



**Communicating in Crisis:  
Lessons for Sport Events  
in the midst of COVID-19**

# Introductions



**Barb MacDonald**



**Sylvie Bigras**



**Martin Richard**



# Overview

1. My experiences – Lessons Learned – Barb
2. My experiences – Lessons Learned – Sylvie
3. My experiences – Lessons learned – Martin
4. Shared experiences – Multi-Sport Games
5. Our top 3!
6. Questions



# My Experiences - Barb

- **Various Crises throughout my career:**
  - Bombscare
  - Labour strife – pickets, full-scale walkouts
  - Student / parent / silent protests
  - War declared on eve of event
  - Tragedy:
    - Suspicious death of coach – World Cricket
    - Death of an athlete – Asian Games



# **My Experiences - Barb**

- **1. Operation Meningo 1991-92**
  - Largest mass immunization program in Canadian history
- **2. Salt Lake City Judging Scandal – 2002**
  - Judging collusion discovered in the Pair Event



# My Experiences - Barb

- 1. *Operation Meningo 1991-92*
  - 'Cluster' outbreak of meningitis at Ottawa High School
  - 2 deaths in December 1991
  - Students and staff from that school all immunized
  - Additional deaths
  - January 10, 1992 – decision - mass vaccination program to launch in 3 days
  - Ages 6 months to 19 years to be vaccinated



# My Experiences - Barb

- **1. *Operation Meningo 1991-92***
  - Planning Committee – led by Medical Officers of Health in Ottawa and Outaouais
  - Placed high priority on communicating with physicians, the media and the public
  - Ten nurses handled public hot line calls
  - Largest # of calls in one day – 2,477
  - Separate line for physicians, school principals



# My Experiences - Barb

- **1. *Operation Meningo 1991-92***
  - Every medical decision and policy was issued in writing to ensure consistency of messaging
  - 1300 bulletins hand delivered to physicians by health inspectors
  - 425 Media Calls fielded by RMOH in January
  - +300 Calls fielded by Carleton Board Staff





# My Experiences - Barb

- **1. *Operation Meningo 1991-92***
  - Schools became the delivery vehicle for vaccinations
  - Information translated by community groups: 8-10 languages
  - Jan 15 – 18: 39,000 high school students vaccinated
  - Designated a ‘media op school’ every day
  - RMOH media person on site
  - CBE media person on site
  - 36 elementary schools and 12,000 students/day



# Lessons Learned – *Operation Meningo*

1. Not always a playbook ready.
2. Effective Leadership is key
3. Communications must be part of management team
4. Know legal ramifications – no need to release names to media
5. Honest, transparent communication critical



# Lessons Learned – *Operation Meningo*

6. In a fluid situation, keep communications consistent
7. Acknowledge changes as information evolves
8. Designate spokespeople and make them available at all times
9. Build relationships with media
10. Review and re-evaluate your process when it's over



# My Experiences - Barb

- **1. *Salt Lake City Olympics 2002- The Perfect Storm!***
  - Pair Event – judging scandal revealed at conclusion of event
  - Highly photogenic Canadian team ‘denied’ gold medal
  - Would have been 1<sup>st</sup> non-Russian pair team in 40 years
  - ISU planned to deal with the French/Russian collusion the following week at planned meeting
  - No ISU Communications Person on site



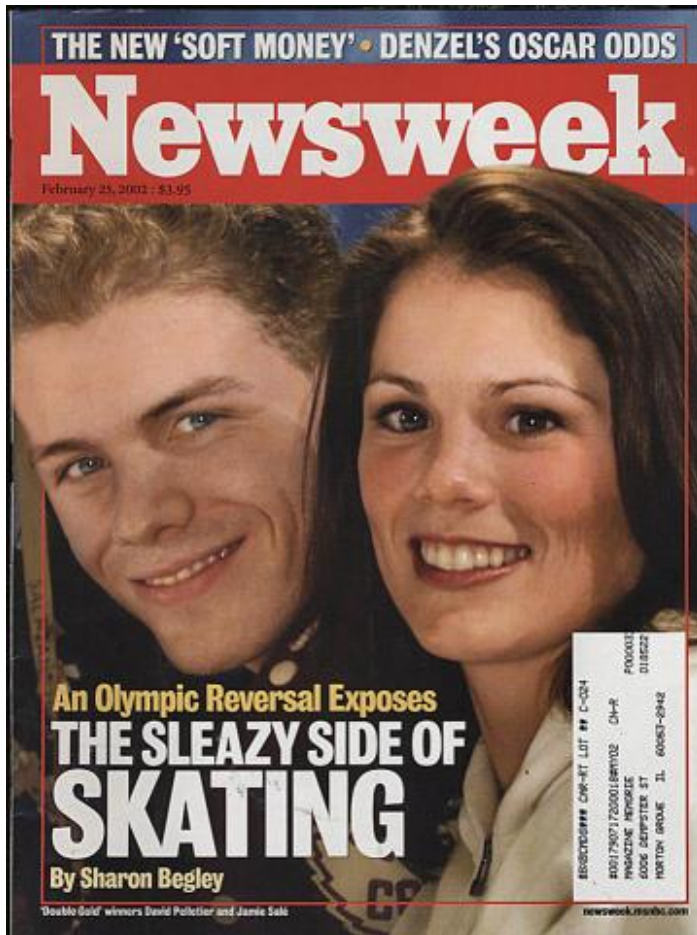




# My Experiences - Barb

- **1. *Salt Lake City Olympics 2002- The Perfect Storm!***
  - Completely overshadowing the Games
  - IOC forced the hand of the ISU
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Gold Medal was awarded to Canadians
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Medal Ceremony held in venue
  - The Games continued





# **Lessons Learned – *Salt Lake City***

- 1. Get ahead of the story early**
- 2. Adapt roles to suit the situation**
- 3. Communications must be part of strategy**
- 4. Honest, transparent communication critical**
- 5. Your International Federation may not be prepared**
- 6. Credible spokesperson is essential**





# Dealing With a Games Crisis - Sylvie

- Major Games – 15 Olympic and Winter Olympic Games, 4 Commonwealth Games, 5 Pan Ams, 2 Universiades
- Issues and crises occur often at major world events
- World and media attention can exacerbate situation
- We are often in a different country with different legal systems, approaches and systems
- There are often multiple stakeholders involved
- 24/7 news window and multiple social media platforms means news spreads quickly and is shared widely



# Types of Crises Impacting Games

- Doping
- Medical - Serious injuries or deaths
- Safety & security (Munich, Atlanta)
- Environmental (pollution, flights to Games, sustainability)
- Political (boycotts, revolts, demonstrations, activism)
- Technical issues / Performance (lack of) / Judging
- Financial (deficits, fraud, corruption, cost of Games)
- Communications (language issues, social media issues)
- Legal (challenges, protests, arrests, charges, jail)



# Crises at Games - Examples

- 1984 LA Olympic Games – East Block boycott
- 1988 Seoul Olympic Games – Ben Johnson doping
- 1992 Barcelona OG – Sylvie Fréchette – fiancé's suicide, marking mix-up and loss of gold medal
- 1995 Pan Ams Argentina – Silken Lauman “Benedryl” vs “Benedryl D”
- 1998 Nagano OWG – lack of French, Canadian flags village, Ross Rebagliati marijuana scandal
- 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games – Kelly Guest (triathlon) positive doping result



# Crises at Games – Examples/2

- 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games – Québec flag held by athlete on the podium
- 2002 Salt Lake City OWG– Salé/Pelletier marking scandal
- 2008 Beijing OG– chicken pox
- 2010 Vancouver OWG– Joannie Rochette – death of mom at the Games
- 2016 Rio OG – “floating cows”, Zika, security, etc.



# The Crisis

**So:**

- You have a crisis
- The World and media are paying attention
- “Everyone” knows about it – social media and 24hr news
- You have to respond/act
- Many stakeholders could be involved (athletes, IOC/COC, IPC/CPC, CGF/CSC, NSFs, RCMP, Governments, sponsors, broadcasters, families and more)



# So What Do You Do?

- Firstly – is it an issue? Is it my issue? (Manchester 02) – don't own the issue if it isn't yours
- Gather facts quickly – what happened, who is involved, is everyone safe, who needs to know what
- Prepare internal messaging and communicate – “Tree”
- Prepare public messages around issue – say what you can at the outset (“What we know at this time is”, “We are continuing to gather facts”, “We will keep you informed”)
- Identify spokespersons and prepare Q&A for them
- (Know your EPRP – shared in advance)



# Lessons Learned

1. Identify who owns the issue
2. Respond quickly with what you know
3. Communicate to all partners/stakeholders in a timely fashion
4. Keep your communications simple and straightforward
5. Provide regular updates
6. Now is not the time to consult your 118-page risk mgt plan
7. Important to support the team member regardless of issue



# Lessons Learned/2

8. Control the story – if you don't speak, the story will be created by others
9. Use the “bridging” technique to maintain control of message
10. And if you screwed up:
  - State the facts (what happened)
  - Apologize
  - Say what you will do to ensure this does not happen again
11. Discuss in debrief and incorporate in future plans





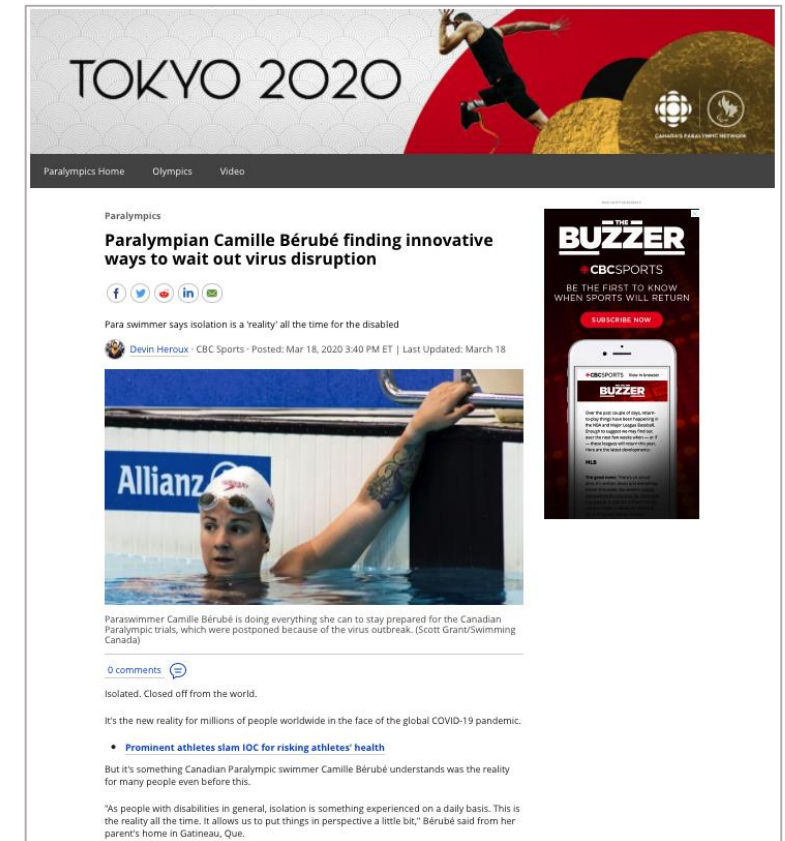
# My Experiences with Crisis - Martin

- 9-11
- Flag flap 2002
- Riots, Jail, Hospitalization
- Head Coach firing
- Infectious disease in China – Mission Pox
- Doping infractions
- Invasion of neighboring country @ Games
- Death of athlete(s) on field of play, support staff
- Deplorable conditions for athletes at Games
- Zika
- My Wedding
- Tornadoes
- Held at Gunpoint during robbery



# Tokyo 2020 COVID-19 Case

- 31.12.2019 – Outbreak of “pneumonia like” cases in Wuhan China
- 30.01.2020 – WHO declares the COVID-19 outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern
- 11.03.2020 – WHO declares COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic
- 12-03.2020 – Public facilities, workplaces start shutting down in Canada
- 17.03.2020 – IOC announces Games still on
- 19.03.2020 – CPC sends message to sport community
- 22.03.2020 – IOC announces they need 4 weeks for decision on Tokyo 2020



# Tokyo 2020 COVID-19 Case

- 22.03.2020 – CPC & COC issues joint statement stating:  
*Canada will not send athletes to Games in summer 2020 due to COVID-19 risks*
  - 7:30 – IMT daily call
  - 10:00 – Briefing call with COC & CPC leadership
  - 11:00 – Comms briefing with CPC President
- Afternoon Zoom meetings
  - CPC Emergency board meeting
  - CPC athlete council meeting
  - COC/CPC sport community leadership



Team Canada will not send athletes to Games in summer 2020 due to COVID-19 risks

MARCH 22, 2020

CPC and COC call for a one-year postponement of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games



# Tokyo 2020 COVID-19 Case

- **22.03.2020 (continued)**
  - **Evening**
    - **Press release advance distribution to sport community (Embargoed)**
    - **Media release & interviews**
- **24.03.2020 – IOC announces Tokyo 2020 postponement to summer of 2021**
  - **CPC & COC issue joint statement thanking the IOC and Tokyo 2020 for the decision**



**Team Canada will not send athletes to Games in summer 2020 due to COVID-19 risks**

**MARCH 22, 2020**

CPC and COC call for a one-year postponement of the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games



# Lessons Learned

1. People first - Your emotions could be your biggest barrier – have a plan established to help manage them
2. Know the facts inside out
3. Stay true to your values
4. Respect each others' lane
5. Timing – lead vs catch up with the crisis
6. Prepare for worst case scenario (have different versions)
7. Communicate to your stakeholders – shape the message with them
8. Be flexible, adjust quickly
9. “Stay calm, do your part & carry on my friend”





# Shared Experiences – Multi-Sport Games

## 1. 2004 – Athens – Martin

- The Power of Colleagues

## 2. 2010 – Vancouver –

Sylvie, Barb, Martin

- Play to your strengths
- Stay in your lane!





**Our top 3 Lessons?**



**Questions?**





**Webinar posted:**  
[sporttourismcanada.com/covid-19-webinar-series](https://sporttourismcanada.com/covid-19-webinar-series)

## **Social Media**



**@SportTourismCA**  
**@Events\_STC**



**Sport Tourism Canada**



**Next Webinar  
June 11  
1:00 p.m. (Eastern)**

**Esports Insights** (aka The future's  
so bright I've got to wear shades!)

**Presenter:** Vlad Marinescu,  
President International Esports  
Federation