

TV Monday

Patriot Games

Winter Olympics take on deeper meaning

By MICHAEL GILTZ

SUDDENLY, the Winter Olympics are hot. NBC's massive multi-year commitment to the Olympics was looking suspect after the last two Games — especially Sydney in 2000 — were moribund affairs, creatively as well as commercially.

With ad sales for the February Games in Salt Lake City stagnant through this summer — even with the huge advantage of being held in the U.S. with most events being broadcast live — some naysayers were suggesting NBC had bought into the Games just when they'd become passé.

"No more. "I think it's going to be huge," says Marc Berman, senior TV analyst for Mediaweek. "I think the country as a whole could use an event like this, and it's going to do really well."

Indeed, the planets seem to be aligning to turn the Games, airing Feb. 8 through Feb. 24, into a blockbuster on every level.

Financially, advertisers seem poised to spend their way out of the recession.

That's why NBC has suddenly seen a surge in sales (especially after Sept. 11), with 94 percent of its inventory accounted for.

"The Olympics are one of the few remaining TV viewing events," says NBC's David Neal, executive producer of the Olympic telecasts.

"The Olympics still has the ability to bring the entire family together."

NBC is guaranteeing ratings 10 percent higher than CBS scored in Nagano, Japan, in '98, but is predicting a much bigger bounce of almost 25 percent higher viewership.

"Viewers are going back to old favorites, and the Olympics are certainly an old favorite," says Berman of Mediaweek, who agrees that the presence of ABC's Jim McKay — an Olympic fixture since 1960 — can only add to the positive nostalgia factor.

Tom McGovern, the director of sports marketing for major ad agency OMD USA, agrees the mood of the country and the natural boosterism of the Olympics are in perfect synch.

"We are in a heightened level of patriotism,"



Thanks to Americans' heightened sense of patriotism, NBC may have a blockbuster on its hands when it begins its broadcast of the 2002 Olympic Games in February.

McGovern says. Ironically, "that's often what we rely on the Olympics to bring out."

Even a relatively weak Olympics is enough to send the competition scurrying for cover, and these

Games look poised to be the strongest in a long time. "It's going to be boring

analyzing the ratings," jokes Berman. "You already know who's going to win the February sweeps."