

New gold dream

Whatever Beijing brings, the Vancouver Olympics could be Canada's finest hour. In medals, and — if Keith Pelley gets it right — in digital-era broadcasting

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It was nothing planned. It just sort of happened. One of the people at the table in Hy's Steakhouse boasted that he could identify a California Cabernet with just a drop on his palate. Keith Pelley made it happen. He flagged a waiter and ordered an array of wines. They were brought out so that only the waiter knew the American from the French. And for a few moments, the Games of the XXI Winter Olympiad were underway.

Okay, so wine-tasting isn't an Olympic event, and it was January 2008, about 750 days away from opening ceremonies. The point is that Keith Pelley was thinking Olympics - just what you'd expect of the freshly appointed president of the CTVglobemedia-Rogers Media consortium that will produce the Canadian broadcast of the Winter Games from Vancouver and Whistler. The others at the table were on Pelley's bandwidth, including Alon Marcovici, president of the consortium's digital and research division, and members of his staff. This meeting was a get-acquainted session, the wine-tasting an impromptu, competitive component.

When Pelley was recruited for this job last year, he knew where his learning curve would be steepest: Online. That's what had changed most since he went from the presidency of TSN, Canada's No. 1 sports network, to be president and CEO of the CFL's Toronto Argonauts in 2004. Then again, everyone was learning, because the digital world was, is and will be changing right through the Games - whether it's the technology, the public's ability to access it, or corporations' success at profiting from it.

For the group at the table, this potential was heady stuff. "Vancouver will be the first digital Olympics," Marcovici declared. "By 2010 the digital natives, the Gen-Yers, will out-number the digital immigrants, the Baby Boomers." Pelley, too old to be a native, recognized the challenge: A television broadcast of a sports event is like wine-tasting; whether it's going from one camera to another or sorting out Cabernets, it's making educated guesses, drawing on history. Digitizing the Olympics, having Canadians watch it on 12-inch and 2-inch screens, was going to require a vision of the future. "These Olympics will make history and so will we," he told the group. "We'll set the standards for every Olympics to come."

MAYBE YOU'VE SEEN Keith Pelley on TSN's "Off the Record" talk show. If you haven't, take it from someone (this writer) who has sat across from him: The three other panelists and the host are instantly transformed from contributors to a dialogue to an audience for a monologue. He has all the answers to every question and would run

laps around the set if they let him.

Don't mistake Pelley for a standard-issue bloviator. No, when he's on, he's always on message. He's there representing his office. He gained profile as an executive at TSN and he announced the sports network's skyrocketing growth wherever a microphone was on. Most recently as the president of the Argonauts, Pelley beat the drum for a listing franchise that under his stewardship won the Grey Cup in 2004 and hosted the event last year. Meet him and you're bound to come away with one impression: He's a compact bundle of optimism. His hope and confidence actually suffer some shrinkage on TV, even on a 52-inch screen with the volume up to 10.

It seems fitting that Pelley landed the Olympic post for the CTV-Rogers consortium. By any measure, Pelley's optimism is Olympian in scale. So is his task of heading up Canadian licensed media for both the Vancouver Games and the 2012 Summer Games in London. In Vancouver, the consortium will also serve as host broadcaster for hockey, figure skating and curling, which means it will provide the technical support that will take images of these events to viewers around the world. The stakes include hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue, the largest audiences in Canadian television history, and hundreds of images that will be forever burned into the national collective memory.

Catching up with Pelley in early April, he's still busy recruiting talent, about two hires a week. His deadline for a production schedule is looming. His daybook, that bulging catalogue of scheduled enthusiasms, has left an hour free around lunch on a Thursday, an interlude while he waits for preliminary reports from his broadcast production chief Rick Chisholm, who is scouting camera locations and sites for anchors in Whistler. He shuts the door to his office at CTVglobemedia's suburban Toronto headquarters and goes to online coverage of the first round of the Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Ga. "The network coverage doesn't start until late afternoon," he says, "but you can catch everything online. It used to be a young person's game, digital and online. Not anymore. And by 2010, people will be even more digitally savvy. Already, my father in his mid-70s is watching video on YouTube."

Even with one eye on Augusta, there's no chance Pelley would choose this moment to display previously hidden skills of understatement. "The Games in Vancouver will be a defining moment," he says. "Canada won more medals than ever before at the last winter Games [in Turin], just one less than the U.S. There's a good chance we'll win more medals than any nation."

Pelley weaves this scenario without solicitation. It's already well-practiced: For a frantically transcribing reporter now, for a studio full of the true-believers/production staffers earlier, for boardrooms lined with rights-holding advertisers and corporate partners like Coca-Cola and Samsung, in the months to come. CTV-Rogers would be guaranteed a profit if they had a buck for every time Pelley called his job "a challenge but, more than that, a great opportunity."

Asked what will constitute success, Pelley doesn't cite ratings numbers or dollar values. He frames it like a broadcast director or producer would, with timelines. "Our job isn't a 17-day broadcast," he says. "It starts with our pre-Olympic coverage in January of next year. We'll be launching our official Olympic website at the same time. We want our top athletes to be household names by the time Vancouver rolls around. We want to change the way Canadians recognize our Olympic athletes." This is, however, just the point of entry for Pelley's ambitions. "We want every second of every event available to the viewers," he says. "We have to come up with a plan that represents a watershed moment in broadcasting."

Pelley is off and running. The broad strokes: If sports on Canadian television looks the same to you in the spring of 2010 or if you think of sports the same way, he will have failed. He doesn't just want to change the way that the Olympics are broadcast; he wants every member of the Canadian audience to change, too.

THE OLYMPIC MOTTO distills optimism: Citius, Altius, Fortius. Faster, higher, stronger. The three words capture the unflagging striving of athletes, but they also capture the nature of the Games themselves. The modern Olympics started as little more than a gentlemen's track meet in Athens back in 1896, but over the second half of the 20th century the International Olympic Committee was patently obsessed with growth. Every four years, the Games seemed to get bigger, more grandiose, farther reaching.

In the field of broadcasting nothing went up Citius than rights to the Olympics. CBS paid a little more than half a million dollars for the U.S. rights to the 1960 Summer Games in Rome; NBC will pay \$1.18 billion for 2012 Summer Games in London. The Winter Games are considered the lesser of the Olympics but they too have followed a similar track. That said, for much of the past decade, it looked like the Olympics' grip on the networks' audiences and advertisers was loosening. North American ratings plunged, albeit with extenuating circumstances - starting with 1998, three of four consecutive Games presented broadcasters in the western hemisphere with time-zone-induced headaches. Dick Ebersol, the supposed visionary at NBC, came up with a cock-eyed solution, running every bit of programming on tape-delay, edited and presented like a schmaltzy soap-opera suitable for the Hallmark network. It was an aesthetic and business failure. Other media outlets gleefully announced results - sniper fire couldn't have picked off viewers more effectively. Those who couldn't stand the suspense went to the Internet for results. NBC's ratings plummeted in 2000 and advertisers were given make-goods when the network didn't deliver as pledged. The nadir of Ebersol's flat-earth prescience: According to the New York Times, he "played down the impact of the Internet on viewing habits and insisted that he would not put live video on his website until it was possible to wall off countries and sell online rights by country the way TV rights are sold."

CBC, the perennial Canadian rights holder, fared better critically but not commercially. It's assumed that in 2004, when the Summer Games were in Athens, it took a loss. Still, when it came to the Canadian rights for the Vancouver Games, CBC was already committed to broadcasting the Beijing Games, and conventional wisdom was that they would do likewise in 2010. The first rumble that CTV might enter the bidding was a surprise. That surprise was compounded by a rumour that

CTVglobemedia (then Bell Globemedia) was negotiating a partnership with Rogers, a marriage unintentionally forced by the IOC. "We knew that the IOC was going to be selling a basket of rights," CTV vice-president Rick Brace says. "We knew we'd have to have as many of those platforms covered as possible for a successful bid. And to cover them we recognized that we had to go beyond our walls." It was CTV president Ivan Fecan who knocked on Ted Rogers's door. "Ivan has a good relationship with Ted and he was able to show the potential of working together on the Games," Brace says. "After that it was simply a matter of hammering out details, which were finalized not long before the bidding."

The CBC's worst fears were realized in early 2005, when the IOC approved CTV-Rogers' bid of \$93 million for 2010, and then threw in the 2012 Summer Games in London for more than \$60 million. CTV promptly announced its plans for 22 hours of coverage daily on the main network, including all major events and finals. This, however, only hinted at the ambitions of the consortium. CTVglobemedia controls CTV, TSN, CTV Newsnet, the Biography Channel, OLN, and, on the French side, RDS (TSN's French-language cousin) and sports-headline network RIS.

CTV also bought CHUM after winning the Olympic bid. Meanwhile, Rogers owns Sportsnet, OMNI, City-TV and a sprawling network of radio stations. With a few independents joining in - among them APTN (the Aboriginal People's Television Network) and ATN (the Asian Television Network) - it might have been simpler not to list those channels on board but rather point to those shut out, namely CBC.

The Olympics had been shipped around the world but never had one nation planned to dedicate so many networks to the coverage of an event. Were CTVglobemedia and Rogers acting upon hubris or irrational exuberance? How to make a mixed marriage work in broadcasting an event trending downwards? CTV's Brace had an answer. He brought in Pelley for what he calls, "Keith's amazing ability to make the trains run on time."

WITH THE 2010 Winter Games, Keith Pelley's getting a second chance at a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Back in 1988, Pelley was working in TSN's newsroom only a few years removed from Ryerson's Radio and Television Arts program, having worked his way up from editorial assistant to a producer on the show SportsDesk. Brace, then a TSN honcho,

offered Pelley a lead role in the production of the Calgary Olympics. To take it, however, Pelley was going to have to give up his day job and have no guarantee that it would be there when he returned. He opted to pass. "I've always envied those who went," Pelley says.

In retrospect, his decision was neither the career-maker nor career-breaker he thought it to be. Pelley would still wind up climbing the broadcasting ladder two rungs at a time. "Keith picks things up incredibly quickly," says production chief Chisholm. "I remember working with Keith at TSN on his first CFL truck [on-site production from a trailer parked outside a stadium]. It was the most frantic production ever and I'd never seen anyone so wired as Keith. By the third game, though, Keith was the best director I ever worked with." In 1995, having risen to senior producer, Pelley was recruited by Fox Network to work its NFL and NHL broadcasts. He returned to TSN as vice-president in 1997. Four years later he had the corner office - from the kid who ran for coffee to the presidency in 15 years.

Pelley's move to the Argonauts in 2004 was curious to some. The CFL franchise was adrift after a succession of clueless owners and executives. Yet the team won a Grey Cup in Pelley's first full season. Though he maintains today that he could have been happy staying on with the team, he likely felt he had accomplished his mission, turning around the franchise, when he helped engineer the return of the Grey Cup game to Toronto last fall. When he left, the Argos hired two people to replace him.

Meanwhile, from the moment CTV-Rogers won the bid for the Vancouver Games, Pelley's name topped Brace's list. "Keith could have headed up any number of departments," Brace says. "It could have been production, marketing, promotion - almost any category that you could come up with his name would either be clearly at the top or beside other qualified executives." Though Pelley says he "never saw it coming," he had to see it the same way.

A ROOTING INTEREST drives ratings and Pelley's convinced that with the Vancouver Games, Canadians will have more chances than ever before to cheer for their own. "Over the past three winters, we've surged past the U.S. in World Cup podium finishes and we're competing with the Germans for the top spot," he says. "It's realistic to project we'll come away with 30 to 35 medals."

Even something below those projected numbers, closer to Canada's 24-medal haul from Turin, would be inspirational compared to the nation's performance as host in 1988: no gold, two silvers and three bronzes. In fairness, there will be more events than in Calgary - many of them ratings winners for programmers, too. "We've seen them bring in some spectacular, visually compelling events, like aerials and moguls and the half pipe, that make great television and draw in young viewers," Pelley says.

Pelley acknowledges the logistics are daunting. "We haven't finalized our production staff yet but it's going to be between 600 and 700," he says. Olympics present unique challenges, but he's confident. "Canadians do winter sports better than anybody," he says. "We just have more practice at it. No one else can put on a hockey production like we do. Same with curling. There has never been a Winter Games that looked as good as Vancouver will."

And none has ever been promoted like Vancouver, one of the benefits of CTV-Rogers' cluster of networks and media outlets. Pelley says fragmentation, previously viewed as a threat, can be turned into an advantage if you control enough of the fragments. More than that, the message can be tailored to the specialty-channel viewership. "Going into the Games, more Canadians will know about our athletes than ever before," he says. "We can produce pieces for the CTV national news that will run at a couple of minutes but get feature treatment on TSN. If it's a skier, maybe it's a documentary for the OLN. It can be picked up by RDS."

This brings us back to the consortium's guessing game: Not wine, but the new media. What was once just broadcast is now content; viewer habits and technology are changing so quickly it's hard to keep up. Pelley knows how to keep the trains running on time but digital and online are not a train - they're more like the transporter lifted off Star Trek's Enterprise. "Media is what I know," Pelley says. "But where we're going to be with our new platforms is the most intriguing aspect [of the production]."

Marcovici has his own take. "The new media forces us to be more nimble, more experimental," he says. "From a perspective of revenue rather than consumer readiness, digital and online aren't at the stage where they can be replacing network broadcasts. Our goal is to make our digital effort complementary to the rest of our effort, from a content perspective and from a sales perspective."

Back in 2000, Olympic results posted on the Internet subverted replays on networks. Now the Web will enable viewers to watch live action or events on demand on CTVglobemedia and Rogers sites. Online offers precise real-time metrics for viewership. No sports event fits the same template as the Olympics but one comes reasonably close: March Madness, the U.S. collegiate basketball championship, with 63 games and 300 hours of preview and game programming over 17 days. CBS, the rights holder, first offered online coverage and game downloads on a subscription basis in 2005, generating just \$250,000 in revenue. The network executives thought so little of it after that first run that they decided to give it away. On the strength of advertising sales, CBS online coverage last year generated \$4 million; this year it spiked to \$21 million. There seems little reason to think that Olympic hockey would be any less of an attraction in Canada for two weeks in February.

"March Madness or the Olympics can be a three-screen experience," Marcovici says. "A consumer can watch it on the TV screen while checking relevant statistics on his computer and getting updates on his cellphone or PDA. By 2010, the two-screen experience [television and online] will not require two screens. Our intention is to have enough robust information adjacent to and complementing the television experience - watching the Games stream live on your computer, while within the player itself seeing the relevant statistics and results and profiles in an

adjacent window."

Media analyst Kaan Yigit, president of Solutions Research Group, says that consumer and viewer trends are on the consortium's side. "A year ago there were approximately one million smart phones in this country," says Yigit. "By 2010, it's likely to be four million. When people are replacing mobile phones, they're opting for smart phones with on-the-go e-mail, Internet browsers and GPS systems. Likewise there's going to be greater market penetration of on-demand and online streaming."

Marcovici believes that, if successful, the consortium's new media will have influence that will outlive any Olympic record. "We'll have a lasting impact on how we use one screen to drive viewers to another, from two-inch to 12-inch, from 12-inch to 42-inch, from broadcast to online or digital," he says. "One of our main philosophies is to make the Games accessible to the consumer whenever and wherever possible - hourly updates on the games, personalized and customized. We can be a catalyst for change and the public is crying for it."

Pelley keeps returning to one talking point - that in two years time, Canadians will be able to watch Canadians win gold in high definition. That said, two years out, the prospects of the Olympic broadcasts are never higher than when Pelley's defining them, talking up the project Citius, Altius, Fortius.

KEITH PELLEY DOESN'T need to guess where he'll be on the final day of the Winter Games in Vancouver, when the puck will be dropped for the gold-medal game in men's hockey. If Canada makes the final, the game could easily break the ratings records posted by Canada's gold-medal victory in Salt Lake City in 2002 - the most-watched telecast of any kind in the history of Canadian television. He doesn't need to guess where he'll be during the closing ceremonies either. Reflexively, he says: "The truck." Force of habit. Goes back to those days when he went from the new kid whose hair was on fire to the best producer Rick Chisholm ever worked with in. The claustrophobia-inducing workplace where he poured the foundation of his career, where he assembled great sporting events, ordering camera angles, flashing stats and scores. A minute later, Pelley corrects himself. "I'll be in the broadcast centre. That's where I'll be 98% of the time at the Games."

Same difference, really. Same job for sure. It sounds like a grind if you're not Pelley. But if his production of the Olympics is a success, then every second of every event will have been accessible to Canadian consumers. If the CTV-Rogers consortium is in fact a catalyst for change, those who followed the Games will have experienced them in all the platforms, live, on demand, in high definition, in their own personal, customized new-media trucks.