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Politics & the Olympics

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 10, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

The Winter Olympics in Sochi once again invite reflection upon the relationship of sports to politics. When the fifth of five electric snowflakes failed to morph into one of the Olympic rings at the opening ceremonies, it was seen as emblematic of the contrast between Russia?s aspirations to greatness and their still woefully inadequate technology and tolerance. Funny, when the fourth arm of the four-pronged caldron failed to lift itself from the floor of the stadium at Vancouver at their opening ceremonies in 2010, I do not recall such geo-strategic significance being assigned to the event.

Politics have long stalked the Olympic Games. In 1976, as my Dad and I prepared to drive to Montreal for the Games, the news reports focused on the boycott announced by twenty-five African nations because the International Olympic Committee had not banned New Zealand from the Games. New Zealand?s rugby team had undertaken a tour of South Africa. (Alas, the same mindset that indulges guilt by association is found, regrettably, among those whose causes are noble.) But, in 1976, as has already happened at Sochi, the Games were saved by a pixie. Then, it was Nadia Comaneci, the gymnast from Rumania who scored the first ever perfect 10, who turned the media?s focus back on to the athletes and their prowess. In Sochi, it has been 15-year old skater Julia Lipnitskaia, who has captured the cameras of the media and the hearts of the world with a closing spin worthy of the finest Cirque du Soleil contortionist.

In 1956, in Melbourne, the water polo pool was red with blood when the Soviet Union played Hungary, the sporting equivalent of the fighting in the streets of Budapest earlier that autumn. The Hungarians won the match, but they had lost their country. Four years later, the Games were awarded to Rome, a sign of Italy?s reintegration into Europe after siding with the Axis during World War II. Four years after that, the Tokyo Games announced Japan?s reintegration into the world community.

The Munich Games in 1972 were expected to represent a similar sign of reintegration. The Games were planned to be as different from Hitler?s 1936 Games as possible. Soft, pastel colors were employed on all flags and banners sporting the rings and the 1972 symbol, a kaleidoscope-like circle, as different as different could be from the black swastika on a red background that had adorned the Olympic venues in 1936. Unfortunately, the Munich Games are most remembered for the attack when Palestinian terrorists murdered eleven Israeli athletes. Once again, Jews were being killed in Germany. It was too horrible.

We humans sometimes try to draw neat lines between different aspects of our lives, but it never works. There are things more important than sports and politics is one of them. On the other hand, two cheers for anything that reminds us that politics is not the only thing, or even the most important thing, that drives human culture. Sport can be used to breakdown barriers, reminding us all of our common humanity discovered in a shared love of, say, ping pong. The U.S. ping pong team preceded the U.S. diplomats to Communist China after all. On the other hand, the pageantry of an opening ceremony can be used by a dictator like Hitler or a wanna-be dictator like Putin as a kind of propaganda. In 2008, the NBC hosts were mesmerized by the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics, but most politically astute people, at least those with no vested monetary interest in avoiding criticism, found that ceremony a little creepy the way the Chinese regime is creepy, all those people moving in

tandem, the regimentation and routine of the group. Enough of that could turn me into a libertarian.

I only caught the end of the Sochi opening ceremony. I drew a different cultural lesson from the one that was apparently being offered: The mental world in which the producers of such extravaganzas lives is a strange place, one that reflects everything we should dislike, and distrust, about our cultural elites. This is not the first time that the NCB commentators have had to explain the symbolism of the event: In London, there was that weird skit about industrialization, followed by a tribute to the NHS. What does that have to do with anything? In Sochi, when the cameras focused on a young girl with a large red balloon, the commentator told us the balloon represented the dreams of the twentieth century, or something like that. If a symbol needs to be explained, it doesn?t really work. The large hammer and cycle that moved across the sky needed no explanation in 2014, as they needed no explanation in 1917. The linked, multi-colored rings of the Olympic flag do not require an explanation. Even if you do not know Greek, the Olympic hymn, with its vaguely pagan overtones, reminiscent of Orff?s ?Carmina Burana? (and all that implies), is understandable as a beautiful and uplifting song. In 2000, the caldron within the waterfall at Sydney needed no NBC host to explain that Australia is an island country. But, the producers of these opening ceremonies live in a strange universe when symbols, instead of being accessible, can be esoteric. It all leaves me cold.

What to make of it all? I am already tired of Putin?s mug, sitting in the stands and cheering on Russia?s athletes. He is still a thug. I hope the people of Russia have the same feeling. I hope the International Olympic Committee, where cronyism and corruption are not unknown, will think twice before awarding future games to tyrants. Indeed, as I have suggested before, the IOC should take the far-sighted decision to award the Summer Games to Greece, if not in perpetuity, at least for the foreseeable future. Greece could use the economic boost and it already has all the facilities, many of which are now completely under-used. But, no amount of planning, no attempts to designate sports as a politics-free-zone, will ever succeed. We human beings are whole and we can no more set aside our politics than a skater can decline to do a required triple axel jump or a skier can navigate a downhill course on one ski. Still, it is good to be reminded that there are areas of human life like sports where you can go when you are tired of thinking about Gov. Christie or Obamacare or the debt ceiling. Our lives are a messy mix of needs and desires and it is only the totalitarian mind, incipient or full-blown, that wishes to obliterate that messiness.

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