

Professional Hockey Gold

by Adam GAUTHIER

The biggest event in the sporting world over the past month was the 19th Olympic Winter Games held in Salt Lake City, Utah. The games were very successful if you were a huge multimedia corporation like NBC (which made \$75 million in profits over the two week event) or if you're Roots the "little"-Canadian-company-that-could, that outfitted many of the participating countries including the US and, of course, Canada. Roots also got plenty of free advertising on the networks for their Olympic clothing line when an athlete reached the medal podium. NBC and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) must have been pissed to miss out on those advertising dollars.

Of course the biggest story at the Olympics for Canadians besides "Skategate" and our favorite figure skating tandem of Jamie Sale and David Pelletier, was the men's and

women's hockey teams. The Canadian Olympic Association (COA) was very ambitious in its prediction of Canada's medal take at these games. The goal was 20 medals and a third place standing overall. We were close with 17 medals and a fourth place finish.

Let's get to the point. The only thing the people of Canada wanted to see in the final medal take was two gold medals. These are the medals that would be earned by the hockey teams. We all know now that both the men's and women's team won gold at the games but if they hadn't these Olympics would have been considered a failure for Canadian sport, especially in our rich and talented hockey program.

In 1998 at the 18th Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, Canada came up short in hockey gold on both sides. The women lost in the final to the US 3-1 in the inaugural event of women's hockey at the Olympics. The men lost in one of the semi-final games to the Czech-Republic in a shootout. Canadian men's coach Marc Crawford must have been on crack by not letting Wayne Gretzky take part in the shootout. Uh, Marc, Gretzky... highest scorer, in like, hockey history sitting on your bench... "The Great One" ring a bell by any chance? Canada went on to play in the bronze medal game against Finland and lost from lack of heart more than any thing.

Canada won, until that time, a record 15 medals at the last games, but no one remembers that. They consider the games a failure because Canada didn't win a medal in our national pastime of hockey. What made the defeat especially devastating was the fact that the men's team was filled with professional athletes. Before these games the players had been amateurs on the verge of becoming professional. Many junior players with rights to NHL teams played for the most part with a few veterans of past NHL teams. Canada's Paul Kariya played on the 1994 silver medal team which lost to Sweden in a shootout. Both



teams were filled with players who are now young NHL veterans including Peter Forsberg and Tommy Salo.

Before these games Canada's last Olympic gold medal in men's hockey came in 1952. This team like all the others since was amateur. For the past fifty years the Russians have dominated the Olympic games in hockey because of their isolationist policy toward their athletes which kept them from turning professional in North America up until 1989. Therefore all of the other nations were putting their best amateur players up against Russia's best professional players.

Now that the professional players are involved in the Olympics things seem to be more even for the big hockey nations of Russia, Sweden, Finland, the US, the Czech-Republic, and Canada. These Olympic games were very exciting because we knew not only the players on our own country's team but also those of others because of their NHL affiliation. We knew that we were seeing the best brand of hockey in the worlds on its biggest stage.

The repercussions of this however was that the NHL season had to be stopped for a week to allow the players to join their country's team. The players had a matter of days to join their team, become acquainted with their teammates and personnel, practice as a cohesive group and go out and play the best hockey of their lives for six games - if they reach the final. A very hefty task, even for a professional athlete.

This is why many believe that Olympic hockey should be left to the junior/amateur players. They can work as a group for a longer amount of time learning about all of the aforementioned details and become a true team. This has left many to reconsider sending professionals to the next games in 2006.

The other consideration is whether professionals will want to represent their country. Patrick Roy of the Colorado Avalanche declined his invitation to go to Salt Lake to play for Canada because he said it would disrupt his stamina for the Stanley Cup playoffs. Many believe Roy refused to go because Team Canada's General Manager Wayne Gretzky didn't guarantee that Roy would be the starting goaltender as he had been for Canada in Nagano.

Whatever happens, the hockey debate will roar on for another two and a half years until the next team is selected, whether they be professional or amateur. Hockey is the only sport which is allowed professional participation in the Winter Olympics. This may change, however, as other sports such as figure skating and snowboarding may be allowed professional athletes.

I personally believe the Olympics should be exclusively for amateur athletes. Although it does make the Olympics more exciting from a fans' standpoint, the fact is that these young athletes must have a starting point if they ever hope to turn professional someday, and the Olympics should be that starting point.

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