THE DYING OLYMPIC DREAM

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When I was younger, the Olympics held some sort of magical quality for me. I would wait for years in anticipation of the competition between countries and the display of excellence in athletics. When the special time finally arrived, I would sit in front of the television, watching with awe and admiration as people, some only a few years older than me, perfected feats I could only dream of.

Now, however, the Olympics seem to have lost their sense of wonder. No longer do I count the years, months, and then days until the Games begin. Instead, I find myself taking an almost apathetic attitude as they approach. Furthermore, I remain unable to partake in the pre-Olympic Games hype with the rest of the world preparing to watch this international spectacle. Maybe I have been spoiled in that each year the Games took place, they were readily at my disposal. Perhaps, I have seen so many amazing performances that I came to expect everyone participating to possess those abilities. Yet, a part of me still believes my fascination with the Olympics decreases proportionately with my knowledge that they are not all I have built them up to be.

I have grown up believing that the Olympic Games are an international competition dedicated to promoting peace and encouraging athletic excellence. While this may be an innocent and somewhat naïve view, it is one in which I truly believe. I could think of no better way to promote international unity than with an event where politics are put aside as nations join together to support individual athletes in their pursuit of a lifelong goal. Disappointing, however, remains my discovery that the Olympics are not free from politics. In fact, many governments use the Games and their athletes to promote political superiority. Even more, the Olympics have been used in various instances by certain governments to express a political viewpoint or show displeasure in the form of boycotts. What these governments fail to realize, however, is boycotts do nothing to positively promote a country. In fact, after the initial reaction and surprise upon hearing about a boycott, most viewers forget about the boycotting country during the course of the Olympics, and those spectators who do remember lose respect for the way that country chose to handle a particular situation.

In my opinion, boycotts do nothing but destroy the morale of an entire country. I find it disgusting that an athlete can struggle his entire life for a chance to compete for his country, only to have that opportunity stripped from him by the same country for political reasons having nothing to do with him. Athletes train for years in hope that they someday will be fortunate enough to represent their country in the Olympics. Thus, by boycotting, the country does nothing but kill an individual's dream and extinguish the Olympic Spirit.

Another aspect of the Olympics I find discouraging is the notion that anything less than a gold medal performance should be considered a
failure. This remains disheartening to me primarily because with my athletic talent, going to the Olympics remains an impossibility for me, and therefore, I consider merely having the chance to compete a tremendous honor. Yet, sadly, the Olympics are beginning to portray society's view that "winning is everything." I find myself becoming extremely annoyed with announcers who speculate that a competitor must be disappointed with a silver medal. Personally, I think knowing you are second-best in the world is cause for celebration, not mourning. Even more, the extreme importance placed on winning overshadows the Olympic ideals that every competitor should take pride in competing to the best of his ability. This year especially, I found myself frustrated with Nancy Kerrigan's lack of enthusiasm upon winning the silver medal. Her apathetic and almost cynical response made me embarrassed that she was the United States' representative. Situations such as these continue to drain the miracle of the Olympic Spirit.

Perhaps my view toward the Olympics changed as I grew older. Or maybe the transformation occurred upon viewing and reading about the numerous scandals involved in this year's Winter Olympics. Whatever the reason, the Olympics are quickly losing their overall appeal. In order for the Olympics to return to the ideal of sportsmanship, international unity, and peaceful competition, more athletes need to perform for the love of the sport and politics definitely must be eliminated. Focus needs to be placed on courage, hard work, and determination rather than victory, superiority, and perfection. Excellence must be found in one's character, not in a country's total medal count. An impossibility? Not necessarily, for despite my disappointment in many of the athletes who competed this year, one provided a glimpse of hope that some athletes still truly do embody the Olympic Spirit and consider it a privilege to compete for one's country. This person could be an example of positive change to follow in putting the wonder and awe back in the Olympics. His name is Dan.