



AUG. 6 - 12, 2004

VOL. 4 NO. 48

Valley tech competes in Olympics

Published: Friday, August 06, 2004

BY STEVE TANNER

The Bay Area may have lost its bid for the 2012 Summer Olympics, but several local businesses and individuals are sporting a financial stake in the 2004 games in Athens, which kick off next week.

The total cost of the games is expected to top \$7.2 billion, a sliver of which will go to local companies. Contracts for everything from drug-testing equipment to television rights are drafted well before a single drop of sweat hits the track on Aug. 13.

Most of the event's information technology contracts were won by European companies, although many of the Olympic games' IT functions use Sun Microsystems Inc.'s Solaris operating system, Intel Corp.'s chips and Redwood Shores-based Oracle Corp.'s database software.

Representatives from Sun and Intel, both based in Santa Clara, did not return calls. Oracle's PR team declined to say how much money the company gained from its involvement in the Olympics, only confirming that its database software is indeed being used at the games.

But there's more to technology than just IT.

Equipment that detects the use of performance-enhancing drugs, such as steroids, is provided by Palo Alto-based Agilent Technologies Inc., which has worked with the Olympics since 1972, when it was a division of Hewlett-Packard Co.

More than 50 instruments ranging in price from \$50,000 to \$250,000 were purchased by the Athens 2004 Olympic Organizing Committee (ATHOC), said Stuart Cram, worldwide business development manager for Agilent's life sciences and chemical analysis division.

Most of the devices are gas chromatographs and mass spectrometers.

Cram declined to give the exact sales figure for the equipment, but said additional revenue comes from consulting and training associated with the devices.

"Obviously it's in the millions," Cram said. "This is a big order and a big event for us. We are not an Olympic sponsor, but we are able to use this [sale] as a highly visible reference account."

The Olympic laboratory in Athens will spend roughly \$6 million to process 4,000 samples, looking for more than 400 banned substances, Cram said.

Other medical applications from the Bay Area include Berkeley-based CoolSystems Inc., which makes devices used to simultaneously cool and apply pressure to sprained ankles and other sports-related agitations.

CoolSystems sold four of its units to the ATHOC for use in the Olympic Village. The devices, called Game Ready, cost between \$3,000 and \$5,000 each.

Individual Olympic athletes who previously purchased Game Ready units likely will bring the portable units to Athens, and at least six of the units will be used at the games, said Tom Oliver, CEO of CoolSystems.

"To us, it's mostly about grassroots marketing," Oliver said. "The athletes and trainers using it are telling others about it."

The global sporting event also presents a marketing opportunity for San Mateo-based Webcor Builders Inc.

Webcor did not sell any goods or services for the Olympics, nor did the company buy an Olympic sponsorship, but one of the members of Webcor's cycling team will be participating in at least one Olympic cycling event.

The cyclist, Christine Thornburn, will compete in the road race and possibly the time trial.

Andy Ball, Webcor's president and CEO, and a cycling enthusiast, says Webcor is spending roughly \$20,000 on expenses related to Thornburn's Olympic effort.

"I never imagined we would have a rider going to the Olympics," Ball said. "We can use articles [for marketing purposes], but we're not an official sponsor of the U.S. Womens [Biking] Team."

NBC-11, the San Jose affiliate of the television network that will broadcast the Olympic games, will benefit from increased ad revenue and heightened exposure, said Jim Monroe, director of creative services for the TV channel.

Monroe declined to comment on advertising costs during the Olympic coverage, nor would he discuss ad revenue related to the games, but said NBC plans to use the increased viewership during the Olympics to promote its fall lineup.

"Typically the Olympics will draw people who like that connection to a high-quality event," said Monroe, when asked about the selling points of ad space during the Olympics.

"It's more than just exposure; it's also association with a world-class event."

Local Olympic viewers also may recognize a local voice broadcasting from the ancient capital.

Bay Area-native Bob Fitzgerald, who has announced televised games for the Golden State Warriors professional basketball team since 1996, was tapped by NBC Sports in New York to announce the Olympic mens and womens U.S. basketball teams.

Fitzgerald covered swimming at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, but longed to focus on his favorite sport, basketball.

Although the Olympics won't be coming to the Bay Area any time soon, a bit of the Bay Area will be in Athens.

Steve Tanner is a Biz Ink reporter. You can reach him at stanner@svbizink.com.