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valuable franchise for NBC Universal, which has committed \$5.7 billion for the Olympic television rights from 2000 to 2012, including \$613 million for the rights to carry the Turin Games. "The Olympics define us," said Randy Falco, the president and chief operating officer of the NBC Universal Television Group. Through six nights, NBC's average Nielsen rating of a 12.5 was down 24 percent from the 16.4 that CBS recorded during the same period in 1998 for the Winter Games in Nagano, Japan. That drop is in line with the ratings slide for other major sports and entertainment events in the same time span. It is also 36 percent lower than the rating for the Salt Lake Games four years ago, but a domestic Olympics is always a magnet for viewers. In previous Olympics, NBC had lost a total of four half-hours to its competitors, and had never lost a night to any network. NBC has promised its advertisers a final rating in Turin between 12 and 14. If the rating is lower, NBC will have to provide them with free commercial time. Mr. Falco is unusually calm about the competitive ardor of Fox and ABC, which are showing original episodes from seven of this season's top 10-rated prime-time shows against the Olympics. In the past, rival networks have shied from such gamesmanship, but not now, during the February sweeps, with NBC having fallen from the prime-time throne. "There is a very tight race for No. 1 between ABC, Fox and CBS," Mr. Falco said Thursday in a telephone interview from his office in Turin. "You can't discount that. That's why they decided to go with original programming. This is about the competitive nature of our business." Preston Beckman, an executive vice president of the Fox

network who is its chief scheduler, said: "We just decided we weren't going to lay down this time. We're just sticking to our knitting." ABC's and Fox's salvos against the Olympics come at a time when NBC is hoping to overcome the absence of the American figure skater Michelle Kwan and disappointing performances by United States skiers. Among viewers 18 to 49, the category most networks care most about, the 11.7 rating for "Idol" on Wednesday beat NBC's 4.1. In addition to the two "Idols," "House" and "Grey's Anatomy," ABC's "Desperate Housewives" and "Lost" surpassed the Olympics with viewers 18 to 49. "Idol," "Housewives," "Lost" and "Grey's Anatomy" are linked by having rabid followings among women 35 and older, an audience that NBC counts on for the Olympics. "People have relationships with these programs," Stacey Lynn Koerner, an analyst for Initiative Media, said. "They are like their close friends or relatives." She added: "You don't get that very visceral connection to the content of the Olympics. It's a two-week-long event with a lot of people you don't really know." Mr. Falco acknowledged that NBC would be in a better position to promote the Olympics if it were in first place in prime time and that its ratings would be better if the American team were doing as well as it did in Salt Lake City and in the Summer Games in Athens in 2004. But he said he was not worried about NBC's Olympic investment. "I'm on top of \$900 million in advertising revenues that I have to protect with ratings and performance, and I feel very good about it," he said. Mr. Falco said that prime time is only one element of NBC Universal's Olympic picture. He said that the strategy of spreading coverage to its USA,

CNBC and MSNBC cable channels, and of expanding its Internet presence on nbcolympics.com, was succeeding."This is about realizing that the Olympics is more than about network television now, and the future is about being a content provider," Mr. Falco said. "In the future, its going to be about going deeper with audiences."The cable networks have reached 36.5 million viewers since the start of the Olympics, 35 percent more than they attracted for their regular programming in the same month last year. For example, curling on CNBC from 5 to 8 p.m., Eastern, Monday through Wednesday generated a rating that is 67 percent above what CNBC produced for various sports during the 6 p.m. to midnight period during the Salt Lake Games. Internet users have downloaded 2.9 million video streams since the Winter Games began. But even as NBC looks toward an even broader Olympic future into broadband and possibly pay-per-view so much focus remains on prime-time. Prime-time is where advertisers pay \$500,000 to \$700,000 for a 30-second commercial. As NBC approaches its next smackdown on Tuesday with "American Idol," what will it do? Dick Ebersol, the chairman of NBC Universal Sports and Olympics, who oversees the production, is quiet about his intentions. "I havent discussed this with Dick," Mr. Falco said. "But I suspect well go on that night and program it the way we normally would, using our best stuff, as we build toward midnight." Would NBC shuttle any part of its ladies figure skating coverage past 10 p.m. to avoid a possible third defeat by Foxs talent show?"We wont back down to anything," Mr. Falco said. Richard Sandomir reported from Turin for this article, and Bill

Carter from New York. 100Test 下载频道开通，各类考试题目直接下载。详细请访问 www.100test.com