

Sunday February 16, 2014

Olympic Games need to re-focus

By Jim Taylor

Already, the XXII Winter Olympics in Sochi have been tainted by scandal.

Even before the Games officially opened, a French sports magazine alleged that the United States and Russia had struck a deal. American figure skating judges would give favourable marks to the Russians in the team event; in exchange, the Russians would give Americans high scores in the ice dance the following week.

And since judges' marks are kept confidential, there would be no way to tell who did what to whom.

The International Olympic Committee shrugged off the story as "just a rumour." To make sure it stayed just a rumour, the IOC ruled out any investigation.

There is, therefore, no proof to the allegations. Even if the Russian skaters did win the team skating event; they probably would have anyway. Similarly, if the American team wins the ice dance competition (which starts today) they probably would have won anyway.

But although the rumour may have no foundation, its focus on Olympic judging suggests to me that the Olympics have shifted from achievement to style.

Missing the motto

Baron Pierre de Coubertin proposed the Olympic motto -- "*Citius, Altius, Fortius*," Latin for "Faster, Higher, Stronger" -- when the International Olympic Committee was first created in 1894. Coubertin explained, "These three words represent a programme of moral beauty. The aesthetics of sport are intangible."

I don't question that figure skating – the sport involved in the alleged scandal – has beauty and intangible aesthetics. I can be totally transfixed by the elegance and skill of the skaters.

But I see nothing in "Faster, Higher, Stronger" that requires a secret panel of judges to determine who wins a medal.

I contend that Olympic events should be limited to those where winning can be determined by a tape measure, weigh scales, or a stop watch. Or by the number of pucks in a net.

Limited, in other words, to measurable results.

Yes, of course the judges are experts. And honourable people, no doubt. But the fact that scores given by a panel of judges have to be filtered through some kind of averaging formula indicates that judging is (and can't help being) a subjective process.

Tape measures and stop watches do not lie, and can't be bribed.

Style over substance

As I write this column, Canada is bragging about its medal counts. But surely it hasn't escaped notice that most of our medals have come from the newer events where judges allot points for style and level of difficulty, not from the traditional races. It's almost as if Canadians seized an opportunity to excel in events that other nations haven't taken seriously yet.

If my proposal were implemented, they wouldn't have to take them seriously.

Granted, Canada would lose most of its medals. I mean no disrespect to the athletes who won those medals. Or, indeed, to the many athletes who didn't win a medal. I am in awe of their commitment, their dedication, their fitness, their skill.

I recall, on one occasion, going cross country skiing on the track that Canada's biathlon athletes were using for training. They powered down a hill, around a bend, with the fluid grace of oil being poured. They were simply beautiful.

But biathlons are not scored on grace or beauty. They're won by times and targets.

Similarly, I suggest, a moguls winner should be the person who gets down that brutal course fastest without self-destructing. That a skier has an awkward moment, or perhaps fails to land perfectly after a double reverse inverted back flip – or whatever – strikes me as irrelevant.

Indeed, I wonder how a panel of judges might have scored Dick Fosbury's unorthodox style in the 1968 Summer Olympics, when he went over the bar backwards and changed high jumping forever.

Would they have penalized Eric Liddell for running with his head tilted so far back that sometimes he couldn't see other people on the track?

And would Eddie the Eagle – oh, never mind, Eddie didn't win anything but people's hearts anyway.

Nothing personal

In advocating a return to measurable events, I mean no disrespect for the Canadian athletes who trained so hard and so long. If they want to be the best in the world at freestyle skiing or snowboarding, more power to them. I just don't think those events belong at the Olympics.

To cite a parallel situation, I was proud of Canadian soldiers serving in Afghanistan. I admired their courage, their dedication, their sacrifice. But that didn't mean I had to support their war. Or any war.

In the same way, I admire, respect, and celebrate Canada's athletes. I want them to excel, and hopefully to win. But that doesn't mean I have to endorse what the Olympics have become.

I think athletes should compete against other athletes, not against artificial scores calculated according to arbitrary formulas by anonymous judges.

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YOUR TURN

Not many letters about last week's column, on the lack of insurance coverage for designated drivers. Perhaps anything related to the law gets too complicated for normal comprehension.

But those of you who did bother to comment generally shared my sense of shock. Christa Bedwin, for example, wrote, "That's a really appalling verdict. I hope they reverse it soon!"

Isabel Gibson wondered, "what vetting governments give to new laws, by their own justice department experts or by judges. Is there some reason they can't get an advance ruling from the courts on how legislation will be interpreted?"

I know how hard it is to write a clear technical specification or contract and expect it must be at least as tricky to express legislative intent clearly. So how carefully do laws get drafted - and, even after being drafted, are they subject to ongoing review for improvement that doesn't involve a patently unacceptable outcome like this one? We shouldn't need to wait for failure in operation to identify and revise a badly worded law. In business, that's what "continual improvement" is all about, and it's a distinguishing characteristic of successful companies.

Ted Wilson: a message to Nancy Kerr. You were both right.

James West disagreed “with Charles Dicken’s character Mr. Bumble -- the law is not an ass, rather its interpreters are.”

I had referred to a fairly sizeable award to the victim. James wondered, “Who paid the settlement?”

My understanding is that the settlement was to have been paid by the estate of the owner of the car that the designated driver was driving. Of course, his estate – without insurance – would have been inadequate for \$800,000 or so. So the payment would have to be picked up by his insurance company, the government-run Insurance Corporation of B.C., which appealed the settlement and thus brought down Justice Saunders’ ruling.

James added, “I am heartened that the issue is under review. Acknowledging a problem in the law and its interpretation is a good beginning.”

You may recall Nancy Kerr’s letter, in which she referred to her ideal that the purpose of a government was to pool our resources through taxes for services such as roads, police, firefighters, and together take care of the blind, lame and poor. Her friend said, “Nancy, that’s socialism!”

Nancy replied, “I thought it was Christian.”

Ted Wilson liked the exchange, and wanted Nancy to know, “You were both right.”

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton’s HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating’s “SeemslikeGod” page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold’s weekly musings, punningly titled “Reynolds Rap” -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson’s thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin’s “Churchweb Canada,” an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood’s satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
