

Some thoughts about the 1998 Winter Olympics

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In writing about an event such as the Winter Games, one comes up against real contradictions.

Does one begin with the extraordinary skill, ingenuity and perseverance demonstrated in Nagano—or with the crass chauvinism of at least the North American media and the commercialism and greed of the corporate sponsors?

One remembers the performance of Norway's Thomas Alsgaard, striding with awesome grace and strength, toward the finish in the men's 4x10 kilometer cross-country relay; the show put on by Austria's Hermann Maier who, after a spectacular airborne crash in the downhill event, came back to win both the super-G and giant slaloms; the brilliant effort of ice hockey goalie Dominik Hasek of the Czech Republic, in shutting down the powerful US, Canadian and Russian teams. But one also recalls all too well the miserable coverage provided by CBS, the US television network, whose combination of ineptitude, national narrowness and desperation for ratings ensured that the games were viewed by the smallest American audience in 30 years.

One would like to retain in one's memory only the inspiring performances of cross-country skier Larissa Lazutina (five medals, including three gold), short track speed skater Chun Lee-kyung of South Korea (two gold medals and one bronze), Alpine skier Katja Seizinger of Germany (two gold and one bronze), cross-country skier Bjorn Dahlie (three gold medals and one silver) and many others. But then there is the matter of the \$1.4 billion in cars and cash given to the International Olympic Committee and NBC, another US television network, by General Motors, so that it could go on calling itself the official US auto company of the Olympic Games through 2008.

How does the "Olympic spirit" best manifest itself?

In Japanese speed skater Tomomi Okazaki (the eventual bronze medal winner) quieting the cheering crowd after she had temporarily jumped into first place in the women's 500 meter competition and pointing to Canadians Catriona LeMay Doan and Susan Auch (the gold and silver medal winners), waiting at the start line, as if to say, "Watch them, they're the best"?

Or in members of the US men's ice hockey team, made up of highly-paid professionals, trashing their apartments after a sound defeat at the hands of the Czech team?

No sporting event, much less one as widely followed and highly publicized as the Olympics, can isolate itself from the society in which it takes place.

All the elements that go into the preparation of an athlete to compete successfully at these levels are enormously time- and, above all, money-consuming. How many families could afford the financial sacrifices that permitted Tara Lipinski, for example, that remarkably composed 15 year old, or her 17-year-old rival, Michelle Kwan, to perform at such heights in Nagano? The present organization of society ensures that only a tiny percentage of the population, even in the countries where the trained personnel and facilities exist, ever has the opportunity to cultivate its intellectual, aesthetic or athletic potential.

The division of the world into competing nation-states hinders the genuine flourishing of sport. Its objective development, as well as those of technology, science, art and the productive forces of mankind as a whole, has rendered national boundaries obsolete. Equipment and training techniques are international, in theory and practice. The American Picabo Street is coached by an Austrian; a Canadian former skater choreographed Lipinski's routines; eastern European and Russian émigrés now dominate coaching in such sports as gymnastics. It is safe to say that Australia would not have won its first medal in Alpine skiing had not Zali Steggall grown up in Morzine, France.

Any competitor or team that stuck to hallowed "national traditions" in any event would quickly be left behind. Athletes travel great distances to train at the most advanced facilities. The fast ice at Calgary's Olympic Oval, built for the 1988 Games, is given credit for much of the success of the Canadian speed skaters; it has become an international Mecca for performers in the discipline.

The obvious fact that nationality has no meaning in terms of excellence in sports or any other field does not mean that its political significance disappears. It intrudes all too often.

There are the obvious cases of stupidity and national blindness. How absurd it was, for example, that hockey player Ulf Samuelsson of the New York Rangers was barred from playing for Sweden because it was learned in the midst of the Games that he had dual citizenship with the US.

The greatest and most arbitrary intrusion of the national element into the Games comes at the medal awards ceremony that follows each event. Here one rapidly descends, it would seem, several stages in social evolution: from the most advanced—represented in the sublime performance of the athlete, expressing the capacity of human beings to accept virtually any intellectual or physical challenge—to the most backward: the reactionary and wasteful confrontation of competing national entities. The national flag is raised. The national anthem is played. It never seems to occur to any commentator, or athlete apparently, that this wretched little ceremony is entirely extraneous, and has no relationship to the quality of the performance that preceded it.

Nationalism and chauvinism do not play quite the same role in the Winter Games as they do in the summer event. For one thing, the medals are distributed more evenly and are shared by a greater number of smaller countries. Norway, for example, a country of slightly more than four million people, has won more medals than any other single political entity (the totals for Germany and East Germany are counted separately, as are those for the Soviet Union, Russia and the “Unified Team”). In addition, aside from figure skating, ice hockey and perhaps Alpine skiing, none of the events are a central focus for the international marketing and advertising machines.

Perhaps these facts, and the apparently genuinely warm and gracious reception given the athletes by the Japanese public, gave the Games in Nagano their relatively civilized character, particularly in contrast to the vulgar, profit-driven affair in Atlanta two years ago. But it would be naive to believe that such events, no matter how devoutly it may be wished for by athletes and organizers alike, lessen tensions or the dangers of nationalist and militarist eruptions. One only has to bear in mind the site of the 1984 Winter Olympics: Sarajevo, in the former Yugoslavia.

The Nagano Games, of course, were held under the shadow of the threat of a massive military assault by the United States against Iraq. The possibility of bombs dropping on Baghdad during the Olympics, Clinton administration officials made clear, would not cause them to alter their war plans.

Advances in technique in any field provide no guarantee in and of themselves of the further progress of human social organization. Sports technique has its own laws, involving the athletes’ mastery of the laws of nature and their own

bodies. But sports, like every other activity, develop within class society. Who plays them and under what conditions, and the general character of their organization are highly dependent on the nature of the society and, specifically, its ruling class. Where that class is militaristic, sport will have that quality.

However, would the ultimate elimination of national rivalries, following the demise of capitalism, mean the end of the competitive spirit, as some assert?

This would be a very wrongheaded conclusion. Socialism does not mean that competition disappears, Leon Trotsky noted, but that, “to use the language of psychoanalysis, it will be sublimated, that is, will assume a higher and more fertile form.... It will have no running after profits, it will have nothing mean, no betrayals, no bribery, none of the things that form the soul of ‘competition’ in a society divided into classes. But this will in no way hinder the struggle from being absorbing, dramatic and passionate.”

Would sport, deprived of its association with nationalism and the drive for profit, suffer a decline? We think not. On the contrary, freed from these constraints and more closely and consciously assisted by scientific knowledge and aesthetic sensibility, athletes would attain new heights of speed, strength and beauty. Athletic ability would for the first time become what it ought to be: one aspect of an all-rounded human personality, which has, as Trotsky put it, the “invaluable basic trait of continual discontent.”



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