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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Surprises at the Winter Olympics
FEBRUARY 20, 2006

As the second week of the XXth Winter Olympic games begins the surprises continue to mount. Some are truly surprises while others are simply a tribute to the slim margins of difference among elite athletes. Still others are rooted in the misplaced expectations of the press.

The biggest surprise of the week was the Swedish women's hockey team advancing to the gold medal game by beating the United States in the semi-final game in a shootout. No one anticipated this outcome, but this is why games are played rather than simply awarding medals based on assumptions of superiority. Hockey is one of those games in which you can dominate an opponent and still look up at the scoreboard to find that the score is tied at the end of the game. The U.S. women must have had that feeling against Sweden. Then when the shootout began it became a crapshoot and in the end this one belonged to the team from Sweden led by some fabulous goal tending.

The hope is that the Swedish victory will give a major boost to the development of women's hockey throughout Sweden, and indeed all of Europe. This is sorely needed if the women's game is to survive at the international level.

By the end of the second Sunday of the games the American press, or at least a good portion of it, was lamenting the "failure" of American athletes at the Winter Games. Coming in for special attention were the U.S. skiers who have collected only a few scarce medals. However, Bode Miller never claimed he would win five golds in five events. In speed skating, Chad Hedrick did not make the same claim. These were wishful thinking projections by media people unaware of the level of international competition. In men's figure skating there was a genuine disappointment when the American trio won no medals.

Somehow American athletes get pre-ordained by the press as "favorites," or at least "favorites to win a medal," in some sport or another. How such ordinations are arrived at is never clear and not surprisingly the pre-ordained often do not medal. This "failure" happens because there are a bevy of athletes in each sport who are simply as good as, or better than, the American "designated favorite." Then when the "favorite" doesn't

win or medal, it is blamed on the athlete who "failed to deliver."

This skewed reading of events shortchanges the effort of the American athletes and shortchanges the efforts of the athletes who in fact do win these medals. It is also the result of considerable ignorance of many of these sports on the part of the American media. The levels of nonsense being written by reporters from Orlando who think that the Daytona 500 is a winter sport, is either shocking or simply laughable, depending on how tolerant you feel while reading the morning paper.

It is another oddity that some athletes rise to a special occasion such as the Olympic games, stun the crowd, and win their event. Following the games they slip back into the pack, still good, but not performing at the peak they displayed in the Olympics. It is also true that some elite athletes fail under the pressure of the Olympics, or have an off day in an event, missing the opportunity to shine on this particular high profile stage. In like fashion they leave the Olympic venue, regain their skills, and continue to perform at the elite level. This is one of the great mysteries of sport and, of course, part of what is so intriguing about sport and about the Olympic games.

The biggest absurdity thus far occurred Saturday night as the Italian police raided the residence of the Austrian cross-country ski team. The result was an initial claim that doping paraphernalia had been seized at the home. Tests are yet to be done. Dick Pound, World Anti-Doping Guru, who tipped the Italian police, apparently following a tip he got from an unnamed source, prompted the raid.

The Austrian team competed Sunday in the 4X100 cross-country relay, and after being up all-night and strip-searched they faded fast in the relay finishing last. Dick Pound thus used a tip to ruin an Olympic event for Austria. If the Austrians had been doping all that was needed was a test, either preceding or following the event. This sort of harassment prior to an event would be a very nice way to manipulate the outcome of events.

Apparently Dick Pound now has carte blanche to do anything he wants to do in the name of the anti-drugs crusade that has become his obsession. "The gloves are off now," said Pound. "The public authorities and sports authorities are prepared to work together." One wonders if it will matter to anyone, other than the Austrians, if nothing comes of this raid. Let the Dick Pound Games begin!

Among the other achievements of Pound's pee patrol are finding carphedon in the system of a Russian biathlete. This stimulant was an unlisted ingredient in an over-the-counter medication given to the Russian woman, who had won gold and bronze in Salt Lake, by a doctor treating her for an ankle injury. The humane approach followed by the Anti-Doping Guru is that if it's in the system you are guilty. Too bad, so sad, you're done.

Before the games started a member of the U.S. skeleton team was detected with an ingredient, finasteride, from a hair growth drug he had been taking. He had been listing it on the proper forms as something he had been taking over the past year. But finasteride was recently put on the banned list and so the athlete was banned for a year. The appeal hearing on the eve of the Olympics acknowledged that the athlete was not cheating, was not taking finasteride as a performance enhancement, and was not aware of the violation. None of this mattered. He had the stuff in his system, so he was banned from competition.

It is estimated by some that undetected and currently undetectable doping is being done by as many as 80 percent of the athletes in some sports at the Olympics. It is also certain that the dopers will always be out front of the detectors in the detection wars. Pound's futile solution is more money, more testing, and more blind justice delivered in as cold a manner as possible.

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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