

LILLEHAMMER AS SEEN BY THE MEDIA

by Christine Brennan

It is tempting to say that the only items the media needed at the 1994 Olympic Winter Games in Norway were the practice schedule for women's figure skating and the telephone numbers for several attorneys in Portland, Oregon.

This is not entirely true, even if many Olympic beat writers from the United States (including those of us who are ISOH members) covered the saga of Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan to the exclusion of almost everything else.

There were other events at the Winter Olympics, races and personal glories that will linger long after the image of Harding's broken skate lace fades from memory. And the Norwegian organizers of the Games handled these events very well, providing reporters, editors, and photographers with ample and efficient room to work while staying within the planners' quaint, small-town framework. But, when we think of the 1994 Winter Games, we will always think, first and foremost, of Tonya and Nancy.

It became very clear even before we arrived in Norway that this was a sports story unlike any other. And, at the time we left, we could safely say that it was the biggest sports story in U.S. history, playing out as it did on a daily basis on the network news and the newspaper front pages. (Of course, by June, it wasn't even the most important sports story of 1994. O.J. Simpson took care of that.)

So it should come as no surprise that no matter how magnificently prepared they were, the Lillehammer organizers still were broadsided by the unprecedented nature of this story. The figure skating venue, the tiny Olympic Amphitheatre in Hamar, no bigger than some U.S. high school gymnasiums, was not prepared for the crush of reporters, camera crews, and photographers that descended upon it. In the organizers' defense, it must be said that even a Super Bowl site in the United States would have been hard-pressed to cope with this kind of media blitz.

But LOOC officials handled everything thrown their way with a firm, steady hand. Quickly, press conferences were moved from a smaller room to the larger area that had been designated as the volunteers' cafeteria. Once Kerrigan arrived in Norway, all figure skating practice sessions were closed to the public. The media came in droves, of course, especially when the International Skating Union (ISU) refused to change its policy of having skaters from the same country practice together. It's amazing that the tiny balcony in the dark practice arena didn't come tumbling down from the weight of all the reporters who were sent to record the first practice session of the two U.S. women; Super Bowl media sessions have never been so well attended.

Considering that the women's figure skating was to become the U.S. sports media event of early part of 1994, it is simply incredible that there were no incidents between reporters and officials, no problems, even very few frayed nerves. This speaks to the superb human and logistical effort of the Norwegians and the U.S. Figure Skating Association. Soon after each arrived in Norway, Kerrigan and Harding were made available in the Main Press Center (MPC) in Lillehammer. Each news conference began with infuriating cream-puff

questions from U.S. staffers, but the reality was that Harding might have left the stage had the tough questions come first.

The Norwegian organizers did a fine job with the media necessities: telephone lines, faxes, television monitors, computers. We have become used to computerized schedules, results, and biographical information on the athletes, and we were not disappointed in Norway. And the housing, transportation, and food were well above usual Olympic standards.

I'm speaking, of course, from the perspective of someone who spent ten days prior to the opening ceremonies in Lillehammer, working out of the MPC and my room in the media village besides the MPC - all on the figure skating story. And, then, as someone who moved to the village in Hamar, and never ventured from the figure skating venue except for two excursions to spectate at speed skating. If there were problems elsewhere, at skiing or bobsled or cross-country, they forever will remain a well-kept secret to me.

Most of my colleagues and I agree that the Lillehammer Games were the finest we have attended, and it's easy to see why. We were served superb food by Olympic standards; we were assisted by the kindest volunteers I've met at my six Olympic Games; we lived in rooms in Hamar that looked like ski chalets. And we were in the middle of the wildest story of our careers. Who could ask for anything more?