

Bill Rea ? Olympics are worth watching

No matter what one's politics might say, or what, if any, sports one might be a fan of.

It's very hard not to be attracted to a spectacle like the opening of the Olympic Games.

I would have loved to have been able to watch the opening ceremonies of Sochi Games live, as they were happening. But it is reality that I work for people who actually expect me to work in the middle of a work day. So I worked.

Actually, Friday was the last day of my vacation, but I had a lot to do, so I worked.

But I was able to watch most of it at home that evening, and I was impressed, as I'm sure I was meant to be.

It was pleasing to the eye and ear. There was beautiful music, reflecting the fact that Russia has produced some marvelous composers over the generations. I was moved enough by the scenes I was watching to actually look up the spelling of Tchaikovsky. The wonderful excerpts from Swan Lake underscored that. And the opening scenes, shown through the eyes of a child, were nothing short of enchanting.

?The soul is healed by being with children.?

Those are the words of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the renowned Russian writer, and that quote was very appropriately cited by one of the CBC commentators during the spectacle.

No such event comes off without a hitch, and that goes for ceremonies like this. There was the glitch involving the snowflakes turning into the Olympic symbol. The fact is this is not a perfect world.

Besides, the Olympic flame ignited without a hitch. I think there are few sights more moving than watching athletes march into the stadium to start Olympic competition. Is there any person reading these words who has not dreamed of being part of such an occasion? How can any of us help but be envious of these people?

Envy aside, it is a fact that these people made it to that parade by earning their places. And for every one of them, there were probably a couple of dozen frustrated and disappointed young athletes who came close. Such is the reality of athletic competition. It was the late Jim McKay who coined the phrase ?the thrill of victory, and the agony of defeat.?

?You are not only the best,? International Olympic Committee President told the competitors. ?You are Olympic athletes.?

In the middle of all the pomp and glamour lie the ideals of the Olympic movement. Lofty ideals they indeed are, reflecting the belief in fair and honourable competition. Athletic prowess, competitive spirit and the indomitable power of the human will ultimately prevail. ?Faster, higher, stronger? is the Olympic motto.

Would it not be nice if all of this reflected reality?

Alas, it is reality that other factors come into play when the games are among us, and that includes politics.

That was even alluded to during the coverage of the opening ceremonies. As the Austrian athletes marched into the stadium, CBC commentators observed that there was a bid to have these games held in that country, based on the argument it wasn't Sochi.

There are other such examples.

These games are being seen, by some, as a platform for gay rights. While I am sympathetic, and can certainly understand there have been many concerns expressed by the way gays are treated in Russia, one would hope this event can get beyond that.

I?know I sound a little naive with some of these comments. I do understand reality, and it's true that politics have always been part of the Olympics and always will be.

The certainly were in 1936, when Hitler used the games to promote the rubbish he stood for. Many Western countries told the Soviets what they could do with the games they hosted in Moscow in 1980, and several countries joined the Soviets in a boycott of their own four years later.

And there was the horror of the 1972 games and the terrorist attack against the athletes from Israel. A bomb went off during the 1996 Games in Atlanta. I think a lot of people in Sochi are tense that there might be some such incident in the coming days.

In this very real world, there is no way to get away from politics.

But even without that, there are ways to get off the main message, with his supposed to be the athletics.

We've already seen one example with the current games, in the form of reports that some of the figure skating judges have been making deals on the side. There's really no way of knowing how true that is. It's also very easy to dismiss complaints about bad judging as simply coming from sore losers.

Actually, I have always had a problem with any sport in which competitions are decided by the opinions of some people. In timed events, the matter is decided by a clock. Team sports like hockey have clear rules, as well as methods of deciding who wins and who doesn't.

But in sports like figure skating, how can one know for sure that everything is as it should be? And without practical and objective

ways of picking a winner, does something like this qualify as a sport? I know the top figure skaters in the world are superb athletes. The physical and mental prowess needed to compete at that level is amazing. How many of you guys can hold a girl over your head with one hand? That being said, is it really a sport?

The freestyle skiing mogul events are another example. Like just about all Canadians, I was pleased to see Justine and Chloé Dufour-Lapointe win their medals, and being the soft, sentimental slob that I am, I felt sorry for their sister Maxime, who didn't make it to the podium. But I worry that it was judges who made the decision, and not a clock.

As well, my knees hurt when I watched the competition.

Some of these events in the Olympics (especially the Winter Games) puzzle me a little. The mogul events are on that list. How does one aspire to take part in something like that, racing down a bumpy course and performing a back flip in the middle of it all. Ski jumping is another one.

My wife and I were watching some ski jumping over the weekend, and at one point, I turned to Beth and told her that as a kid, if I had told my father I wanted to give ski jumping a try, not only would probably not have let me, he would have told me I was nuts. Yet people get into these sports when they're young, and some of them get so good that they find themselves invited to the Olympics.

The Games have another 10 days to run, and I expect I will be watching more of them. For one thing, the Leafs won't be playing, so Beth, who usually is in charge of the remote in our house, will probably switch the Olympics on. I know she likes to watch figure skating, and we'll probably tune in for the hockey games.

The Olympics are a special time, with lots of special moments for those taking part. True, there are some problems with the Games. It will be interesting, for example, to see how close they come to being on budget.

But they only come every couple of years, and they're worth watching.

That's what we plan to do, and so do a lot of you out there

