Though barred from Olympics, two sports dot-coms will still give Sydney Games big play

BY FRANK ALVARADO

Although the International Olympic Committee blocked two South Florida sports-oriented Internet companies from covering the 2000 Olympic Games, the companies plan to provide event coverage when the Games get under way this weekend in Sydney, Australia.

The Sydney Games mark the third straight Olympics in which sports dot-coms will be barred from providing any extensive coverage from audio play-by-play to taped video highlights. What's more, journalists for the dot-coms will not be getting media credentials to cover the world's largest sporting event.

Even the dot-com divisions of electronic media companies like ESPN and Fox Sportsnet are banned from the Olympics.

The IOC fears that Web coverage will dilute television coverage and jeopardize

MEDAL-WINNING ROSTER: Emilio Romano, president and chief executive for SportsYA.com, says his company has assembled a roster of former gold-medal-winning Olympians to provide in-depth analysis of the Games.
broadcast deal with NBC. (The IOC did not return repeated phone calls from the Review for comment on this story).

But that isn’t stopping Fort Lauderdale’s SportsLine.com and Miami Beach’s SportsYA.com from covering the Olympics.

“We will have extremely robust Olympic coverage,” said Joe Ferreira, vice president of programming for Sportsline. “We will provide very detailed Olympic trial results. In some cases, the results will be in real time.”

Although SportsLine is barred from sending its own reporters, Ferreira said, the company will be using free-lance articles by sports writers from major newspapers for Olympic content. “There is no way the IOC can keep Web sites from getting content,” he said.

Emilio Romano, president and chief executive for SportsYA.com, said his company has assembled a roster of former gold-medal-winning Olympians, including sprinter Jackie Joyner-Kersee and swimmer Janet Evans, to provide analysis of the Games.

Romano said SportsYA will also have people in Sydney doing pre- and post-event coverage to provide insight and commentary on what is going on. Romano said the strategy will not be in conflict with the IOC’s prohibition of dot-com coverage.

Without credentials, dot-com reporters will have the same limited access to venues that the thousands of fans attending the Games have. There will be no entry into the Olympic Village, where athletes reside during the Games. This makes it virtually impossible to get reactions from athletes and coaches right after the events.

“I can say that we are being very careful with respect to the IOC,” he said. “Nevertheless, we will have a huge amount of content even though we won’t have the live audio and video feeds.”

Still, providing real time audio and video content is one of the benefits of the Internet and to restrict dot-coms from using its medium effectively, the IOC is selling itself and the dot-coms short, said Ferreira of Sportsline.

**DETAILED COVERAGE:** Joe Ferreira, vice president of programming for SportsLine, says the company will be using free-lance articles by sports writers from major newspapers for Olympic content.

In December, the IOC is hosting a sports and new media conference in Switzerland to address the issue. In a statement about the conference, Richard Pound, an IOC vice president and chairman of the conference, said the committee recognizes the extreme importance of the Internet in relation to the Olympics, which is why the conference has invited the dot-coms and other industry leaders to hammer out a resolution.

“The IOC is realizing that they have to change their [Internet policy],” Ferreira said. “The IOC has gotten a lot of heat from NBC about protecting their investment. But I think we can be complementary to the TV coverage.”

Romano agrees, adding that blocking out big-name dot-coms like SportsLine or SportsYA is not in the best interest of the Olympics.

“The IOC is leaving money on the table,” he said, referring to cross promotional and advertising opportunities. “As the relationship between television and the Internet matures, the IOC will realize that the Internet is not going to kill television coverage.”

**FIU launching challenge for best e-business plan**

Graduate students aspiring to become Internet entrepreneurs now have a chance to test their ideas for cash. The College of Business Administration at Florida International University will launch its NetBiz Challenge 2001 on Oct. 16 with a grand prize of $15,000 up for grabs for the best e-business plan.

The challenge is part of the university’s strategy to restart its small business entrepreneur program, which was cut last year due to lack of funding, says Sally Gallion, assistant dean of the business school. She said the program had always held an annual business plan competition.

“We have several people interested in relaunching the program and the challenge,” she said. “At the same time we are integrating e-business into our curriculum to make sure we are preparing students for the new economy.”
The competition is open to graduate students from any accredited college or university in Monroe, Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties. Competitors can submit plans individually or as part of a team. Participants must have a faculty adviser on board and may also enlist the help of a volunteer coach from the business community.

Gallion said applications will be available through the business school on Oct. 16 and that students have until Nov. 20 to apply. The participants must turn in their plans by mid-January.

A panel of up to 15 judges will then select a group of semi-finalists in February with the winner to be named in March. The grand prize is $15,000 with the first and second runners-up receiving $5,000. The fourth and fifth runners-up will receive $2,500.

Gallion said the school has enlisted the support of technology related business organizations, including the InternetCoast to find volunteer coaches, judges and event sponsors.

Kevin Watson, a contest judge and managing director for C/Max Capital Corp., a venture capital firm, said the challenge will help foster a more formidable entrepreneurial environment in South Florida.

"When you look at technology hotbeds like Silicon Valley or Boston," said Watson, who is also vice chairman of the Florida Venture Forum, "you notice that each one has a university structure in place that provides a constant stream of good entrepreneurs, who are able to foster their ideas into real businesses at an early stage."