

# *SportsLetter Interviews*

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## **Keith Olbermann**

He has been called the “Howard Cosell of his generation,” and he has been called a lot of other things including, most recently, “a witty bastard” ([www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com)). Now, you can call Keith Olbermann “Olympic anchor.” At Athens, he will serve as studio host at both MSNBC and CNBC, part of NBC’s wall-to-wall coverage of the 2004 Summer Games. (Bob Costas will continue to anchor NBC’s primetime coverage of the Games.)



“Keith’s unique talent will lend a fresh perspective to our Olympic coverage and we are looking forward to working with him again,” said Dick Ebersol, Chairman, NBC Sports & Olympics.

In the early 1990s, Olbermann and tag-team partner Dan Patrick stylized the intelligent, humorous banter that made ESPN1s SportsCenter must-see TV. With his Groucho Marx eyebrows aflutter, Olbermann was the brainy one: he dotted his remarks with homages to broadcast legends (“From Way Downtown . . . Bang!”) and cerebral riffs about obscure, turn-of-the-century baseball players. After stints at MSNBC and Fox Sports Net, he now hosts a nightly news show on MSNBC.

Recently, SportsLetter emailed Olbermann to ask him about his upcoming Olympic gig.

**SL:** You covered one Olympic Games in 1980 at Lake Placid. For whom were you working and what events did you cover? What else do you remember about those Games?

**Keith Olbermann:** It was my first year out of college and I was one of

the two correspondents covering the Olympics for UPI Radio. We had about 1,000 stations carrying our stuff, and the other reporter was my boss, Sam Rosen. We pretty much split everything: I did almost all the skiing, skating, and much of the hockey, plus all the commentaries and most of the nightly wrap-ups. Imagine having just turned 21-years-old and going to Whiteface Mountain to cover the Mahre brothers and Anne-Marie Moser-Proell, or to the Olympic Center the night Babilonia and Gardner had to pull out at the last minute due to Randy's groin injury. I covered Eric Heiden's gold medals by literally leaning out the window of our radio booth, which hung over the second turn of the skating oval!

Given Sam's hockey expertise — he was already the back-up play-by-play man for the New York Rangers — he took the medal games and sat up in the press row. And I got to cover . . . the crowd! They got me a ticket, center ice, and all I had to do was watch that amazing American run, and interview fans afterwards. I don't know if I provoked the first-ever chant of "U.S.A., USA" outside a sports event, but I was there for it, recording it after the win over the Russians. And I vividly recall that the next day, the TASS bureau down the hall was closed and a hand-written sign hung on the door: "Today Closed Are We."

What an opportunity that was. Sam and our boss, Stan Sabik, let me do all kinds of off-beat stuff about how strange luge was, or the first international trading mart for Olympic pins. Didn't sleep too much. And I can remember the bus shortage, how difficult it was to get around. And at least twice, I'm standing there, temps well below zero, at a bus stop when an ABC van shoots past us and there's only one guy inside — Jim Lampley!

**SL:** When you worked at MSNBC in 1997-98, you had talks with Dick Ebersol about covering the Sydney Olympics. If you had stayed at MSNBC then, what would your role have been in Sydney?

**KO:** I think we never formalized this, but Dick had talked about having me host the late-night coverage on NBC.

**SL:** What will your duties be in Athens? Will you be an anchor exclusively? What are you most looking forward to?

**KO:** I'm the primary cable anchor. Dick's told me to expect a lot of desk time — maybe eight hours out of 12, from 2 a.m. to 2 p.m. Eastern. We've talked about my reporting for the NBC broadcasts of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, but we'll have to see how that all plays out, based on the MSNBC and CNBC schedules. And, I'm looking forward to the whole shebang.

**SL:** In the next year and change, how much time will you devote to studying for the Games? What will your "homework" be in the run-up to Athens?

**KO:** It will be growing exponentially. Obviously, the advent of my nightly newscast on MSNBC was a surprise to everybody and it's taken, appropriately enough, most of the last two months. But I get the monthly briefing books — and they are books — and I study them intently. We will be increasing the frequency of production and planning meetings as the date actually approaches and begin to talk specifics. And, of course, the homework for the television part of this, the anchoring, began when I broke in on CNN in August 1981.

**SL:** What will be the differences between MSNBC's coverage and CNBC's coverage? And, how will their coverage be different than NBC's?

**KO:** Principally it's timing. MSNBC will be the primary cable source on weekdays, CNBC on weekends. I expect there will be little difference between the coverage on the two networks. Relative to NBC, Dick's made our charge very clear — we're broadcasting mostly to sports fans, not people watching the Olympics as spectacle. So the studio host's job is to tell the occasional story and make the occasional commentary, but, principally, to anchor, as one would a day of baseball or the NFL.

**SL:** The total coverage in Athens is expected to be over 800 hours. Is there any danger of overkill? Can we have too much Olympic programming on TV?

**KO:** Judging by the past 20 years: no way. The appetite seems to grow as the supply expands. And just for comparison, 800 hours over 14 or 15 days is a drop in the bucket compared to say, how much news there is in

the same span just on MSNBC, CNBC, and NBC stations. What's terrific about this is that the viewer next August can watch the more general-appeal broadcasts on NBC, or join us on cable for anything their hearts desire, mostly, as it happens.

**SL:** Much is made about the time difference between the U.S. and Europe and that American viewers end up watching events whose results they already know. How does that change your approach? How do you anticipate working under these conditions? Will the cable entities broadcast more live events than NBC?

**KO:** I haven't seen a final schedule, but I think it's fair to say we're going to show an extraordinary percentage of events live on cable. We don't have to draw 40 percent of a total audience to make it work for the company; we can show anything that's worth showing, live or nearly so. We can switch back and forth. We can cut back to the studio for updates. We can respond to breaking news, knowing that the audience wants it that way and is not likely to consist of the same viewers who'll be watching at night on NBC.

**SL:** How about the Torino Games [in 2006] and the Beijing Games [in 2008]: Will you work those Olympic Games in some capacity?

**KO:** Haven't talked about it.

**SL:** You're a student of sports broadcasting history. How has Dick Ebersol changed the way television covers the Olympics? How has he changed the way we watch the Olympic Games?

**KO:** I'd argue that Dick Ebersol has become the most important figure in US Olympic history. Not TV history, Olympic history. The reason that NBC's coverage has improved and grown and matured is that Dick was the first executive to procure for one network the rights to a series of Olympiads. Previously, you'd get the games, hire a staff, do the games, then fire everybody because you couldn't be sure you could keep everybody busy for another two years, or four, or whatever. Years ago, when Dick made his mega-deal, they began knocking out walls at 30 Rock and keeping a full-time staff. The Olympic experience wasn't walking out

the door after every closing ceremony. It's kind of like the concept of the full-time US Olympic Committee. And on the air, Dick correctly divined that the Olympics are really two events - a real spectacle that happens to be about sports, and a festival for fans of individual sports. Now, with cable options, he can broadcast the spectacle and cablecast the sports festival.

**SL:** One of your sports broadcasting heroes, Howard Cosell, made a name for himself at the Olympics, beginning in Mexico City in 1968. What memories do you have of Cosell at the Olympic Games? What about Jim McKay? What memories do you have of him? What are your most memorable Olympic memories, from a television standpoint?

**KO:** Cosell on boxing at Montreal [in 1976], certainly. And before that I remember him from Mexico City. I think part of my sense of the Olympics as important owes to the urgency with which Cosell broadcast every moment of them. He was constantly electric. And when you think Jim — and Howard — you think of how really perfectly they covered a stark, terrifying news event as it erupted in front of them in Munich. I get inundated with questions about the duality of my career in news and sports. Think of the duality they expressed in one day in 1972.

My favorite memory is probably Ali in Atlanta — and the parade of athletes at the opening, but that's for selfish reasons. My buddy Rebecca Lobo was killing time in the press office before the ceremony and sent me a goofy fax. Twenty minutes later she's on TV waving a flag. Very nice.

And I was at the ABC station in Boston in 1984 for the L.A. Summer Games and the switchboard sent all of the complaint calls to us. I must've answered 200 of them myself. "I want to talk to Cosell now," somebody said. Another caller wanted to know how to get to the soccer games and when we explained they were in Los Angeles, he said "And what part of Boston is that?"