



Powered by Clickability

The Games I used to love

By Tim Wendel

Not that long ago, the Winter Games appealed to the foolhardy, the inventive, even the misfit in all of us. You could picture kids in Minnesota, Michigan or Massachusetts dreaming up something as bizarre and as madcap as skeleton or two-man luge.

But with another Olympics underway, the Winter Games has gone Hollywood with its glam skaters (figure, speed and short track) and professional hockey players. Today's event is under so much pressure to grow up, to be a big-time moneymaker, from TV networks to Olympic honchos, that any irreverence, even such silliness, is on the verge of being lost forever.



I wish the Olympics had never grown up. Or pulled in the big names. Or been tarnished by the big bucks.

elbows out to gain a profitable audience.

It used to be that February was the dead month for sports. The Super Bowl had just concluded and college basketball's popular March Madness was still weeks away. Seemingly a perfect opportunity for such U.S. Olympic hopefuls as skier Bode Miller, figure skater Sasha Cohen and curling sisters Cassie and Jamie Johnson to steal our hearts.

But David Carter, professor of sports business at the University of Southern California, points out that February is actually "the most cluttered sports month of the year." NASCAR, one of the new big boys on the sports block, begins its season, and the National Basketball Association will hold its All-Star Game on Sunday.

"There's a lot at stake for the Winter Olympics now," says Roland Rust, chair of the marketing department at the University of Maryland.

Overkill

Certainly, skier Miller has learned how cutthroat life can be under this new system. In pre-Olympic interviews, when he graced the covers of *Sports Illustrated*, *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines, he joked about racing drunk and said that Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong and baseball slugger Barry Bonds had to be using performance-enhancing drugs.

If Miller had competed at the Lake Placid Games 26 years ago, his comments would have barely caused a ripple. In 1980, ABC aired about 53 hours of coverage from upstate New York. Speed skater Eric Heiden won five individual gold medals on an outdoor oval, not one of the indoor high-tech facilities that host cities must build now for millions of dollars. Even the memorable USA-Soviet Union hockey game was on tape delay.

Since then, TV coverage has been steadily climbing to the Torino Games, where NBC and cable stations (CNBC, MSNBC and USA) will air a staggering 418 hours of coverage by the time the Games conclude Feb. 26.

Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, says the Olympics are driven by the exorbitant costs of hosting the event (\$4 billion) and TV's spiraling fees to bring the competition into our homes (\$700,000 for a 30-second commercial). In addition, the Winter Games has to get its

By Suzy Parker, USA TODAY

The Olympics are big business, and the allure is as much about the almighty dollar as it is to compete for one's country. What was a Winter Wonder Neverland where competitors were often regular Joes has become rife with superstar endorsement athletes who train year-round. As part of the U.S. Olympic Committee's "Operation Gold," American athletes receive \$25,000 for a gold medal, \$15,000 for silver and \$10,000 for bronze.

Perhaps that's the price of success. But pardon me for being a tad nostalgic for the true amateurs from past Olympics — ski jumper "Eddie the Eagle" and the Jamaican bobsled team.

A different perspective

I grew up near the Canadian border, enthralled with the Winter Games. After all, those were my kind of people. They wore hats and gloves four months out of the year and were at home at a pond hockey game or the nearest ski slope. What helped spur my interest was watching the Olympics on the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. Unlike much coverage out of the USA, the CBC focused on the best race and the best competitor on a given day. A viewer came to appreciate French skier Jean-Claude Killy, even the Soviet Union's formidable hockey team.

Thompson, of Syracuse University, says today's TV coverage is more like "a multi-barbed hook." We've been bombarded with features about such veteran U.S. Olympians as figure skater Michelle Kwan and short-track Apolo Anton Ohno. I've seen them so much that they almost seem as if they're family, family I'd just as soon skip during the next round of holiday visits.

When it comes to sports, I don't want to be baited every time I turn on the TV. That's why I'm eager to find the next Sarah Hughes — somebody who will come out of nowhere to reach the medal podium. I suppose that's why curling appeals to me: Those guys look like somebody I'd find on a barstool at my local tavern. And that's why it was satisfying to see 21-year-old Ted Ligety, ego largely in check, upstage Miller and the field to win gold in men's skiing.

As we gather around for another Olympics, I miss the times when college kids played hockey under the banner of their country and sometimes did the impossible, such as upsetting the Russians and going on to capture the gold.

I miss how competitors used to return home to their day jobs after the Olympic flame was extinguished.

I miss how this event once aspired to bring the world closer together rather than be another battle for medal-count supremacy.

Tim Wendel covered his first Olympics in 1976. He teaches writing at Johns Hopkins University and is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2006-02-15-forum-olympics_x.htm

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

✖