Ski Jumping at the Olympics

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The first thing that you need to know coming from Florida is that it is called the Winter Olympics because it takes place in the winter. Therefore it is cold. At times it is bitterly cold, but most of the time it is just cold. As this was my first Olympics and the Winter Games are my favorite none of this mattered as we headed off for Olympic Park and the 90m ski jumping competition on Sunday.

Ski jumping might be a better event to see on television because you get a number of different angles that you don't get in the stadium, even if you move around a bit in the standing room areas. On the first day we were in stadium seating looking right up the hill and the jump.

Each time a competitor starts down the jump and heads into the air the crowd cheers and the sound of cowbells fills the air. Flags and banners wave from the appropriate country. The Japanese fans have the most interesting with their colorful banners done in characters of the Japanese language. They also have large fish wind socks they wave back and forth. The Japanese jumpers have the most interesting style because they lean out so far over their skis with their nose appearing to extend below the tips.

The excitement generated by each jump is considerable and the excitement of a long jump is electric. The Finns are generally considered the best jumpers in the world and they performed well, along with the Austrians who also have a reputation as being among the best in the world.

The day would belong to neither Finns nor Austrians but rather to a young twenty-year-old Swiss jumper who had not won anything of note prior to this event and had taken a very bad fall a few weeks before the games. This was Simon Ammann, who in street clothes and wearing his glasses has an uncanny resemblance to Harry Potter.

The Olympics has the ability to bring out the very best or worst in an athlete. Some rise to the occasion, some are battered by it. Each Olympics seems to see the emergence of some new athlete who uses the events to announce to the world, “Here I am.” This day on the 90m hill Simon Ammann
made such an announcement as his combined point total exceeded that of all others, and whose second jump brought him to the fore as it was the longest of the day.

The excitement generated by this young man sent a roar across the mountain at Olympic Park and when all the jumps had ended his Swiss teammates lifted Simon into the air, then tackled him, and jostled him in victory. When the flowers were awarded he thrust his arms and skis into the air, and his smile was a sight to behold. The Swiss fans were elated and shouted and waved their red and white flags in delight. At this moment all the commercialization drops away and the pure essence of sport flows across both fans and competitors alike. It was such a great pleasure to be there for the moment that in fact only served as prelude.

Lech Walesa was in the crowd that day to cheer on Adam Malysz the young Polish sensation known affectionately in Poland as Batman. There was a large contingent of Polish fans with their flags and signs proclaiming the wonders of Malysz to the world. He gave a fine performance with an excellent jump marred only by a little wobble on the landing. He left with the bronze medal while Sven Hannawald of Austria won the silver.

On Wednesday it was back to Olympic Park for the 120m jump an event all the more exciting than the 90m at least by the same ratio as the difference in distance. Simon Ammann was back and everyone now knew him. Adam Malysz was there to reassert his superiority on the big hill, the strongest of his events. The Finns lay in wait as they always do, while the Germans and Austrians hoped to claim a share of the glory.

There were two rounds of jumping and all eyes were on Ammann and Malysz. Again the Swiss and Polish fans were there in force in crazy hats and waving their red and white flags. The German flags were much in evidence and the Austrian band, which seemed to be at every skiing event, was there to add to the festive atmosphere.

In round one Ammann and Hannawald were tied for first, while Adam Malysz was close behind. It seemed that the second round would be a battle between these three for the available medals. Two Finns were bunched at a distant fourth and fifth but only a major disaster could vault one of them to a bronze medal.
All through the first twenty-seven jumps in the second round the anticipation was building. Each jumper seemed to be just a little stronger than the previous one. Then Adam Malysz who stood third at the end of the first round came to the start gate. His jump was magnificent in both distance and form as he hit near the 130m mark.

Then came the boy wonder from Switzerland. Certainly the pressure applied by Malysz and the moment would be too much for him. As Ammann came down the jump the crowd was in a frenzy, and when he flew gracefully and gloriously to a distance of 133m to take the lead the crowd broke into a roar that did not stop for what seemed like ten minutes. Simon Ammann had risen to the occasion again and took the crowd with him. He stood at the bottom of the hill and pumped his arms and fists in the air as his distance and points were recorded on the big board. It was for me the defining moment of this my first Winter Games.

One jumper remained. The German, Sven Hannawald, who was tied with Ammann after the first jump was yet to come down the hill and when he did the Germans fans screamed, cow bells filled the air, and those who wanted to see a double by Simon held their breath. When he took off and soared through the air it was apparent that this would be a long jump in excess of 130 meters, and indeed it was at 131. In the excitement of the moment I didn’t even notice that in the split-second following his landing Hannawald had fallen and with the fall went his silver medal. Malysz would now claim the silver, and Matti Hautamaeki of Finland would take the bronze following his very strong jump.

Simon Ammann now held the gold medal in both the 90m and 120m jumps, the double, completed at the Olympics in the first major victories of his career. The crowd cheered, the press gathered to get their interviews and photos, we gathered too to try to get a look at his remarkable young man and perhaps even get a photo. We joined the crowd as we had in during Ammann's two jumps with the chant of “Si-mon, Si-mon.”

At the flower presentation Simon Ammann once again was on the podium, smiling an enormous smile, and with just a slight look of bewilderment.
As we left the viewing area and headed for the exit we saw the Polish fans in national costume and several photo opportunities followed. There were also two Elvis impersonators on hand and they were clearly crowd favorites. People from across the world were getting their pictures taken with the King or Kings. These two wore zany costumes and bad wigs with sideburns pasted to the bows of their sunglasses. It was so tacky it was wonderful, and they delivered the “Thank you very much” line with great flare. It was a festive time in the aftermath of the great finish to the jump.

At the end of the evening we saw an interview with our new hero. At Swiss House where the celebration was on, Len Berman asked Simon how it felt to be a national hero. His answer could not have been better. “I am not a hero, I am only a ski jumper.”

He should be given a third gold medal for perspective.

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

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