

Olympics – part athleticism, part political intrigue

By Susan Wood

The modern Olympic Games have come a long way over the last 100-plus years, with moments that stand out vividly and lessons that remind us how fragile, yet courageous, humanity from across the planet to the streets of Tahoe can be.

The Games – which were dedicated to Olympian Gods – can be traced back to 776 BC, with the first Olympiad isolated to ancient Greece featuring a stadium race. They continued for nearly 12 centuries until Emperor Theodosius decreed in 393 A.D. that all such “pagan cults” be banned.

The modern international Olympics opened in 1896 in Athens, the origin of the Olympic torch. The symbolic gesture burned at the altar of Zeus, signaling the beginning and end of the event. Many myths aside, the Greeks were fiercely competitive and enjoyed a good contest.



Walkway
leading to the
track at the
original
Olympics in
Olympia,
Greece.

Photo/Kathryn

Reed/1990

The addition of various sports through the years demonstrates that quest for athletic entertainment. Even the Greek calendar was based on the concept of the four-year Olympiad.

One of the most dramatic feats of the modern Olympics includes the triumph of the U.S. track and field team in 1896. The 10-man squad barely reached Athens in time to participate. They won nine out of a dozen events.

In 1912, Jim Thorpe – a Native American – became the only man to win the decathlon and pentathlon in one year. His medals were ripped away when officials learned he had played professional baseball. This was not the era of “the dream team.” They were later restored in 1982.

In 1936 in Berlin, Jesse Owens made his mark in history by taking home four gold medals, including a team medal. Being black, especially competing in Germany, was a feat in itself.

Four decades later, Nadia Comaneci of Romania received three gold medals and seven perfect scores – a first for Olympic gymnastics.

In 1972, the Summer Games were rocked by tragedy in Munich, West Germany, when Palestinian terrorists murdered 11 Olympic team members from Israel. Protests and boycotts over political skirmishes ensued through 1984 when the Games were staged in Los Angeles. The U.S. and some allies boycotted the 1980 Moscow Games, and Russia and other Eastern Bloc countries returned the gesture four years later.

But in the spirit of the Games, 1972 also marked a major year for milestones. U.S. swimmer Mark Spitz won a record seven gold medals at a single Olympics – only to witness Michael Phelps beat the record in Beijing in 2008.

Being an Olympian means overcoming adversity with the world

watching. After having set six world records in 1982, U.S. sprinter Mary Decker took a heartbreaking fall when she collided with Zola Budd two years later during the 3,000-meter final. The photo of the young sprinter became one of Time-Life's most recognized shots of the century.

Speed skater Dan Jansen confronted heartache head-on when the favored athlete lost his chance of bringing home gold in 1988 – the same day his sister died of leukemia. A stumble four years later kept him from earning any hardware. When he finally won gold and set a world record in 1994 on the Lillehammer, Norway, track, a tearful Jansen looked up as though his sister was watching. (He has retold that story as a competitor in the annual celebrity golf tournament on the South Shore of Lake Tahoe.)

Tahoe's slice of history

It was the Olympic Games of 1960 that placed Lake Tahoe on the map in both a gesture of bravery on the North Shore, and as some would put it, bravado on the South Shore.

South Lake Tahoe historian Betty Mitchell recalls how inspiring it was for the Tahoe region to host the games and for her to see them – sitting on a rooftop to watch ski jumping at Squaw and listening to the music of Walt Disney that still accompanies the Olympics of today.

“Having the Olympics in your country is always exciting, but (Alex) Cushing getting them here is a story in itself. It was a brave thing to do. I think he had a unique idea,” she said of the late founder of Squaw Valley. At the time it was a modest ski area with one rope tow and one chairlift.

Mitchell contends the South Shore should have embraced the Olympics around the lake instead of jacking up prices and “charging an arm and a leg” for lodging.

“The funny thing was, we were not very crowded during the

Olympics,” she said. “It’s sad. We don’t have the best reputation around the world you know.”

Still, the longtime resident admits to being enthusiastic about the prospect of a bid in 2022, and more timely, Squaw’s 50-year anniversary falling on the Olympics’ return to the West Coast in Vancouver beginning Feb. 12.

“I hope our kids do well,” she said, adding praise to Sierra-at-Tahoe’s contribution of sponsored athletes to the Olympics. The Tahoe region features a slew of athletes vying for a spot on the ski and snowboard teams – with Squaw’s Jonny Moseley headed to the NBC broadcast booth to give color on his Tahoe buddy Daron Rahlves in skiercross, among other sports.

“We should take pride. This is what this community does in winter. We used to wrap ourselves around skiing,” Mitchell said.

Timing is everything

Tahoe City historian David Antonucci is keeping the spirit and motivation alive by recently releasing a chronicle of the VIII Olympic Winter Games. The book, “Snowball’s Chance,” highlights the quest for gold and green at Squaw Valley.

Antonucci remembers the 1960 Winter Games as the first “techno” Olympics with updated electronic timers to clock the events.

Skating rinks also came into the picture at Squaw.

“Before, we used to have these events on frozen lakes,” he said. “We would have had to have them on Echo or Caples (lakes).”

Fifty years ago, the Games also featured the first biathlon – a sport Northstar-at-Tahoe this season put its weight behind by opening the only official course on the West Coast.

"This is fantastic and will do so much for this sport," Antonucci said.

South Lake Tahoe resident, Martin Hollay, 89, who volunteered his efforts to build the 1960 cross country ski course in Tahoe City said the addition is inspiring to him.

"You know, I've gone out there and found shells from that time," Hollay said.

Some parts of history never go away.

Publisher's note: *Find out on Feb. 2 what a non-Olympian thinks about skiing the women's and men's downhill courses in Whistler.*