

2-19-1992

## The Winter Olympics - Some History

Richard C. Crepeau  
University of Central Florida, [richard.crepeau@ucf.edu](mailto:richard.crepeau@ucf.edu)

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Other History Commons](#), [Sports Management Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)  
Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety>  
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Public History at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in On Sport and Society by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Winter Olympics - Some History" (1992). *On Sport and Society*. 312.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/312>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE  
February 20, 1992

For nearly two weeks now the Sixteenth Winter Olympics has filled television screens across the world. In the United States CBS and TNT have carried countless hours of competition.

The Winter Olympics have never drawn the audience that the Summer Games have, but for me they are easily the superior version of Baron Pierre De Coubertin's invention. When the modern Olympics were created and first held in 1896 they were summer only. Winter sports were housed in the summer games, with ice skating events taking place as early as the 1908 games, and ice hockey joining the games in 1920.

The Scandinavian countries along with the British pushed hard for a separate winter version of the Olympics, to showcase those sports that were for the most part invented in those nations. The opposition, including that of Coubertin, saw winter sports as involving too narrow a geographical base. These games could not bring together the youth of all the world in the way the summer games did. Despite the opposition the advocates of winter sports prevailed and the first winter Olympics was held at Chamonix, in France, from January 24 to February 4, 1924, establishing the tradition that the winter games should precede the summer games.

Not surprisingly the Norwegians dominated the skiing events with 11 medals, and the Finns dominated the speed-skating events winning four of the five gold medals at stake. The only other gold medal in speed-skating went to Charles Jewtraw of the U.S. who won the gold in the 500 meters.

The 1928 games at St. Moritz were again dominated by the Scandinavians, and the '28 games produced the first gold medal for Sonja Henie, who would return in 1932 and '36 to repeat the feat. In the process she established the tradition of women's figure skating as the glamor event of the winter games. Sonja Henie went on to a career as movie star and ice show performer, and became, for U.S.O.C. president Avery Brundage the first of many symbols of betrayal of the amateur Olympic ideal. Brundage would remain an opponent not only of professionalism, but also commercialism, team sports, and even the winter games themselves.

In 1932 the winter games came to Lake Placid and the United States for the first time, and in 1936 the winter version of the Nazi Olympics were held in Garmisch. Then it was time off for war, with the Winter Games returning in 1948 again at St. Moritz. Neither Germany nor Japan was there. The winter games quickly reestablished their place, and from this point on grew in interest and stature. Red Barber was the only radio reporter at the 1948 winter games, and there were only a few newspaper people at St. Moritz. The memorable moments in 1948 were a gold medal performance in men's figure skating by Dick Button, and Gretchen Fraser's gold in the women's slalom. Button, from Harvard, would repeat his feat four years later at Oslo.

For the first time in 1952 at Oslo the Winter Olympics were contested in a Scandinavian country, and for the first time women competed in nordic skiing events. Perhaps the most important development in the Winter Games came in 1956 at Cortina in Italy when the Soviet Union competed for the first time. This brought the atmosphere of the Cold War to the Olympics, and initiated the Soviet-U.S. rivalry that would be the focus of the Olympics for many people over the years.

1960 was notable for the addition of women's speed-skating, and for the fact that the American hockey team led by goalie Jack McCartan won the gold medal on an outdoor rink in Squaw Valley. The United States hockey team would win the gold again exactly 20 years later at Lake Placid. In 1964 at Innsbruck and 1968 at Grenoble interest in the Winter games increased, and a world-wide television audience was building. 1968 also made superstars out of Peggy Fleming and Jean-Claude Killy, the organizer of the 1992 winter games in France. By this time the Alpine skiing events had clearly joined figure skating as glamor events. The endorsements and professional opportunities awaiting the medal winners in skiing had become enormous, much to the dismay of Avery Brundage, by that time the I.O.C. President.

As the games grew in size and popularity the television audience and the crowds in attendance increased correspondingly. One indicator of the increasing stature of the Winter Games is the cost of TV rights paid by the American networks. In 1960 it was a mere \$50,000, by 1968 rights fees had jumped to \$2.5M, \$10M in 1976, \$15.5M for the Lake Placid games in 1980, and then in 1984 at Sarajevo the fee was \$91.5M. The figure of \$309M for the Calgary games in 1988 was staggering and an aberration. Realism returned this year with the rights fee of \$243M for the Albertville games.

As the coverage has grown in the United States it has grown world-wide as well. The winter games, like those of summer, are beamed around the world by satellite, and as they have been seen around the world they have produced such phenomena as the Jamaican Bobsled team, the Senegalese ski team, and the Moroccan cross-country team. Winter sports have spread to climates that are without ice and snow, and competitors have come from those locals, not to win medals, but to compete and experience the joy of sport. Somehow these competitors seem more in the Olympic spirit than the advertising billboards disguised as skiers, or the skaters who will glide their way to professional careers and triple lutz their way to multi-million dollar endorsements.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport, to be a bad luger.

Copyright 1992 by Richard C. Crepeau