



NBC Trying It's Best to Be Cool

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Using terms like gnarly and dude, Matt Lauer archly nudged the Olympic snowboarding medalists on NBC's "Today" show Wednesday to admit that they had celebrated in a "party-hearty" fashion. He looked a little like an English anthropologist poking at Tarzan. But the three young snowboarders, trained in the halfpipe and also in public relations, waxed wholesome. "Yeah, for sure," Ross Powers, the gold medal winner, replied politely. "I mean, after winning it's hard to sleep and you just want to spend time with your friends and family."

NBC, which has woven rock music, high-tech graphics and MTV-style vignettes into its Olympic coverage to lure younger viewers, would like athletes to act their age, but the athletes want to persuade corporate sponsors that they are mature enough to handle a spokesman's duties. Evan Morgenstein, a sports agent, calls NBC's tactics the dudification of the Olympics.

"We tell them to remember who their real audience is," said Susan Castorino, an Olympic media coach. Castorino and her husband, Randy Minkoff, have a consulting firm, The Speaking Specialists, and were hired by the United States Olympic Committee to train athletes in dealing with the media. "Grace under pressure," she said. "That's what leads to endorsements and sponsorships."

Concerns about breaching the line between sports and entertainment are so old they sound quaint. But for the 2002 Winter Olympics, NBC is taking the blur to new heights.

In Olympic Games past, the effort to lure female viewers led to gauzy biographies focusing on personal hardships usually found on the Lifetime channel. This year the tone is closer to the antics on "Fear Factor."

"Feel the pump," Kevin Delaney, NBC's snowboarding commentator, yelled excitedly as J. J. Thomas's snowboard leapt into the air. "He's looking liquid — he's dripping with style."

Attitude is cool. Bad boys are hot. NBC promos stress the rebel streak of the speedskater Apolo Anton Ohno or the laid-back wackiness of the mogul skier Jonny Moseley. When the Swiss ski jumper Simon Ammann won his second gold medal Wednesday, Len Berman, the NBC reporter interviewing him on the slope, got him to repeat the same scream he used after winning his first gold medal.

Even figure skating — a sport more associated with bad girls like Tonya Harding than with tough guys — has gotten the dude treatment. A segment previewing the hopes of the American figure skater Timothy Goebel showed him practicing in a James Dean-style black T-shirt. The camera zoomed in on his skates braking menacingly, scraping ice high in the air.

In the quest for hipness, NBC experts and correspondents sound like Colorado ski bums hanging out. Next to them, the freestyle skiers sound like Rhodes scholars.

When asked on the "Today" show if he intended to keep skiing after the Games, the mogul silver medalist, Travis (the Raddest) Mayer, a native of Springville, N.Y., replied, "If I can continue to balance my academics with my skiing."

His agent was pleased. "He was able to bridge into it," Morgenstein said, referring to Mayer's studies at Cornell University. "We want to get away from the image that freestyle skaters are party boys drinking Red Bull."

The benefits of media training were most evident in the poise of the Canadian figure skaters Jamie Salé and David Pelletier. After initially losing the gold medal in a vote that unleashed a judging scandal, the two managed to project dismay, not bitterness, in interview after interview. (They managed to preserve their dignity even while onstage for a nighttime serenade by the Canadian rock band Barenaked Ladies.

NBC committed \$3.5 billion to broadcast five Olympics from 2000 to 2008 and will spend more than \$650 million in Salt Lake City. To prod ratings, NBC has borrowed the sensibility of its top-rated shows to jazz up its Olympic coverage. In a biographical segment, the American skier Picabo Street races her wheelchair

through a hospital ward like a character on the sitcom "Scrubs." The star of "Scrubs" appears in an Olympic promo dressed in track shorts.

Corporate synergy works in other ways, however. CNBC interviews Katie Couric on what it is like to interview Olympic champions. But MSNBC broadcasts afternoon curling competition in its entirety, allowing cable viewers to recapture the worthy dullness of Olympic coverage in the days when Jim McKay was young and television came in black and white.

Prime time has stuck to the wilder side of winter sports, and it seems to be working: in the first six days, ratings are up significantly over Nagano's dismal showing in 1998, with a 31 percent increase in viewers in the 18-34 age category. Children 12 to 17 are also watching in greater numbers than in 1998, but on Thursday night, more teenagers watched sitcoms on Fox than the Olympics.

But NBC executives seem pleased. "We have preserved the mantra of storytelling with a focus on the cooler, hipper, faster element of sport," Cameron Blanchard, a network spokeswoman, said.