

SIMPLY TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE”
AN EVALUATION OF THE LILLEHAMMER WINTER OLYMPICS

by Arild Gjerde

I have been asked to write an article on the Lillehammer Winter Olympics. I will do that, but would first like to give the membership some information on my own position and role in the Lillehammer Olympics.

I work as the General Secretary of the Norwegian Skating Association, and my organization was responsible for the technical aspects of the speed, short-track, and figure skating events during the Olympics. From 1989 to 1992 I was a vice-member of the Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee (LOOC) Council, which was responsible for the decisions about organizational structure of the LOOC, the main budget and the localization of the Olympic arenas. I was also a member of the Organizing Committee for skating, responsible for supervising and controlling the preparations for the technical organizing of the above mentioned skating events. During the Olympics, I was staying in Hamar as a member of the Norwegian Olympic Committee's leadership group, which was on call to be summoned for any unforeseen problems arising concerning the Norwegian Olympic Team. Fortunately, this never occurred.

I also had regular contacts with the Chairmen of our three event committees during the Games, but everything went well and I must admit I mostly had a nice, relaxed time during the Olympics, able to fully enjoy the Games from the stands. A dream for an Olympic enthusiast! Of the 16 days of the Olympics, I was in Hamar for 14, the other two in Lillehammer, and this fact of course affects my judgment of the Games.

To sum up my personal experience of working with the Games: it was hard work but great fun. I felt privileged and thankful for a once in a lifetime experience to take part in the process of planning and organizing an Olympic Games.

The headline for this article, “. . . simply too good to be true,” does not contain my own words, but rather a quote from an editorial in *Sports Illustrated*, written by Leigh Montville. He concluded his article as follows:

“The buildings are constructed of gingerbread. The snow is really ice cream. The king of Norway is named Hansel and the queen is named Gretel, and the only way to reach this country is to fall through a wide rabbit hole or to be swept away by a cyclone. The capital is Oz, not Oslo.

“You read it here first. The XVII Winter Olympics did not exist. Norway did not exist. These were the fairy-tale Games, drawn from the imagination, staged in the pages of a children's book. They could not exist. Reality cannot be this good.”

Mr. Montville's views are in many ways representative of 'the feedback received from competitors, leaders and guests after the Games. Typical of this is the statement by U.S. speed skater Dan Jansen. After meeting him the day after his well-deserved gold medal in his last Olympic chance, and offering congratulations, he responded, “I'm extremely happy that when I at last won my Olympic gold medal, it happened here. Everybody here seems to

appreciate sport performances; this must be the finest place to win Olympic honors. Thank you, Norway!”

Our objectives and goals for the Lillehammer Olympic Games were achieved in all ways. What were the main criteria for success? Although a complete answer to this question cannot be given, some key points can be made. There are first some factors emerging from Norwegian society and culture:

- Our long tradition as organizers of winter sports events
- Norwegians are extremely interested in sports, especially our traditional winter sports
- Almost 100% of Norwegians enthusiastically supported the Lillehammer Olympics
- An advanced economy and the necessary high-tech competence to use in hosting the Olympic Games
- Our natural resources and clean air

Secondly, we were very lucky with everything that happened in the inaugural part of the Games:

- The weather conditions were excellent with stable snow conditions and sunshine every day, although it was cold. No delays in the program were made necessary by the weather.
- The success of the Opening Ceremony.
- The Games started splendidly for the Norwegian team, with gold and silver in the men’s 5,000 metre speed skating on the first day and the same in the 30 km. cross-country skiing for men on the second day. The Norwegian sports fans had plenty to celebrate.
- The upset victory of U.S. skier Tommy Moe in the men’s downhill skiing in a close battle with Norwegian favorite Kjetil André Aamodt created a good start for the important American television ratings.

Were there then no problems at all with the “Fairy-Tale Games.” Of course not. The biggest problem occurred before the Games started, when Norwegian cross-country skier and national hero Vegard Ulvang, who would later deliver the Olympic Oath at the Opening Ceremony, made some critical comments about the IOC in a television interview the week before the Games. The Norwegian press jumped at this opportunity and the next day, the same day as President Samaranch and other leading IOC Members arrived in Norway, Ulvang’s statements made front page headlines in almost every Norwegian newspaper. This created an awkward situation between the IOC and the LOOC and some people thought Ulvang should be removed from his position in the opening ceremony. However, clever diplomacy between the IOC and LOOC smoothed over the situation.

During the first days of the Games, the transportation system was under great pressure, but the LOOC had the flexibility to make some adjustments to solve the problem and after that, everything functioned well in spite of tens of thousands of people gathering in the small Lillehammer area every day. Of course, heavy snowfall would have caused havoc with the schedules and prevented many spectators from reaching the arenas on time, but as earlier mentioned, the Weather God was on our side.

All the other problems were minor in character, the most visible one being the 15 minute delay of the victory ceremony for women’s figure skating while the organizers scrambled to find the Ukrainian national anthem.

All of Norway was very proud of the attendance figures at Lillehammer, even if it did not better the Calgary record from 1988 with 1,338,199 spectators. The official figures for

the Lillehammer Games were 1,223,358 (including 11,785 tickets sold for figure skating training), but if we compare Calgary's population of 650,000 to Lillehammer's tiny 23,000, the figures are quite impressive. In addition, many non-paying spectators surrounded the tracks in cross-country skiing. As an example, in the men's relay, the official number of paying spectators was 28,322 but the police made unofficial estimates that another 50-70,000 non-paying spectators surrounded the track out in the forest around the Birkebeineren Ski Stadion. Many people even camped out in the forest overnight to secure good positions by the track for the competition. Finally many people went to Lillehammer without tickets, just to have been there during the Olympics.

For the first time in Olympic history, the Lillehammer Games were organized under the new qualification rules set up by the IOC and the IFs. The total number of participating athletes in Lillehammer was 1,737, a slight decrease from the Albertville record of 1,801. Sixty-seven (67) countries sent teams to Lillehammer, a record compared to Albertville's 65. But since Albertville in 1992, with the partition of the former Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, and the re-admission of South Africa to the Olympic Games, there were 14 new participating nations in Lillehammer: American Samoa, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Georgia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Slovakia, Trinidad & Tobago, The Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. However, 12 nations which took part in Albertville were not present in Lillehammer and, with the exception of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea (North), the reason was that they had no qualified athletes. The nations in this group were: Algeria, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Honduras, India, Ireland, Lebanon, Morocco, Netherlands Antilles, The Philippines, Swaziland, and the People's Democratic Republic of Korea (North).

The new qualification rules were not easy to implement and caused a lot of trouble for the LOOC. I was personally involved in the process regarding the skating events and can give some examples of how the system worked.

In figure skating, the ISU decided on a maximum quota of 30 participants in men's and women's singles, 24 couples in ice dancing and 20 pairs in pairs skating. These were based on the results from the 1993 World Championships and a reserve list was also established. After the preliminary entries on 1 November 1993, the ISU formulated the final list of participants, allowing no substitutes. At this time, many of the NOCs had not made their final decisions concerning their Olympic teams, and there were therefore several withdrawals which resulted in the following number of actual competitors: Men - 25, Ladies - 27, Dancing - 21 couples, and Pairs - 18 couples. Fourteen places went unfilled because of the decision allowing no substitutes after 1 November 1993. The principle was easy to understand, but had the effect, for example, that Chinese Taipei's best known winter sports athlete, figure skater David Liu, was not allowed to start in the Games. He is an internationally merited skater, but was hampered by injuries in the 1993 World Championships and placed 33rd, which resulted in a 3rd place on the substitute list for Chinese Taipei in men's figure skating. A pity . . .

In short-track speed skating, the ISU decided that a maximum of 33 skaters would be allowed to start in the individual distances and eight teams in the relays. Reserves were allowed until close to the start of the competitions. But the late withdrawal of the North Korean team caused problems. They had qualified a ladies' team for the relay, but did not show up. On very short notice, only the third reserve team, the United States, was able to field a team in Norway, and they managed to win a bronze medal!

¹Editor's Note: South Africa was often listed in the media as participating in the Olympic Winter Games for the first time, but South Africa had actually competed in 1960 at Squaw Valley with four competitors (one man, three women) in figure skating.

In the men's distances, it became clear only at the last minute that Mongolia, third on the substitute list, would be able to compete. This was vital for Mongolia which had no other athletes competing in Lillehammer. The problem was that at the time of the final decision, their skater Bat-Orgil Batchuluun had left Europe and was on a train from Moscow to Ulan-Bator. Arriving in the capital of his homeland, Batchuluun was immediately put on a train back to St. Petersburg and from there by air to Oslo. He did not reach Lillehammer in time for the opening ceremony but was proudly able to represent his country in the Olympics. But I do not envy him all the fuss and uncertainty surrounding his Olympic participation.

In speed skating, the ISU set up required qualification times for the three longest distances and this rule caused no major problems. For the 5,000 metres for men and the 3,000 metres for women, the 32 highest ranked skaters (by qualifying times) would be eligible to start. This caused a special problem for the USA. At their final trials, the 5,000 metres was won by K. C. Boutiette, but his time ranked him only 35th among entered skaters. The final entry for the 5,000 metre race was 12 February 1994, and it was impossible to advise the USOC at the time of their departure from the United States if Boutiette would be able to start the Olympic 5,000 metres. The USOC feared a lawsuit and decided to send Boutiette to Lillehammer, but only one skater withdrew from the 5,000 and he was not allowed to start. He did get to skate at the Olympics, however, four days later when he was placed on the U.S. team for the 1,500 metres, where he had achieved the qualifying time but had not been among the top four skaters in the trials.

The new qualification rules had the effect that the total number of participants was down from 1,801 in Albertville to 1,737 in Lillehammer.² The biggest decrease appeared in alpine skiing, where the participants decreased from 321 to 250. In cross-country skiing the number of participants decreased from 223 to 197, while for other sports, the numbers for 1992 and 1994 were very close. The exception was freestyle skiing: due to the inclusion of aeriels, the participants increased from 71 to 97.

One of the reasons for the new qualification rules was the number of new NOCs due to the inclusion of the nations from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. I have tried to compare the participation in Albertville to Lillehammer by dividing the competing nations into four groups based on the following principles;

1. Strong winter sports nations with good infrastructure for more than one sport (excluding Eastern Europe): Austria, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, and the United States.
2. Eastern Europe, including the republics of the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.
3. Winter sports nations with some infrastructure for winter sports within their borders: Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, China, Denmark, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Korea, Lebanon, Liechtenstein, Mongolia, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, and Turkey.
4. Nations with a weak infrastructure (or none) for winter sports: Algeria, American Samoa, Bermuda, Bolivia, Brazil, Chinese Taipei, Costa Rica, Cyprus, Fiji, Honduras, India, Ireland, Israel, Jamaica, Luxembourg, Mexico, Monaco, Morocco, Netherlands Antilles, The

²The numbers are from Wolf Lyberg's recently released study of the Lillehammer Games.

Philippines, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Senegal, San Marino, Swaziland, and Trinidad & Tobago.

This division of Olympic Winter Games nations results in the following table regarding participation in 1992 and 1994:

Participation - Albertville 1992 and Lillehammer 1994

| | | 1992 | | | 1994 | | |
|----|---------------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| | | Teams | Number | % % % | Teams | Number | % % % |
| 1. | Strong Nations | 11 | 989 | 54.8 | 11 | 987 | 56.8 |
| 2. | Eastern Europe | 12 | 437 | 24.3 | 21 | 512 | 29.5 |
| 3. | Some infrastructure | 20 | 263 | 14.6 | 18 | 199 | 11.4 |
| 4. | Weak infrastructure | 22 | 110 | 6.1 | 17 | 40 | 2.3 |

The table shows that the number of participants for the strong nations is almost constant, but we have an unexpected rise in the numbers from Eastern Europe, a decrease in nations with some infrastructure, and a marked decrease in participation for nations with little or no infrastructure for winter sports. The qualifications rules seem to have achieved their goal: the rise in number of competitors has been braked and the overall standard of the athletes has been raised.

Medals distribution - Lillehammer 1994

| | | Total Medals | % of medals | % of athletes |
|----|---------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1. | Strong nations | 133 | 72.7 | 56.8 |
| 2. | Eastern Europe | 34 | 18.6 | 29.5 |
| 3. | Some infrastructure | 16 | 8.7 | 11.4 |
| 4. | Weak infrastructure | 0 | 0.0 | 2.3 |

The medals won by nations in category three were won by China, The Netherlands, Korea and Great Britain. These nations have a strong skating history but no real impact on skiing.

Based upon the experiences from the Lillehammer Olympics, I would propose the following procedure regarding qualification rules for the forthcoming Olympic Winter Games:

1. Keep the present rules worked out by the IFS, with necessary adjustments based on the Lillehammer experience.
2. Give each IOC Member Nation the right to enter one participant of each sex as wild-cards in whatever sport they desire. The IOC Member Nation must report their intention and in which event they wish to use their wild-card before a given date, e.g., 1 December prior to the Olympics.

I think the effects of this proposed change would be minor. It would likely increase the number of participants by 15-20 athletes. It would be easier to handle for the organizing committees. And it would secure what I believe is a self-evident right for all IOC Member Nations to take part in the Olympic Games.