

FEATU

Mission possible: turning Canada's ath

by Michael Tutton
of the Charlantan

All seems to be quiet on the amateur sports front. It has been six years since Canadian athletes competed in the Montreal Olympics and two years since they stayed home from the Moscow games.

But appearances are deceptive. Place an ear to the carpeted floors of the sports administration offices and you'll soon hear a buzz of excitement.

The word being used is watershed. Canadian amateur sports is at a crossroads. There are two ways to move.

The first is towards excellence — where funding for amateur sports is stepped up and Canada climbs to become the fifth or sixth best nation in international sport. The second route sees continued mediocrity and a decline from Canada's eleventh place standing at the Montreal Olympics.

Money, the age-old divider of great

and near great, is the essential element that will determine which route Canada will follow.

There's an indication the federal government is willing to make a move towards the first alternative.

Gerald Regan, the minister responsible for fitness and amateur sport, has a bill which will legalize a sport pool game

"Canadian amateur sports is at a crossroads. There are two ways to move"

(where Canadians will bet on the outcome of hockey and baseball games), with the proceeds of the federally-run game going towards sports and arts.

The idea ran into a roadblock when it was introduced to a bogged-down House of Commons this spring, but Regan has promised to reintroduce the sports bill

when the House sits again in the fall.

Although provinces initially opposed the betting pool, calling it an intrusion into the lottery field, provincial opposition has died down since they introduced the new interprovincial lottery, 6/49.

The federal government bargained away its right to lotteries in 1979 in return for an annual payment of \$29 million (split

evenly between sports and arts) but it looks now as if the provinces will allow the pools.

Reuben Baetz, the Ontario minister for culture and recreation, said in a interview last spring that his government strongly disapproved of sports pools. But he added if they came into effect ("as a result of federal bulldozing") then his

government would probably be willing to set up the game on the computer system established for their lottery, Wintario.

Since then, Baetz has made more public overtures to the feds about the possibility of a deal on the pools.

Once the sports pools are in place there is a well-prepared band of bureaucrats at Sports Canada (the federal government's sports administration body) eager to pounce on as big a chunk of the money as they can.

They are led by Abby Hoffman, a former Olympic runner who was a major force behind the drive to get athlete's assistance (monthly cheques from the government) improved prior to the 1976 Olympics.

Now she is the director of Sports Canada but she was a spokeswoman for amateur athletes even while a competitor herself, taking advantage of every opportunity to point out the need for increased federal government funding for amateur sport.

When speaking about her fight to have athlete assistance increased she says "It was a nasty business getting that money." The next stage in the battle will involve an equally vigorous bureaucratic battle.

The runner-turned-public-servant says politics shouldn't frighten athletes. "Politics in sport may be a worrying thing," she says, "but it is a reality. You have to avoid the head-in-the-sand approach. We have to use politics to our advantage."

Hoffman has had her staff working on a task force report since she arrived at Sport Canada a year ago. The task force is looking at ten sports (which vary from individual sports such as track and field to team sports such as volleyball) and defines precisely what each needs to win medals.

She will be able to tell federal politicians where sport pool money should be spent.

"If we get 10 million more dollars a year we can start making improvements," she says.

Hoffman's wish may be modest. Consider that in its last years Loto Canada was bringing in \$80 million to \$90 million. This makes Regan's estimate that the sports pool will be bringing in \$50 million in its first year and \$100 million two years

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