

THEY SHOULD SUFFER TO BE CALLED AN ATHLETE

By DON SIKORSKI
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I've been consciously trying to make an effort to catch some of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games on television. Because it's sports and I consider myself to be a sports fan, I figure that I should at least try and gain enough knowledge to hold my own in a conversation about what's happening. After all, guys are supposed to be interested in sports. But the more I view, the more cynical I become. Call it jealousy if you will, but seeing attractive Canadian figure skaters grace the cover of every major magazine on the newsstand because they were "robbed" of a gold medal by snobbish foreign judges makes me dislike figure skating that much more. I'd almost go as far as saying that any sport which requires judging to determine the winner should be eliminated from Olympic competition altogether, but that would also eliminate boxing, so I'll retract that sentiment for now. Watching four speed skaters crash into one another during the final lap of a short-track race, allowing some Australian who was a half a lap behind to step over on the final straightaway for a place on the medal podium confirms my hypothesis that there's more luck than skill involved here. The speed skaters and cross-country skiers certainly have my respect. Those sports hurt and hurt bad, plus the pressure of the moment is unnerving. But Curling? It looks like shuffleboard on ice. Snowboarding should remain part of the Xtreme Games; put a pair of skis on if you want to race down snowy mountains in the Olympics. And don't even get me started about Ice Dancing. If the event should be held at the Bushnell in Hartford, then it's more Fine Arts than athletics. Sure, it requires a great deal of skill, but so do horseshoes and billiards. So by definition, a high degree of skill isn't the only qualification in determining what is a sport and what isn't.

Now that I've potentially offended hundreds of Olympic fans, I may be at fault for requiring these activities to measure up to the sports that I am familiar with. I've always felt that a true athlete earns that status because of the years of blood, sweat, and suffering required to condition their bodies to handle the rigors of competitive athletic competition. While ski jumping and bobsledding do require precise skills and a certain level of athletic ability, they just look too damn enjoyable. So again I'm a bit jealous. I loved to ride down an icy hill on a sled when I was a kid (actually, I still do), so practicing that activity 200 times doesn't seem like hard work to me. But if we were to eliminate bobsledders from the definition of athlete simply because their sport of choice is more pleasure than pain, then what do we do with golfers and NASCAR drivers? I guess that the reality of it all is that doing things like bobsledding, downhill skiing, golfing, and auto racing are enjoyable, while training to be a competitive distance runner is just plain hard work. I watched the Daytona 500 on television with my 3 year-old; very cool to be able to do that for a living. And a bad day of golf is usually better than a good interval workout on the track. As far as suffering, Tiger Woods and Jeff Gordon have it made compared to a Bob Kennedy or a Lynn Jennings.

The bottom line is that runners run because we enjoy it. The benefits go deeper than just competition. Factor in weight maintenance, improving the cardiovascular system, stronger muscles, better endurance, prevention of health problems, easy access, relative inexpensiveness, and numerous social rewards, and running is a terrific sport. And although the competitive aspects require a lot of hard work, we wouldn't trade our sport's rewards for all the Olympic medals in Salt Lake City.

Racing Roundup

- Tim Broe is running as well as any American distance runner in the country right now. Broe recently erased Steve Scott's American Indoor 3,000-meter record by running 7:39.23 on January 27th. Broe, who finished 2nd in the race to Kenyan Leonard Mucheru, earned a well-deserved \$25,000 for his record-setting performance. Former Massachusetts high school standout Jonathan Riley, now competing for Stanford University, was 4th in 7:46.84.
- Killingly High School junior Meghan Owen finished 3rd overall in 4:59.10 at the Millrose Games at Madison Square Garden on February 1st. Owen, who is in her first season competing at Indoor Track, followed that performance by setting ECC records at both 1,000 meters and for the mile at the Conference Indoor Track Championship at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy a week later.
- Chad Johnson's plan to spend the winter tuning up his short distance speed is paying off. At the February 17th USATF-New England Indoor Track Championships at Harvard University, Johnson finished 6th overall in the One-Mile event in 4:16.09. Former Lyman Memorial standout and State Open XC Champion Eric Blake was 7th overall in the 5,000 meter run in 15:15.
- The University of Connecticut claimed the Big East Indoor Track team title with 136.5 points, better Villanova's total of 125. UConn was lead by Elliott Blount's win in the 500m (1:03.19) and the 800m (1:52.10) and Dan Wilson's win in the 1000m (2:25.26). Wilson, a former Notre Dame-West Haven High School standout, also placed 5th overall in the Mile Run, while Blount and Wilson both contributed to UConn's 4x800m relay teams' 2nd place finish in a school record time of 7:34.43. Wilson had also previously set a school record in the mile, running 4:01.94 at the Terrier Classic in January. Connecticut last won the Big East title back in 1997.

This month in history

February 20th, 1994 – In a specially-created Indoor Mile race held during the Massachusetts High School State Championships at Harvard University, Ireland's Eamonn Coghlan accomplished something never done in the sport of Track and Field by becoming the first runner over 40 years of age to run a sub-4 minute mile. World class 800-meter specialist Stanley Redwine pulled Coghlan through splits of 1:59.44 for halfway and 2:59.22 for ¾, then left Coghlan to run alone for the final two laps. The "Chairman of the Boards", a nickname Coghlan had earned because of his dominance on Madison Square Garden's wooden indoor track (seven Wannamaker Mile wins), reached the finishing line in 3:58.15 to claim the record. The only man to ever break 3:50 for the mile indoors, Coghlan's world indoor mile record of 3:49.78, run at the Meadowlands in 1983, still stands today.

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