

European hockey to the fore in Turin

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
European hockey to the fore in Turin
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Before leaving the Olympic Winter Games behind I want to make a few closing observations on what might be regarded as the downside.

The center of the hockey universe has shifted to the other side of the Atlantic. For any number of years now it has been clear that the European game was growing in skill and strength. Many have argued that the larger ice surfaces, the stress on skating, and the attention to stick handling and passing were putting European hockey on a higher plane than the North American brand.

Three years ago, while watching games in Stockholm and Helsinki, I was struck by how much more attractive the games were compared to the dismal clutch and grab hockey of the NHL. The Finnish game seemed to offer a nice balance between the finesse of the European game and the power of the North American game. One could argue that the changes in, and the enforcement of, the rules in the NHL this season are an acknowledgment of that reality. Even if that is not the case, the results of this Olympics should offer sufficient proof of the new balance of power in elite hockey.

No one was surprised by the fact that the U.S. team was eliminated early. What did surprise many was the dismal level of play exhibited by the 23 talented NHL veterans who filled the roster of the United States. They were a step slower than their opponents and, although at times they displayed some offensive flourishes, they could not put the puck in the goal.

In seeking an explanation for this futility one need only look at two quotations. The first from Mike Modano of the Dallas Stars who complained after the U.S. was eliminated: "You'd think USA Hockey would be a well-oiled machine, but it's not. Basically we were on our own for hotels, tickets, flights, stuff like that. Normally we wouldn't have to worry about stuff like that."

The second quote from Teemu Selanne of Finland following the Finnish victory over the U.S. in which he lost three teeth from a stick to the face. Selanne said, "I lost three teeth, but that's a little sacrifice to win a medal. You can always get new teeth." He did not comment on hotel and airline reservations.

As for the futile performance of Team Canada, the explanation must go beyond mere attitude to an examination of the question of skills and style of play. Being shut out in three games, with players of such talent and scoring ability as those who populated the Canadian roster, can only be the result of being beaten by better personnel playing a superior brand of hockey.

If you look at the rosters of the national teams in Turin for the Winter Games you find that 153 NHL players were there. Forty-six were with Team USA and Team Canada. The remaining 107 were from Europe. If you look at NHL rosters you find in excess of forty percent of the players from Europe, a figure that continues to rise as the numbers of Europeans picked in the early rounds of the NHL draft correspondingly rises.

It is clear that World Hockey is being taken over by Europeans and that the Europeans represent the best the NHL has to offer. The skaters were faster, the stick handling skills were higher, the passing was stunning in both speed and accuracy, and the goal tending was simply superior. In every facet of the game the North Americans have fallen behind the Europeans.

Why this is so can be debated, but the fact that it is so, is no longer in doubt, Don Cherry to the contrary notwithstanding, with or without a visor.

While this disaster was unfolding in hockey, the Canadians were garnering their biggest haul of medals ever at a Winter Games. This was due largely to the Canadian women who accounted for nearly two-thirds of Canada's glory. The Canadian gold medal in women's hockey and the manner in which it was won only served to underline the dismal showing of the men's team.

For the United States disappointment seemed to be waiting at every turn of the corner. Bode Miller authored a kind of perfection in skiing that even he could not have anticipated. Sasha Cohen continued to skate to her well-established form in major competitions. Unrealistic goals set by the U.S. athletes and the public relations mavens at NBC television set up the U.S. athletes for failure and the television public for a letdown.

Some U.S. athletes managed to irritate others around the world with their attitudes both prior to and after events. By the end of the speed skating, Chad Hedrick had established a prime position on the most unwanted list among the Dutch. U.S. skiers isolated themselves in their RV's rather than spend time in the

Olympic village, and many others sought private accommodations for their non-Olympic experience.

NBC's coverage was decent but not great. After watching the NBC version of the games, I must say that I was surprised to find that Germany topped the medals count with 29 and the gold medal count with 11. I can recall very few of these appearing on the family of NBC Networks.

The final sour note belonged to Dick Pound and his obsessive quest to ferret out drug users. Following the raid on the Austrian cross-country skiers and the negative tests on the athletes, Pound still insisted that the IOC would have a case on the Austrians no matter what the tests didn't show. Then in his usual judicious manner he added, "You don't need an analysis of a positive to have a doping infraction. . . .I don't know the facts and even if I did, I probably couldn't tell you."

Pound seems to have been taking public relations lessons from the American Secretary of Defense.

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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