

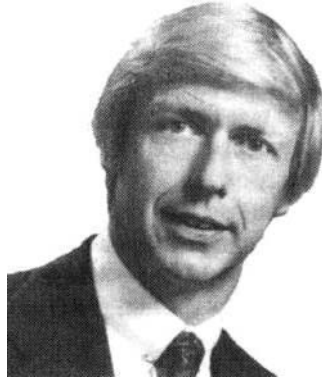
THE SALT LAKE CITY CANDIDACY

by Herb Weinberg

The roar of the Salt Lake City crowds have subsided; the medals have been won and suspended under the tears of winter athletes; and we're recovering from one of the most exciting Olympic Winter Games during the three-quarters of a century those snow and ice Games have been held. Americans are particularly happy in that their athletes won 34 Olympic medals, more than twice the number won at any previous winter Olympics and they're happy it happened on American soil which served as a spur for their athletes.

However, it almost didn't happen. Years ago Salt Lake City came within a hair of losing those 2002 Olympics. In fact, the game was almost over before it started. But there was a hero, a Des Moines lawyer, whose political sensibilities nipped a plot in the bud, a plot to remove Salt Lake City from the Olympic bidding process.

Robert
HELMICK



He's Robert H. HELMICK and during the late 80s and early 90s he was President of the *United States Olympic Committee* and a member of the IOC's Executive Board.

HELMICK'S moment occurred back in Birmingham, England, in 1991, where a handful of municipalities from three continents were placing bids before the IOC to host the 1998 Olympic Winter Games. The city of Nagano, Japan, won those '98 Games, but certain circumstances happened in '91 that almost turned Salt Lake City away from a bid for 2002, which they eventually won but almost lost except for Bob HELMICK'S sense of politics.

What made HELMICK the hero; what kept Salt Lake City in the game?

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Overwhelmingly the objective is to win.

Even when the context of the competition is sportsmanship, world peace and brotherhood, the objective is to win, particularly when billions of dollars are involved.

Within the IOC there is the process every fourth year of selecting the municipal site of the Olympic Winter Games, those Games usually taking place seven years hence, giving the host city 15 days of glorious worldwide attention. (The Olympic Summer Games go through the

same quadrennial process, alternating every two years with the winter procedure.)

This is Salt Lake City's story about the acquisition of their winter Olympics and how the Japanese version of dirty politics brought them within that hairsbreadth of being eliminated from the race almost before the race had begun.

Ever wonder how the IOC selects its Olympic cities? If you'll take a moment to read this tale you'll also gain some insight as to how these elections work.

However, to avoid confusion, be aware of these facts of history:

1 - At the IOC sessions in Tokyo in 1990, Atlanta is chosen as the site of the 1996 Olympic Summer Games, defeating Athens, Greece, among others.

2 - At the IOC sessions in Birmingham, England in 1991, Nagano, Japan is

selected as the site of the 1998 Olympic Winter Games, defeating Salt Lake City and others.

3 - At the IOC sessions in Budapest, Hungary in 1995, Salt Lake City is selected as the site of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games, defeating three other candidates.

The *International Olympic Committee* met in Birmingham in 1991 to decide among five candidates as to which would host the 1998 Winter Olympics. They were Jaca (Spain), Aosta (Italy), Osternund (Sweden), Nagano (Japan), and Salt Lake City. The favorites were Nagano and SLC, the others considered small fry compared to what those two metropolises could offer in meeting the expensive and expansive needs of an Olympic Games. The city by the lake was clearly the most qualified candidate, a major city with major competitive facilities conveniently placed within itself and within Park City, a nearby skiing resort, and within other reachable competition venues. By comparison Nagano was above the other three candidates as Salt Lake City was above Nagano in meeting the major needs of the Olympic contract relative to housing, transportation, facilities for the print and broadcast press, the Olympic Village, a major

airport and the other necessary big-league facilities and accommodations needed to host an Olympic Games.

However, despite these seeming SLC advantages, the Nagano delegation in Birmingham realized that another United States city, Atlanta, only a year earlier, in 1990, at the IOC meetings in Tokyo, had won the right to host the 1996 Olympic Summer Games, defeating the favorite, Athens. And the Japanese were not without justification in believing the IOC would certainly hesitate to award two consecutive Olympic Games, summer and winter, within two years, to two United States' cities: to Atlanta in '96 and to Salt Lake City in '98. The year 1996 would be the centennial of the modern Olympic Games and in Tokyo it had been assumed those summer Games would be returned to their point of origin: Athens. But the Greek delegation screwed up, Atlanta won, placing the Utah delegation on the horns of a dilemma: should they, despite Atlanta's victory for '96, stay in the race and continue to strive for those '98 winter Olympics?

Surely, the IOC wouldn't grant consecutive Olympics, winter and summer, to the same country.

Tom WELCH, president of the Utah delegation was in Tokyo when Atlanta pulled its upset victory. He was surprised and depressed when it happened and of a mind to pull out of the bidding for the '98 Winter Games in Birmingham the following year (1991). Why bother?

However, Bob HELMICK strongly advised WELCH and his delegation not to quit, to hang in; it could still be done: his reasoning being that within the IOC there was subtle talk the duplication of many Olympic preparatory costs could be prevented by consecutively holding both the summer and winter Olympics within the same nation, rather than separating the Games by continents. SLC had nothing to lose; stay in the race.

Therefore, the delegation hung in, and HELMICK'S theory was almost proven to be right. After four ballots the two finalists came down to Nagano and Salt Lake City, Nagano winning by a final 46-42 vote. Therefore, the Utah delegation came out of Birmingham encouraged, confident they'd be back in four years as favorites to garner the 2002 Games. And they were proven correct when in 1995, at the IOC session in Budapest, SLC easily won that 2002 bid.

But all of the above nearly didn't happen. When the Utah people did stay in the running for '98 the Nagano delegation lit out on a strategy to win that had it succeeded might have destroyed any SLC bid for either of those two Olympics. The Japanese strategy was nefarious and almost successful until they overplayed their hand.

To get a clear picture of what happened let's take a look at the election process.

That process involves a series of ballots depending upon the number of candidates. When there are three or more candidates if a majority is not achieved on the first ballot, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and another ballot is taken, and that process continues until a candidate achieves a majority vote. And with five candidates in Birmingham that meant it could go as high as four ballots.

And that's what happened: Aosta went out after the first ballot; Jaca after the second, and Ostersund after the third, no one having achieved that majority until that fourth and final ballot between SLC and Nagano.

Of course there are voting blocs within the IOC, blocs voting for their regional and continental candidates, a kind of loyalty, and deals are made within the course of a campaign. However, these are not corrupt so much as they are natural political actions. Therefore, there may be campaigns within campaigns. For example, two blocs may make a deal wherein each pledges to switch their vote to the other's candidacy if their original and preferred candidate is eliminated early on. Thereby, lobbyists may extract promises that may apply as far down as the third and even the fourth balloting, each city's representatives optimistic if not praying they are still in the running on those late ballots, *"I'll vote for your city if my first and second choices are eliminated,"* and so on.

In any case, Tom WELCH, after losing that tight race to Nagano in '91 in Birmingham, came to distrust the process, knowing the Japanese had played some dirty pool, some of the facts of which are described in this story. (The Nagano organizers burned their books immediately after their '98 Winter Olympics were completed.)

In Budapest four years later, in '95, SLC's opposing candidacies for 2002 were Ostersund, Quebec and Sion (Switzerland), none of which could compare with the quality of the SLC bid. But by this time it seems the SLC people had



lost faith and determined they would not be slickered again? Or possibly they didn't want mere victory so much as they wanted overwhelming victory and so they went under the table. Eventually it was alleged that in striving for the '02 Games several SLC people indulged in the various forms of alleged cheating exposed by the scandals that were to come. WELCH and his second-in-command, David JOHNSON, were indicted on federal charges that were later dismissed, the judgment being that what they'd done may have been immoral and unethical but not illegal when practiced on an international basis. According to HELMICK *"It was the closeness of the 46-42 vote in '91 that may have flipped them. Welch and Johnson were decent people but they decided to play by the 'unwritten' rules"* Eventually ten members of the IOC who'd had their hands in the pockets of the *Salt Lake Olympic Organizing Committee* were thrown out of the IOC and others were given severe warnings.

Anyway, as it came out in Budapest, SLC won the '02 bid on the very first ballot, garnering 54 of the 89 votes cast (Sion and Ostersund each had 14 votes, Quebec 7).

But the facts described above nearly didn't happen at all. Something happened in Birmingham back in '91 that almost told the SLC delegation not to bother in '95 to bid for the '02 winter Olympics. I refer to a possibly immoral Nagano strategy that almost killed any SLC candidacy for '02 aborning.

What happened?

In Birmingham, as Nagano and SLC emerged as the clear favorites, the outside candidacies of Aosta, Jaca and Ostersund merely represented the fact that hope springs eternal. All national delegations making their bid have spent several millions of dollars and tens of thousands of hours over several years, living within an optimism that says they cannot lose; they must not lose. Even when all intelligent signs of life are nearly gone they carry on with their campaigning, their lobbying and their prayers, in the vain hope the IOC electors will somehow come to see their city represents the best Olympic site. At the least they struggle onward to avoid the embarrassment of being eliminated on an early ballot. Depending upon their social system losing delegates often come home to censure and ridicule after having convinced their populations they could win, that the effort and

the money spent would pay off. But when reality falls short of expectations the losing delegations very much need an excuse, something to hang their hat on, something to help save face.

And thereby a kindly Olympic tradition has developed. IOC members know whom the heavy hitters are just as they realize which candidates stand little chance of winning these races. In 1991 Salt Lake City and Nagano were the heavy hitters. Thusly for the first ballot charity takes over. For example, in Birmingham the 88 members of the IOC realized that with five candidates on the ballot they took for granted neither of these two favorites would achieve a majority on the first ballot. Therefore, on that initial vote certain members voted for one of the lesser candidates, to give the appearance that at least those candidates were in the running early on. And as you can see there was only a six-vote differential (21 for Nagano; 15 for Aosta and SLC) between the highest and lowest achieving candidates on that first vote. On that ballot Jaca with 19 votes was close to Nagano's 21 votes (45 votes needed for a winning majority). Clearly Jaca was not among the favorites, however the IOC President Juan Antonio SAMARANCH, is a Spaniard and it would have been an embarrassment for him if the Spanish candidate had been the first eliminated. Therefore, SAMARANCH was thrown this bone, a few altruistic votes on the first ballot, a minor political payoff of a sort. Then as of the second ballot the IOC really got down to business, charity no longer in their hearts.

However, if we linger with that first vote for just a moment longer we realize there was a shocker there, almost an American tragedy, despite the assumption that Nagano and SLC were the true favorites.

Note that on that first vote SLC tied for **last**, with Aosta! Thereby, it is apparent that according to the rules if SLC had achieved just **one** less vote, having scored 14 instead of the 15 that tied Aosta, the SLC candidacy would have been instantly eliminated from the contest on that first ballot there would have been no battle down to the last ballot with Nagano.

What was going on?

A Japanese strategy is what was going on, inscrutable and devious, but brilliant, coming within a scintilla of being successful if it hadn't been slightly overplayed.

We can only surmise whether the

Nagano delegates came to Birmingham with a specific plan to do dirty work or if they saw a trend and decided to create an electoral exodus which borders on dirty politics. In any case surely they understood the tradition of certain IOC members voting for a weaker candidate on that courteous and charitable first ballot and they figured if they could sway enough votes out of the American column on that ballot they could bring the SLC total to a level so low, finishing last, they could eliminate the Americans immediately. It was done quietly, slyly, making hardly a ripple.

The Japanese deliberately sought out those IOC members they believed favored SLC's candidacy and directly and indirectly praised the tradition of sacrificing their first vote. Thereby, the SLC vote total was being subtly and gradually reduced, one by one, playing off of Olympic good-heartedness while the Americans slept. It was generally conceded Aosta was the weakest candidate, expected to be last on the first vote, becoming the first eliminated. Therefore, the Nagano strategy was also to convince as many IOC members as possible to give that first altruistic vote to Aosta if not Jaca. Thereby before the voting began they'd ostensibly reduced the SLC vote and raised the Aosta vote to a point wherein that little Italian Alpine town was out-polling SLC, placing the unknowing Americans last and on the precipice of elimination.

It was a wild concept and came within a whisker of succeeding. In fact, for a brief time, before the vote, they did succeed. HELMICK, tall, slender, as fit as the water polo player he used to be, with Nordic blonde hair, in retrospect surmises they believed they'd pulled it off. However, the Japanese did not know when to step back; pressing just a bit too firmly, were unsubtle for just a moment, tipping off HELMICK as to what was happening, and within only minutes of the start of the voting he realized the paucity of votes for the SLC bid and hurriedly took the action that brought the SLC total back to a level that at the very least breathtakingly achieved that 15-15 early tie with Aosta, saving Salt Lake City's keyster. SLC won the run-off vote with Aosta 59-29 to stay in the race)

What tipped off HELMICK as to the existence of a scheme?

As we described earlier the election process finds it wise for delegations to lobby for votes on every ballot. And the Nagano

delegates were bold enough to even lobby HELMICK, an act of bravado. For example, they took him to dinner one evening and inquired *"Once Salt Lake City is eliminated, would you give us your vote?"* Taken aback and a bit by surprise he told them he expected the American candidacy to be in the running to the very end, as he wondered *"Why would they approach me, of all people, the President of the United States Olympic Committee, with such a request? What are they up to? Is this some form of mockery? Why?"* HELMICK acknowledges *"There was nothing immoral about this. In any competition it's always a tactic to remove your best competition in the preliminaries."* But this amounted to hubris and he was alerted, *"Something's happening. Be careful."*

At breakfast on the morning of the vote he noted the continuing Japanese lobbying, and the light went on, the epiphany. His lawyerly mind put things together. He realized the race could be over before it had begun, before the SLC people realized what had hit them.

He quickly polled members he knew were in the SLC camp and found too many of them were altruistically going to vote otherwise on the first ballot as a political gesture to SAMARANCH (Jaca) or to help prevent national embarrassments (Aosta or Ostersund). HELMICK realized *"This vote is rigged, manipulated!"* and minutes before voting started he scurried around the room like an indoor speed skater, relaying his suspicions, imploring his cohorts not to go with a vote for a non-favorite and to come back to SLC. Some thought his intuitions preposterous and HELMICK didn't re-convert all that many, but he brought back a few, enough to at least achieve that tie-vote for last place giving SLC the shot at the runoff vote that kept them in the race.

The Japanese had the misjudgement and the gonads to attempt to give HELMICK the impression the American candidacy wouldn't be around for very long. Such boldness (or foolishness) proved to be the one step too far. He got wise and in the end the Japanese did not succeed in pulling it off because of hubris: hubris which created a ripple which flipped a switch in HELMICK'S psyche that tipped him off.

Why were the Japanese so unwise as to even approach a key figure within the SLC delegation about switching his vote? Was it because they figured SLC was all but

eliminated when Atlanta sewed up the '96 summer Games? Or, conversely, they realized SLC was still too strong a rival and so they hatched their plot. Or was it chutzpah, over-confidence or a combination of these factors?

So much for history. But think about it. Suppose the SLC candidacy had been eliminated as of that first ballot in Birmingham in '91. Would such a stunning and immediate removal from the contest have given the SLC people the impression *"They just don't want us; why waste our time when even three small town candidacies polled more votes?"* And thereby would the city never have come back four years later to bid for the '02 Winter Games? Would the Utah delegation have been

too dispirited to try again, too dispirited to have come back in '95 to overwhelm Ostersund, Quebec and Sion?

One less vote; just **one** less vote and it could have happened. In light of the eventual indictments of Tom WELCH and David JOHNSON, maybe the two of them wish the Japanese had succeeded. Ironically, in either case, neither the Nagano dirty tricks campaign in '91 nor the shady SLC campaign in '95 was necessary in that consensus tells us each would have achieved their goal, their Olympic Games, without such chicanery.

The inscrutable Japanese. Dirty tricks? Or maybe all's fair in love and war.



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