

Cable and DSL compete for the gold!

By Bruce A. Love

Olympic competitions exemplify the human drive to become better, stronger and faster. Many world records have fallen this week; replaced by ones that will, no doubt, fall in the not-to-distant future. Some records are measured in fractions of seconds and centimeters. Others are measured in bits per second and megabytes. Like our Olympic athletes, the performances of home computers have increased significantly in recent history, and there appears to be no letting up in this quest for digital gold.

My first PC modem transferred data at a blistering rate of 2400 bits per second. At the time, that seemed quite adequate. File sizes were much smaller, and there were no web pages (Al Gore hadn't invented the Internet yet). In those days, we used our modems to dial-up and connect directly to other computers for the purpose of sharing files, and learning about the new technology.

I soon replaced my old modem with one that could transfer data at a rate of 14.4 kilobits per second, and later replaced that computer with one that had a 28.8k modem. Could it possibly go any faster? Oh yeah! While today's dial-up modems have apparently topped out at 56k, faster Internet connection speeds are possible using new technologies that are now available for residential use. Two competing technologies include cable modem and DSL.

About a year ago, I took the plunge, and signed up for cable modem. I felt that the website development side of our business justified the upgrade and added expense (about \$28/mo at the time). Cable modem is provided by your cable company. It uses the same cable that delivers television programming, so you won't need a second phone line to access the Internet. One of the first tests of my new modem was uploading a web site to a host server. Previously, when I used my 56k modem to upload similar websites, transfers typically took all night and required my presence throughout the night to restart the

process when my computer inevitably lost the connection. The process took less than 45 minutes with cable modem!

Local phone companies offer a competing broadband technology called DSL (Digital Subscriber Line). Like Cable modem, DSL is "always on." There are several flavors of DSL, but all use ordinary copper phone wires already connected to our homes. No additional phone lines are necessary! Last month when the DSL sales representative offered services at rates slightly less than I was paying for cable modem, I decided to give it a try.

Both technologies will give you high-speed performances that leave dial-up modems in the dust. Under some conditions, DSL will be faster; under other conditions cable modem will be faster. Broadband is not available everywhere. You will be unable to receive DSL if your house is more than 18,000 feet from your telephone company's central office. If you do not have cable TV, cable modem is not an option.

If you sign up for either of these services, you will need a new external modem to accept the broadband cable, and your computer will need a network interface card (NIC) that will interface with the new modem. With DSL you will also need filter modules (supplied by your DSL provider) on every phone in your home. With all the competition between broadband service providers, you may be offered free installation and free use of a broadband modem. If you need a NIC, they run about \$10. Unlike cable modem, which permits cancellation of service at anytime, DSL requires a one-year contract.

We all enjoy a spirited competition. Especially when companies compete for our business. When they do, quality improves and prices drop.

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