

## Dispatches from Vancouver, Vol. V: A tale of two hockeys

Posted By [Ilya Shapiro](#) On February 24, 2010 @ 12:00 am In [Feature:Opinion](#), [Opinion](#), [Opinion:Upper Section](#) | [No Comments](#)

ALBUQUERQUE—Having left Vancouver for a long weekend in the Bay Area, I now arrived in the frozen desert. It was 38°F when I landed, and the temperature dropped below freezing overnight. Never mind that I was now over 1,000 miles south of the Winter Games; I had returned to winter for the first time since leaving D.C. on the last flight out of Dulles before the airport shut down two weeks ago.

Nevertheless, the Olympic show has gone on, with Apolo Ohno and Bode Miller leading the American charge—the United States now likely to become the first country not named Germany or Norway to top the medal standings since the 1988 Calgary Games (and the first such U.S. result since the 1932 Lake Placid Games). Canada's performance, meanwhile, after getting the monkey off the national back by attaining a home gold early on, has been below expectations.

The Canadian government had poured over \$100 million over five years into an "Own the Podium" training program, and so far is in a three-way tie for fifth, no better than before. (Interestingly, Canada has 17 fourth- and fifth- place finishes, the most of any country.)

"Own the podium?" one wag chuckled, "They're not even sub-letting the podium."

"They can own the podium, we just want to borrow it," said the soul-patched Ohno, who has climbed it twice in Vancouver and with seven total medals is now the most decorated American Winter Olympian in history (passing fellow speed-skater Bonnie Blair).

Speaking of the Canada-U.S. rivalry, over dinner I found myself watching the semi-finals of women's hockey on TV. Canada and the U.S. won their respective matches over Finland and Sweden by large scores, setting up the only game that deserves to be part of the Olympics. Seriously: Canada has thus far outscored its opponents 46-2, while the Americans had scored 40 goals and allowed two. The other six teams, by definition, all had negative goal differentials. It's like watching men playing boys or, in this case, women playing girls.

The IOC and the International Hockey Federation will be getting together after these games to discuss whether to remove women's hockey from the Olympic program—not because "women's hockey is an oxymoron" as early critics complained, but for a lack of competitiveness. Much like baseball and softball—which will no longer be part of the Summer Games—simply not enough countries play women's hockey at a high enough level.

One sport that is most definitely competitive is men's hockey: Forget the U.S. beating Canada—which is hard to forget, though it's not nearly as big an upset as 1980 or 1960—these games have seen the Slovaks beat the Russians, the Swiss taking Canada to a shootout, and Sweden winning by more goals over Finland than over Belarus and Germany. This competition is still any team's to win—four different countries have won the last five gold medals—but, due to the vagaries of the draw, pre-tournament co-favorites Canada and Russia will meet in the quarter-finals. If they win that match, Canada could have a chance to seek revenge against the U.S. in the gold-medal game.

If Canada does have a rematch against the Americans, I'll need a stiff drink to reconcile my competing loyalties—though I must say, ironically, that it's been psychologically easier to admit I'm Canadian since I got my green card (facing less of a threat of having to return and thus not needing to be defensive about it). I have no trouble supporting the U.S. in events from soccer to war, but having grown up on Ontario's neighborhood rinks and sported a GOLEAFS vanity plate while living in Mississippi—referring to Toronto's beleaguered NHL team, not my bad grammar—it's hard to root against Canada where its national pastime is concerned.

Luckily, whoever plays in the hockey final, I'll be home to watch—and thus able to enjoy my favorite type of aforementioned stiff drink. Because much as you can't use American Express

at the Olympics, bourbon doesn't exist in Canada.

*Ilya Shapiro, a senior fellow in constitutional studies at the Cato Institute, wrote his master's thesis at the London School of Economics on the transformation of the Olympics in the post-Cold War era. He is filing periodic dispatches for The Daily Caller from and about the 2010 Winter Games.*

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