

My Olympic experience

by Ivar Formo

I will start this lecture by mentioning the ideas that the athletes expressed in the appeal of the 10th Olympic Congress in Varna, and the same expression that Mr. Tretyak, the Russian ice-hockey player, mentioned in his speech of the 11th Olympic Congress in Baden-Baden :

Everyone who loves sport has to concentrate their efforts on the practical realisation of the most important principle of the Olympic movement, namely the strengthening of peace, understanding and friendship amongst human beings and nations.

If we could manage to put this in focus, instead of political pressure, doping, and commercial problems, as aspects of violence, I'm sure we will take a big step in the right direction for the sport.

Cross-country skiing, which is my sport, is an individual sport, and I think that violence is a much bigger problem in many other sports than cross-country skiing. The biggest problems in cross-country skiing are concentrated on doping, and on the pressure on the young athletes, from relatives and coaches, to be a very good athlete.

I will come back to the doping problem later in this lecture, but just mention here, that a cross-country skier has been disqualified some years ago after taking anabolics, and that problem together with blood doping perhaps are the biggest problems in cross-country skiing. The pressures on young athletes have been discussed a lot in Norway, and I will here give you two examples of what I mean by such pressure.

The first example was a 13 year old girl, who did not get her dinner until she had taken her daily training.

The second example was a 15 year old boy, who would get a new pair of skis, only if he was amongst the 5 best in the Norwegian championship for girls and boys. I think we have this problem in all sports, and I was glad

that Madame Berlioux touched this problem in her lecture yesterday. I hope we can solve this problem, so that all athletes all over the world can participate in competition without the pressure from relatives, coaches, officials and other persons.

Now I will give you some information about cross-country skiing, about the preparation for the Olympic Games for a cross-country skier, and my experience taking part in the Olympic Games.

I will end this lecture by mentioning the conclusion of the athletes discussions about doping in the 11th Olympic Congress in Baden-Baden.



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Cross-country skiing has 4 competitions for ladies, and 4 competitions for men in the Olympic Games. The ladies competitions are 5, 10 and 20 km individual races, and 4 x 5 km relay. The men's competitions are 15, 30 and 50 km individual races and 4 x 10 km relay. Four people from each nation are allowed to start in each competition,

I have been lucky to be able to take part in two Olympic Games. The first time was in Sapporo, Japan in 1972, where I won the silver medal in the cross-country relay for Norway, and the bronze medal in the 15 km cross-country individual race. The second time I took part in the Olympic Games was in Innsbruck, Austria 1976, where I won the silver medal in the cross-country relay for Norway, and the gold medal in the 50 km cross-country individual race.

Of course, I often look back on these two Olympic Games, and I feel a great happiness when I think about the days in Sapporo and Innsbruck. It was some years after that I realised what it felt like to take part in the Olympic Games. The experiences have given me a memory for life, and I really hope that many athletes will have the same experience in the future.

I believe that almost all athletes have the Olympic Games as the greatest goal in their career. During the whole period of an Olympiad, athletes prepare themselves for this world festival of sport, - The Olympic Games -, investing all their strength in their efforts to reach top form on the right day.

In all Olympic competitions there are many possible winners, and I believe there are many factors which decide who will achieve the Olympic gold medal.

If I have to mention some of the factors that are necessary to reach top form at the right time for a cross-country skier, I would say training, the coach, the leaders, the competition programme, eating, sleeping and personal hygiene.

It is obvious that one must do all these things properly, and being in top form at the

right time depends on succeeding in all your planning, the small as well as the big.

Training

Training for a cross-country skier consists mainly of skiing, running, training on roller ski and some gymnastics. In most parts of Norway we have snow from the beginning of November till the end of April, and on the glaciers we can ski almost all the year.

The skiing competitions end about the 1st April, and then it is easy training for a couple of months. During the summer the training increases again until the beginning of November. At this time the competitions start and the training is gradually reduced, depending on how your racing form is at that time. From October until April we mostly go cross-country skiing as our only training.

The coach and the leaders

I have always looked at coaches and leaders as important elements in an athlete's career. During the year, it was very important for me to have a person, with whom I could discuss all my problems. Not only problems concerning training, but also others like personal problems. For me this person was my coach.

The leaders are important too, perhaps especially in connection with the competitions. Cross-country skiing is a sport where equipment, waxing of skis, timing and footing in the track are principal parts of the competition.

The leaders can also do a great job when the environmental influences are concerned, and this is a factor that must not be forgotten in sports.

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The competition programme

The competition season for a cross-country skier starts in the beginning of November, and ends in the beginning of April.

During the season I normally competed in about 30 competitions. The Olympic Games took place in the middle of February, and I competed in about 15 competitions before the Olympic Games.

I used the first competitions in November to find out where I was in my form-rebuilding, so that I could adjust my training immediately if necessary.

About eating, sleeping and personal hygiene

I, myself, tried to live as close to a normal life as possible. I studied at the Norwegian Technical University during the years I prepared myself for the Olympic Games, and I lived in a flat together with a student friend.

Cross-country skiing is especially an endurance sport, and it is of great value to get enough calories, vitamins, sleep and relaxing between training.

I did not follow this strictly, and I never had a bad conscience when I occasionally had something that I liked very much, but perhaps was not so healthy. Now and then I also had some alcohol and stayed up late at night, without feeling that I destroyed either my training or form-rebuilding.

I also took good care of my personal hygiene, so that I did not catch any small constant illness or infections. When the skiing-season drew near, - and more important -, when the Olympic Games drew near, it is obvious that one took much more care -, with right eating, sleeping and so on -, and avoided infection centres as cinemas and other crowded places.

I have now mentioned some factors which I consider important for a cross-country skier in his preparations for the Olympic Games. All these factors contribute to form the basic physical form for a cross-country skier. But to reach the top form on the right day, I think all athletes had to think about the psychological cycle of training.

For me, this started up to 1 year before the Olympic competitions, when I knew the tracks. I went through these tracks in my thoughts many times during the last year before the Olympic Games, thinking where I could win seconds from my competitors. The last weeks I went through the tracks many times every day and thought about the different downhill and uphill.

For me it was also very important that I liked the surroundings, like the weather, the hotel, the food, etc.

The last 14 days before the Olympic Games started in Innsbruck 1976, the Norwegian team had a training camp in the mountains in North Italy.

I had won the last World Cup competition over 30 km, and was among the favourites in the newspapers. My physical form was on top, and it was essential for me to build up my mental strength, which is necessary to be a winner in the Olympic Games. I went for short ski-trips and enjoyed myself in the well prepared tracks. The weather was beautiful and everything seemed fine for me.

When we finally arrived at the Olympic village, 3 days before the competitions started the atmosphere was great, and I felt strong and in very good shape.

To be allowed to attend the Olympic Games and to feel the atmosphere is in my opinion the greatest experience an athlete can obtain.

For the athletes the usual festive atmosphere which is expressed during the Olympic Games is very important, an atmosphere which also exists when the athletes meet, exchange opinions, discuss common problems and relax together. I consider this to be the expression of

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the Olympic traditions, which must be maintained in future Olympic Games. I will say that the unity of athletes representing different countries and continents is one of the most important achievements of the Olympic Movement.

During the last couple of days before the competitions in Innsbruck 1976, we tested the competition tracks and the equipment.

I met all my friends from different countries, and the happiness of meeting each other was so great, that it was difficult to think that we a couple of days later should fight against each other for the Olympic medals.

The first cross-country competition in the Olympic Games for men is the 30 km individual

race. When I prepared myself the last hours before the start, I felt that my physical and mental form was on top. After the first 5 km, I was in the lead, but then I felt that my waxing was not the best. The skis would not go, and I lost seconds in every downhill.

This was a big disappointment for me especially because my physical and mental form was on top. But this time the leader of the Norwegian team had taken a wrong wax, and I finished eleventh in the 30 km individual race.

At the next distance, 15 km individual race, 2 days later, I was tired after fighting with bad skis in the 30 km race, and I finished fifth. I was disappointed with this too, and after two bad races it was important for me to build myself up psychologically.



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To be honest, I was very disappointed after the 2 first races. This was perhaps not right. I should have been satisfied because I was one of the few athletes who got the opportunity to take part in the Olympic Games.

On the other hand, as a top level athlete, I knew I could fight for an Olympic medal under normal circumstances, and I therefore hope you understand my disappointment.

Norway got the silver medal in the relay 4 x 10 km, and we were satisfied with this.

I had now 2 days left before the last competition which was the 50 km, the marathon distance for the cross-country skiers. I was determined not to go ski training these two days. I knew I was in top physical form and that I had to build myself up psychologically. For me, the best medicine to do this was to walk around in the Olympic Village and enjoy myself with the Olympic atmosphere.

This Olympic atmosphere is one of the things I will always remember from the Olympic Games. I have been participating in World Cup competitions and other international competitions, but I didn't find the same atmosphere here.

It is difficult to say how much this Olympic atmosphere gave me in the psychological rebuilding, but when I started on the 50 km individual race I felt myself in top form physically and mentally. As you have already heard, I got the gold medal in this 50 km competition in Innsbruck, Austria 1976, and the greatest and most exciting moment was when the national flag was hoisted, and the national anthem played. During this Olympic ceremony I was thinking of and thanking all the people who helped me achieve this Olympic gold medal.

I will now give some minutes to the doping problem.

As you perhaps know, we were about 30 athletes coming from different countries and various sports to present the opinion of the athletes in the 11th Olympic Congress in Baden-Baden 1981.

During a week in Baden Baden we had many discussions over different topics. It was, doping, rule 26 (the eligibility to compete in the Games), inclusion of women and athletes in the Olympic movement, political involvement in the Olympic Games and Olympic Ceremonies.

I will now give you the conclusions on the discussion about doping.

Two of the basic principles of the Olympic Movement which are also stated within the rules of the IOC are, among others, fairness and equal opportunities. Therefore, all athletes who participated in the discussions in Baden Baden agreed that illegal use of all kinds of doping for the improvement of performance is against these principles.

The result of our discussions was that this problem is more relevant in some sports than in others, but all of us are aware of it, and we all want a solution to this problem. Therefore, we demand that all responsible organisations and persons in sports should try their utmost - really their utmost, in order to solve this problem. Being real athletes, we should achieve good success, but if this success is the result of using any kinds of doping, then we are no longer real athletes. For this reason, we asked the IOC to take the following into consideration.

1. We need a better control - not only on the occasion of important competitions, but also during the whole year or training season in order to ensure that doping regulations are observed by all athletes.

We believe that an international committee composed of representatives from several countries could help to achieve such a strong control. This committee, composed of qualified specialists, could help to prevent any one particular country from not observing the doping regulations. This control would have to be equal for each country.

2. In all cases, where doping is proved, all persons involved should be punished (not only athletes, but also trainers, leaders, doctors and officials). This punishment should be hard

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enough and last long enough to have a strong effect. The punishment did not seem sufficient up to now, because doping rules continue to be broken again and again. The IOC, the International Federations and the NOCs should therefore investigate if it is advisable to add financial penalties to lifelong disqualifications in case of proved breaking of doping rules. It should be possible for the IOC to take legal action in order to execute such punishments. Funds should be established to use the penalties for the organisation of the doping control.

3. Better information is necessary for the athletes in regard to doping possibilities. It should never happen that drugs are given to athletes as vitamins, etc., when in fact they are a sort of anabolic, blood doping or other kind of illegal drug.

We well know that the doping problem can only be solved by high financial and time investment. However we, the athletes, asked the IOC, the International Federations and the NOC's to do their utmost to solve this problem, which is very important to save the athletes from the selfish interest of a third person.

Now, at the end of this lecture I will go back to the Olympic Games. We heard yesterday from Madame Berlioux that Olympism has overcome all the problems in the world up to today and I'm sure we all are happy for this.

But don't let us stop here, let us all work so that we could solve the political pressure, the doping, the commercial problems and other aspects of violence, so that we could be sure that many people can live to see the Olympic Games in the future, and so that many athletes also in the future can take part in the Olympic Games, and feel the Olympic atmosphere.

I.F.

