the plane flew between the mountains of the Andes, dodging the icy peaks. The players had to wear oxygen masks.

Question? – Beginning a feature with a question – not easy but it can work.

Is Freddy Adu the real deal or just the latest great American soccer hope to sink under the weight of hyperbole?

Descriptive – Where you first describe the scene, then get into the story.

Dawn breaks over a rice field in rural Thailand as a dozen barefooted children jog along a dirt track.

Among the small figures silhouetted against the slowly brightening sky is Phannipa Chaithes, a shy 12-year-old girl whose quiet voice and skinny build belie her ranking as a national Muay Thai champion.

Or:

It costs \$4 to sit in the main stand at the Roberto Bettega stadium in the swampy outskirts of the Paraguayan capital, and insect repellent is not included in the price.

Tacuarembó are hosting Nacional where a paying crowd of 304 have braved the rutted track to the stadium to bring in gate receipts of 4.1 million Guaraníes (\$800), barely enough to pay the floodlight bill, and the mosquitoes are having a field day.

Welcome to the Paraguayan first division, where the league table reads like a list of important dates in the country's history and where, not so long ago, the federation held a vote to decide the season's champions.

Clichés, hyperbole, jargon

Sports writing seems to attract clichés and lazy adjectives more than any other type of reporting. Every Tour de France cycling stage is 'gruelling' (why would they be doing it if it were not?), every football match becomes 'crucial' or 'critical'. They are superfluous and make the writing look tired.

A good reporter can create excitement and drama using simple, direct language, without the need to use 'exciting' and 'dramatic'. Remember the comment of American writer Mark Twain: 'If you see an adjective, kill it.'

Similarly, avoid hyperbole, which also has a mysterious attraction for sportswriters. Words like 'disaster' and 'legend' should be used sparingly, if at all. It is not a tragedy when a team loses a match, in whatever circumstances. Save it for a real tragedy, such as the death of 39 football fans in 1985 when a wall in Brussels' Heysel Stadium collapsed during a European Cup final match as Liverpool fans attacked rival Juventus supporters.

Don't over-dramatise an event

One sometimes hears players or coaches say: 'It was war out there.' For anyone who has experienced a real war, a ridiculous assertion.

Try to avoid jargon, particularly with medical and legal terminology. Get on the web to find out about anterior cruciate ligaments and post-concussion syndrome. Will they be fit in a few days, or out for the season?

Don't pretend to be an expert

You will be found out, and made to look foolish. There are a multitude of experts among your readers, and they will be quick to point out any glaring errors.

If you are unfamiliar with a particular sport, as can happen particularly in an Olympics where reporters may have to cover a variety of disciplines, keep it simple, work within what you know. If you need advice on the rules, every sports organisation has a web-site, and the IOC has a very comprehensive one with interactive animated displays showing the facts and rules of all the Olympic sports, and how they are scored.

If no Internet connection is immediately available, there are always experts around on even the most obscure sports, who are willing, even eager, to share and show off their knowledge.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship of sports events is becoming ever more pervasive, while most news organisations prefer their sports content not to resemble an advertising billboard.

Sponsors are becoming increasingly aggressive and may refuse to accredit news organisations which do not include sponsor names in their event coverage.

Policy on the use of sponsor names in sports coverage may differ widely among news organisations, but here are some options for consideration:

- **Team names** – Avoid commercial brands in team names when the sponsorship may change from year to year, which can be highly confusing for the reader.
- **Events** – If the title of an event is clear in its own right (e.g. world championships, FA Cup) the sponsor's name can be dropped. However, it should be used when it would otherwise be necessary to invent a name to describe the event.
- **Rankings/statistics** – Sponsor names should only be used where it is necessary to distinguish them as a legitimate source e.g. the FIFA world soccer rankings would not require a sponsor name.
- **Soccer leagues** – Sponsor names may not be required for domestic soccer leagues which can be described by their category e.g. English Premier League, Division One etc.

Drugs

A major problem affecting most sports, which will be dealt with in detail in the Olympics section, since it is around Games time that the issue really comes to life as some athletes are tempted to risk all for the ultimate prize.

Stories involving athletes accused or suspected of taking drugs are highly sensitive, legally, and should be handled with extreme care. If in doubt about a drugs incident in the past it is well worth going back to the original story and immediate follow-ups, as over time vital details have a habit of becoming blurred. And always check with your editor.

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has a useful website wada-ama.org.



Some useful websites

Archery:	archery.org
Athletics:	iaaf.org
Badminton:	internationalbadminton.org
Baseball:	baseball.ch
Boxing:	wbaonline.com wbcboxing.com wbo-int.com
Canoe/Kayak:	canoeicf.com
Cricket:	icc-cricket.com
Cycling:	uci.ch
Fencing:	fie.ch
Drugs:	wada-ama.org
Equestrian:	horsesport.org
Football:	fifa.com uefa.com
Golf:	pgatour.com europeantour.com
Gymnastics:	fig-gymnastics.com
Handball:	ihf.info
Hockey:	worldhockey.org
Judo:	intjudo.com
Modern Pentathlon:	pentathlon.org
Motor cycling:	fim.ch
Motor racing:	fia.com
Olympics:	olympic.org
Rowing:	worldrowing.com
Rugby:	irb.com
Sailing:	sailing.org
Shooting:	issf-shooting.org
Softball:	internationalsoftball.com
Swimming:	fina.org

Table tennis:	ittf.com
Taekwondo:	wtf.org
Tennis:	itftennis.com sonyericssonwtatour.com lta.org.uk
Triathlon:	triathlon.org
Volleyball:	fivb.ch
Weightlifting:	iwf.net
Wrestling:	fila-wrestling.com

Winter sports:

Biathlon:	biathlonworld.com
Bobsleigh:	bobsleigh.com
Curling:	worldcurling.org
Ice Hockey:	iihf.com
Luge:	fil-luge.org
Skating:	isu.org
Skiing:	fis-ski.com

General sites:

infoplease.com/sports – good background

yahoo.com/sports – Click on 'More' at the top of the page, for a list of links to all sports.

journalisttoolbox.com/sports/onlineindex – site of the American Press Institute. Good for background on sports injuries, drugs.

reuters.com/news/sports

bbc.co.uk/sport

These links are for websites that you may find are useful sources of information on individual sports. The URLs were correct at the time of publication but of course web addresses can change at any time



'Sport reaches areas far
beyond any sphere of
political influence and has
probably done more to unify
nations than any politician
has been capable of'

Nelson Mandela.

Reporting the Olympics

Your role

You must be very clear about what is expected of you. Unless you work for an international or national news agency, you will not be expected to match the sort of blanket coverage of sports events offered by the big agencies, which your employer is already receiving back home. Your job is to add value for your readers or listeners.

Your first priority is to follow the fortunes of your national athletes, who may not feature in the global picture. And if they do emerge among the big names, you should be able to get privileged access to them in order to provide in-depth coverage. You should also concentrate on sports that are popular in your home country.

This does not mean you should ignore all events and personalities during the Games that do not include your national athletes. Apart from putting your personal touch on the sporting highlights of the Games, there will be a wealth of other stories to cover, particularly of human interest. And always be ready for the big story that almost invariably breaks during the Games – the seizing of the Israeli hostages in Munich in 1972, the bomb in Atlanta in 1996.

Preparations

Try to arrive several days before the opening of the Games. The organisation of events, and getting journalists to and from them in time, is highly complex and can be bewildering for first-timers. Most news organisations will also require preview reports looking back at the events leading up to the Games, the preparations of Olympic sites by the host country, security for athletes and spectators, and forward to the prospects for your national athletes and the likely stars of the Games.

Organisation – Once you have found your accommodation and received your accreditation, check out the venues you are likely to be visiting, which press buses will take you there and how long the journey will last.

Essential facts and figures – You will need these for your preview, and for covering the opening ceremony. How many athletes, from how many countries, in how many sports? In the 2004 Games in Athens there were 10,500 athletes from 202 countries competing in 300 events in 37 different sports or disciplines. In the first Olympics of the modern era, in 1896, there were over 240 athletes, all men, from 14 countries competing in 43 events across a total of nine sports.

Political background – Keep abreast of political developments in the host country and the world outside. The Olympics provide a potential showcase for individuals and organisations with a grievance to put their case to a global audience.

International politics has often intruded – In Montreal in 1976 22 African nations stayed away in protest over a New Zealand rugby tour of apartheid-era South Africa. In 1980 the U.S. led a boycott by 65 nations of the Moscow Games in protest over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In Los Angeles in 1984 Moscow responded by leading a 14-nation boycott of the Games.

Countries that have just won independence, or emerged from long civil turmoil, are likely to get a warm response from spectators during the opening ceremony.

Olympic site preparations – Preparations by the host country are kept under constant scrutiny by the national and international press to see that they are on schedule. In Athens the organisers came under heavy criticism for slow preparations, but against all expectations the stadiums were ready and the Games were a success.



T.E.E.M.
BOMB SQUAD



Check how much has been invested to upgrade the city's infrastructure – roads, rail links and airports, to deal with the mass of tourists expected to visit during the Games.

Security – Always a major issue. In Athens, the first Summer Olympics since the attacks in New York, Bali and Madrid by Islamist extremists, there were 45,000 security staff on guard, three times more than at the previous Games in Sydney. NATO's entire Mediterranean fleet was called in to help the local coast guard protect Greek waters. The sky was patrolled by an airship with cameras and chemical sensors.

Money – Sport in general, and the Olympics in particular, have become big business, and the business side is always worth a mention, if not a full report. Global broadcast revenues from the Games have increased 30 times over the past 25 years and are estimated to reach \$3 billion by 2008.

IOC marketing chief Gerd Heiberg expects the Beijing Games to be the most profitable ever staged, beating the \$224 million surplus of the Los Angeles games.

The Games

Opening ceremony – Invariably spectacular shows in which host countries aim to depict their culture and history. If you are a writing journalist, many if not most of your readers will have watched the ceremony on television. Your job therefore is to report the highlights of the show, focusing on aspects of particular political or cultural significance, aided by detailed explanatory notes issued to the media by the host authorities. You should also try to give a flavour of the atmosphere in the stadium from your unique perspective, in a way that the TV cameras cannot – crowd reaction, comments from people sitting near you, etc.

In the march-past of national athletes, watch out for how teams are received by the spectators, and explain why some get more applause than others.

The opening ceremony also offers an opportunity to recall the key news stories during the build-up to the Games.

Here is how Reuters covered the opening ceremony of the 2004 Athens Olympics.

Athens, Aug 13 – Greece staged a triumphal pageant to welcome home the Olympic Games on Friday, weaving ancient tradition and modern technology that lifted spirits after a drugs scandal engulfed the home nation's two top athletes.

By the time the Olympic flame was lit, three hours of music, dance and fireworks had helped dispel lingering doubts about Athens' readiness and taken minds off gold medal sprinter Costas Kenteris - expected to light the flame, he lay instead in hospital facing expulsion and shame for missing a dope test.

As helicopters patrolled the skies and troops ringed the futuristic Olympic Stadium for the first Summer Games since the September 11 attacks, Olympics chief Jacques Rogge urged athletes to forswear the drugs that have so tarnished sport's image.

In three paragraphs the report mentions the return of the Games to their ancient roots, the drugs scandal affecting two Greek stars and the drugs problem facing sport in general, a taste of the opening ceremony show, the doubts about Greece's ability to get ready in time, and the heightened security.

Surviving the mixed zone

At every Olympics there is a Mixed Zone (MZ) where journalists and athletes can meet. Athletes are obliged to pass through the zone, but are not obliged to talk to media.

The MZ can be crucially important for media on a deadline, offering the possibility of getting quotes from successful or unsuccessful athletes. However space is often cramped, the athletes are on a tight schedule, and reporters at the back may not be able to hear questions and answers.

The IOC is studying ways of improving conditions in the MZ.

Olympic News Service

At many major sporting events you will encounter a news agency run by the organisers; at an Olympic Games this is called the Olympic News Service (ONS), a lifeline for journalists who have a wide range of sports to cover but can only be in one place at any one time.

Among their other duties, ONS reporters work in the MZ to obtain 'flash quotes' for fast distribution to the media.

The ONS output is available to accredited media via INFO, the Games-time information system which provides:

- Results and other data including event schedules and start lists
- Breaking news
- Administrative announcements for journalists, such as bus time changes and ticketing requirements
- Background on the sports, their rules, the teams and the organisation running the event

- Diaries for the events and any time changes
- Pre-event/post-event bullet points for each event
- Flash quotes from athletes leaving the field of play
- Press Conference highlights
- Press Conference schedules
- Games-related general news stories
- Human interest stories
- News releases by the IOC and other official bodies
- Athlete biographies
- Historical results
- Olympic facts and figures
- A review of the sport for the day
- Occasional features and unusual background stories

The information is available via INFO terminals at competition venues and at the main press centre. Also, most of the information is printed, photocopied and distributed to pigeon holes at the venues and in the main press centre. Any mistakes are corrected quickly.

There is usually a press centre at each sports venue, run by a venue press manager who looks after journalists covering the event. An experienced journalist who knows the sport well runs an ONS operation at each venue, supervising volunteers working as reporters to capture the quotes from athletes in parts of the building where access is restricted and to maintain the supply of information to journalists.

A desk of editors in a room at the main press centre will be checking the reports from the venues to ensure their quality as they pass through the system to publication.



Stars, personalities

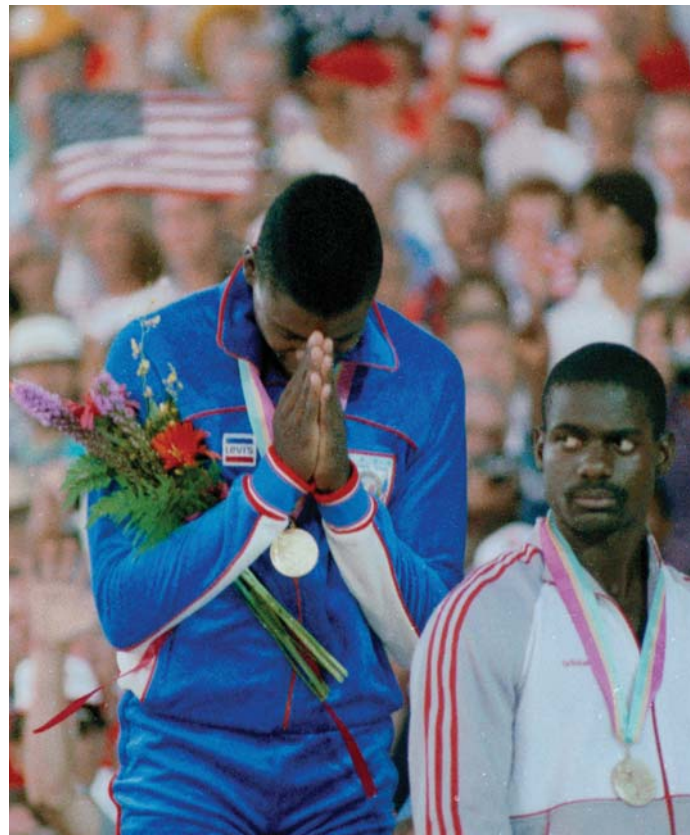
Each Olympics produces its outstanding figures, those who have captivated crowds and media through their sporting achievements or personalities or both. These will inevitably be the subject of heavy press coverage from the big agencies. However any reporter should be encouraged to try to get his own personal slant on the story, either by organising an interview or getting comments from other athletes and trainers.

For your audience the outstanding athlete or personality may be someone well-known in your country or region, but largely overlooked by the international media.

Sometimes the personality that captures the hearts of the media and the fans is not the high performer. One unlikely hero of the 2000 Sydney Games was Eric 'The Eel' Moussambani, 22, from Equatorial Guinea, who had only been swimming for six months. He briefly became the focus of world attention when he won his 100m freestyle heat after his two opponents were disqualified for false starts.

In 1988 Eddie 'The Eagle' Edwards became the first Briton to compete in Olympic ski-jumping when he entered the 1988 Calgary Games. Overweight, with thick glasses that fogged up and a technique that involved wildly waving arms, he came last but became a media star, at least in Britain.

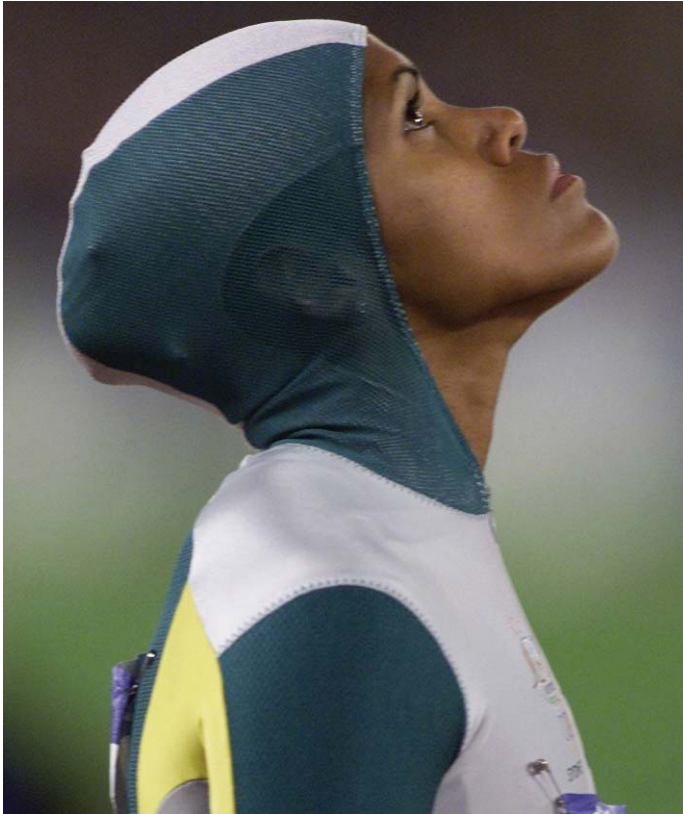
- **1968, Mexico City** – Bob Beamon of the U.S. sets a world long jump record of 8.90 metres that stands for 23 years.
- **1972, Munich** – American swimmer Mark Spitz wins seven gold medals.
- **1976, Montreal** – Romania's Nadia Comaneci becomes the first gymnast to score a perfect 10.



- **1984, Los Angeles** – American Carl Lewis matches the 1936 feat of compatriot Jesse Owens by winning the 100m, 200m, long jump and 4x100m relay.



- **1996, Atlanta** – Michael Johnson of the U.S. emerges as one of the all-time greats of Olympic athletics with a 200m-400m double that includes an astonishing 200m world record of 19.32 seconds.



- **2000, Sydney** – Cathy Freeman is selected to light the Olympic flame to symbolise Australia's desire to reconcile its white and Aboriginal populations. Ten days later she wins the 400m before an ecstatic 112,000 crowd.



- **2004, Athens** – Hicham El Guerrouj of Morocco wins the 1500m and 5000m double to match the feat of the great Paavo Nurmi of Finland in 1924.

Reporting the highlights

As in the case of the major stars of the Games, the big moments will receive blanket coverage from the agencies.

However if you are fortunate enough to witness one of the great moments in sport, such as Beamon's 1968 leap or Johnson's remarkable 200m, put your own personal stamp on the occasion, by describing every moment of the event, including the reactions of the athlete and the crowd.

Drugs at the Olympics

Enhancing performance through drugs dates back thousands of years. Ancient Greek athletes used mushrooms and Roman wrestlers took herb mixtures.

The temptation to use drugs to gain an unfair advantage has developed over the past half-century along with the money that success can bring. However the IOC and national and international bodies have been tightening testing for drugs. In the Athens 2004 Olympics a total of 24 athletes committed doping violations during or before the Games, double the previous record of 12 at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Several of the athletes were stripped of their medals.

The main doping classes:

- **Stimulants** – Substances that act directly on the central nervous system to speed up parts of the brain and body. Stimulants can increase alertness, reduce tiredness and increase competitiveness and aggressiveness. Examples of stimulants are amphetamines, cocaine, ephedrine, and mesocarb.
- **Narcotics** – Commonly known as painkillers because they can mask the effects of pain. Narcotics may also produce sensations of euphoria, invincibility and illusions of athletic prowess beyond athletic ability.
- **Anabolic steroids** – A natural or artificial version of substances such as the hormone testosterone, which makes muscles grow larger, and can speed recovery from hard training.

- **Beta-blockers** – Will stop an athlete from trembling, reducing blood pressure, slowing heart rate and having a calming effect. Useful for shooters and archers where a steady hand is needed.

- **Diuretics** – Increase the amount of urine passed from the body. Used illegally in sports with weight divisions, such as boxing and wrestling, for athletes having difficulty keeping their weight down to qualify.

Diuretics may also be used by some athletes to dilute their urine in an attempt to avoid detection of anabolic agents.

- **Hormones** – Including natural or artificial Human Growth Hormone (hGH) and Insulin-Like Growth Factor 1 (IGF-1) which can be used to reduce muscle cell breakdown and body fat.

- **Gene doping** – A synthetic gene is transferred into human cells to manipulate or trigger a specific response within the body which will improve athletic performance.

- **Chemical and physical manipulation** – The use of substances and methods, including masking agents, which alter, attempt to alter or may reasonably be expected to alter the integrity and validity of specimens collected in doping control.

- **Blood doping** – The process of artificially increasing the amount of red blood cells in the body in an attempt to improve performance. In past years an athlete would take out a unit of blood, store it, then return it to the body after three weeks, when the body has naturally replaced the loss. The athlete received a sudden boost in blood supply, usually just before a big event.

Scientists have developed a synthetic version of a protein produced by the kidneys, erythropoietin, or EPO for short. It stimulates the production of red blood cells.

Breaking news stories

At some point at most Olympic Games, a major 'hard' news story will break that will jump from the sports pages to the front page, and may run for days. Some may have little to do with sport, though they are likely to have some connection with the Olympics as a major focus of world attention. Such stories can break when you least expect it, often late at night, when it is difficult to reach people.

In 1972 in Munich it was the seizing of Israeli athletes by Palestinian guerrillas.

In Seoul in 1988 it was a doping scandal involving Canada's Ben Johnson after he had won the 100m.

In 1996 a bomb in Atlanta during the Games killed two people and injured over 100.

In Athens, Greece's top two athletes withdrew from the Olympics after missing compulsory drug tests before being involved in a mystery motorcycle crash. The story ran for a week as Olympic officials tried to question them.

When these big stories break, the reporter needs to switch mentally from the relative freedom offered by sports writing to the tighter disciplines of straight news reporting. The five W's of journalism – Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How? – must be answered in the first two paragraphs.

Above all, sourcing is all-important. For an agency or broadcast journalist covering breaking news, it is crucial to report only what you know.





Feature, off-beat, human interest, humorous stories

These so-called 'soft' stories provide a valuable balance to the hard news of sports event coverage and breaking stories. They can add depth and colour, and sometimes humour, to an often one-dimensional portrait of an athlete who has devoted most of his or her life to training by pointing up sacrifices endured and hardships and adversity overcome.

Soft stories offer more opportunity for imagination and creativity, but also require some skill in picking an unusual angle that will lead into the story, often in a roundabout way, and encourage the reader to read on. They can be fun to write and should be fun to read.

The Olympics, bringing together thousands of athletes from widely diverse backgrounds and cultures, offer a multitude of such story opportunities. Reporters just need to keep their eyes and ears open.

Some examples from recent Olympics:

Sydney – At 13 years and six months, Fathimath Fariha is the youngest athlete at the Sydney Olympics. Her age doesn't worry the diminutive swimmer, but then there's the sprawling Olympic Village – bigger in area than her hometown, Male, capital of the Maldives.

'I am very small and I fear I may get lost,' said Fathimath, who weighs just 39 kilos (86 pounds). 'This is so big and so green. Sometimes I think I am dreaming.'

Sydney – Fenella Ng is not your average Olympian.

The Hong Kong rower has already competed in two Games as a swimmer, she is a chemical engineer and is about to finish a masters degree in finance.

Athens – Their athletes are so poor they train in bare feet. When they get together to compete on a crushed coral track, they have to share running shoes.

Now, with sparkling red spikes donated by Nike and a welcome from the world that blew them away, Kakianako Nariki and Kaitinano Mwemweata from Kiribati already have their sights set on Beijing.

Shanghai – By kindergarten, Yao Ming was already so tall he was paying adult bus fares. In first grade, he was as big as his teacher, and by the age of 13, at nearly two metres tall, he was described as 'a crane towering among chickens'.

Now 18 years old and 2.25 metres tall (7 ft 4.6 inches), the youngest and tallest member of China's national team hopes to slam-dunk his country into the later rounds of the basketball competition at the Sydney Olympics.

Sydney – Alcoholic Charlie has trouble remembering the day, but as he sits around a smouldering fire in Sydney's Aboriginal ghetto he knows black Australia has a date with destiny when Cathy Freeman runs the Olympic 400 metre final.

'I want to see Cathy run,' says Charlie, who will only give his first name. 'She runs for all of us black fellas,' he says, taking another swig from his bottle of beer.





Unusual sports and events

Keep an eye out for unusual sports and events that will be unfamiliar to your readers. Sometimes just describing them can make interesting and amusing reports.

Some examples:

Sydney – There are not too many Olympic sports where a man who is beaten at the tape to a gold medal dances with joy over his silver and where a podium of three nationalities contains three bosom friends. But triathlon is not like any other sport.

Athens – A giant man placing his blue boots in the centre of a yellow mat would be a strange sight to the uninitiated.

But to American Rulon Gardner, the symbolism was huge. The Greco-Roman wrestler did much to make his once obscure sport popular by beating the long-invincible Russian Alexander Karelin at the Sydney Olympics four years ago and by displaying an articulate personality at odds with wrestling's image.

Athens – Wearing their elegant blazers, polished boots and flawless black hats, the equestrian competitors in Athens exude an air of 19th century chivalry and civility that seems to perfectly embody the Olympic ideal.

Especially the three-day eventers who speak of their contest as a celebration of sportsmanship, the epitome of fair play where they say there is an altruistic readiness to help and support each other in a way that transcends national boundaries.

But when gold medals are at stake it appears the genteel world is just a facade.

Sydney – There is no sport at the Sydney Olympics quite like beach volleyball. The competitors are the grooviest of all the athletes in Sydney. There's no helmets and goggles here, just sun-glasses and bandanas.

Winter Olympics

A few key points to note:

- Drugs stories can be as likely to crop up as at the Summer Games, especially in endurance events such as Nordic skiing.
- Don't dismiss events such as curling or luge, which may be less well known to your readers. There is always a story somewhere.
- Get up early and wrap up warm. Many of the events take place in the morning when the snow is at its best.
- Exceptions to this include figure skating and short track speed skating where late finishes – and controversy – are commonplace.
- Be familiar with scoring systems in ski jumping and figure skating which are not straightforward.
- Watch out for the glorious under-achievers – e.g. Eddie the Eagle and a bobsleigh team from Jamaica, which eventually starred in a feature film.



Tips for the Olympics reporter

- Research on the internet for background, rules of the sports, previous results.
- Don't stay glued to your friends – go out of your way to meet new people.
- Get feedback from your desk every day.
- Send your story ideas and travel plans every day.
- Check what your competition is up to.
- Pace yourself – keep the energy flowing right through to the end of the job.
- Plan ahead – spend some time thinking about and organising what you will do tomorrow, not just today.
- Think laterally to tease out the angles no one else has thought of.
- Bring plenty of lapel pins and other little mementos from home, particularly sports organisations, to give to helpful officials and guides.
- Go to the venues you will be covering soon after your arrival in the city to get to know the lay-out of the place, meet the people who are running the press centre, see where you will be sitting and how much desk space you will have, check communication lines and see how it will all work.
- On competition/match days make sure you leave plenty of time – more than you think you'll need - to get to the venue.
- Get there well ahead of the start/kick-off time to make sure your communications are working, so you have time to do something about it if they are not.
- Check communications (phone lines, computer, laptop), send test messages and make check call to Desk.
- Try not to 'lose it' if your computer/lap-top crashes or other hitches occur when you're under pressure. Screaming abuse rather than Zen-like calm acceptance may be the instinctive reaction but losing your temper won't help – easier said than done.
- Stay healthy, beware of the sun and the cold, eat and sleep well.
- The Olympics are a great adventure, a ripping yarn – enjoy!

Photo credits:

Cover: Gianna Angelopoulos, president of the Athens 2004 organising committee, holds a torch with the Olympic Flame in Athens' Panathinaiko stadium, March 31, 2004. REUTERS/Yannis Behrakis

Page 4: Performers hold banners during the one-year countdown celebrations for the Beijing Olympic Games, Tiananmen Square, August 8, 2007. REUTERS/David Gray

Page 7: Russia's Marat Safin holds aloft the trophy after he defeated Australia's Lleyton Hewitt in the men's singles final at the Australian Open tennis championship, January 30, 2005. REUTERS/David Gray

Page 9: Australia's Ian Thorpe swims his 400m freestyle final at the world swimming championships in Barcelona, July 20, 2003. REUTERS/Albert Gea

Page 10: Chicago Cubs outfielder Alfonso Soriano speaks to reporters at Wrigley Field in Chicago, November 30, 2006. REUTERS/Joshua Lott

Page 11: Leeds United and England's Alan Smith is surrounded by journalists during a press conference at Burnham Beeches, October 9, 2002. REUTERS/Darren Staples

Page 12: Real Madrid's Ronaldo celebrates scoring against Real Sociedad during Spanish first division match in Madrid, April 8, 2006. REUTERS/Susana Vera

Bode Miller of the U.S. passes a gate during the downhill leg of the men's Olympic combined race at the Torino Winter Olympic Games in Sestriere, Italy, February 14, 2006. REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay

Page 13: Jim Courier curses a blimp flying overhead that distracted him during his Davis Cup match in Massachusetts, July 16, 1999. REUTERS/Brian Snyder

Page 14: Five-time Olympic champion Ian Thorpe of Australia gives a statement during a news conference in Melbourne, April 1, 2007. REUTERS/Wolfgang Rattay

Page 17: Sumo wrestler throws ceremonial salt during Grand Sumo Las Vegas tournament, October 9, 2005. REUTERS/Steve Marcus

Page 18: A Rwandan child cheers his team during match against Congo in the Africa Nations Cup in Bizerte, Tunisia, February 1, 2004. REUTERS/Radu Sigheti

Page 19: Russian Alexei Nemov tries to calm booing crowd during horizontal bar exercise at Athens Olympics gymnastics, August 23, 2004. REUTERS/Jeff J Mitchell

A crew member of challenger team Shosholozo of South Africa prepares to round the top mark during the second match race of the Marseille Louis Vuitton Cup in southern France, September 10, 2004. REUTERS/Jean-Paul Pelissier

Page 20: France's Zinedine Zidane walks away after fouling Italy's Marco Materazzi during their World Cup final soccer match in Berlin, July 9, 2006. REUTERS/Dylan Martinez

Page 23: Marion Jones sheds tears as she speaks to the media after leaving the U.S. Federal Courthouse, New York, October 5, 2007. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Page 25: Nelson Mandela speaks after being conferred with an Honorary Doctorate in Galway, Ireland, June 20, 2003. REUTERS/Paul McErlane

Page 27: An explosives expert police officer stands in front of the Olympic rings at Athens' Olympic Canoe/Kayak slalom centre, July 29, 2004. REUTERS/Yiorgos Karahalidis

Page 28: Fireworks explode over the Olympic stadium during the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympic Games, August 13, 2004

Page 31: Photographers cast shadows as Spain's Jordi Sangra competes in final race of men's C1 canoe single at the Athens Olympic Games, August 18, 2004. REUTERS/Damir Sagolj

Page 32: Carl Lewis prays after being presented his gold medal for winning the 100m sprint at the Los Angeles Olympic Games, August 4, 1984. REUTERS/Andy Clark

Page 33: Michael Johnson celebrates after breaking world record in 200m finals at the Atlanta Olympic Games, August 1, 1996. REUTERS/Mike Blake

Page 35: Australia's Cathy Freeman prepares to run the 400m final at the Sydney Olympic Games, September 25, 2000. REUTERS/Mark Baker

Page 35: Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj gestures as he celebrates winning the men's 5000 meters final at the Athens Olympic Games, August 28, 2004. REUTERS/Gary Hershorn REUTERS

Page 36: Canada's Ben Johnson wins gold medal in 100m sprint in Seoul, September 12, 1988. REUTERS/Gary Hershorn

Page 39: China's Yao Ming attempts to slam dunk during the men's basketball quarter-final at the Athens Olympic Games, August 26, 2004. REUTERS/Adrees Latif

Page 40: A shadow of a member of the Australian volleyball team smashes the ball over the net during a practice session during the Sydney Olympic Games, September 13, 2000. REUTERS/Kieran Doherty

Page 41: Japanese's Madoka Harada struggles in the track during an official women luge training run for the Torino Winter Olympic Games, February 10, 2006. REUTERS/Jean-Paul Pelissier

Notes

Notes

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