

# *The pleasure of the Games*

We were dazzled. It wasn't only the effect of the light in which Lillehammer bathed during the Olympic fortnight, that pale Nordic light with its iridescent edges that inspired a generation of painters at the turn of the century. It was just that our eyes were no longer accustomed to so much beauty in sport, polluted all too often with chauvinism and racketeering. These XVII Olympic Winter Games were radiantly simple, purely

transparent, elegantly majestic: in a word, sumptuous. A magnificent success, At least in comparison with what we had before: Lake Placid and its confusion, Sarajevo and its tensions, Calgary and its microclimate, Albertville and its Tarentaise.

For two weeks we went around in a daze of astonishment and delight, seduced by the simplicity and the quality. The first shock was the visit to the Gjovik ice rink in an artificial

cavern hollowed out of a hill. The quantity of explosives used to excavate the rock could apparently have sent a rocket to the moon. In any case, there was enough to pulverize part of the little industrial town, just south of Lillehammer on the opposite side of Lake Mjosa. The techniques perfected in this large-scale project meant that only minimal vibrations occurred in the homes built above. In fact, the only nuisance their





occupants appear to complain about is the noise from the ice hockey matches taking place beneath their feet.

Inside, the huge reinforced doors, airlocks and repeated security warnings give one the impression of being in a nuclear shelter disguised as an



ice rink. James Bond could have chased Dr No in there. The atmosphere of the place is striking. And the excavation procedure, which allows space to be created where there was none before, could be useful for cities in the South, where there is a distinct lack of space. Gjøvik is not the only venue to display architectural inventiveness. The covered speed skating rink in Hamar, in the form of an upside-down Viking ship, is also a spectacular feat. Moving to a different aspect, the telecommunica-

the spectators: dressed in red and blue, laughing, singing and drinking. More than 2 million people visited the sites and events, the equivalent of almost half the population of the country.

How could the host country, with only 4.3 million inhabitants, hope to rival these invited powers with their populations of 150 and 80 million respectively?

Educationalists, who are traditionally deeply egalitarian, have for a long time opposed any idea of competi-

country and at minimal cost, is rooted in this tradition. Their failure at the Games in Calgary (no gold medals) made it easier for mentalities to evolve towards the idea of competition, and this evolution was to accelerate when Lillehammer was awarded the Olympic Games.

### **ROOTED IN TRADITION**

Around 600 million francs were then invested in a training programme for a protean elite. Freestyle and Alpine skiers appeared alongside the traditional Nordic skiers. Norway's rising strength began to surface in Albertville (third in the medals table, with a total of 20 medals) and carried over to Lillehammer (first place with 26 medals).

The Norwegian plan, as effective as the East German system was in its day, but based on the respect for the individual, has permitted a legion of champions to emerge: speed skater Johan Olav Koss (3 gold medals and 3 world records), cross-country skier Bjorn Daehlie (2 gold medals and 2 silver), ski jumper Espen Bredesen (1 gold and 1 silver) and Alpine skiers Lasse Kjus, Kjetil André Aamodt and Harald Nilsen (gold, silver and bronze in the combined).

However great this success, it did not appear crushing or inhuman. There were some disappointments among those who looked to be in line for medals: cross-country skier Vegar Ulvang, the great victor in Albertville, had to give up his silver medal in the relay because of a thigh injury; alpine skier Kjetil André Aamodt, the great favourite in the downhill and super-G, came away with only diplomas. But a weak point in this seemingly admirable arrangement (the Norwegians won 75 times as many medals per capita of population as the French) was the women's results.

Looking at their male compatriots' performances, they gave a poor



*Messes Samaranch and Heiberg at the opening of great Games*

tions services were particularly impressive. In exchange for a deposit equivalent to 12,000 francs, in a matter of minutes you could have a portable telephone, the ultimate executive toy. Two million calls were thus made during the Games, without any particular problems, reaching a peak of 900,000 calls before the opening ceremony.

Norwegian ingenuity and technology, however, were nothing compared with their enthusiasm. Perhaps even more than the champions, the real heroes of these two weeks were

any notion of selecting the best. The cult of cross-country skiing, which is possible for five months during the winter throughout the



show with only 3 medals, including a single gold for freestyle skier Stine Lise Hattestad. A nation that wants to improve its sports results usually starts by improving the results of its women: this was the case in the GDR and it is so in China. Does Norway have a cultural block against high-level women's sport? This would be particularly surprising, as the first great star of the Winter Games was Sonja Henie, the "ice fairy", who won three Olympic titles between 1928 and 1936 before founding a variety show and making eleven films.

In any- case, Lillehammer bore its female champions no grudges. With very different personalities, and in very different disciplines, the Ameri-

can speed skater Bonnie Blair (2 gold medals), the Canadian biathlete Myriam Bédard (2 gold medals), the cross-country skiers Manuela di Centa of Italy (2. gold medals) and Lyubov Egorova of Russia (3 gold medals) have written some of the finest chapters in winter sports history for an appreciative public. Without forgetting the South Korean Yoon Mi Kim, who set a new record as the youngest athlete to win a gold medal (3000111 short-track relay) at thirteen years of age, ousting Sonja Henie, who became champion at fourteen.

Around these champions there was none of the odour of scandal that lingered around the Hamar ice rink throughout the Games. The

Kerrigan-Harding soap opera, in which the former, Nancy, was supposedly the victim of a plot purportedly engineered by the latter, Tonya, poisoned the atmosphere, then turned to farce when "had" Tonya's lace broke a few minutes before she came onto the ice, and the programme had to be changed. The judges provided their own epilogue to this pathetic saga by awarding the gold medal to the Ukrainian Oksana Baiul who, like a fledgling fallen from the nest, succeeded in capturing the hearts of the world. Figure skating did not come well out of this affair; the public did not understand the judges, who they perceived as too powerful to be really impartial.

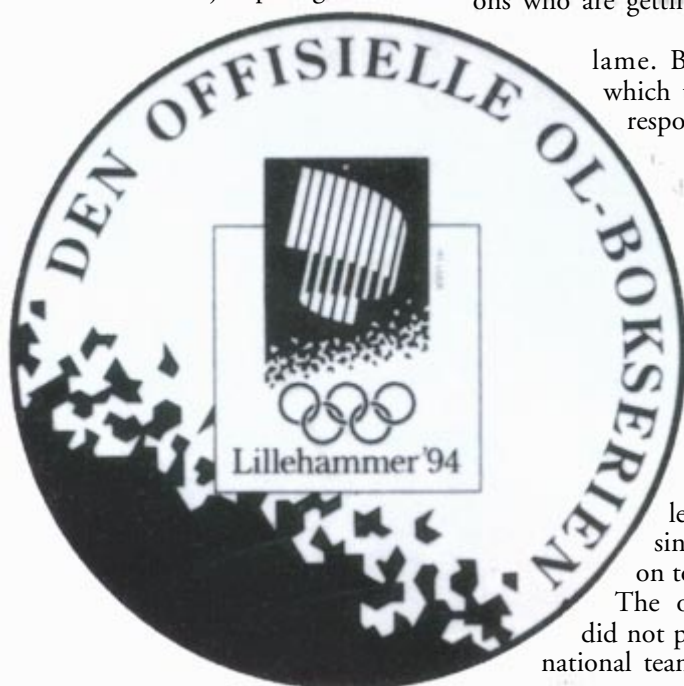


**THE ODOUR OF SCANDAL**

These petty intrigues, however, had little effect on the overall balance of power. Alongside Norway, the host power, we find at the head of the honours list, inevitably, Russia and Germany. Despite the autonomy granted to the former republics of the USSR, and the economic and financial difficulties in which the country is plunged - through lack of funds, the cross-country skiers were not able to train at altitude, which did not stop them picking up five medals - Russia won the most gold medals. According to some people the boat has run out of steam, and is merely continuing under its own momentum. The inescapable sign of the decline is the defeat of the ice hockey team which, deprived of its best players, who defected to the United States professional league, was relegated to fourth place after winning the tournament at eight of the last ten Games. Germany, on the other hand, seems to have absorbed its athletes from the East. Ten years after his success in Sarajevo Jens Weissflog became number one ski jumper again.

Two years after the Games in Albertville, where they won 9 medals, the performance of the 110-strong French team was not outstanding. The number of medals (51) was, how-ever, comparable with previous Games held outside France. A

the closing ceremony from calling attention to itself by provoking disorder in the parade. Did they stop to think how lucky they were to be there? Too many losers console themselves by saying that the Games are a competition just like any other.



lack of motivation in certain champions who are getting ready to retire somewhat to lame. But the extent to which the technical staff responsible for selection are at fault should also be established. Finally, aside from the accidental disappointments (Surya Bonaly), one may wonder about the quality of the cross-country skiers' and biathletes' preparation, since they were not on top form.

The overall mediocrity did not prevent part of the national team participating in

The error is flagrant: no other competition is broadcast to 100 countries, or has a cumulative television audience of 10 million: no other competition radiated joy and happiness like Lillehammer. To such an extent that we would be the first to applaud if, as the town authorities have suggested, in the interests of installation management, the Games were to come back in 2010.

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