

Lake Placid: nearly fifty years past

The IIIrd Olympic Winter Games

by Georges Deschiens



In 1932, practically on the same dates (4th to 13th February), Lake Placid organised the Olympic Winter Games for the first time. Georges Deschiens, whose "Histoire des Jeux Olympiques d'Hiver" (History of the Olympic Winter Games—see Bibliography in Olympic Review No. 146, December 1979)—has just been published by Jean Vuarnet, the Olympic downhill champion. The author recalls in a few lines the story of these Games for which no snow fell. We thank him for permission to publish this extract from his book... which takes us back 48 years.

In Lausanne, in 1929, the 27th Session of the IOC had received seven applications to stage the 1932 Olympic Winter Games. The most feasible came from Yosemite Valley (California), Denver (Colorado)—already ! and Lake Placid (New York), for the USA, and from Montreal, for Canada.

It should be remembered that at the time the only events were skating, ice hockey and Nordic skiing. There was no need for the big differences in altitude or special tracks required by Alpine events, which were not yet officially recognised. Even so, none of these resorts was really what we would call a resort today. The least open to criticism was Lake Placid and, in the end, the IOC awarded it the organisation of these IIIrd Games, in accordance with the decision taken by the IOC at Prague in 1925, giving priority for the Olympic Winter Games to the

country organising the Games of the Olympiad "provided that country can give sufficient guarantees of its ability to organise the Games as a whole".

Times have changed and, since the end of the last World War, resorts have sprung up all over the American west not only in the Rockies (Aspen, Sun Valley) but also in the Sierra Nevada (Heavenly Valley, Alpin Meadow and especially Squaw Valley, where we were to journey in 1960 to see the most magnificent Winter Games I have ever watched, held with all the simplicity, camaraderie and purity desired by de Coubertin).

In Lake Placid the barometer was set fair. The remoteness of America, the long and expensive journey, prevented a large European participation. Only 307 competitors came, including 30 women, representing 17 countries in all. The programme was the same as in 1924 and 1928 with, as "demonstration" sports, an unofficial curling tournament, won by Canada and a race for sleds drawn by huskies, also won by a Canadian with the very French name of Goddard. The Games were declared open by the Governor of the State of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who later became President of the USA.

A clear, cloudless sky, and therefore not a snowflake to hope for from nature. As for the ice, fortunately it was possible to make some. Snow ? They would have to go and fetch it from the nearby mountains, which were higher and therefore had more snow. But it was of very poor quality and melting, the kind that skiers call "soggy" snow.

Whole trainloads of snow were therefore transported from nearby Canada. The trails were marked out, the ski-jump covered as well as possible with snow. But the ambient warmth melted the carpet of white ; rocks and shrubs stuck out dangerously... For the ski-jumping, the sacrosanct event, it rained. It was a disaster, a catastrophe in fact. The landing area was turned into a veritable quagmire. Everyone fell in the water,



including the Norwegian Birger Ruud (brother of the silver-medallist at Saint Moritz) who became Olympic champion just ahead of two of his compatriots. He was to win the gold medal again in 1936 and the silver... 16 years later, at Saint Moritz. What talent !

The cross-country races were terrible. France had entered a team of four Jurasians in the 18 km, all French champions. They came far behind Sven Utterstrom (a Swede) who had been beaten in the 50 km three days earlier, and who now took his revenge. Finland's Veli Saarinen, 3rd, and 1st in the 50 km, is at present Secretary General of the Finnish federation.

Fortunately for the mortified Norwegians, Grottnsbraaten was still there. He took two of his partners with him onto the stand for the combined event.

To add to the unfavourable atmospheric conditions, violent arguments broke out in speed skating circles.

Under the pressure of the Americans, the UIP had decided some time before that the races would be timed, but in line and not in pairs. When they heard of this, some of the Europeans withdrew (among them the famous Finnish competitor Clas Thunberg). This debatable—and hotly contested—decision enabled the North Americans to win all the events—the 500 m and the 1500 m by John A. Shea, the 5,000 m and the 10,000 m by Irving Jaffee, who had already been Olympic champion in the 10,000 m at Saint Moritz in 1928.

After the speed skating, the figure skating was held in a beautiful covered skating rink, with artificial ice. The winner in 1924 and 1928, Sweden's Gillis Grafstrom, was injured



during training and lost all chance of fulfilling the dream he had harboured for so long of an Olympic triple victory. The gold medal was won by a young Austrian, almost unknown, even in his own country, Karl Schaffer. Trained at the skating school in Vienna, he shone by the daring of his pirouettes, some of which still bear his name. He was to renew this success, four years later, at Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

Among the women, Norwegian competitor, Sonja Henie, 20 years old, at the height of her physical powers and with complete

technical mastery, won again, even more easily than four years previously.

Andrée Joly, who had become Mrs. Pierre Brunet, won again¹, with her husband. This was the beginning of the growth of figure skating in the United States. Artificial rinks began to be built all over the country, even in the heart of New York, where skaters could practise all year round. The Brunets moved to the United States where they trained the future Olympic champions of 1948, 1952 and 1956.

In hockey, Canada repeated its 1928 success, inflicting crushing defeats on the four other teams competing. The US team, which came second, was disappointed. The spectators too... but were the Canadians 100 % amateur ?

A new event was added to the bobsleigh, the two-man bob, as if the four-man bob was not enough to wear out the soft and water-logged track... A fresh dispute : the American bobsleighs were equipped with new runners, in the form of a blade, like the skates of the ice hockey players. These blades damaged the ice. They were in fact subsequently banned by the Federation Internationale de Bobsleigh et Tobogganing. Meanwhile, the American teams used them and won both events...

The closing ceremony of these first Winter Games on the other side of the Atlantic was held on 14th February. It snowed... Too late however. These Illrd Winter Games left no fabulous memories with our compatriots. Except, of course, for the Brunets... In wishing to arrange everything to their own advantage, the Americans had upset their visitors from the Old World.

Was it reasonable to apply to stage the Winter Games at a venue situated at an altitude of 568 m ? Obviously, the American continent has different atmospheric norms from ours, but even so... Besides, the same situation arose again in 1950, during the Nordic world championships also held at Lake Placid, which had to be transferred to Rumford, where they were held in debatable conditions.

And yet we are ready to start all over again in 1980...



¹ The French couple Andrée Joly and Pierre Brunet were already victorious in 1929 in Saint Moritz. Georges Deschiens spoke of them in the previous chapter of his book "L'Histoire des Jeux Olympiques d'Hiver" (Published by Jean Vuarnet).