



Post-Olympic Recap: Immigrants are American Gold

By Rita Sostrin

The Winter Olympics are over, and with it, the attendant hype and hope. In taking stock of the United States' perceived lackluster performance in Pyeongchang, viewers and readers were barraged with stories and images of unfulfilled expectations, reeling disappointments, and broken dreams. Yet beyond the erratic winds of South Korea that seemingly carried away our nation's chances at Olympic medals, there was a cloud with a silver lining: immigrants whose unrelenting drive and ambition inspired millions and left indelible memories in the chronicle of American sport.

It is said that there is nothing worse than finishing fourth in the Olympics—just out of medal contention. That is exactly what the U.S. did in the overall medal count by country, trailing behind Norway, Germany, and Canada. It was America's worst performance since the Winter Olympics of Nagano, Japan 20 years ago. And yet, just imagine how much worse the U.S. would've have performed—and how much less captivating these Games would have been—without the presence of Olympic athletes and coaches who are immigrants or descended from immigrants.

Consider:

The irrepressible snowboarder and social media star Chloe Kim, the 17-year-old daughter of South Korean immigrants who took home gold for snowboarding in the half-pipe. Reflecting her parents' work ethic, she has dominated her sport for years and would have competed in Sochi four years ago were it not for the fact that being only 13 prevented her from participating.

...Or skier Mikaela Shiffrin, who despite criticism for pulling out of several events where many expected her to excel, nevertheless shined and took home a gold and silver respectively in the giant slalom and combined. Her parents bestowed her first name to honor the roots of her paternal grandparents, who were Belarussian.

...And we'll likely see more from siblings Maia and Alex Shibutani—known as the “Shib Sibs”— who have been an ice dancing duo for 14 years. They claimed bronze in Pyeongchang after finishing ninth in Sochi. Their parents, both of Japanese origin, met at Harvard and infused their own spirit of sacrifice into their world-class children. Their coach, Marina Zueva, formerly a world-class ice dancer herself, hails from Moscow, Russia. She is also the coach of Nathan Chen who had a rocky but ultimately successful debut at the 2018 Olympics, and the former coach of the 2014 Olympic ice dancing champions, Meryl Davis and Charlie White.

...Or Mirai Nagasu's role in earning Team USA a bronze in the team figure skating, though we will remember her best for becoming the first American woman to perform a triple axel in Olympic competition. Her parents are both Japanese citizens who struggled to make a better life for their daughter, often paying her in quarters to wash dishes at a sushi restaurant they ran in Los Angeles.

...And we'll not soon forget the early flameout and fiery comeback of 18-year-old figure skater Nathan Chen. After his disappointing short program, his follow-up performance in the free skate competition—where he became the first to land six quadruple jumps—catapulted him from 17th to 5th place and rekindled his future prospects. Persistence is a family value he learned from his Chinese parents, and discipline was further instilled in Chen by his Armenian-born coach, Rafael Arutyunyan (together with Russian-born coach Marina Zueva).

In a recent article in *The Washington Post*, Olympic skating coach Tom Zakrajsek, himself the grandson of Polish and Slovenian immigrants, credited his Eastern-European family for a work ethic he infuses in his students. He also recognized the power of many immigrants' cultural mindset that "nothing is ever good enough," which compels them to strive for better. Indeed, if always raising the bar for their prospects fuels immigrants' indomitable impulse to transcend their fate, they will continue to lift the fortunes of America not just in the Olympics, but also in every corner of our country.

And as Chloe Kim would tell you, that is no half-pipe dream.