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Posted by:
David Demchuk

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Working the Olympic Games – Staying up with CBC's overnight production team

After a year of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, Tokyo 2020 is now well underway. As with other Games that have taken place on the other side of the world, Canadians everywhere are staying #UpwithCBC and our production teams are staying up along with them. How do they do it? Harbinder Singh, director of CBC's overnight/morning programming for Tokyo 2020, sat down with us to share his tips and tricks to staying alert on one of the most complex shows in the business.

Hi there, Harbinder, thanks for taking a few minutes away from your busy schedule to join us! You've worked with us on a number of shows, including Family Feud Canada and Road to the Olympic Games. As director of the Tokyo 2020 overnight/morning programming, what does your job entail? What does a typical night look like for you, and how many people are working alongside you on the project?

Thank you very much for having me a part of this article. These are my fourth Olympic Games and second Olympics as studio director. My role is the lead overnight/morning director working with the senior producers and our amazing technical team to bring Canadians the best pictures and audio from Tokyo 2020.

I have the pleasure to work with CBC Olympic Executive Producer Chris Irwin and Karen Sebesta, Olympic Games Morning Senior Show Producer, who build the road map for our extension overnight and morning programming. They drive the Canadian stories of the day and my job is to help lead the technical crew with the best pictures and audio to support the stories and action of the day. So far it's been a variety of different sports we have had on our shows, everything from gymnastics to soccer to softball. The best part of my job is that no two days are alike. We take over the broadcast from the late primetime show at approximately 3am ET and keep pushing the Canadian stories until 12 noon when our afternoon show Tokyo Today takes over.

I could never do my job without the support of the amazing technical staff we have at CBC and CBC Sports. Many of the best technical staff in the country who specialize in live Olympic production. Our overnight/morning show has a team of about 40 on-site team members at the Toronto Broadcasting Centre and many more working from home.

Would you mind sharing when you start your shift each night, and what time it ends? And is your team working on staggered shifts or do they have similar schedules to yours? This seems like such a complex project with many moving parts--and people!

I start my shift at 12 midnight and start prepping the rundown for the first show. The overnight show is produced by Dan Gladman and we are on the air from 3 a.m. ET to 6 a.m. ET. Then Karen Sebesta comes in to produce Olympic Games Morning from 6 a.m. until 12 noon. I am part of the best directing team in the country with four other directors including Geoff Johnson who takes over as director for the morning block around 7:30 - 8 a.m. to take the broadcast until 12 noon. We have a team of five directors for the 23 hours of Olympic coverage each day.

- Approximately 23 hours of **live** coverage a day
- 6 show producers
- 5 directors
- 2 full studio crews
- 13-15 editing suites working at one time editing and producing material for the broadcast
- Digital teams with the streaming coverage

It's an epic project and I am very proud to be a part of the team.

Are you naturally a night owl or do you have trouble staying up from dusk to dawn? Do you have any special tips or tricks to suggest for people who suddenly find themselves having to work through the wee hours on a complicated high-stakes project like this one?

The hours are one of the toughest things to get used to. I had similar hours as a director for PyeongChang 2018. It takes a few days to get into the hours but once the Games are over and we have to get back to 'regular hours,' that is the toughest part on your body. You end up taking about 3-5 days to normalize and then you're up in the middle of the night calling your production friends saying "You can't sleep either, eh?!"

The CBC Sports team is a world-class group and one of the best in the industry. They treat their teams very well. Expectations are high for production value and storytelling, but they make sure everyone on the team is taken care of. Everyone has all the tools and resources they need to bring Canadians all the stories from Tokyo 23 hours a day for the next three weeks.

The pandemic has placed some constraints on how people move through the Broadcasting Centre during these Games, to make sure that staff stay in their own designated work areas and reduce crossover of teams. How is it working out for you and your colleagues? Have you run into any difficulties while following the COVID guidelines?

COVID has not made it easy for anyone, especially in live Olympic broadcasting. We have strict guidelines with the number of team members we can have in the control room, the studio floor and in designated areas.

The biggest challenge is with our large group meetings to discuss the shows and rundowns. Live television production is like a team sport, we need everyone on the production/technical teams to understand what we need to accomplish on the day. For example, our "pit boss" Kyle Wagner, the person responsible to gather all the video footage we need for our show. Him and his team work non stop once we get on air gathering/editing and prepping all the visuals we need to show.

The meetings are key for all departments to understand the key Canadians in competition so we can prep graphics, visual language from past events and edit highlight reels. We have moved to zoom calls and voice chats. During the rehearsal of the Games, we would have to meet in mini groups outside the CBC to discuss our plan of execution. There were a couple of days when we all got rained on standing outside during a meeting.

Do you ever have moments where you stop and realize that thousands and thousands of Canadians are awake and watching as you bring the Games to life for them alongside your Overnight team? How does it feel to work on something with that kind of impact?

I had that moment as I directed the Opening Ceremony this past Friday. It was a very proud moment for me and a life goal to be able to direct a world-class event like this for our Canadian audience. I was thinking "my whole family across Canada is watching the ceremony and I am in the director's chair for this event." I never thought I would be able to say I directed an Olympics Opening Ceremony for a national audience. I am very humbled and honoured to be given the opportunity.

Of course we have to ask: Are there any events that you've been looking forward to as a fan, or any athletes or teams that you've been rooting for?

I am looking forward to Track and Field and watching our athletes compete on the world stage. Fingers crossed for Andre De Grasse, and I look forward to seeing Canadians on the podium.

Thanks once again for spending some time with us, and best of luck throughout the rest of the Games. Get some much-deserved rest when they're done!

*Watch the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 from the comfort of your home, starting nightly at 7 p.m. ET with Olympic Games Primetime, and then follow all the live action through to the next morning. Stay **#UpWithCBC** one minute longer, one event more and don't miss the action from Tokyo 2020. If you need to catch up, don't worry as Tokyo Today with Perdita Felicien and Andrew Chang will ensure you are filled in on the night before and up to date on what's ahead. And remember to check out the **internal Tokyo 2020 google site** for all the behind-the-scenes info you need.*

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