

The Sochi Winter Olympics: Chaos in the Competition Zone

Olympic Excess from Lake Placid to Sochi

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What's it like these days in Sochi, the Black Sea resort about to host the Winter Olympics? That depends on who you ask, or if you live there. Sochi is widely known as "Putin's town," and, in the run-up to the Games, it has become a boomtown where gleaming residential and office complexes dot a city filled with Stalin-Gothic architecture.



Construction in Sochi

But for the average Sochi resident the Games are largely an inconvenience – in danger of becoming a disaster. Long power and water outages and colossal traffic jams have been caused by Olympic construction. Some residents have been evicted, especially if their homes were in the path of a planned venues. There have also been multiple violations of labor law, along with widespread corruption in the course of Olympic construction, including illegal permission for the building of large private homes and shopping malls unrelated to the Games. And that doesn't cover the security threats or overkill response.

Yet this is not the first Olympic community to be shortchanged, disrupted, and abused. Take the 1980 Winter Games, which happened shortly after the US and USSR began their face off in Afghanistan. In fact, the Lake Placid Games could easily have become a \$150 million disaster movie. But like most of the media gathering in Sochi, ABC, the network with the exclusive US rights to cover the 1980 Winter Olympics, ignored much of the news unfolding outside the official sites. For example, the fact that thousands of spectators missed events they paid premium prices to attend, or were left out in the cold after the athletes were done.

On opening night, to keep from freezing spectators and New York state troopers broke into the VIP lounge near the luge run. The next morning then-Gov. Hugh Carey said that no one would be prosecuted.

By the first weekend, amidst US hopes that the US hockey team would prevail in a finals battle with the Soviets, and that speed skater Eric Heiden might win as many as five gold

medals, Olympic officials were on the verge of banning more visitors – for their own protection. “I don’t want to endanger people,” admitted Rev. Bernard Fell, president of the Lake Placid Olympic Organizing Committee (LPOOC).

A tiny upstate New York community, one that had fought hard for the right to host these Games, was instead hosting a regional emergency. And it took even more unpleasant turns over the first few days. Fights broke out over bus rides; to get on an “official” bus you needed the right color ID. People fumed as half-empty vans left them at roadside. Attending as a journalist I watched entire families hitchhike through the snow.

One crowd, catching sight of a van downtown, was refused entry when they tried to board. Surrounding the vehicle, they ended up rocking it angrily. After that a new order went out from the top: drivers should not travel on Main Street in Lake Placid during midday.

In some accounts the sense was conveyed that thousands were stranded on the streets, many on the verge of severe frostbite. But only about ten frostbite cases were reported during Week One, and a mere 4,000 people were kept waiting in the freezing cold at Mt. van Hoevenberg after bobsled and luge events. Some accounts claimed it was 15,000. One driver explained that the real problem was the LPOOC. “They had six years and still couldn’t get it straight,” he said. “After one ski jump there were thousands of people waiting. They sent three buses.”

Gov. Carey authorized a Department of Transportation contract with Greyhound for added services just in time. But then over 30 Canadian drivers expectedly walked off their jobs. They just locked their buses and left. And if any remaining drivers needed some wiper fluid, forget it. Not even local gas stations had any left after the first day of bad weather.

Relations between bus drivers and State Police deteriorated along with the transportation system. When 15 troopers asked to hitch a ride on an “official” van, approval was denied by the LPOOC’s director of operations. With two hours drivers were being ticketed for minor infractions. About 40 drivers got tickets over the next few days.

If the Winter Games were proving nothing else they were confirming widespread suspicions that although the US could certainly put a man on the moon, it had no idea how to run a mass transit system.



1980 US Hockey Team

By the second week war stories about LPOOC incompetence had become a new fad – almost as popular as mixing politics with sports. There was little hope that the US would attend the upcoming Summer Games in Moscow. President Carter, who didn’t attend the opening ceremonies in upstate New York, was taking a hard line on withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. But what about the 1984 Winter Games, scheduled for Sarajevo? After Tito’s death there was no telling what political earthquakes might rock Yugoslavia by then.

“Sarajevo is next.” So said a button circulating in what Olympic officials took to calling the “competition zone.” Maybe so, but “next” could mean anything from another boycott to World War III.

A political subtext emerged in the competition for medals: the US was the underdog, perhaps no longer number one. In fact, the USSR and East Germany were establishing a dominance close to devastating. In the first week each country won 16 medals. The only US wins at that point were men’s and women’s speed skating, including three medals for Heiden.

The Competition Zone was a new concept, a temporary nation, and a virtual police state with its own hierarchy, built to accommodate 1,400 athletes and up to 30,000 spectators a day, plus a media crew of thousands more.

At the low end of the ladder were the ticket holders, enthusiasts who paid \$60 per event only to wait hours for a bus. Next were the holders of temporary passes, people like bus drivers and lower-level staff. Some of them had been told they could attend indoor events. But once the Games began the offer was withdrawn.

Athletes had obvious status and value. Yet many were nevertheless lodged in claustrophobic cubicles at the Olympic Village. Their rooms were actually cells for a future youth prison; the bars would be added once the Games were over. Saunas and other recreation facilities would be ripped out. Sometimes even athletes were victims of the transportation system. Take the Soviet team that missed an awards ceremony when they weren’t picked up on time.

Even in the press contingent there were levels of privilege. But most journalists and photographers did find a comfortable home in the Press Center, a converted high school where free drinks flowed and huge TV screens captured the action. Texas Instruments produced summary printouts within minutes of every event. A reporter would have to be blind and illiterate not to fill a newscast or column.

By midday the gym would fill up with writers, who eventually went to work on typewriters provided by Olympia. Upper levels classrooms housed various wire service offices, temporary corporate lounges and Olympic administrative suites. Where were the students? At the Coca-Cola Olympic School learning about metrics, sports medicine and athletic competition. The 200 students displaced for the Games also studied Olympic history and heard lectures from veterans of past competitions.

“It’s an ideal solution,” crowed Project Coordinator Don Morrison, who normally ran the local elementary school. “We don’t make it as rigidly formal as our regular classes.” That turned out to be an understatement. Students mainly attended events and exhibits, while their less-fortunate peers worked as part of the “Olympic family” in jobs ranging for ticket-handling to food service.

No sacrifice seemed too great. Residents of Lake Placid and surrounding towns had their lives seriously disrupted, and saw staggering price hikes and traffic snarls in which a trip to the grocery could take hours. Store owners initially expected to clean up during the mass confusion by hiking their prices. But customers balked at the systematic scalping and sales ended up being more modest than projected.

A new awareness gradually crept into local consciousness. Residents began to feel they were really hostages in their home towns, captives of the LPOOC, a new, un-elected and almost criminally incompetent government.

When the planning for the 1980 Winter Games began, organizers called it “the Olympics in perspective.” This was supposed to be the time when the needs of athletes finally came first. But that promise evaporated once the Games were politicized by the start of Cold War II. When Secretary of State Cyrus Vance urged the International Olympic Committee to move or cancel the Summer Games – only four days before the opening ceremonies – sports lovers rightly began to fear that the competition itself would ultimately be eclipsed. Subsequent events confirmed those fears.

In the end, the LPOOC could not even deliver on its most basic pledge. The 1980 Games were not just out of perspective, they were buried in an avalanche of corporate huckstering, opportunistic politics, and logistical confusion. Should anything different be expected in Sochi?

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