

# **THE RECONSTRUCTION OF SPORT BY TELEVISION**

**Paper prepared for the  
Television in Transition Conference  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Cambridge, Ma. May 2-4 2003**

**Gilad Weingarten. Ph.D**

*Zinman College for Physical Education and Sport Sciences  
Wingate Institute, Israel*

## **Introduction**

As a result of its abiding symbiotic relationships with television, competitive sport undergoes a substantial process of accelerated change. As a matter of fact it is almost impossible to find, nowadays, a single sport which has not been altered to better fit the subtle and direct demands imposed by television.

Such development, we must understand, could not have occurred without the parallel "changing of the guards" trend that took place in recent years and as a result of which the curriculum vitas of the present international, national and local sport leadership is by far richer in business and media qualifications than idealism or sport involvement, compared to the past.

The variety of changes in sports, instigated by television, may be classified in two main categories, 1.rule modifications, 2.organization and conduct. Regardless of its nature, the motivation energizing most changes was to appear better and more often on the screen in order to attract a wider, more variable spectatorship, potential sponsors and "juicier" financial contracts. Both pace and scope of change are

unprecedented in the history of modern sport and accommodate the matrimonial bond of common interests evidenced between sport and television in recent decades.

The world of sport, so conservative and stable in the not too far past, has turned suddenly into a dynamic and restless domain, continuously pursuing new ways and means to affirm and perpetuate its status as the greatest and most popular show on planet Earth.

Indeed, recent statistics indicate that as much as 65%-70% of the 2002 yearly total of 25-30 billion\$ global sponsorship was directed at sport and that the television "viewer- hour" index of the Sydney-2000 games and the recent Soccer world championships approximated an unprecedented record of 35 billions each.

Some sports have changed more rapidly and radically than others, generally in reverse order to their world wide and/or local popularity. For example sports such as Soccer, American football, Baseball, Basketball or Golf underwent far lesser modifications compared to Volleyball, Water polo, European handball, Gymnastics, Weight lifting or Swimming. At this point, specific changes executed in several sports will be presented and discussed to illustrate what has been done to better fit the screen.

### Gymnastics

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>
<b>Duration</b>	Competition-very long process	Shorter by over 50%
<b>Organization and conduct</b>	<p>Olympics: tedious, repetitious and monotonous- (compulsory exercises especially)</p> <p>Team score: sum of best 5 performances of 6)</p> <p>One color uniform and apparatus</p>	<p>No compulsory, only optional exercises</p> <p>substantial bonuses given for virtuosity and originality</p> <p>Team scores: sum of best 4 performances of 5 (6 members per team)</p> <p>New version competitions—short, interesting, tactical (mixed competition, single apparatus championship, "joker" etc)</p> <p>A variety of colors allowed in uniform and apparatus</p> <p>Advertisements allowed on apparatus</p> <p>New apparatus design enabling new movements( Jumps)</p>
<b>Officiating</b>	<p>Subjective, inconspicuous, often scandalous</p> <p>Process too long</p>	<p>Subjective, conspicuous, personally identified</p> <p>Fully computerized, time limit imposed (90 sec.)</p> <p>Officials- famous past gymnasts</p>
<b>Cooperation with Television</b>	None	<p>Coordination committee (FIG-T.V.)</p> <p>Head official directly connected to T.V. producers for timing</p>

## Judo

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>
<b>Dynamics and conduct</b>	<p>Competition often passive and static</p> <p>Defensive and offensive maneuvers of equal importance</p> <p>Longer grounding time (30 sec. = ipon)</p> <p>Mat size (100m<sup>2</sup>)= less action</p> <p>Traditional scoring system</p>	<p>Encourage offensive over defensive play</p> <p>Negative score for passive conduct (sometimes disqualification)</p> <p>Shorter grounding time (25 sec.= ipon)</p> <p>Mat size (64m<sup>2</sup>) = frequent action</p> <p>Simpler scoring system (koka=3, yuko=5, vazari=7, ipon=10)</p>
<b>Uniform</b>	White only	White and blue - easier identification of competitors

### Weight lifting

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>
<b>Competition duration and dynamics</b>	<p>Long, too many dead moments</p> <p>3 min. allowed for lift</p> <p>10 weight categories</p> <p>National anthem played in all ceremonies</p> <p>Presentation of participants and officials - part of competition</p> <p>4<sup>th</sup> attempt allowed for world record</p>	<p>Shorter, more dynamic</p> <p>1 min. allowed for lift</p> <p>8 weight categories</p> <p>National anthem played only in teams award ceremony</p> <p>Presentation of participants and officials during 10 min. of warm-up</p> <p>4<sup>th</sup> attempt not allowed for world record</p>
<b>Organization</b>	<p>Divisions "A" and "B" include 12 lifters each</p> <p>No women competition</p>	<p>Division "A" includes 8-10 best lifters and televised</p> <p>Women competition</p>

## Swimming

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>
<b>Competition</b>	<p>Long , too many dead moments</p> <p>Climax followed by anticlimax</p> <p>Long award ceremonies</p>	<p>Short and condensed</p> <p>From climax to climax</p> <p>Award ceremonies shorter and combined</p>
<b>Dynamics and conduct</b>	<p>Final A (1-8) followed by final B (9-16)</p> <p>No semi-finals</p> <p>One false start allowed</p>	<p>Final –A only</p> <p>Semi finals up to 400m.</p> <p>Inclusion of 50 meters short sprints.</p> <p>Single start only-no false start allowed</p>
<b>Time table</b>	<p>Dictated by professional interests and priorities</p>	<p>Dictated by T.V. interests and priorities</p>
<b>Spectators involvement</b>	<p>None</p> <p>under water swimming- too long</p>	<p>Interviews with swimmers following victories</p> <p>Limiting under water swimming</p> <p>Greater exposure to under- water photography</p>

## Volleyball

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Past</b>	<b>Present</b>
<b>Competition time</b>	Too long (average 3 hrs.) Indefinite time makes T.V. planning impossible	Games much shorter (average 90min)= better T.V. panning
<b>Scoring method</b>	Only serving team can score points Too complicated for lay audience 15 (long) points in all sets set	Each ball scores points Less complicated for lay audience 25 (short) points per set 5 <sup>th</sup> set = 15 points
<b>Dynamics and conduct</b>	Volleys often too short Many interruptions of game Advantage given to offensive play  Serve can not touch net Only upper body for ball contact  Coach very passive during game  White ball only  Very strict in ball "carrying" calls	Longer volleys Game flow Advantage given to defensive play  Smaller air pressure in ball Serve may touch net Can use lower body (legs) for ball save  Coach very active during game  Colorful ball allowed "Libero" inclusion to assist defense  Leniency in ball "carrying" calls
<b>Time outs</b>	2 per coach per set No microphones allowed in time outs	2 T.V. time outs per set (8th, 15th points) and 1 per coach, Microphone allowed and imposed in time outs

## **Discussion**

These changes represent the current reshaping wave which has swept all spectator-sports with no exception. All designed and targeted to make sport more dynamic, dramatic, interesting, colorful, timely defined, simple and appealing to variety of audiences, secure higher television ratings and...prevent zapping.

Of all sports, volleyball, most probably, underwent the most extreme changes in both rules and organization since its older version was incongruous with the majority of the demands and principles set forth by commercial television. On top of that, the threat imposed upon it by Beach Volleyball, the new television spectacle, served as a catalyst. The international volleyball leadership headed by President Ruben Acosta, being aware of the forthcoming catastrophe, had to act both promptly and aggressively to rescue the game from obscurity. Indeed, what has happened to the game of volleyball in the last few years in terms of popularity, international acclaim and affluence may be legitimately termed: resurrection from clinical death. The link between international volleyball and television, at present, brings unprecedented multimillion annual T.V. contracts making this game one of the wealthiest sports.

Even traditional sports such as judo had to find ways to revive themselves, often sacrificing some elements of tradition and philosophy. Cardinal Olympic Sports such as Track and Field, gymnastics, swimming and weight lifting had to cut many lose ends and dead moments, often at the expense of professional principles. Commercial television, we must realize, does not force itself brutally upon a sport to reconstruct and reshape it merely hints: if you don't you will not appear on the screen but should you do comply we will both benefit a great deal.

Not too long ago the rules and the organization of sport served first and foremost the personal, professional and safety needs of the competitors, nowadays it must surrender to a totally different set of aims and objectives the most important of which is to make sure television loves you .....