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The quest for perfection at Turin

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The quest for perfection at Turin
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With the XXth Winter Olympics now in the books, I want to reflect on a few of the many extraordinary occurrences of the past two weeks. Some of these I saw on television and some I read about. Most of these observations concern the second week of competition as I have already written about the first week.

It sometimes seems as if sportsmanship is passing out of the world of sport, especially at the elite levels of competition where so much seems to be at stake. It is especially striking when in this atmosphere an act of spontaneous sportsmanship takes place.

Early in the games, during the women's cross-country relay, Canada's Sara Renner was skiing one of the laps when her pole broke. Without hesitation a Norwegian coach, Bjoernar Haakensmoen, reached out and handed Renner a replacement pole. He later said it was a reflex and that he had not really thought before acting: "Our policy of the Norwegian team, and my policy, is we should help each other. We should compete on the same ground. Everybody should have two skis and two poles."

This remarkable act of sportsmanship enabled Renner and her skiing partner Beckie Scott to finish second and take home a silver medal. The Norwegians finished fourth, and so, at least theoretically, Haakensmoen's sportsmanship might have cost his nation a bronze medal. Across Canada, Haakensmoen's gesture provoked considerable comment and praise.

Another memorable moment came in the Italy/Russia women's hockey game when Italy scored its first goal ever in Olympic hockey. The Italian crowd cheered lustily for several minutes and the young woman who scored the goal was interviewed on television. She was extremely happy and it was one of those great small moments of the games.

The other great stories that come out of any Olympic games are those of the athletes who are at the games representing their country and are the only ones from that country. Invariably these competitors have no chance to win a medal. Instead, they are at the games to compete in the games. There will be no bonus money, no endorsements, and indeed they will have made great personal sacrifices to be there.

Cross-country skiing attracted a significant number of these competitors including skiers representing Kenya and Ethiopia. In the 15K-sprint, forty-nine year old Arturo Kinch represented Costa Rica. Two months short of his fiftieth birthday, this is Kinch's fifth Olympics. His first was at Lake Placid in 1980 where he finished 41st in the downhill. This time The Old Man and the Skis finished the cross-country course in just over an hour. He finished 96th, a little over a half-second faster than the representative of Thailand who finished 97th, and last, and ten minutes behind the skier from Nepal who finished 95th.

Victories by athletes of the host nation are usually exciting. Certainly that was true at these games when the Italians won the 4 x 10km cross-country relay, an event once owned by their rivals from Norway. When Enrico Fabris captured double gold in speed skating the Italian crowd had another major celebration and the spectators were treated to high drama. Finally, it seemed appropriate that, in the last event of the games, Giorgio di Centa of Italy won the 50K Cross-country event in a mad and furious finish.

Austria provided Alpine skiing fans with a dominant performance. In the men's slalom the Austrians swept the medals giving that nation a record 14 medals in Alpine events over the course of the games. It was the first sweep ever in an Olympic slalom event.

For Americans, curling once again appeared on the TV ratings radar, and for the first time Americans collected a medal in that sport. It was thought going into the games that the American women's team would be the first Americans to medal. Instead there would be another surprise as the American men won the bronze medal, defeating the always powerful team of Scots representing Great Britain. The pizza parlor owner, Pete Fenson, from Bemidji, Minnesota, led this group of Americans who looked and sounded like the supporting cast from the Minnesota film saga, "Fargo." Whether or not this sets off a wave of "Curling Fever" remains to be seen, but even here in Central Florida the game of the "rocks" and the "house" played on a sheet of ice featuring people furiously sweeping, attracted a following.

The performance of the Canadian women, led by the speed skaters, was most impressive. Canada won 24 medals in these games and the women won two thirds of those. Eight medals were won by the women long-track speed skaters, five from the record setting performance of Cindy Klassen. Klassen has won six medals in her career, the most ever by a Canadian athlete.

As with all Olympics, this one had its great stories of athletes coming back from career-ending injuries or illnesses to win medals or to just compete once again. There were also stories of athletes coming from war-torn countries and somehow persisting in their quest for Olympic glory. These unfortunately have become a caricature as television producers in the past decade or so have bombarded the viewers with story after story of this type.

If you step back and look at the achievements of these athletes without the music track on the video tape, the saccharine narration, and the tears running down their cheeks and across your TV set, these remain impressive tales of the human spirit. They are still one reason why we return every two years to the Olympic games.

In the end, of course, it is the quest for perfection by the imperfect, the near achievement of that perfection, and even the failures, that remain what is most attractive in the Olympics and in Sport.

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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