

**1,731 words**

Surprisingly, my good friend Pat, a sister of Mercy, professor of English, and author of books of poetry, spent hours intently watching the Winter Olympics on television. “Surprisingly” because Pat has seldom showed much interest in sports. She does not watch the Super Bowl, World Series, NBA finals or March Madness, but she tuned into Olympic events like snowboarding. She does not know the strike zone from the end zone, but she now speaks knowingly of a triple Axel and a death spiral. Her name recognition does not include Derek, Lebron or Peyton, but she knows the story of Shani Davis who failed to medal in speed skating after winning gold in 2006 and 2010.

My friend’s fascination with the Winter Olympics intrigues me. What is it about the Olympics that attracts people like her who are not big sports fans? One important element is the idealism connected with the Olympic Movement. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, considered the founder of the modern Olympic Games, was convinced that athletic competition could help promote understanding among diverse cultures and thus lessen the possibility of international wars. For him, athletic competition taught lessons for life: “The important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle, the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.” The Olympic Charter, an evolving document, describes a philosophy of life called “Olympism” that combines “in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind;” that celebrates “the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles;” and that promotes “a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.”

Unfortunately, such high idealism has not always prevailed in the Olympic Games. Hitler used the 1936 Games in Berlin to promote his sinister “master race ideology” that failed to take into account

the greatness of the black sprinter Jesse Owens. During the 1972 Olympics in Munich, terrorists killed 11 Israeli athletes and a German policeman, before being killed themselves. In the 1976 Melbourne Games, the East German female swimmers won 12 gold and 6 silver medals, benefitting from a systematic state-sponsored drug program. More than 60 nations, including the United States, boycotted the 1980 Olympics in Moscow over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and in retaliation the Soviet Union boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles Games. In the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, as many as seven athletes were disqualified for using banned performance substances, a problem still in evidence in London ten years later when a shot-putter from Belarus was stripped of her gold medal.

Nevertheless, an aura of idealism continues to surround the Olympics, as was evident during the opening and closing ceremonies in Sochi, Russia, and the glorious weeks of competition in between. People on all five continents, symbolized by the interlocking circles of the Olympic symbol, were brought together enjoying the camaraderie and competition. We were all reminded once again that we inhabit one global village and are members of one human family. We share a common human nature that enables us to appreciate the hard work, dedicated perseverance, and athletic skills of the Olympians. The participants get to know and respect one another, exchange mementos and find new reasons to work for world peace. Spectators who took the opportunity to meet people from other countries return home with a greater appreciation of cultural pluralism. The Olympic Games have a unique transcendent significance in the world of athletics that appeals to people like my friend Pat.

Once drawn into watching the Olympics, Pat found herself fascinated by the athleticism of the competitors. She marveled at the grace and power of the figure skaters and the body control of the snowboarders as they twisted and turned in midair. A 20 year old American snowboarder from Utah, by the name of Sage Kotsenburg, won the first gold medal of the Sochi Games with a courageous and creative run on the treacherous slope-style course that included coming off a ramp and rotating his body  $4\frac{1}{2}$  times in midair before landing smoothly about 30 feet below. Sage, who had not won in

competition since he was 11 years old and barely qualified for the Olympics, was amazed at his performance and claimed his signature 4 ½ rotation move was a creative response to the moment. Marveling at the physical skills of athletes like Sage, Pat recalls the line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "What a piece of work is a man! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel!" While watching the slow motion replays of the great performances, she feels a sense of awe, a thrill that brings shivers, a deep exhilaration that human beings can perform seemingly impossible feats with such courage, grace and beauty. In turn, this excites her soul and uplifts her spirits. Pondering what a marvelous work are we humans, Pat wonders "how anyone can watch these inspiring athletic feats and not believe in God."

The Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (mee-hy cheek-sent-me-hy-ee), who teaches at Claremont Graduate University, developed the notion of "flow," which he described as "being completely involved in an activity for its own sake (cf *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*). The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved and you're using your skills to the utmost." Applied to the world of sports, we say athletes are sometimes in a zone where everything flows smoothly, all the training and practice comes together, the ego is shut down, the body responds spontaneously to the challenge of the moment. Without conscious thought or negative feelings, athletes in the flow perform at an optimal level. Tiger Woods often has to grind out a round of golf, but we have seen special moments when he is in another world, raises his game to a higher level, and pulls off shots that seem impossible. Athletes in the flow often say the game slowed down, enabling them to perform at a peak level. In one game against the New York Knicks in Madison Square Garden, Michael Jordan made a series of three point shots and spectacular dunks in a few minute period after which he just shrugged his shoulders, seemingly amazed at his own focused performance. In the Sochi

Games, Sage Kotsenburg, though probably not destined for lasting fame, had his own experience of flow when time slowed down and he surprised himself with a gold-medal performance.

Actually, the Olympics showcase various types of physical skills. Figure skating, for example, demands the exact repetition of planned moves, both graceful and demanding, that have been ingrained through countless practice sessions. The skater needs disciplined perseverance in perfecting the routine and confidence in performing it in stressful conditions. The task is to manage distractions, to focus diffused energies, to bring the long hours of practice to a moment of spontaneous performance.

As interested spectators, we are caught up in the beauty of the moment, raised above daily concerns, lifted out of ordinary clock time, and liberated from the usual preoccupation with self. As the skaters move through their routine, we anticipate the next major twisting leap and share a sense of relief or repose if the landing is smooth and graceful. We marvel at the beauty of the performance and appreciate the discipline that made possible such poetry in motion.

Further reflection suggests that great figure skating affirms our own longing for a harmonious resolution of all the tensions of life, a fruitful rewarding outcome to all our disciplined efforts. For Christians, Jesus Christ is that ultimate point of harmony who focuses all the positive energy of the world, the Logos who brings order out of chaos, the Icon of the Father who represents all that is beautiful in human existence and striving. In the Olympic figure skating, eyes of faith detect glimpses of our yearning for harmony and of the Christ who fulfills this longing.

Alpine skiing demands another set of skills. American Ted Ligety, who as a 21-year old won a gold medal in the 2006 Turin Games, won his second gold in the grand slalom in Sochi. He said the second was more meaningful because he faced such great competitors and had to deal with the pressure of being the favorite. Commentators noted his creative techniques of making turns by leaning down and touching the snow with his body as well as his strategy of making a more cautious

second run after his first effort put him in the lead. Rather than simply repeating practiced moves, the slalom skiers, without benefit of a practice run, have to adapt as they race, finding the best route for making the necessary turns and making the proper adjustments in technique. Some of us need expert commentary to appreciate the fine points of mastering the specific challenges of the slalom course, but we all can thrill to the courage, strength, timing and athleticism demonstrated by the skiers racing down the slope and weaving past the gates.

We can compare the slalom competition to life itself as an exciting adventure filled with unsuspected obstacles that call for courageous perseverance and practical wisdom. The medal winners suggest that we can continue the human adventure with hope of surmounting the obstacles and reaching the finish line intact. For believers, the Spirit is at work throughout the whole process: calling us to disciplined training; supplying us with courage to enter the race; guiding us through the obstacles; lifting us up if we fall; and rewarding us for persevering to the conclusion of the great human adventure. Reflection takes us from the thrilling performance of Ted Ligety to a greater appreciation of bodily dexterity and a more focused celebration of the Holy Spirit, the source of all creativity.

The Olympic Games are uniquely important for the wellbeing of the human family. Sochi, which proved to be such a marvelous success, gave millions of people all over the world, including “Olympic only” fan like my friend Pat, the opportunity to reflect on what we have in common and to celebrate the high ideals of disciplined training, healthy competition and human achievement.