

After the Winter Olympic Games *by Willy Meisl*

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By now we know what to expect. With very few exceptions, all Olympic Games become "Record Games"—and the VIIIth Winter Olympics in Cortina d'Ampezzo were no exception. The number of participants (949), the number of competing nations (32), even the number of events (24) all constituted new records—apart from the innumerable international and national records set up in the various individual events.

Thirty-seven records were established in the speed-skating alone. In the 5,000 m., the first 16 competitors all beat Hjalmar Andersen's Olympic record of four years ago in Oslo; and this same Andersen although himself 5.1 secs. faster this time, could only finish 11th! So speedily does time race on in sport, and especially in the Olympics...

No doubt these Winter Games were the biggest and best ever. No doubt there was never so much money spent on preparation, organization and participation. Italy's Olympic Committee alone invested more than L. 3,000,000,000.—in the Games, much of which will turn out to be a loss, for I cannot see the beautifully-situated Dolomites resort of Cortina making much use of giant installations such as the Ice and Snow Stadium. On the other hand, the publicity may prove of inestimable value in the long run.

In addition, we must not lose sight of the fact that the Cortina events were staged by the Italians as a kind of public general rehearsal for the Summer Games in Rome in 1960—to show the world what Italy can do, and partly to train herself for that much bigger occasion.

Having said all this, I have to state that these VIIIth Winter Games, though a huge record in many respects, were, nevertheless, a curious mixture of surpassed and unfulfilled expectations; of maximum and mediocrity. All the skiing events and the speed-skating reached and almost surpassed the heights. Ice-hockey and figure-skating remained rather mediocre.

When discussing Winter Olympics, tradition demands that we begin with the Norwegians, who dominated the first (Chamonix, 1924) and, to a great extent, the last (Oslo, 1952). But Norway must now feel like the British at soccer. For the first time in history she is without a gold medal in speed-skating (her winter equivalent to football),

and—what hurts even more—without a medal, without a place in the first six, in the ski-jumping (her prestige-equivalent to cricket in England).

These two events given to the world by Norway, and until quite recently she ruled more or less supreme in them, especially the jumping. Only four years ago, Norway took three gold and a number of other medals on the ice track and had all her four representatives among the best jumpers, two finishing on top. How speedily times change...

Still, Norway had the consolation of winning the Nordic Combination (15 km. and jumping), and of repeating her 15 km. success through Hallgeir Brenden (also an Olympic steeplechase runner), who joins the tiny band of skiers who have won a gold medal in the same event in two Olympic Games—though the 1952 distance was actually 18 km.

The Russians made a splendid debut in the Winter Games, but, formidable as they were—above all on the Misurina Lake ice-track constructed by Gösta Nilsson, the Swedish ice-surface-specialist—they were not quite as irresistible as had been feared. In the skiing events we saw once more that even the most purposeful and relentless training cannot turn men into *complete* robots. The human element remains, and the spark which made Hakulinen (Finland), Jernberg (Sweden) and Brenden (Norway) explode with unique efforts and produce extraordinary performances could not be kindled in those magnificent ski-athletes from the U.S.S.R. There remained, of course, a sufficient number of sparks, which they administered to excellent opposition in other fields.

Speed on ice, comparatively speaking, has obviously lingered behind speed on the cinder track. From now on, led by the great Russian phalanx, and aided and abetted by track-building specialists who construct their record-smashing installations at above 5,500 ft. (1,700 m.), we are in for a continuous shower of world and national records.

In Cortina, we saw the best Alpine skier of all time—Austria's Toni Sailer, 20-year-old son of a Kitzbühel plumber, who won all three Alpine events—slalom, giant slalom and downhill. Toni is in a class by himself. He beats the opposition, not by the customary fractions of a second, but by almost half a-dozen full seconds.

It is past my power of imagination to see him fall in a race; in fact, it is impossible at present to imagine that a greater Alpine skier can ever descend upon us. The time seems near when competitors in top-class international downhill or slalom events will be asked to race long portions of the track on one ski only, but until that stage in the development of the Alpine ski-circus is reached. Toni Sailer's Olympic hat-trick, cannot be surpassed and probably will not be equalled.

By the way, as the Cortina Alpine events also counted as the World Championships, and as the latter also include an "Alpine Combination" title, Sailer won four world championship gold medals in addition to his three Olympic ones.

This young man is a genius; at technically perfect as he is daring and clever. If the Swiss girl, Madeleine Berthod, who won the women's downhill event, had possessed half of Toni's innate skiing commonsense, she might have landed a hat-trick herself, but there are always ifs, even with champions. With Toni Sailer, however, there is none.

The second outstanding personality was the Swedish long-distance ski-runner, Sixten Jernberg, who won two silver medals (15 and 30 km.) then a gold medal in the 50 km. Marathon, and finally clinched a third place for his country in the relay. Thus he collected more Olympic medals than any other competitor. Jernberg, intelligent and refreshingly outspoken, is a neighbour and close friend of Hallgeir Brenden, who runs a small farm far up north on the Norway-Sweden border.

Figure-skating, in my opinion, has been stagnating and has not produced one outstanding personality in Cortina, though Ronald Robertson, a marvellous acrobat, who came second to his U.S.A. colleague, Hayes Alan Jenkins, is a true successor to Richard Button in the free-skating. The American grand slam" of all three men's medals was a unique and well-deserved success.

Besides the figure-skating, the U.S.A. did very well to come second in the ice-hockey. They had sent a team of students, who concentrated on playing the puck and not the opponent; thus they quickly became popular, and were almost certainly the finest side ever to represent the Stars and Stripes in the Olympics.

The Canadians had a similar experience to the Norwegians, seeing themselves relegated to third place in what used to be their traditional domain. Well as the Kitchener-Waterloo Dutchmen played (against the U.S.S.R. they hit the thin posts five times and lost 2—0), they were not as strong as Toronto Maple Leaf had been in Oslo, and still weaker than last year's world champions, the Penticton "V's", who beat Russians 5—0.

Russia deservedly won the Olympic title at the first attempt—and thus also took the World and European championships. Technically, the Russians are excellent; and they are such fine skaters that even obviously-drilled and often-repeated tactical movements come off, and advantages obtained by opponents can still be foiled.

Sweden were weaker than I have ever seen them, but they finished runners-up for the European title which is incorporated in the Olympic competition. Italy won the so-called consolation tournament.

The demands made on players in such a tournament are unreasonable; too many matches have to be played almost non-stop. Czechoslovakia's 5—0 defeat against Sweden was due more to tiredness from the immediately preceding battle with Canada than to the actual superiority of the Swedes.

The bobsleigh track was truly dangerous on the last day of the four-man event, won by Switzerland. In the two-man bob, the Italians, who had grabbed a fortnight's training before anybody else was admitted, scored an outstanding "double" for first and second.

W. M.