

SQUAW VALLEY SET AN EXAMPLE FOR OLYMPICS

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SQUAW VALLEY – The late Avery Brundage was a crusty former Olympic discus thrower – "the kind of guy who likes to wrestle with you before he says hello" – and Alex Cushing met him for the first time in 1955.

Cushing, then 40, was the manager of a 20-room ski lodge in the Sierra Nevada near Lake Tahoe. He had only one chairlift climbing the hill out back. But he had persuaded the U.S. Olympic Committee to select his Squaw Valley ski area as the U.S. entry in the bidding for the 1960 Winter Olympic Games, and Cushing knew he needed the support of the 66-year-old president of the International Olympic Committee.

In Brundage's office at Chicago's LaSalle Hotel, Cushing was about to make his presentation when the IOC president halted him.

"You're going to set the Olympic movement back 25 years," Brundage said.

Brundage was wrong.

The 1960 Games were awarded to Squaw Valley and went off without a hitch. There was perfect weather for 1,000 athletes and 350,000 spectators. There were spectacular opening and closing ceremonies, and the festive atmosphere was unmarred by the political or civil strife that has marked most subsequent Olympics.

But Cushing miscalculated, too.

He originally bid for the Olympics as a publicity gimmick to get Squaw Valley mentioned in the newspaper. When shrewd politicking unexpectedly won the bid, Cushing figured he had guaranteed Squaw Valley's place as the United States' premier ski resort.

In reality, Squaw Valley probably did more for the Olympics than the Games did for Squaw Valley.

CBS paid \$50,000 to televise the 1960 Winter Games (the first to be shown on live TV), and the network sent Walter Cronkite to anchor the production. Even by the standards of the day, the rights fee was a token sum.

But that deal cemented a relationship between the Olympics and television that has been the most important factor in the financing and popularizing of every Olympics since, winter and summer.

ABC will spend \$309 million for broadcast rights for the Calgary Olympics, making TV rights the 1988 Games' largest single source of revenue, including Canadian government subsidies and corporate sponsorships.

The 1960 Games also were significant for other reasons:

- Walt Disney was commissioned to stage the opening and closing ceremonies, turning what was a routine part of the Olympic program into a Hollywood pageant. The precedent was established for elaborate productions at every Games, with the zenith reached in 1984 at Los Angeles.
- They established the Winter Games' "home-nation advantage" when the U.S. ice hockey team, assembled just three weeks earlier, upset the favored Soviet Union to win the gold medal. Eight years later, Jean-Claude Killy swept the men's alpine skiing gold medals in Grenoble, France. In 1972 at Sapporo, three Japanese swept the medals in the 70-meter ski jump, an event in which Japan has not won a medal before or since. In 1976, Austrian Franz Klammer came from behind to win the downhill at Innsbruck. In 1980, the United States repeated its hockey miracle at Lake Placid. And in 1984, Yugoslavia won its first winter medal when Jure Franko won the silver in the giant slalom at Sarajevo.
- The Olympic Village, ideally a place where athletes from all over the world would eat, sleep and socialize with each other for the duration of the Games, worked exactly as it was envisioned. In few Games since has the village functioned so well as an informal international melting pot. In Calgary there will be two villages, separated by 50 miles.

Cushing's Squaw Valley resort, on the other hand, has flirted with bankruptcy since the 1960 Games. The huge ski-lift system installed for the Olympics fell into disrepair. The state and private owners argued over control of the resort for years.

Today, Squaw Valley is profitable, private and rebuilt from the ground up, but it is still better known among European skiers than it is among Americans outside California.

"People told me, 'The Games will make you a household word,' " said Cushing, now 74, who still lives in an antique-filled blue frame house beside Squaw Valley's Cornice I ski lift. "That's right, but the truth of the matter is, it's all in what you do with it.

"I think we did not take full advantage of it the first few years after the Games."

And part of the failure, he concedes, was due to his personality.

Cushing was an Eastern-born, Harvard-educated lawyer who offended Tahoe locals when he wrested ownership of Squaw Valley from Wayne Poulsen, a California native who first owned and planned the area. The Westerners who weren't privy to the ins and outs of the ownership battle were put off by Cushing's brusque and even rude manner.

"We've been introduced 26 times, and he never remembers me," the wife of a neighboring resort owner told Time magazine in 1959.

But when it came to selling Squaw Valley to members of the U.S. and international Olympic committees – men from the same old money background – Cushing was a smashing success.

On Jan. 7, 1955, Cushing went to New York to present Squaw Valley's bid for the Winter Olympics to the USOC, competing against Reno, Nev., Sun Valley, Idaho, Lake Placid, N.Y. (which was host to the 1932 Winter Games and would stage them again in 1980) and Anchorage, Alaska.

"There were just eight or nine guys in the room," Cushing recalled. "They were very fair, these people. They asked me questions for the full 45 minutes. I do better as a counter-puncher, and the more questions I answered, the more they had. But I didn't have any problems with any of them because I had thought the thing out pretty well."

Squaw Valley was selected as the U.S. entry for the Games, and Cushing went about lining up support for his presentation to the IOC in Paris in June. After visiting Chicago, Cushing invited Brundage to visit Squaw Valley in February to see the place for himself.

"Who's going to go to Paris?" Brundage asked him when he arrived at the Reno airport.

"I guess I am," Cushing replied.

"They're going to kill you."

Brundage said Innsbruck, Austria, had the bid virtually sewn up. The Winter Games were considered European property, and the IOC believed the only real decision was on which Alp to stage them.

Brundage made himself perfectly clear, Cushing said. He was an American, but that would not influence him in Paris. If his vote were needed to break a tie, he would vote for Innsbruck.

But when he finished his tour of Squaw Valley, Brundage – whose tenure as IOC president was marked by strenuous efforts to ban professionalism and maintain the "purity" of the Olympics – turned to Cushing and paid him his highest compliment.

"I will have to hand you one thing," Cushing recalled him saying. "You are an amateur."

Cushing was not an amateur politician. He went to Europe to meet with IOC delegates and size up the competition. In a St. Moritz Palace Hotel bar, he ran into Chicago Daily News reporter George Weller, whom he knew from Harvard.

Together they cooked up a plan to win the vote in Paris by locking in the votes of the IOC's warm-weather members.

"We said, hell, we'll go down to the Amazon and talk Winter Olympics to these guys," Cushing said. "Nobody ever discussed the Winter Games with these people in their lives. Then we contacted the countries in the Pacific Basin, because we felt California could relate to them.

"We had all those people solid, but nobody knew it. It wasn't until the day before the vote that Innsbruck realized they were going to have a ton of coal poured on them."

Still, the IOC was resistant. Cushing spent four hours before the committee answering questions and listening to accusations.

"There is no such place as Squaw Valley, you're not the mayor, and this is just a real estate scheme," he was told. But when the vote came, it was 32-30 for Squaw Valley.

When the Games opened, Cushing had put together a combination of state and federal financing to hold them. He had faced down President Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, to allow the People's Republic of China's one-man team to enter the United States during the height of the Cold War.

There have been several efforts since 1960 to return the Games to Lake Tahoe, most spearheaded by the city of Reno. But Cushing, who never maintained formal contact with the Olympic establishment after the Squaw Valley Games, won't be part of a second try.

"You can only do it once," he said. "It's an emotional thing, once in a generation. You can't do it twice.

"We made no money out of the Olympics, but it was a great deal of satisfaction. And it was, for 10 days, the greatest show on Earth."

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