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The Winter Olympics Approach

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE WINTER OLYMPICS APPROACH
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With the approach of the 2018 Winter Olympics, one can only wonder what might happen. The threats of war on the Korean Peninsula, the threat to the games posed by the quiet diplomacy of the President of the United States, the possibility that Russia was to be excluded from the games and now will be only partially excluded, the decision by Gary Bettman and the National Hockey League to keep NHL players out of the games, all endangered or diminished the games in their own way.

The Olympic aim to promote peace and international understanding through the vehicle of sport has always been, at best, wishful thinking. That said, sport at the international elite level can be an example of the extraordinary capabilities of human beings and their ability to stretch themselves physically and mentally in search of perfection.

This is the ongoing appeal of the Olympics, and, for me it is the two weeks of competition at the Winter Games that I savor. Attending the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City was one of the great spectator experiences of my life. During the Winter Games, I am drawn to the television to watch the figure skating; speed skating; ski jumping; the alpine events especially the downhill; the bobsled and luge; and even the cross country now that producers and directors have learned how to present them on the television screen.

Women's hockey has become a favorite of mine because it presents hockey in its purest form as a skating and stick-handling event of great skill. Men's hockey in recent games has become a major international sporting event with the presence of the NFL players and other professionals from around the world.

Four years ago, it was reported that the most watched Olympic event on the college campuses was curling. I must admit I too got hooked and sat spellbound watching men and women throw the rock at those targets using great touch and considerable strategy. The physics of force and inertia was never this much fun in my high school and college science classes. In recent weeks, I have found myself late at night watching the Olympic Curling Trials and some of the International curling competition as NBC is priming its American audience to reconnect with curling. This is a sport with a very limited following in the United States that is extremely popular north of the border in Canada. Could curling become must see TV in the U.S. this winter?

This brings me back to the issues that have threaten the Winter Games. Apparently the immediate threat of war or nuclear destruction has dissipated. The decision of the North Koreans to participate in the games has, at least temporarily, changed the atmosphere. So the games will go on. Whether or not 'Rocket Man tweets' will return remains to be seen.

Unfortunately, the men's side of the hockey event has been heavily damaged by the imbecility of the Commissioner of the National Hockey League. His myopia has been stunning. In the past several Olympics, hockey, both internationally and in the U.S., has been given a tremendous boost via its Olympic exposure. Bettman's willingness to toss this off to protect the investment of the NHL owners is pathetic. Failing to "grow the sport" through the Olympics should be enough to require his dismissal as Commissioner. I had hoped that when Alexander Ovechkin said he would go to play for Russia regardless of the NHL position, it would lead to a major walkout by the players. It did not, and that is unfortunate as a major walkout might have saved the day and initiated Bettman's departure.

Most of the winter sports have significant numbers of Russian competitors, including many of the top performers. Some of them will be missing from the competition. It looked at one point that all of them might be banned. In fact if, as reported, Russian athletes who refused to take part in doping would not be selected for the Russian team, then none of them should be banned.

The doping scandal, as some insist on calling it, has taken its toll. It is a scandal because the Russian government has apparently directed the doping of its athletes. Evidence for this lies with the testimony of the person who allegedly designed and ran the program and then had an ethical epiphany and fled from Russia.

The reliability of Dr. Grigory Rodchenkov, who ran the Russian program, has not questioned by either WADA or other Olympic investigators, even though in his accusations he falsely implicated Martial Saugy, a chemist at the Swiss Lab involved in the testing of Sochi participants. Saugy resigned his position as director of the lab following the charges. Dick Pound said he didn't believe Saugy's claims of innocence, but now Rodchenkov has apologized for this mistake.

Why Rodchenkov who directed the Russia program for several years should be believed is explained by other investigations and a documentary film that validated much of his information.

Dick Pound, and many others in the west, are delighted by any chance they have to raise doubts about Russia. The western press, which has been incapable of leaving cold war stereotypes behind, are inclined to accept any information that discredits Russia. So, Rodchenkov is seen as a bearer of truth even though he unfairly defamed a colleague in Switzerland and had run an illegal operation for several years. In Russia, he is seen as a liar and cheat because he left the mother country and then

turned on it publicly while in exile. Generally, Russians hold those who leave their country in very low regard.

As a result of all of this, the IOC decided that Russia will not be represented as a nation at the Winter Games; however many Russian athletes will be allowed to participate. This will weaken the games somewhat, but it will not devastate the competition and render it illegitimate. This decision has led to considerable criticism of the IOC as spineless.

The drug issue simply will not go away. Athletes will keep on using them for any number of reasons, including fame and glory. The chemists will continue to create new drugs to enhance performance and new ways to mask the drugs. In effect, the Olympic competition is just as fierce between the chemists as it is between the athletes. This is not likely to change as long as so much is at stake for those who win medals and for nations that see the medal count as essential to the prestige of the nation.

Further clouding the drug issue is the fact that some athletes are given drug exemptions for medical reasons, while others are denied such exemptions. In addition, drugs are not the only means of enhancing performance through the application of science to the human body. The athlete has become an object and a vehicle whose parts and mind are worked upon in search of the infinitesimal edge that separates gold from silver. Why chemical applications are ethically different than other applications has never been clear, at least to me.

There is no way out unless the insistence that athletes be free of drugs is shelved. As an alternative, I would suggest that there be two renditions of the Olympics: the drug free games, allowing no performance enhancements, and the open games, allowing all substances to be used with no testing.

Which one would you watch?

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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