

The 'Semi-Final' That Wasn't: When the USA Stunned the USSR at Lake Placid

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Among historic Olympic events, one that is frequently mentioned but rarely understood is the USA's hockey win over the Soviet Union (USSR) at Lake Placid on 22 February 1980. Research into that Olympic tournament finds frequent references to that game as a "semifinal" in academic articles as well the popular press, in sources from the USA, Canada, Great Britain and Australia.¹ It is encouraging that this game is remembered as a semifinal, because that means the USA's subsequent victory over Finland has not been forgotten. It also is understandable, given the popularity of single elimination formats in international sports tournaments, including Olympic hockey since 1992.

Yet while it is understandably referred to as such, the USA-USSR hockey game at Lake Placid was not a semifinal. The USSR claimed the silver medal, which would not have been possible had it lost a semifinal.² The Finns, moreover, finished without any medal at all, which they could not have done had they reached a championship final. As these final standings indicate, heading into the last morning of Olympic hockey at Lake Placid the final outcome of the tournament was still very uncertain. In fact, misunderstanding the USA-Soviet game as a "semifinal" misses some of the drama of that last morning. Not only was the USA not guaranteed a gold or silver medal, but it was possible that a loss to Finland could have left the USA without any medal at all even after the historic win over the USSR.

The purpose of this note is to address this frequent misunderstanding. It will explain Lake Placid's medal-round format, establish the record for future scholars writing on the subject, and identify trends in Olympic hockey medal round play that may be useful to scholars working in the field.

Historically, Olympic hockey tournaments had used a round-robin format for medal-round play. From the first official Winter Olympics at Chamonix in 1924 through the 1976 Games at Innsbruck, hockey medals were determined by standings after round-robin play based on hockey's traditional point system: teams received two points for a win, one for a tie, and none for a loss. In many years, there was some form of qualification before

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medal round play began, often involving one to three games after which round-robin play took place among medal-round qualifiers.³

More recently Olympic hockey tournaments have culminated in a single-elimination medal round involving eight teams that proceeded through quarterfinals, semifinals and a final to determine medalists. This has been used since 1992, including the tournaments since 1998 involving NHL all-stars.⁴ Neither this single-elimination format, nor the earlier round-robin tournaments, will strike scholars of sport as particularly unusual. At Lake Placid in 1980, though, and at Sarajevo in 1984 and Calgary in 1988, Olympic hockey tournaments used a most unusual format for medal-round play.

At each of these tournaments, twelve teams participated in Olympic hockey. They were divided into two groups of six teams each for preliminary-round play, which was conducted on a round-robin basis. After the preliminary round, the top teams from each group advanced. In 1980 and 1984, two teams advanced from each group.⁵ In 1988, with the Winter Olympics extended to a full two weeks, three teams from each pool qualified for the medal round.⁶

In all three of these Olympiads, medal round play was conducted on a round-robin basis, with one important modification: games already played against medal-round qualifiers during the preliminary round carried over and were counted in the medal round standings.⁷ In 1980, the USA and Sweden qualified for the medal round from the blue group, and the USSR and Finland qualified from the red group. So the preliminary round game between the USA and Sweden, and the preliminary round game between Finland and the Soviets, both counted in the final medal round standings. In the case of the USA and Sweden, this made for particular confusion, as their preliminary round game actually was played on Tuesday, 12 February—the night before the Opening Ceremonies that officially started the Games.⁸

Entering medal round play on Friday, 22 February, the Soviets led the medal round standings because of their win over Finland. The USA and Sweden were tied for second place because of their tie, and the Finns were alone in fourth place. After the USA's upset win over the Soviets, Sweden and Finland played to a 3-3 tie. So after the Friday games the USA led the standings with three points because of its tie with Sweden and win over the Soviets. Sweden and the USSR were tied for second place with two points: the Soviets earned two points in their win over Finland, and the Swedes had a pair of ties. The Finns had only one point from their tie with Sweden, leaving them in fourth place, but they were only two points – one game – behind the first-place USA team.⁹

The historic win over the USSR left the Americans in control of their own destiny: if they defeated Finland, they clinched the gold. This fact, combined with the USA's win, contributed to perceptions that the game was a final. But there were more possibilities.¹⁰ An American loss combined with a Soviet win

over Sweden would have given the Soviets the gold medal. It was also possible for the teams end in a four-way tie, with medals to be awarded based on tiebreakers involving goal-differential calculations, if the Finns defeated the USA, and Sweden and the USSR tied.

As it worked out, there was no need for tiebreakers. The USA team took care of business and clinched the gold medal with a total of five points in the medal round. The Soviets whipped Sweden, 9-3, to claim the silver with four points. The Swedes claimed the bronze medal, their tie with the USA in a game played before the Opening Ceremonies giving them one point more than the Finns.

While the Lake Placid Olympic hockey tournament used an unusual medal round format, that format preserved suspense and drama into the final day of competition. The USA was not guaranteed silver or gold, and scenarios were possible that could have given the gold medal to any of the four medal round participants. Understanding this will help scholars to better explain the uncertain and dramatic nature of this tournament.

Endnotes

- 1 For some examples of references to the USA-USSR hockey at Lake Placid as a "semifinal"; see Craig Nickerson, "Red Dawn in Lake Placid: The Semifinal Hockey Game At the 1980 Winter Olympics as a Cold War Battleground," *The Canadian Journal of the History of Sport* 26, no. 1: 73-85; Mary G. McDonald, "Miraculous Masculinity Meets Militarization: Narrating the 1980 USSR-US Men's Olympic Ice Hockey Match and Cold War Politics," in *East Plays West: Sport and the Cold War*, Stephen Wagg and David L. Andrews, eds. (London: Routledge, 2007), 222; Michael Silk, Bryan Bracey and Mark Falcoux, "Performing America's Past: Cold War Fantasies in a Perpetual State of War," in *East Plays West*, 297; Jacquelin Magnay, "Winter Olympic Moments; The Top 10," *Sydney Morning Herald* (Australia), 28 January 2006, 59; Al Strachan, "Wanted: Miracle on Ice II," *Toronto Sun*, 7 February 2002, O5; Grant Kerr, "Lockout Baffles Olympic Heroes," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), 16 February 2005, R9; Robert Phillip, "'Miracle on Ice' When Kids Whipped the Red Machine," *The Daily Telegraph* (London), 17 February 2006, 9; George Vecsey, "Sports of the Times; Larionov, 41, Survives Shift in Nationality," *New York Times*, 17 February 2002, sec. 8, 8; David Walsh, "Heroes of Hell State Claim For Glory," *Sunday Times* (London), 10 February 2002 (all newspaper articles in this footnote obtained via Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe).
- 2 "Final Report, XIII Winter Olympic Games," Official Results, 105. All of the official Olympic reports, through the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Games,

- can be found at the website of the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, http://www.aafra.com/5va/reports_frmst.htm.
- 3 *Les Jeux de la VIIIe Olympiade, Paris 1924: Rapport Officiel* (Paris: Librairie de France, n.d.), 708; *Resultats des Concours de Hmes Jeux Olympiques d'hiver* (Comité Olympique Suisse, n.d.), 15; *Official Report, III Olympic Winter Games, Lake Placid 1932* (Lake Placid: III Olympic Winter Games Committee, n.d.), 235; *IV Olympische Winterspiele 1936* (Berlin: Reichssportverlag, n.d.), *Rapport Général sur les Ves Jeux Olympiques D'Hiver St-Moritz 1948* (Lausanne: Comité Olympique Suisse Secrétariat Général, n.d.), 69; *VI Olympic Winter Games Oslo 1952* (Organizing Committee, n.d.), 248-251; *Official Report VII Olympic Winter Games* (Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano, 1956), 680-688; *VIII Olympic Winter Games, 1960, Squaw Valley California, Final Report* (California Olympic Commission, n.d.), 123; *Offizieller Bericht der IX. Olympischen Winterspiele Innsbruck 1964* (*Official Report of the 9th Winter Olympics Innsbruck 1964*) (Vienna and Munich: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, n.d.), 158-9; and *The XI Olympic Winter Games Sapporo 1972* (The Organizaing Committee for the XIth Olympic Winter Games, Sapporo, 1972), 483.
 - 4 *Official Report of the XVI Olympic Winter Games of Albertville and Savoie: Results* (Albertville: Organizing Committee of the XVI Olympic Winter Games of Albertville and Savoie, 1992), 62-64; Untitled final report of Lillehammer Olympics, 127-8; *The XVIII Olympic Winter Games Official Report*, vol. 3: Competition Results and Participants (The Organizing Committee for the XVIII Olympic Winter Games, Nagano 1998), 172; Salt Lake 2002: Official Report of the XIX Olympic Winter Games (Salt Lake Organizing Committee, 2002), 2: 264-266.
 - 5 See *Final Report, XIII Olympic Winter Games*, vol. 2: Final Results; and *Sarajevo '84: Final Report* (Sarajevo: Organizing Committee of the XIVth Winter Olympic Games, n.d.), 87-88.
 - 6 *XV Olympic Winter Games: Official Report* (XV Olympic Winter Games Organizing Committee and Calgary Olympic Development Association, n.d.), 587-589.
 - 7 The previously cited reports do not specify the format of the medal round play, but the Sarajevo and Calgary reports identify the medal round games as having identical scores to preliminary round games among the relevant teams. For contemporary media accounts discussing the "carry over" of preliminary round games to the medal round standings, see, for example, Allen Abel, "Games' Muddled Hockey Rules Keep Canadian Chances Alive," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), 18 February 1980; James Christie, "Canadians Earn Shot at Hockey Medal," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), 14 February 1984; James Christie, "Czech Win Ends Dream of Canadian Gold," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), 16 February 1984; and "Team Canada Backed Into Must-Win Corner," *The Toronto Star*, 22 February 1988.

- 8 Gerald Eskanazi, "Americans Tie Swedes, 22, On Goal in Last 27 Seconds," *New York Times*, 13 February 1980, A2; Red Smith, "Winter Games Under Way In Show of Color and Pomp," *New York Times*, 14 February 1980, A1.
- 9 See standings under "Olympic Results," *New York Times*, 24 February 1980, sec. 5, 4.
- 10 For more of the possibilities, see "Hockey Medal Muddle," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 February 1980, sec. 4, 1.