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The Seventeenth Winter Olympics

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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The Seventeenth Winter Olympics at Lillehammer roll on with moments of high drama, high controversy, and great disappointment. There were many highlights and several events, individuals, and trends that stand out at these games.

After Dan Jansen's continuing failure in the 500 meter last week, his gold medal and world record in the 1000 qualify as a great moment. The frustration had built since Jansen fell at Calgary and then continued in Albertville. For Jansen to finally win a race, in what was to be his final race at the Olympics, and for him to do it with a world record, and to do it while slipping twice, was truly high drama. Perhaps not quite as significant as CBS made it out to be, but close.

The other big story out of men's speedskating came from Johann Olav Koss, the 25 year old Norwegian medical student who won three gold medals and set three world records in the process. In the 10,000 meters he shattered his own world record by an astounding 12.99 seconds, and shocked himself in the process. His other records and medals came in the 5,000 and 1,500 meter races. Also impressive was the fact that Koss donated his winnings from the skating federation to the Olympic relief fund for Sarajevo, an act that set off an avalanche of donations from around the world.

In women's speedskating America's girl next door Bonnie Blair won two more gold medals in the 500 and 1000 meter races to give her five, more than any other U.S. woman Olympian. Somehow after all these years Blair has managed to retain her plain, simple, middle-American personality, and the sense that there may still be some small part of the Olympic ideal left in this over publicized and over commercialized spectacle. In the 1500 meters Blair finished in fourth place but skated a personal best something she has not accomplished in over five years.

Ski jumping and Cross Country also produced some very high drama. On the big hill Sunday Germany's Jens Weissflog came down for his second jump, sailed high into the air, stuck his nose out over the tip of his skis, and produced the glorious sight of man in flight. There is nothing else quite like ski jumping, and this event had a fabulous finish. Weissflog had a near perfect jump, and then had to watch and wait as Norway's Espen Bredesen, Espen the Eagle, prepared to come down the 120 meter hill. The Eagle led after the first jump, having set a hill record, giving

him a comfortable lead on Weissflog. The home crowd was in a frenzy as the man who is the best in World Cup competition came flying off the hill. The noise was deafening, but in the end it was Weissflog who would take home the gold. The sight of Jens Weissflog standing alone at the bottom of the hill, skis crossed above his head, casting a long shadow across the snow, and the Norwegian crowd now cheering him, was another great moment. There days later Weissflog led the German's to a gold in the team competition.

Another upset came in the super bowl of cross-country skiing. This was the 40K relay race in which the Norwegians were heavily favored, and which 110,000 people had turned out to see, some camping in the woods for a week to have a choice view of the competition. At last CBS offered some extended coverage of a cross-country ski event, and it was a beauty. Through the first half of the race Norway, Finland, and Italy traded off the lead. Then in the second half of the race it became a two team struggle between Norway and Italy. When it ended it was Bjorn Daehlie for Norway finishing just .4 of a second behind Italy's anchorman Silvio Fauner. The length of the race, the massive effort involved by each of the skiers in the four-man relay, the tiny margin of victory after 40K, and the intensity of the crowd made this the most exciting event of this Winter Olympic games.

Then there was the controversy in the Ice Dancing competition when Torvill and Dean finished third behind the two Russian couples of Maya Usova and Aleksandr Zhulin who took the silver, and Oksana Grischuk and Yevgeny Platov who won the gold. In point of fact there wasn't much to choose from in the technical side of this event, and the medal's were awarded on the basis of artistic taste and preference. This reinforces the suspicion among many that Ice Dancing really isn't a sport, but rather an art form, and that any event that relies so heavily on subjective judgement should not be in the Olympics.

The other great surprise came from the American Alpine skiers who walked off with gold and silver medals. Tommy Moe, Peekabo Street, and Diann Roffe-Steinrotter surprised their countrymen and the other competitors. As for the Harding-Kerrigan story it looks to be over. Praise the Lord.

We'll take a final and more critical look at these Winter Olympics next week.

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.

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