

2-26-1992

The Winter Olympics

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Winter Olympics" (1992). *On Sport and Society*. 220.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/220>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
February 26, 1992

After sixteen days the Winter Olympics in Albertville have ended and like all the previous winter games, these produced their share of great stories, great performances, and disappointments. It's difficult to pick out the highlights, but for me several moments stand out.

In ski jumping the come-from-behind team victory by Finland, overtaking the Austrians, was the most dramatic moment of the games. With three Austrians and three Finns having jumped, the CBS commentators had already awarded the gold to the Austrian team. But Toni Nieminen, the sixteen-year old phenom, was yet to jump. When he did, he flew like a great bird, hanging in the air, skis turned out to form a V, leaning forward until his nose was parallel to the tips of the skis. Then he held the pose until the last possible mini-second before a perfect telemark landing. His distance was breathtaking, his style was near perfection. The final Austrian jumper need not have bothered. Finland, or rather Toni Nieminen, had wrested the gold medal from the Austrians who scanned the scoreboard in dazed disbelief.

At sixteen Toni Nieminen looks to be a worthy successor to fellow Finn Matti Nykanen who had dominated the sport of ski jumping for so long. Nieminen returned home with three medals, the youngest competitor ever to win gold at the Winter Games.

In speed-skating Bonnie Blair won two gold medals, and became the only woman to ever win three gold medals in speed skating, and the only one to successfully defend a gold in speed skating. Watching Bonnie Blair on speed-skates has become a familiar site at the Winter Games, and the television people never seem to tire of repeating the story of the young woman from Champaign, Illinois, who has been adopted by that community. It is a heartwarming story and perhaps it is repeated so often to reassure people that the Olympic myth of amateurism is not entirely dead, and that there still is some semblance of purity out there in the heartland of America. Whatever the case may be, it should not detract from the achievements of this remarkable athlete, who may be back in two years to add to her medal count.

On the men's side in speed skating was Dan Jansen. Who could forget his tragic story at Calgary as he lost his concentration and fell twice, while trying to skate through the death of his sister. Again at Albertville he was unable to win a medal. Just

three weeks before he had set a world record for the 500 meters, but he finished fourth well off the pace in an event he had been dominating all season. In the thousand meter race he was skating at a gold medal pace, but ran out of gas in the final 400 meters, finishing 26th. Jansen already has reservations for Lillihammer, as he continues what has become a quest for an Olympic medal. He may never find more than windmills.

In Hockey the biggest tease of the games took place as the U.S. team skated their way through their division, and into the medal round. Unfortunately it turned out that their division was the weaker of the two, as all three medal winners came out of the other group. Nonetheless this team achieved much more than anyone expected, and allowed the entire nation to dream for nearly two weeks before the Unified Team, and then the Czechs, gave us all a nasty wakeup call. But it was a nice run.

The Unified Team, the Soviets, under the familiar direction of Viktor Tikhonov once again demonstrated that hockey is one of the great inventions in the history of sport, and that the inventors have forsaken the beauty of the game, for hitting. In the process the Canadians seem to have lost their ability to play hockey at the highest possible level. The Soviets skated circles around the Canadians and the U.S. both of whom seemed so intent on "taking the body" that they forgot the basic object of the game, to put the puck in the net. But then "taking the body" has always been the refuge of those whose playing skills were not up to the demands of the competition. In that sense it was pleasure to see them lose, and have the game itself vindicated.

In skiing the performance of Alberto Tomba of Italy was extraordinary to see, with his successful defense of a gold medal in the Men's Super G, making him the only one ever to defend a gold medal in Alpine skiing. It was a shame he had to settle for a silver in the slalom.

The Ice Dancing competition as usual was dominated by the Soviets as was the pair's competition. In both cases the Russians brought that extra dimension to the ice, almost a sense of desperation. They have an ability to reach into the soul, in ways that others do not, and the result is a depth of emotion that is both disturbing, and a thing of beauty, at one in the same time. In the men's and women's singles competition the performances were flawed. Almost everyone fell, as the pressure that has been brought to these particular events has grown way out of proportion. The anguish of Midori Ito was painful, muted

only by the joy of her performance in the exhibitions after the pressure was off.

These Winter games will also be remembered for Herschal Walker's proving that bobsled is a team sport, the dominance of the Norwegian cross country team, the unification of Germany and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the great achievements of the women of North America who totally outperformed the male athletes of the U.S. and Canada.

The great thing is that the next Winter Olympics is only two years away.

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