

AN OLYMPIC WRAP-UP

(AND WHAT'S NEXT FOR FAR WEST NORDIC?)

By Sally Jones

Anyone who was fortunate enough to be at Soldier Hollow last February during the Olympic Games was treated to seeing the best racers in the world racing at one of the most spectator-friendly courses you'll ever find.

Athletes loved how much of the course was packed with cheering crowds, and the cheering crowds loved how close they could get to the action. I was pleasantly surprised to hear many "non-nords," who had bought "that was all we could get" tickets, expressing sheer delight as to the excitement of the events. That has to be good for our sport!

Making the most of the home court advantage (and stricter drug testing), the US Team achieved some of the best results ever. Although we didn't see any US athletes on the podium, there were some impressive (and much improved) results worth noting. The men's relay team (John Bauer, Kris Freeman, Justin Wadsworth and Carl Swenson) had the race of their lives (and the best U.S. result — ever!), taking fifth place. John Bauer took 12th in the 15km classic, Kris Freeman was 15th in the pursuit, and Nina Kemppel was 15th in the 30km classic.

This success has been recognized by the "powers that be" at USSA. While most snow sports are facing budget cuts, USSA has promised increased funding for the Cross Country Program over the next few years.

The doping scandals were the only dark cloud to hang over the Nordic venue. The most important effect for North American skiing was the disqualification of the 2 Russian women, Larissa Lazhutina and Olga Danilova in the 30km classic. These were the 2 women who stood between Canadian Beckie Scott and the Gold in the pursuit race earlier in the week. Becky is the first North American woman to ever win a medal in the Olympics. Imagine if that had been gold! The two Russians had not tested positive for the pursuit race, but who's to say that maybe their timing was just better on that day?

After watching Johann Muehlepp power up the hills minutes ahead of the field just one day later, it was a great disappointment (but no great surprise) to learn that he, too, tested positive for the performance enhancing drug darbepoetin, an EPO-like drug that increases red blood cells. Lets hope that the technology keeps improving for testing to be able to catch this cheating in our sport and make it fair competition for the athletes who are "clean."

On a lighter note, there were several faces in the crowd from Far West, and there were even a couple of familiar faces on the "other side of the fence." Coach Glenn Jobe and two of our juniors, Nick Sterling and Tony Bozzio, were selected to join the official forerunning team, which had the important responsibility of checking the course just minutes before the races started.

Our role was as spectators—not quite as glamorous, but an opportunity not to be missed. After roaming the venue, running for the best view and absorbing the amazing atmosphere, my group of enthusiastic young skiers would head off to a nearby ski area to try and ski just like our favorite Olympian. We even met Bjorn Daehli out there!

Since the Olympics, some of the Auburn Ski Club crew has returned to the venue to learn how they pulled off such an amazing event. Having a seemingly limitless budget certainly helped, but the design and organization was almost impeccable to us on the outside. What we couldn't see was the fun stuff behind the scenes. For example: The \$1 million that were spent on architects for trail designs and profiles were left in the file, and the real design was dictated by the guy in the bulldozer! What about the design flaw in the 12,000 specially-made V boards course markers that slid down the hills? Or the 8 brand new Bombardier snow cats, which were not enough to prevent the human element of drivers oversleeping!

The lessons learned at Soldier Hollow can certainly help us put on even better races here in the Far West. Auburn Ski Club is taking the lead on learning how to train race crews to a new level. The Club will be offering opportunities to become USSA certified officials, or for those who want to learn it all, we can help you qualify to become a Regional or National Level Technical Delegate.

Yes, the Club has good reason to offer such training. You might have caught wind that Auburn Ski Club and Far West are bidding to bring the Junior Olympics to town in 2005. We have already secured the bid to host NCAA Nationals in 2004 as a test event. We think it is our turn to have the home court advantage for our athletes! Don't be surprised if we come asking for your help in the near future.

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Italia's Gabriella Paruzzi in the Women's 5K Pursuit Classic leg.

Photo by Mark Nadell