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## The Olympics on TV and Live and in Person

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(The second in a series of impressions  
from the Winter Games)

The Olympic experience in person is considerably, perhaps even radically, different from the Olympic experience on television, especially American television. NBC's "virtually live" Olympics, which we were told was necessary during the games from Sydney because of the great time difference, continues at the Winter Games for some complex of other bogus reasons offered up by NBC.

Too many events continue to be taped for later broadcast in a format that allows for faux drama manufactured by television producers. In this format most athletes tend to be Americans or in medal contention, or they have suffered a particularly spectacular accident. The ordinary competitor might as well be on another planet as far as NBC is concerned.

This makes the Olympic experience in person radically different and considerably more satisfying in many ways. At the actual games there are many competitors who never really have a chance to medal, and who are not in the same class as those who compete for the medals. This was true at nearly every event we attended.

At the Men's 10K cross-country Free Pursuit there were approximately seventy-six skiers in the classical leg and the field was trimmed to sixty for the free style section of the competition. In the classical leg there were skiers like Jayaram Khadka of Nepal, Isaac Menyoli of Cameroon, and Phillip Boit of Kenya all of whom finished far back in the field. Nonetheless they were cheered as they came to the finish line and never gave up their effort.

In the free style portion of the race the field was cut to sixty and here the effort was even more extraordinary as well after the three medal winners had been determined the skiers continued to give total effort down the stretch. Whenever skiers approached the finish in proximity to one another, whether for 35<sup>th</sup> place or 58<sup>th</sup> the two or three or four skiers gave every ounce of effort to finish ahead of those around them some three to four minutes behind the medal winners.

Similarly in the men's Super-G we saw this phenomenon repeated. In this race the best skiers were all finished by the 15<sup>th</sup> competitor on the list and as the field continued down the hill and the times got longer the crowd continued to cheer. These skiers were there to compete and not to win. The skiers from Chile, Ireland, Argentina and Australia who finished four to seven seconds behind the winner all were cheered on with shouts and cowbells as they braved a very harrowing hill. For the most part the crowd remained in their seats except for the few who left early, no doubt Los Angeles Dodger fans unable to break old habits.

Similarly with the Women's Downhill the very best skiers were in the middle of the field but the fans stayed to the end cheering on all who braved this treacherous hill. As for the ski jumpers the cowbells rang and the crowd cheered from start to finish as everyone seemed to realize that competing was every bit as important as winning.

Of course this is not necessarily good television and so this sort of thing is not seen on NBC. Who after all wants to watch the Hungarian Super-G skier come in nearly 29 seconds behind the leader? Or the African cross-country competitors finish five or ten minutes after the leader? But indeed these are among the inspiring moments of any Olympics. These are the competitors who contribute to the growth of their sport in their countries by inspiring some young man or woman to compete in a new sport for their nation. This clearly was part of the motivation for the President of the Nepal IOC and his wife for attending the cross-country event.

The other great difference in attending the Olympics rather than watching them on television is to experience the international crowd with their costumes (national and otherwise), unique ways of cheering on their athletes, and their signs and hats supporting the athletes and displaying their patriotism. A study of international hat styles alone would reveal much to a trained cultural anthropologist of fashion. Face painting in national colors seems now to be a nearly universal trait.

The excitement generated within the crowd, the waving of flags, the ringing of cowbells, the whistles and shouts, the horns and the bands all serve to create a festive and exciting atmosphere that television can only vaguely

convey. The Elvis impersonators gave a particular American touch at some venues.

Of course attending the games limits your vision. You do not see all the venues or all the events. We missed the great pairs-skating event and the attendant uproar that followed. That night we were in downtown Salt Lake wandering the streets and did not see the skating. Being away from the television a good deal of the time we also were not subjected to the NBC obsessive reporting of this "great injustice."

One wonders if today the same sort of thing would happen if it had been Apolo Ono who was disqualified and lost the gold medal in short track speed skating rather than Dong-Sung Kim of Korea.

Television does do some things very well. I did miss some of the stunning replays available for ski jumping or the close-ups of the skiers. The new technology allowing for direct comparisons of the ski runs of competitors skiing at separate times is indeed interesting. Clearly also the luge, bobsleigh, and skeleton are better seen on television rather than in person where if you are lucky you see no more than a blur for 1.5 seconds. Also the downhill fans see about 15% of each competitors run, and for Super-G events fans can see only 30-40% of each run on the hill. Video screens compensate for this problem but not adequately.

These were not the same games I have seen all my life whether hosted by Jim McKay or Bob Costas. There simply is no substitute for being there.

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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