

He's covered the Grey Cup and Olympics for more than 24 years. And he always has a watch handy

Time after time

BY SEAN FITZ-GERALD
in Vancouver

Maybe it's the hair, familiar and white as snow. Or maybe it's the blue eyes: alert, alive and alight. More likely, it's the hands. They never stop moving, gesturing in a hypnotic rhythm to the sound of that unmistakable voice. In a matter of minutes, Brian Williams has ceased being the interviewee and has resumed his more traditional role as interviewer.

That familiar posture has been the anchor of Canadian Olympic coverage for a generation, ever since he helped the CBC cover the 1976 Summer Games in Montreal. Williams has also been the face of the Grey Cup and is in Vancouver this week for what has been billed as his 25th appearance with the Canadian Football League's showcase game.

He's not sure it's been that many, though. Either way, the 59-year-old will be there when the game kicks off tomorrow at 3 p.m. Pacific.

That's 4 p.m. in Edmonton, 5 p.m. in Winnipeg, 6 p.m. in Toronto and 7:30 p.m. in Newfoundland.

Williams is referred to as "the dean of Canadian sports commentators" on CBC.ca, and the assertion is difficult to debate. But before the show really got started this weekend, Williams (BW) sat down with the *National Post* to discuss a life on the road, country music and his penchant for always telling us the time:

1. We might as well get this out of the way first: What is the deal with the constant waving of the hands on set?

BW Oh, gee. That's me. I've been doing it since I was a boy. I think it was Larry King who was once asked, "Are you ever nervous?" And he said, "Only when I'm not myself." [gestures hand] And I'm sitting here talking to you, that's me. Sometimes, I probably should tie them down. It's not as bad as it was.

2. And the other tendency, and I think this has been on *Royal Canadian Air Farce* or *This Hour has 22 Minutes*...

BW [interrupts] What time is it? The funny thing is I started doing that, I think it was in Sarajevo or Seoul, simply because we were live and it's halfway around the world. And I find it really interesting that if you're in Melville, Sask., and it's eight o'clock at night, it's 10 o'clock the next morning over in Korea. It was just to give the viewer a point of reference.

3. Can you explain why your friends used to call you Rand?

BW It's after Rand McNally. Because I was born in Winnipeg. I went through Grades 1 to 5 in Invermere, B.C.; six and seven in New Haven, Conn.; eight in Edmonton; high school in Hamilton and university at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Mich. I've just always been a geography nut.

4. Since your father was a doctor, was there ever a chance you'd spend more time cutting into patients than cutting away to commercial?

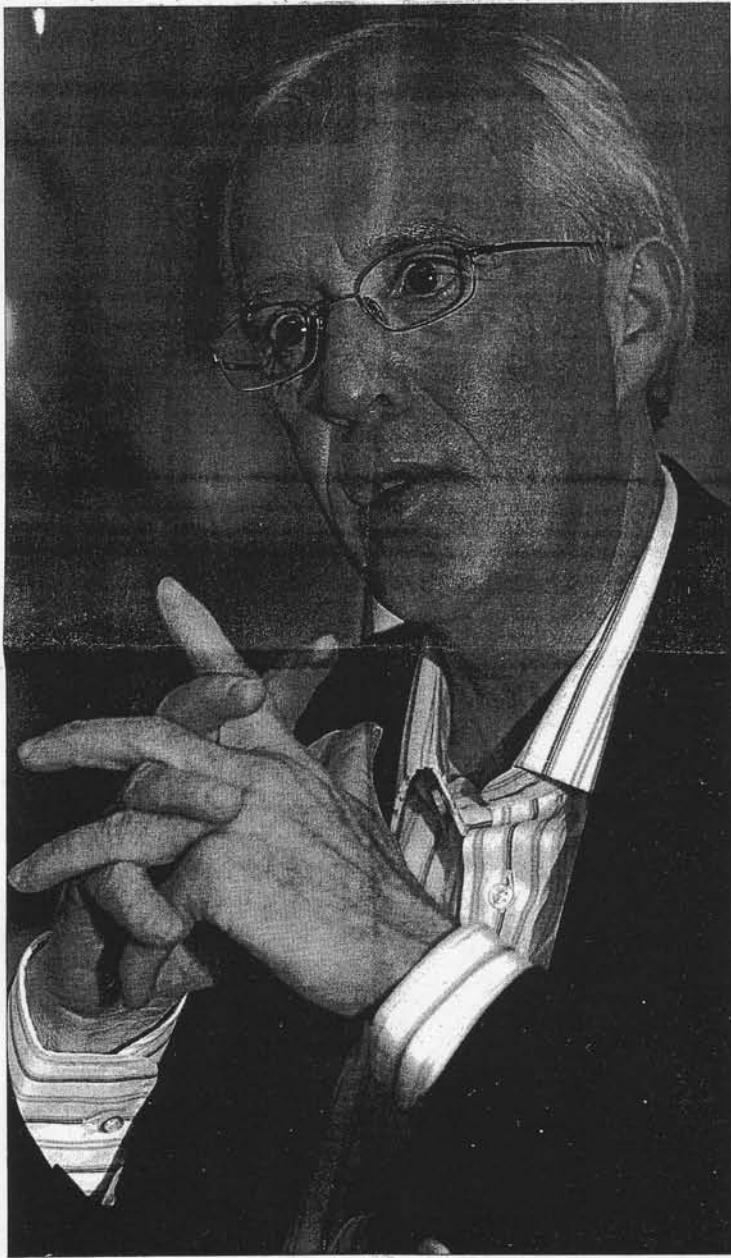
BW No, no. My Dad was an outstanding — still is — public speaker. I can remember once, when I was a young boy, he took me to Nebraska. I think it was Omaha. He was doing a speech, they were living in St. Louis at the time and he was running the Catholic Hospital Association. I saw him speak and I was so impressed. I've always wanted to be in broadcasting. He bought me a tape recorder once because he used to get tired, and say, "Quit talking to yourself and make like you're a broadcaster and do your homework!"

5. Is it true you learned how to drive a Formula One car for research?

BW It was a Formula 3000. I went to a driving school at Mosport. And until I'd done that, I never understood how you could be killed in a race car. But I got there, I had the lesson and, after a couple of hours, I get cocky. I thought I was hot stuff. You step on it a little hard and the front end will lift a little bit and you go, "Whoa. I could get hurt doing this."

6. Is there anything you absolutely have to take with you in all your voyages across the world?

BW My glasses, I guess. I need them to read. I don't use a teleprompter. I do the Olympics with no teleprompter. I do my own research, make my own notes and talk off the top of my head,



RICHARD LAM FOR THE NATIONAL POST

A childhood spent growing up all over the continent has left CBC broadcaster Brian Williams with the atlas-inspired nickname Rand, after Rand McNally. "I've just always been a geography nut," the 59-year-old says.

so I have to be able to look down. I don't need glasses to drive, but I do need them to read notes. And the producer, Doug Sellars, said, "If you're gonna wear glasses, you can't wear those ones on your nose. You either wear them all the time or you don't wear them." So I started wearing them all the time on the air.

7. You have been on hand for two dozen Grey Cup games and almost every one of Canada's Olympic triumphs over the past 30 years. What is your crowning personal athletic achievement?

BW Mine? I don't know, Gee, I don't know. I never got killed playing hockey in Hamilton, I guess. [chuckles] I wasn't the greatest hockey player or the greatest football player... I like golf, I'm a runner. I've given up running, actually, because all my friends are having hip surgery. So I work on one of those elliptical trainers. I don't really have a crowning athletic achievement. But I'm not a frustrated jock.

8. You work for a heavily subsidized crown corporation. How do you feel about the state of funding for amateur

athletics in Canada, and are we too cheap to be golden?

BW I think the athletes succeed in spite of the system. And I think until the system is cleaned up... I think the amateur sports system has to clean

I am much more relaxed now... I'm not as in-your-face as I used to be

itself up before they get more federal funding. Better use of money they have, go after the big corporations. And I will tell you this: I recently met with Chris Rudge, of the Canadian Olympic Committee, and they are going after corporations. What we need in this country is a high-performance sports centre that is for both the elite athletes

and the financial side of the elite athletes. The Olympics is not an intramural activity, you know? Just show up. And I think Chris Rudge gets it.

9. What is your most vivid memory of the Ben Johnson debacle in Seoul?

BW We went on the air here I go again — at nine o'clock in the morning, Korean time...

10. What time is that in Invermere?

BW In Toronto, I think it was at seven o'clock the previous night. And I was awakened at about 4 a.m., 5 a.m., and they said, "Ben has tested positive, get over to the studio." And I thought it was that the crew maybe had been up drinking a little too much, someone was playing a game on me. But when I realized it was serious, it was truthful, I went into the studio. And I just remember it was like competing in a sporting event. When I got off the air, my shoulders were so tense I could hardly move.

11. Early in your career, some critics suggested you might have been a little too tense, or intense. You received adulation for your work on the Johnson

story, so did it lead to significant professional growth?

BW I am much more relaxed now, I'm different. I'm not as in-your-face as I used to be. I think I came out of local sports and I wasn't part of the "we" group of broadcasters. I never looked at myself as a flak for a team or a sponsor or an organization. So I guess I tried to be tough and outspoken. And I think, in 1998, that probably changed it a lot because you had to be so thoughtful in what you said that night. You had to pull in all the research you'd done, and you were literally learning as you were going. And to do that, you've got to be much more relaxed.

12. Of all the games you've done since, is there a moment that cleansed your Olympic palate?

BW Donovan Bailey never got the credit he deserved. And that was unfair, looked at in a strange way. For me it was in Athens, with Kostas Kenteris, who was the favourite in the 200, and Katerina Thanou, who was the favourite in the 100, two Greek athletes. A small nation, the birthplace of the modern games, is welcoming the world. The 200-metre is really the first event ever held in ancient Olympia — it is the ultimate — so these are two Greek stars. They don't show up for their drug tests and, not only do the Greek officials kick 'em out, but the Olympic officials do.

13. Is there a chance you could be anchoring the 2010 Games here in Vancouver, even though CBC has lost the broadcast rights?

BW [shakes head] I'm looking to Turin. To be honest, I gotta get through Turin and you look beyond Turin to Beijing to Vancouver to London, whatever's coming. But no, I'm just focusing on Turin.

14. Is there a sport in the world that simply confounds you?

BW No, I mean, yes. Cricket. I think it confounds most North Americans. Soccer used to. But when I was in Italy last spring, in Turin doing research, I went to see Real Madrid play Juventus. And once you've been to a big-time soccer game and seen them, it doesn't confound me anymore.

15. Do you think a lot of people might be shocked at your affinity for country music?

BW Probably. I mean, my family makes me listen to it in the car by myself. I'm a little boy in Invermere, B.C. in the '50s. We have no radio or TV. My mother would go grocery shopping at Hecker's grocery store on Saturday mornings and we'd go to the Invermere Inn and she would let me play, for a nickel, five songs. And the song I played five times was *I Walk The Line*, by Johnny Cash.

16. On those rare days that you're home and you have the television to yourself, what do you watch?

BW You're gonna laugh. My wife and I love reruns of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. At night, you want something light, just to laugh.

17. You've signed off hundreds of broadcasts, but who gets the last word at the Williams home?

BW Oh, my wife. I'm blessed. I have a wonderful family. But I don't kid myself. My family is what it is because my wife held it together when I was away. I mean, I would go away for six weeks to the Olympics. It takes a pretty special person to run the family. And the last word definitely belongs to her.

18. Of the Grey Cups you have covered, which one stands out?

BW I think the Argonauts' big win in '83. They hadn't won since 1952. I think that stands out, so do some of the Edmonton wins. One moment that stands out to me was, prior to a game at Montreal's Olympic Stadium — and I can't remember which one it was — I interviewed Prime Minister Trudeau.

19. Who wins tomorrow?

BW I think Montreal. I think it's going to be closer than people think. But I don't think Montreal, love 'em or hate 'em. Don Matthews can coach. So can Danny Maciocia. But, I don't know why, I just think it's Montreal.

20. Finish this sentence: Old Grey Cup broadcasters never die, they just...

BW I don't know. I'm not an old Grey Cup broadcaster yet, I still feel pretty young. [laughs] When I'm an old Grey Cup broadcaster, I'll tell you.

National Post
sfitzgerald@nationalpost.com