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 From the Los Angeles Times

When Stars Don't Shine, U.S. Team Is Left in Dark

By David Wharton
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TURIN, Italy — A day after winning the women's giant slalom, putting a golden finish on her Olympic experience, Julia Mancuso sounded a bit weary.

"It was a long couple of weeks," the Northern California skier said. "We had some bad luck."

By cold, hard numbers alone, Mancuso and the rest of the U.S. team enjoyed an extraordinary Winter Olympics. They had won 25 medals through Saturday, second only to powerhouse Germany, in events as varied as hip snowboarding and traditional bobsled.

The problem is — and Mancuso seemed to sense as much — American fans don't root for cold, hard numbers, especially when it comes to winter sports.

In a nation where skiing and speedskating make headlines but once every four years, experts say that fans and the media latch onto recognizable faces — Michelle Kwan, Bode Miller, Lindsey Jacobellis. As the 2006 Turin Games draw to a close in northern Italy today, the failure of these big names to produce has taken some of the shine off the U.S. team's performance.

"We have a strange set of expectations and not much historical memory," said Mark Dyreson, an associate professor of kinesiology and history at Penn State who has written extensively about the Olympics. "To the American public, there is that undertone of disappointment because of those big stars."

An injury-hobbled Kwan withdrew before the start of figure skating, and Miller did not win a medal in five races. Jacobellis, introduced to the nation through a credit card commercial, turned certain gold into silver when she attempted a trick near the end of a snowboard race and fell short of the finish line.

With so much pre-Olympic hype focused on athletes who ultimately struggled, the Games lost their buzz, said Paul Swangard, managing director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon.

Through the first two weeks, television ratings were off 34% compared with the 2002 Salt Lake City Games and 22% compared with the 1998 Nagano Games. Shows such as "American Idol" and "Desperate Housewives" flew past NBC's nightly broadcasts like a bobsled rumbling down an icy chute.

"If you sell the sizzle, the steak has to be there," Swangard said of Turin. "There was no steak."

Miller was a lightning rod for disappointment. He came into these Games as an appealing figure, skiing with abandon, almost as reckless in his personal life as he struggled with the ski federation, partied until all hours and spoke of once competing drunk.

He might have become the classic antihero if not for missing a gate while leading in the Alpine combined event and crashing over another gate in the super-giant slalom. Jim Scherr, chief executive for the U.S. Olympic Committee, mused: "We all assumed that he could get focused."

The rest of the U.S. ski team struggled along with him. Forecasted to win as many as eight medals, they got two — from Mancuso and from Ted Ligety in the men's combined.

But it wasn't just poor results that hurt U.S. athletes. They took a few image hits in Turin too.

Aerials skier Jeret Peterson was sent home after an early-morning brawl, and Miller made news by staying out late in a Sestriere pub. Speedskaters Chad Hedrick and Shani Davis — who won a total of five medals — carped at each other off the ice.

As Dyreson put it: "Terrell Owens, welcome to the Winter Olympics."

Scherr promised a full review of his team's performance, both in and out of competition, while also suggesting that if a few of the stars had come through — especially in marquee sports such as figure skating and Alpine skiing — "this could have been a very different picture."

In fact, the U.S. had more than enough moments worth celebrating in these Games.

Amid his bickering with Hedrick, Davis skated powerfully and became the first black athlete to win an individual gold medal at the Winter Olympics.

Another speedskater, Joey Cheek, made for the perfect hero, not only winning gold and silver, but also donating his \$40,000 in USOC bonus money to aid refugee Sudanese children. He was selected to carry the flag in tonight's closing ceremony.

Toby Dawson, abandoned as a baby in South Korea and adopted by two Vail, Colo., ski instructors, provided another inspirational tale by taking third in the men's moguls.

Finally, on Saturday night, short-track speedskater Apolo Anton Ohno won gold and bronze, which, along with a previous bronze at these Games, tied him with speedskater Eric Heiden for a U.S.-record five medals in his Winter Olympics career.

Taken in conjunction with a brilliant display by U.S. snowboarders, these achievements prompted Scherr to give his team a grade of B-plus. David Wallechinsky, Olympic historian and author of a series of comprehensive reference books on every Olympics since 1984, agreed. He rated the overall performance as "impressive ... something to be proud of."

"I try to look at these things from a cold, statistical point of view," the author said.

His assessment relies not only on medals won — second-highest for the U.S. in the Winter Games — but also on percentage of total medals awarded to Americans, which he predicted would be high by the end of today. Through Saturday, the U.S. had won 10.1% of the medals awarded to 26 nations, the largest number of countries to win medals in the Winter Games. Four years ago, the U.S. percentage, among 24 nations winning medals, was 14.5%.

Still, Wallechinsky acknowledged, statistics don't always sway public opinion.

Tremendous expectations followed the Americans to Italy. They had won 34 medals in Salt Lake City, a quantum leap from previous Winter Olympics even when you take into account that host nations experience a bump in medals.

Given that those same nations usually drop about 40% in the medal count when they travel to the following Olympics, Wallechinsky figured that 25 would be a respectable number this time. His calm appraisal ran against the grain of other mainstream media that predicted 30 or more.

Feeding the hype, it seemed, was America's love of fame.

"Pop culture is all about celebrity, and that's exactly where the sports industry is going," said David Carter, executive director of the USC Sports Business Institute. "Athletes are personalities."

Kobe Bryant gets top billing over his team, the Lakers. Brett Favre grabs a lion's share of the spotlight even in a storied franchise such as the Green Bay Packers.

American fans tend to view the Olympics through this prism, especially when watching from afar on television and through newspapers, said Wallechinsky, who regularly attends the Games. "It's always a culture shock when I get back to the U.S. and find out that I appear to have been at a different Olympics than Americans see," he said.

So the U.S. image suffered when the women's hockey team, usually a lock for the gold-medal game, slipped to bronze. And when men's figure skater Johnny Weir melted down in the long program.

To compound matters, no new stars emerged to fill the void.

Salt Lake City served as a grand debut for Ohno and bobsled brakeman Vonetta Flowers. Turin provided no fresh candidates for the next Wheaties box.

Speaking to reporters less than 24 hours after her giant slalom victory, Mancuso said it was "pretty sad" that some Americans look upon Turin as a disappointment. She didn't think the struggles of a few stars should make that big a difference.

But experts reiterated that trouble for the likes of Kwan and Miller meant trouble for the whole team, no matter how many medals the U.S. ultimately won or what the final numbers looked like.

As Swangard put it, "star power matters."

Times staff writer Larry Stewart in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

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