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OLYMPIC FIGURE SKATING PART I

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - OLYMPIC FIGURE SKATING PART I
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Other than the World Series, this is my favorite two weeks in sport, and among all the events at the Winter Olympics, figure skating and ski jumping are the ones I enjoy most. I have been lucky enough to attend one Winter Olympics, the 2002 Winter Games at Salt Lake.

Among the first events in South Korea was Team Figure Skating. Several performances in this event were memorable. Eight teams were entered in four disciplines: Men's Singles, Women's Singles, Pairs, and Ice Dancing. Each discipline had a short program and a long program and after the short program only five teams advanced to the long program. Going into the event the Canadians and the Russians were favored to win. The United States, Italy, and Japan were expected to battle for the bronze medal with the U.S. the likely winner of the bronze. This is exactly as it turned out, although the road there was not as anticipated.

In the short program there were several wonderful performances, and as usually happens, a few disappointments. The biggest disappointment came from Nathan Chen of the United States who fell during the men's short program. Rather than starting the competition in first place the United States was in a hole as Chen did not deliver. Nathan Chen is considered the very best of the men, but this is the sort of thing that happens at the Olympics.

On the women's side of the short program there were very good and clean performances from Carolina Kostner of Italy and Bradie Tennell of the United States, however it was Evgenia Medvedeva who was the star of the women's short program. She is the defending two time world champion and the early favorite for gold in the individual event. Her skating technique is near perfect, and the grace of her performance is a thing of beauty. Remarkably she is only a few months away from a broken ankle. Her Russian teammate, 15 year old Alina Zagitova, (Medvedeva is 18) was more impressive technically, while skating the women's long program for Russia.

Mirai Nagasu became the first American woman to land a triple at the Olympics. This was an especially poignant moment as Nagasu had been passed over for Sochi despite placing third at the U.S. championships. It was one of those ugly political moments that

appear too often in figure skating. The brother and sister team of Maria and Alex Schibutani also performed a highly entertaining and very strong performance in the Ice Dancing portion of the team event, leading the U.S. to the bronze medal despite the hole dug by Chen. In the end it was Canada that left with the Gold Medal driven by solid performances from all team members and a near perfect performance by the ice dancing team of Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir. It was an excellent opening act for figure skating.

The individual program began two days later with the pairs. Third after the short program, the Russian pair performed poorly in the free skate and finished fourth. Favored, and in first and second place respectively after the short program, were the Chinese pair of Sui Wenjing and Han Cong, and the Canadian pair of Meagan Duhamel of Canada. Both of these pairs skated well in the long program, but each had minor flaws that opened the door for the German pair, Aljona Savchenko and Bruno Massot. This was the fifth Winter Olympics for Savchenko, and she came to South Korea looking only for the gold. In the short program her new partner missed on one element and that is what put them in fourth place.

In the long program it was a very different story. They needed those in front them to be less than perfect, while they skated to near perfection. Both things happened. Savchenko and Massot produced a record points score in the free skate with some magnificent and highly emotional skating. The opening element, a triple twist lift, was frightening and jaw dropping with the height and length they achieved. From there the only question was what those in front of them would do. In the end the German pair won the gold medal by about half a point, 235.90 to 235.47. Adding to the drama was the fact that Savchenko and Massot skated first in the final group and had to sit and wait while the other contenders performed. This is not the greatest pair nor best final I have seen over the years, but it was, as often is the case at the Olympics, a great story.

The next night the men's individual competition began with the short program. One of the top skaters and one of the clear favorites in this event, Nathan Chen, skated second in the short program. First was defending gold medalist Yuzuru Hanyu who skated a near perfect short program, posting the second highest score since this scoring system was adopted. It was a thing of beauty with skating skills at a level rarely seen anywhere, combined with exquisite artistry. Each of his steps were tightly tied to each note of the music, giving this performance a

seamless quality that was a privilege to see. It is in fact this combination of the athletic and artistic that make figure skating so compelling, similar to ballet. Johnny Weir once described Yuzu's skating as "liquid silk."

Having to follow this would be difficult but surely Nathan Chen could handle it, if anyone could. He could not, and perhaps no one could. The master of the quad fell in his first jump, and it went downhill from there. Chen finished an astonishing 22nd in the short program. The next night in the free skate Chen skated early and completed six quads, but it was too much too late. Still he did climb into fifth position by the end of the night.

The only question to be settled in the free skate was who would get the silver and the bronze medals. Yuzuru Han had the gold already gift wrapped for delivery. He was the first man to repeat as a gold medalist since Dick Button in 1948 and 1952. For some perspective on change and time, the 1948 figure skating events were held outdoors.

Shoma Uno of Japan won silver and Javier Fernandez of Spain won bronze, the two flip-flopping their positions after the short program. Fernandez skated a wonderful short program to the music from "Modern Times," doing an interpretation of Charlie Chaplin that was remarkably close to the film. In the end Fernandez won the first medal ever for Spain in figure skating. He skated a very nice program to the music from "Man of La Mancha." Uno was himself very good although he seems to be destined to live in the shadow of "Yuzu" who has reached superstar status in Japan.

It was a glorious first week of figure skating with more anticipated in week two, especially in the women's individual event, where the top two Russian women are the favorites for the gold and silver. There may also be a third Russian who could become a factor in this event. It should be another great week of figure skating.

Meanwhile there have been great performances and big upsets across many venues. It is what makes the Olympics the Olympics, and why despite all the corruption, it continues to hold my attention.

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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