

The 2026 Winter Olympics: Remarkable athleticism poisoned by nationalist chauvinism

Andy Thompson
27 February 2026

The 2026 Winter Olympics in Milano-Cortina, Italy closed on Sunday after 17 days of competition between the most talented athletes in the world. On the one hand, the Games provided a stage for truly breathtaking displays of human achievement. On the other, these feats were muddied by the worst forms of national chauvinism and overshadowed by the looming threat of international economic conflict and war.

Viewership estimates already are reporting that the 2026 games will be the most watched winter Olympics in history. In the US, NBC has reported over 23.5 million daily viewers, with approximately two-thirds of the total US population having watched at least one event. Globally, the audience reached well into the billions.

There is an almost universal admiration for the athletes and for good reason. Taken at face value, the “Olympic ideal” is ostensibly an expression of internationalism—a celebration of extraordinary athletic ability realized through equal competition by all the peoples of the world.

From a purely athletic standpoint the games saw several historic achievements. France’s Laurence Fournier Beaudry and Guillaume Cizeron secured a remarkably beautiful Ice Dance gold, while Brazil and Kazakhstan celebrated their first-ever Winter Olympic golds. Norway’s Johannes Høsflot Klæbo won six gold medals, becoming the most decorated winter Olympian of all time.

But the realization of a genuine Olympic spirit is at direct odds with a global political order characterized by capitalist economic competition teetering on the edge of world war. For this reason, the games are used to promote the most filthy forms of nationalism, pitting nations against one another as bitter rivals rather than competing as equals in sport. The degeneration of the games has reached the point where the International Olympic Committee is little more than a direct tool of imperialism.

The most obvious example, and a recurring blight on the Olympics, is the continuing ban on Russian and Belarusian

participation from international competitions. Despite being home to athletes capable of competing in nearly every event, men and women from these countries are barred entirely or forced to compete under “neutral” status. This anti-Russian campaign began with the politicized doping allegations following the 2014 Sochi Games and have expanded to ban Russia from essentially all international competitions since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Even to compete as a neutral athlete, Russian competitors have to state their political opposition to the Russian government, which can lead to major personal consequences. The IOC’s requirements specifically state that “Athletes who actively support the war [in Ukraine] cannot compete.”

The position of the Olympic Committee is immensely hypocritical. While Russian athletes are treated as pariahs, Israel is permitted to compete with full national honors and state sponsorship, even as it continues its ethnic cleansing operations in Gaza. The difference is only that the reactionary Russian invasion is an obstacle to imperialist interests, while the genocide in Gaza advances them.

Among the most grotesque examples of the toxic environment has been the media coverage surrounding the US Men’s hockey victory over Canada. This match has been deliberately poisoned by the escalating trade war measures initiated by the Trump administration against Canada and its threats to annex the country. The Olympic match up was billed as a high-stakes rematch of the 2025 Four Nations Face-Off, a tournament in which Canada defeated the US in an overtime final after an earlier preliminary meeting saw three fist fights erupt within the first nine seconds of play.

It is worth noting that in both the Olympics and the earlier tournament, Russian teams were not allowed to participate. Despite being among the few other countries capable of fielding a team on a similar competitive level to that of the US and Canada in hockey.

FBI Director Kash Patel, who is leading the coverup of the

Epstein child sex trafficking ring of billionaires and politicians, traveled to Milan and inserted himself into the post-game celebrations. In scenes reminiscent of a frat house, Patel was filmed in the locker room chugging beer and spraying champagne alongside the players. Patel subsequently called US President Donald Trump to speak with the team. During the call, Trump invited the men to attend his State of the Union address, promising to send a “military plane” to collect them.

In a display of sexism, while on the call Trump offered a belated and insulting invitation to the US Women’s hockey team, who had secured their own gold medals days prior. He remarked begrudgingly that he would be obligated to also invite the women and “probably would be impeached” if he failed to include them. The women’s team, to their credit, declined the invitation, though officially citing scheduling conflicts.

A group of the men’s team did ultimately travel to Washington to attend the state of the union. As they were called upon by Trump, Democrats and Republicans alike filled the Congress hall with chants of “USA,” the American equivalent to the “Sieg Heil.” Trump also announced he would award the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the US, to Connor Hellebuyck, the US goalie whose performance significantly contributed to the win.

The toxic atmosphere surrounding the 2026 Winter Olympics was perhaps most starkly exemplified by the sustained and targeted harassment of freestyle skier Eileen Gu by figures within the American political establishment. Gu, a world-class athlete and medal contender, became a lightning rod for nationalist controversy after making the personal decision in 2019 to compete for China, her mother’s home country, rather than the United States, where she was born and had previously represented earlier in her athletic career.

Her decision in 2019 prompted disturbing attacks against her, with online threats escalating to real crimes, including a break-in at her student dorm room at Stanford University and an assault on campus. Despite this, Gu never backed down from her decision and remained with the Chinese team.

The right-wing media has attempted to cast her decision as a betrayal of the United States. Speaking to Fox News, US Vice President JD Vance attacked Gu along these lines, “I certainly think that someone who grew up in the United States of America, who benefited from our education system, who benefited from our liberties—I would hope they would want to compete with the United States of America. I’m going to root for American athletes, and I think part of that is people who identify themselves as Americans, not

people who use our country for its resources and then turn their backs on it when it’s convenient,” he said.

Gu would win three medals at the games including a gold in her signature half pipe event.

There were important signs of opposition among some athletes. Initially the US Olympic hospitality center was forced to change its name from “The Ice House” to “The Winter House” due to complaints from US athletes not wanting to be associated with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

In an interview that was later attacked by Trump, freestyle skier Hunter Hess told the press, “It brings up mixed emotions to represent the U.S. right now I think. It’s a little hard. There’s obviously a lot that I’m not the biggest fan of and I think a lot of people aren’t. If it aligns with my moral values I feel like I’m representing it—just because I wear the flag doesn’t mean I represent everything that’s going on in the U.S. I just kind of want to do it for my friends and my family and the people that support me getting here.”

Hess’s teammate, Chris Lillis, went further, explicitly referencing the ICE raids in Minneapolis and the protests that followed, “I feel like as a country we need to focus on respecting everybody’s rights and making sure that we’re treating our citizens, as well as anybody, with love and respect. I feel heartbroken about what’s happening in the United States. I hope that when people look at athletes competing in the Olympics they realize that’s the America we’re trying to represent,” he said.

US snowboarders Bea Kim and Maddie Mastro also voiced their opposition. Kim emphasized that “diversity is what makes us a very strong country,” while Mastro added: “I’m also saddened with what’s happening at home. It’s really tough and I feel like we can’t turn a blind eye to that.”

Gus Kenworthy, who competed for Great Britain but lives in the US, posted a protest video online against the presence of ICE agents in Milan, who were acting as a security detail for JD Vance. Kenworthy stated, “You can love the U.S. and be proud to be an American—I am—and still think it can be better. Just because you love the U.S. doesn’t mean you stand with this administration and stand behind their policies. I do not support ICE. I think it’s absolutely evil and awful and terrifying. Officers are essentially acting with impunity... racially profiling people, rounding up black and brown folks and kidnapping them in unmarked vehicles.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)