

Chicago gets caught in middle of Olympic rift

COPENHAGEN — That Rio won the 2016 Summer Games is easily understandable.

The International Olympic Committee fancies itself a force in global affairs. As in the case of breaking Olympic ground by giving the 2008 Olympics to China, the world's most populous country, Friday's vote was a chance for the IOC to say that by giving the first Olympics to South America it will have aided the development of Brazil, the most populous country on the continent.

That Chicago was eliminated in the first round, as shocking as it seemed, also was surprisingly understandable, given the IOC's Byzantine internal politics, its fractious relationship with the country whose companies have been its cash cow and the way the host-city election system is structured.



Philip Hersh
On the Olympics

Since the IOC narrowed the 2016 field from seven to four finalists 16 months ago, it has been apparent that Chicago's biggest challenge would be surviving the first round in what was expected to be a very close election.

Chicago was the only candidate without a significant regional constituency. And it was working to overcome years of IOC members' ill feeling toward the U.S. Olympic Committee, which intensified in the past year.

NBC Sports chairman Dick Ebersol, whose company paid \$5.7 billion for Olympic TV rights from 2000 through 2012, placed the blame squarely on the USOC.

"This was the IOC membership saying to the USOC there will be no more domestic Olympics until you join the Olympic movement," Ebersol told me early Saturday morning, after he had talked with many leading members. "Chicago never had a chance, it turns out."

Chicago failed — miserably, it would seem at a cursory glance — for some of the same reasons New York lost in the second of five

rounds of voting for the 2012 Summer Games. It also failed out of a naivete that having what may have been the best bid was good enough.

"We (North Americans) kind of think if you've got the best bid, the world will recognize that, and these decisions are made solely on the merits of the bid. Well, not solely," said veteran IOC member Richard Pound of Canada.

The issue isn't that Rio earned what Ebersol called a "spectacular and deserved victory." It was Chicago's early departure after long having been considered the favorite.

"Good for Rio, very disappointing for Chicago," said IOC member Kevan Gosper of Australia. "They deserved much better."

Conversations with IOC members and other Olympic officials Friday produced a number of reasons factoring into the second straight slap in the face at a U.S. bid city.

■ Even with an intense USOC international relations effort after New York's expected defeat four years ago, the United States is not a player in international sports politics. President Barack Obama's impressive international relations effort as a speaker in Chicago's final presentation could not make up for the nation's lack of influence in the Olympic arena.

"The United States, within the Olympic movement, hasn't engaged as well as we could have for a long time," said Bob Ctvrtlik, who filled a newly created position, USOC vice president for international relations, following the New York defeat.

"This (defeat) isn't just on the merits. I don't think it's anti-American. Maybe we still don't have the horsepower to do some of the politicking within the movement."

■ The USOC, in its habitual revolving-door leadership mode at the start of New York's bid, went right back into that position in March, when its board unceremoniously dumped chief executive Jim Scherr in favor of Stephanie Streeter.

IOC member Denis Oswald of Switzerland cited the USOC instability as a problem and said it was his impression "this was a defeat for the USOC, not for Chicago."



President Jacques Rogge, seated, and the International Olympic Committee awarded the first Olympics to South America on Friday in Copenhagen. MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

"It was clear that between the USOC and Chicago there were differences," Oswald said. "Although everybody tried to look united, it was clear it was not."

■ The apparent truce between the IOC and the USOC in the acrimonious negotiations over revenue-sharing didn't hold. And the USOC's decision to go forward with its own TV network despite IOC warnings to desist remained an irritant even when the USOC put its tail between its legs and backed off.

"The colleagues who asked me, I told, 'I would like you to forget about this, (that) we will try to find a solution, and we should judge Chicago based on the quality of its bid,'" Oswald said. "But everyone has a different approach, and I cannot say this has not played a role for a number of people."

Those words may be self-serving. Oswald has been on the IOC committee trying to get the USOC to give up some of the revenue it gets from U.S. TV broadcast rights and global IOC sponsorships, and he described former USOC chairman Peter Ueberroth as arrogant for stonewalling the negotiations.

"The truce might have held if not for the network thing," Ebersol said. "It made IOC members suspicious the USOC was just going to keep all the sponsorship money and use it for the network."

■ Any North American city lacks a natural constituency in an IOC dominated by Europeans, especially in a race where there was a South American and European candidate.

Chicago got 18 votes in the first round, when there were only four North Americans voting — two from Canada and two from Mexico, the latter certainly more inclined to align with their Latin cousins.

Tokyo had 22 votes in the first round, Rio 26 and Madrid 28. In the next two rounds, nearly all the eliminated cities' votes went to Rio, allowing it to rout Madrid 66-32 in the decisive round.

Some members may have been so convinced Chicago would advance that they initially gave another city what Swiss IOC member Rene Fasel called "sympathy votes."

"(Chicago) going out in first round, that was just an accident," Fasel said. "I expected to have a different vote in the end. If Chicago is against Rio, it will be much closer."

■ Rather than an accident, it was clever electioneering by Brazil that eliminated Chicago early.

"When you look at the margin, it was clear there was an effort to make sure Rio got this, and the only meaningful threat to Rio would have been Chicago, so all the friends of Rio were urged to try and make sure Chicago didn't get into that position," Pound said. "I've got to say I was surprised nevertheless that it was a first-round loss."

You can read all these explanations, shake your head and be forced to fall back on the reasoning of poet Emily Dickinson, who wrote that much madness makes divinest sense to a discerning eye.

Or rely on the impression of Norway's Gerhard Heiberg, long a cool voice of reason within the IOC.

"I am very sad, I am very sorry," Heiberg said of Chicago's early exit. "This should not have happened. This was, I can't say a wrong decision, but it was not a right decision."

Yet not an unexpected one.

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