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Olympic Impressions: Drugs, Judging, High Quality Hockey

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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(Fourth and last in a series of
impressions from the Winter Games)

Looking back on the two plus weeks of the Winter Olympics a number of things stand out. As I have noted here this was an extraordinary experience for me as I had never been to any Olympics before. Beyond that I would like to look at three areas that seem of some significance to me.

First, the area of drug testing and blood doping. Having watched Johann Muehlelegg in the 10K Cross-Country Pursuit, I must say I was a bit taken aback when it was announced that he had failed a blood doping test which led to the revocation of his win in the 50K cross-country race. His huge margin of victory in the 10K Pursuit now looked suspicious. Indeed the drug issue casts a shadow on all events. When Derek Parra took fifteen seconds off his personal best in the 5000m speed skating event my suspicion was immediately aroused. This is unfair to Parra and to all other athletes.

Muehlelegg and the Russian women who were charged with doping all were using a new substance, darbepoetin, which became available in October and is not yet on the IOC banned substance list. However their hemoglobin levels had reached unacceptable levels.

The fact is that the IOC and any other sporting authority simply can't keep up with the pharmaceutical technology and never will. The fight to drive out drugs from sport is a losing one, and given the fact that the athlete has already been so highly objectified by other bio-techniques and technologies it seems absurd to me press the drug issue.

Selena Roberts of the New York Times pointed out prior to the games that the IOC does not concern itself with the issue of supplements that promise the winning edge to athletes. Roberts reports that a quarter of the 600 over-the-counter nutritional supplements in one study contained banned substances that could lead to a positive drug test. However an article on "resistance training with supplements" was featured in a U.S.O.C. publication last fall: it recommended that various carbohydrate and protein drinks, mixes and shakes available on the commercial market could be consumed after a workout to 'increase the amount of

anabolic hormones in the body.'" These supplements are heavily marketed to athletes at all levels and used legally in many competitions.

The hypocrisy in this area is monumental.

Second in the area of judging, especially in figure skating, the notion that anyone is surprised or shocked by "arrangements" among judges, or the predetermination of the outcomes of competitions by judges is amusing. This sort of thing has been endemic to figure skating for decades now. For any skater to crack through to medal status at a major national or international competition is extraordinary as most judges arrive at the event with their top three already selected.

The "outrage" over the pairs result was a product of NBC's campaign. There would have been a similar outrage over the women's final had Irina Slutskaya been an American and Sarah Hughes a Russian. If you examine the scores of that event you find the margin of victory by Hughes over Slutskaya to be virtually identical to that of the Russian pair over the Canadian pair. So where was Scott Hamilton's screaming voice on this one?

I am not suggesting that Hughes didn't out-skate everyone, including herself, in the long program, nor that she didn't deserve the gold. Clearly she did deserve the gold and her skating was magnificent. I am only suggesting that as usual judging of figure skating is conducted by totally different standards than other merely human events. It should remind everyone of gymnastics at the Summer Games.

If you go back and look at the scoring in all the skating events this year and over the past fifty years you will note peculiarities. There was nothing new here and nothing to get bent out of shape about. Awarding double gold medals was not a solution to the problem. Finding another judging system might be.

Finally, I do not want to leave this edition of the Winter Games without saying a few things about hockey.

Congratulations to the Canadians on their double gold in hockey. The Canadian women outplayed the U.S. team and the referee to take the gold. Women's hockey, as it had at Nagano, displayed its appeal as a game of speed and skills,

but one that needs further development around the world so that there will be other nations competing for the gold.

Men's hockey revealed the flaws in the NHL game. These great hockey players from the NHL showed that they can play a game of hockey based on skating and stick handling skills without the fighting and brutality that is routinely accepted and marketed by the NHL. In addition the wider ice and the lack of a red line open the game up to display its beauty and artistry.

As for this tournament the two U.S. v. Russia games and the final between the U.S. and Canada offered some of the best hockey I have ever seen. The Russians may well have been the best team on the ice in Salt Lake City, but for some reason they couldn't put together the necessary intensity for an entire game. The U.S. team skated extremely well in winning its games, however in the final they were clearly out-skated by the Canadians.

If there ever was a case of one team wanting, indeed needing, victory more than the other, this was it. The joy, and in some cases relief, expressed by the Canadian players and coaches, by Wayne Gretzky, and by Canadians across the world was something to behold.

Whether this moment at the end of this Winter Olympics will come to hold a place similar to the Henderson Goal and the 1972 Challenge Series between the Soviets and Canadians remains to be seen. It is clear however that for this generation of Canadians it was an extremely joyous and significant moment.

Whether any or all of this justifies the money spent to put on the Winter Games is of course another question, which for now I will not touch.

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

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