

What is behind the Olympics figure skating furor?

David Walsh
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The most striking aspect of the furor over the Olympics pairs figure skating medal is the disparity between the intrinsic significance of the incident that sparked the flap and the media/political uproar it provoked. The affair has shed light on two interrelated phenomena: the degraded state of the Olympics and the poisoned state of international political relations.

The sports story is clear enough. On February 11, by a 5-4 decision, judges awarded the gold medal in the pairs figure skating competition to Russians Elena Berezhnaya and Anton Sikharulidze, and the silver to Canadians Jamie Salé and David Pelletier.

As has often been the case in Olympics figure skating, the competition was very close, with two highly talented and skilled pairs delivering excellent performances. Given the nature of the sport, there is always room for conflicting evaluations. Unlike speed events or team contests such as ice hockey, the measure of excellence is not entirely objective, and judges must take into account such matters as artistic merit, originality and gracefulness. There have been many occasions in past Games when the judges' decision left many viewers and even expert commentators unsatisfied.

Moreover, political factors and national rivalries have long played a role in the judging of figure skating at the Games. Throughout the Cold War it was routine for judges from the Soviet bloc to give higher marks to "their" skaters, and their counterparts from the West to do the same for skaters from countries allied to the US.

But never before has a controversial verdict provoked a media-driven storm of protest like that which unfolded last week, or a public campaign to overturn the judges' ruling.

In its campaign in support of the Canadian pair, the US media, led by the broadcaster of the Games, NBC, threw all pretense of journalistic impartiality out the window. NBC television commentators Scott Hamilton and Sandra Bezic (a former Canadian pairs medalist openly rooting for the Canadian skaters) exultantly declared that the Canadians had won the gold before the latter had even left the ice. They expressed outrage over the judges' verdict. "How did this happen?" demanded Hamilton. Bezic told the viewing audience she was "ashamed for our sport."

This became the opening shot in a raucous drive to reverse the judges' decision. Throughout the week the American and Canadian media were unrelenting in their attacks, directed in the first instance against the French judge who cast the swing vote tipping the verdict in favor of the Russian pair. There were allegations that she had caved in to pressure from French skating officials to vote for the Russians in the figure skating event, in return for a vote by the Russian judge for the French pair in the upcoming ice dance event.

"World shares our anger," proclaimed the February 13 *Toronto Star*.

But the Canadian press acknowledged that the "Americans have led the international outcry," and indeed, the US media, which speaks (or bellows) with a considerably louder voice, adopted the Canadian skaters as its own. NBC's own commentators, including the *Today Show*'s highly paid and highly irritating Matt Lauer and Katie Couric, did everything they could to keep the pot boiling. The network's heated and slanted coverage of the figure skating controversy was in keeping with its overall presentation of the Olympics—jingoistic and simplistic to the point of being unwatchable.

In the face of this blitz, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) executive began publicly pressuring the International Skating Union (ISU) to come up with an immediate solution that would appease the Americans and their Canadian allies. IOC President Jacques Rogge of Belgium accused the ISU of dragging its feet in the affair. Commentators noted that Rogge's position would "lead to charges that the IOC is catering unfairly to North American athletes in an attempt to appease sponsors and television rights holders, who pay the bulk of the Olympic corporate freight" (*New York Times*).

The ISU was meanwhile proceeding with a degree of caution, promising to meet and discuss the matter on February 18. The ISU head pointed out that some of its delegates had not yet arrived in Salt Lake City, and that there had been no opportunity to investigate the charges of fraud.

The skating union was carrying out an investigation, "but," according to the *Times*, "not nearly quickly enough to satisfy senior members of the Olympic committee [IOC], who have pressed the union through a letter Wednesday [February 13] and strong words today [February 14] to get the mess resolved quickly."

Bowing to the pressure from the IOC, US and Canadian officials and the North American media, the ISU held an extraordinary midnight meeting on February 14 at which a majority of its delegates voted to award a second gold medal to Salé and Pelletier and to suspend French judge Marie Reine Le Gougne for "misconduct." Le Gougne was disciplined, according to the ISU, for failing to report, prior to the figure skating event, attempts to influence her vote.

Le Gougne maintains that she was not giving into pressure when she voted for Berezhnaya and Sikharulidze. She told the French sports daily, *L'Equipe*, "I judged in my soul and conscience.... I considered the Russians were the best." She also spoke of the atmosphere created by the media campaign. "I felt threatened physically," she said. "And that continued inside the shuttle and when I reached the hotel." Le Gougne asserts that a British ISU official "assailed me, scolding me for having voted for the Russians."

The awarding of a second gold medal was front-page news in most US newspapers and the first item on the evening television reports.

The news was greeted with a banner headline stretching across four columns of the February 16 *New York Times*. The newspaper devoted its two lead articles to the issue, with another two pages worth of reports further back in the edition. The *Times*, which ran dozens of articles about the controversy, editorialized *twice* in the course of the week about the figure skating competition, declaring the gold medal awarded to the Russian pair an “injustice.”

The Russian media and political establishment likewise plunged into the fray. Deputy Prime Minister Valentina Matviyenko called the controversy “an unscrupulous row which should not be in the spirit of the Olympic movement.” President Vladimir Putin weighed in by sending Berezhnaya and Sikharulidze a telegram congratulating them on their “brilliant victory.” The February 15 edition of *Izvestiya* ran a headline, “By Crook or by Hook, America demands That Our Only Olympic Medal Be Taken Away.”

It is impossible, based on publicly available information, to sort out the conflicting charges and make an objective determination as to whether the judges’ verdict in the February 11 pairs event was tainted. Nor is it a question of being “for” or “against” the Canadian or Russian pair. There are undoubtedly valid arguments on both sides of that issue. For the most part, moreover, the skaters themselves have behaved rather well. They have not been the main instigators of the furor.

One thing is certain: the unseemly manner in which the dispute has been handled, with arm twisting from the IOC and a resultant rush to judgment, can only impede a serious investigation into the charges of rigged marks. If, indeed, the French judge agreed to a swap with the Russians, or in some other way allowed her vote to be influenced by outside pressure, she has committed a serious offense and should be barred from the sport, and perhaps prosecuted for fraud. But neither that question, nor many others, could possibly be properly examined in the time that has lapsed since the disputed event, especially given the heated and poisoned atmosphere created by an unscrupulous and sensationalist media.

Who tried to pressure Le Gougne? Was she the only one? Is it possible she did not report such an attempt, if it occurred, because such things are commonplace? What role have corporate and media interests played, if any, in attempting to influence the outcome of Olympic events?

The proceedings of the past week were clearly not motivated by a determination on the part of the IOC executive to get to the truth and root out corruption. On the contrary, they have been conducive to a cover-up.

Beyond the question of the functioning of Olympics officials, there is a more basic question: what accounts for the transformation of a disputed call in a sports event into a political controversy of international dimensions?

The shocked tones of the commentators when they discuss the possibility that politics and corruption might have had something to do with the outcome of the skating event are disingenuous to the point of absurdity. The Olympic Games are principally about politics, nationalism and big business.

Crass commercialism played a major role in fueling the media frenzy over the figure skating event. NBC, in particular, had a monetary stake in its outcome. The network, which has made a huge investment in obtaining the rights to broadcast the Games, had heavily promoted the Canadian pair, featuring them in their promotion for the Olympics. Ratings for the Games had languished prior to the February 11 pairs competition. It would not be beyond the network moguls to

ignite a public scandal in order to drive up the ratings and boost advertising revenues.

One commentator has called the Games part of the “sport-media complex.” The price tag for the Summer Games is now above \$2 billion. The IOC stands to receive more than \$3.5 billion in television-rights fees from NBC for games through 2008. Corporations pay at least \$40 million each to be official Olympic sponsors over a four-year period.

This year’s Games have been dubbed by some the “Bribery” Olympics. Revelations that cash payments and other benefits were provided to IOC members to influence their vote to award the 2002 Olympic Games to Salt Lake City forced the resignation of the leaders of the city’s organizing committee in early 1999.

But commercialism alone cannot explain the extraordinary, even bizarre dimensions of the figure skating uproar. Even more decisive is the malignant state of international political relations, which found a peculiar expression in the dispute over the pairs event. That incident became a prism through which the embittered and tense relations between the US and Europe, especially France, and the US and Russia were refracted.

The normal protocols of the Olympics were ripped apart under conditions of an unprecedented eruption of American militarism and jingoism. The Bush administration and the US media have been shameless in exploiting the Salt Lake City Games to promote Washington’s drive for global hegemony, packaged for public consumption as a “war on terrorism” launched in response to the events of September 11.

The belligerent and reckless stance of the Bush administration has increasingly shocked and angered the Europeans. It is no secret that many in the Bush administration look on the French government as a leftist fifth column, and many within the French establishment consider the present US government a threat to their own imperialist interests. There are similar feelings of resentment between Washington and Moscow.

American chauvinism is increasingly an object of scorn and hatred throughout the world. A column in the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented harshly on the February 8 opening ceremony of the Salt Lake City games. It noted that “The Iranian team marched out in the Parade of Nations to be greeted by American broadcaster NBC referring to the athletes as part of President Bush’s ‘axis of evil.’... The Mormon Tabernacle Choir could well have begun the national anthem with, ‘Oh say can you see ... the biggest display of nationalism since Berlin in 1936.’ NBC made frequent crosses to American troops in Kandahar, Afghanistan, who pointed to the American flag on their military uniforms and chanted, ‘U-S-A.’”

No one has come out of the skating medal furor unsullied: not the IOC, the ISU, the various skating federations, nor, of course, the North American media. The Olympic Games themselves have been irreparably polluted by commercialism, greed, political interest and chauvinist hysteria.



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