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Turin Winter Olympics

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Turin Winter Olympics
FEBRUARY 14, 2006

Here we are only five days into the Winter Olympic Games and already there have been several disappointing and magnificent moments. From the departure of Michelle Kwan to the always beautiful and astounding pairs skating, this Olympics is off to a very fast start.

For many watching the NBC version of the games here in the United States, both live and on tape delay (or virtually live as the people at NBC once tried to call it), the weaknesses of presentation by the network have been overshadowed by the drama of the events themselves. This is as it should be. We have come to expect a certain amount of smarmy drivel and bloated sentimentalism, but luckily the games themselves have trumped the nonsense.

For me it has helped that several of my Winter Olympic favorites have been on full display in the first days of competition. Women's hockey, despite the mismatches, has been a remarkable exhibition of high speed skating and deft stick handling by the American and Canadian women. In addition, the individual stories of these athletes illustrate just how significant an impact the women's movement has had on sport in North America. The rosters are full of women who have played both high school and college hockey, and who have overcome the taboo of women in hockey with the support of their parents, friends and family.

Speed skating put on a display of the grueling effort required in the 5000m and the high-speed precision required in the 500m event. It is worth noting that the two Americans who won gold in the 500m and 5000m both came to the sport via in-line skating. Chad Hedrick won the gold in the 5000m only three years after coming over to the sport. Then Joey Cheek won gold in the 500m sprint, or rather double sprint. This hair-raising test of speed and balance never fails to produce edge-of-the-chair excitement.

Another extremely attractive event is ski jumping. I think part of the appeal comes from the desire somewhere in the human spirit to take flight. To me, ski jumping offers something very close to flight, and even on the small hill I am awestruck by the sight of someone coming off the slide and defying gravity, if only for a few brief seconds. In 2002 at the jumping venue I got caught up in the crowd cheering on Simon Ammann, the Swiss

Harry Potter lookalike, who won gold in both the 90K and 120K with electrifying jumps. Unfortunately the cries of Simon! Simon! were not heard this year as Ammann failed to qualify for the second jump on the small hill. Nonetheless it was, as always, a wonder to watch.

My favorite among the winter sports offered the most beautiful and dramatic moments in these first few days of competition. The pairs figure skating has been for me the signature event of the Winter Olympics for the last forty plus years that I have been aware of its existence. During that time it has been an event dominated by Russian skaters who combine high level skill with the grace of the ballet. For twelve consecutive Winter Olympics Russian/Soviet skaters have won pairs skating. This year was no exception.

Tatiana Totmianina and Maxim Marinin, in their short program, offered a performance as near to perfection as one can get. Commenting on it later, Dick Button, who has forgotten more about skating than most of us have ever known, pointed out that this pair differed from earlier Russian champions in that they did not skate with the emotion one has come to expect from Russian skaters. He then went on to say that when you skate a near perfect program, it generates an emotion all of its own.

Totmianina and Marinin demonstrated that principle clearly on Saturday in the short program. The grace and beauty of the skating, which can only come to the surface when the skill levels are extremely high, was breathtaking. I don't know that I have ever seen anything quite like it before.

Monday night, in the free-skate, the pair was a bit more tentative, at least it seemed so at times. Skating to "Romeo and Juliet," Totmianina's delicate grace carried Marinin's strength to a level of combined excellence that made the whole greater than the sum of its parts. It couldn't reach the heights of the short program, but when it ended Marinin acknowledged the debt owed to Totmianina by kneeling in front of her and kissing her hand. For anyone else this very Russian gesture might have looked like strained theatrics, but in the history of this pair it was as natural as the more conventional embrace.

That history goes back two years to the horrendous crash at the 2004 Skate America competition in Pittsburgh when Maxim dropped Tatiana at the height of a lift. The resulting fall left Tatiana with a concussion and no memory of her crash to the ice. It left Maxim emotionally distraught and doubting his ability to perform

again. It was Tatiana Totmianina who insisted on getting back to the ice as soon as possible, and it was Tatiana that that led the pair back to the level of greatness and perfection they displayed in winning the gold medal.

If that wasn't enough drama for one night, the Chinese pair of Zhang Dan and Zhang Hao provided more. In attempting a quadruple salchow, a move never before completed in competition, Zhang Dan went crashing to the ice, legs twisted at the knee, and then slamming into the boards. It appeared that their night was over.

However, after a few minutes of recovery time, Zhang Dan was ready to resume the skate, which the Chinese couple did, skating well enough to hold second place and win the silver medal. It was a gutsy performance as they had about four minutes still to go in a program that contained a number of lifts, spins, and throws. At each such move the heart jumped in anticipation of further disaster.

What a remarkable finish to this signature event of the Winter Olympics. It was a performance that will not soon be forgotten and one that underlines the fact that the Chinese are closing the gap in figure skating, as in so many other areas of sport and life.

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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