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ZOOM in on america

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American Winter Olympics

Skeleton rider, Photo: Wikimedia

The Winter Olympic Games are a younger sibling of the Summer Olympics. Before they were officially established, winter sports, such as hockey and figure skating were events at the Summer Games. However, figure skating, ice hockey, and the skiing events are naturally associated with the winter aura, so a decision was made to have separate games for winter sports held in winter time. In 1924, the International Winter Sports Week in Chamonix, France was later proclaimed the first Winter Olympics. For many years both the Winter and Summer games took place in the same calendar year, but starting with the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer, the Winter Games were moved to the alternate even year from the Summer Olympics.

The list of sports in the Winter Olympics has changed over time. the current list includes alpine skiing, biathlon, bobsleigh, cross-country skiing, curling, figure skating, freestyle skiing, ice hockey, luge, Nordic combined, short-track speed skating, skeleton, ski jumping, snowboarding, and speed skating.

The United States has hosted more Winter Olympics than any other country. Lake Placid, New York had the honor to organize the Games twice, while Squaw Valley, California and Salt Lake City, Utah each hosted the event once.

In the year of the Twenty-First Olympics in Vancouver, Canada, Zoom in on America looks back on the four Olympics that took place in the United States.

Olympic.org

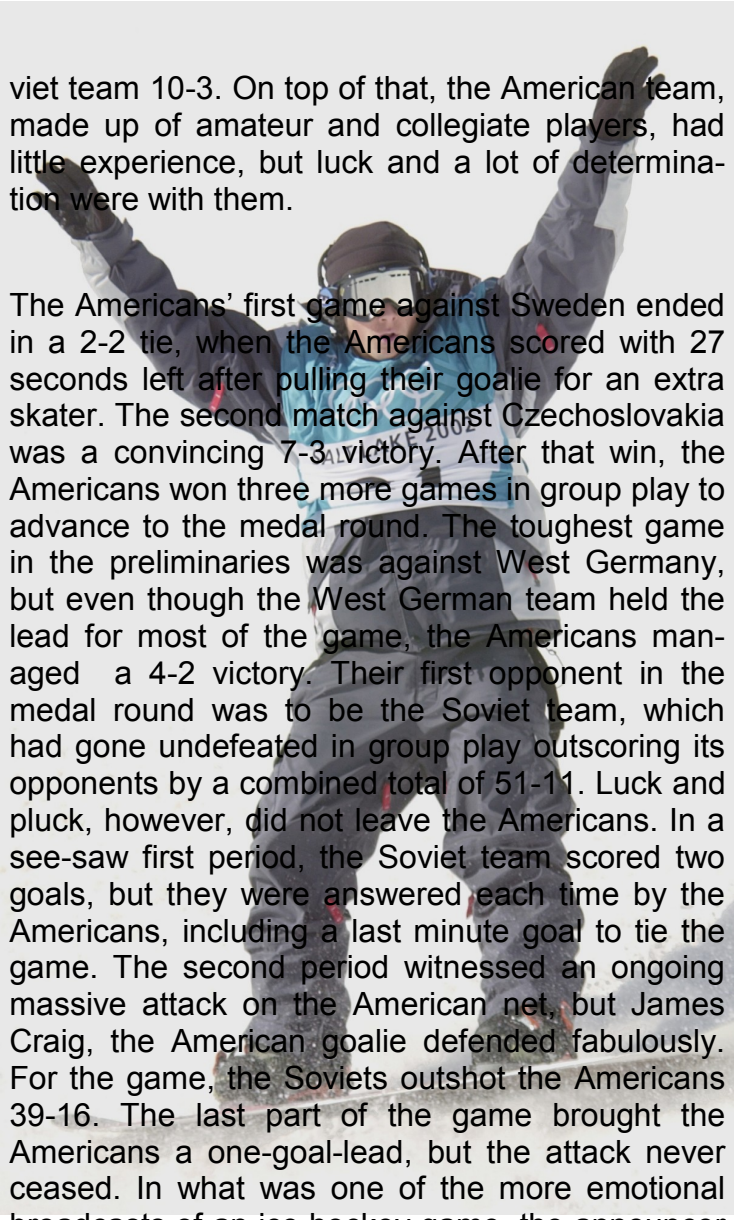
Vancouver 2010

Olympic Stadium in Lake Placid, Source: Wikimedia

Lucky Lake Placid

Lake Placid, a village in northeastern New York State situated on the banks of Mirror Lake and Lake Placid, has twice been host to the Winter Olympic Games, in 1932 and 1980. Along with St. Moritz, Switzerland and Innsbruck, Austria, it is one of only three places to have hosted the Winter Olympic Games twice.
One of the heroes of the 1932 Olympic Games was American Edward "Eddie" Eagan. He is the only person to win a gold medal at both the Summer and Winter Olympics. Three other athletes have won medals in both games, but none of them has won two golds. Eagan's first gold came at the 1920 Summer Olympics in Antwerp, where he won the heavyweight boxing gold. At that time he was still in college, studying law. In Lake Placid, he won his second Olympic gold as a member of a four-man bobsled team. Eagon did not spend the intervening twelve years actively practicing to accomplish his double gold medal feat. In fact, he took up bobsledding only three weeks before the Games. In recognition of his achievement, in 1973, Eagan was included posthumously among the first group of American sportsmen and sportswomen inducted into the Olympic Hall of Fame.

One of the greatest surprise victories in Olympic history happened at the 1980 Olympics in Lake Placid. At the height of the Cold War, the American Olympic hockey team beat the mighty Soviet team in a game called the Miracle on Ice. Prior to the Games, the Soviet team, the dominant team in international hockey over the 1970s, was a favorite to win the Olympic gold. The Americans had won the Olympic gold in the 1960 Games in Squaw Valley, but the whole decade of the 1970s belonged to the Russians. Before Lake Placid nobody gave Americans a chance of success, not even the team's coach, the legendary Herb Brooks. In fact, in a demonstration match before the Olympics, the American team lost to the Soviet team 10-3. On top of that, the American team, made up of amateur and collegiate players, had little experience, but luck and a lot of determination were with them.



The Americans' first game against Sweden ended in a 2-2 tie, when the Americans scored with 27 seconds left after pulling their goalie for an extra skater. The second match against Czechoslovakia was a convincing 7-3 victory. After that win, the Americans won three more games in group play to advance to the medal round. The toughest game in the preliminaries was against West Germany, but even though the West German team held the lead for most of the game, the Americans managed a 4-2 victory. Their first opponent in the medal round was to be the Soviet team, which had gone undefeated in group play outscoring its opponents by a combined total of 51-11. Luck and pluck, however, did not leave the Americans. In a see-saw first period, the Soviet team scored two goals, but they were answered each time by the Americans, including a last minute goal to tie the game. The second period witnessed an ongoing massive attack on the American net, but James Craig, the American goalie defended fabulously. For the game, the Soviets outshot the Americans 39-16. The last part of the game brought the Americans a one-goal-lead, but the attack never ceased. In what was one of the more emotional broadcasts of an ice hockey game, the announcer called out a countdown of the final seconds, finishing it with the words that have become part of the game itself: "Do you believe in miracles? YES!" The match ended United States 4, the Soviet Union 3. There was one more game yet to play to secure the gold and the American team beat Finland 4-2, again coming from behind to win.

The spectacular victories of the ice hockey team were not the only great success of the American athletes in the 1980 Olympic Games in Lake Placid. Within one week speedskater Eric Heiden won five individual gold medals in all speed skat-

Background photo © AP IImages

ing events: 500 m, 5,000 m, 1,000 m, 1,500 m, and 10,000 m, thus breaking a record in the number of gold medals won at a single Olympic Games. Interestingly, it was Heiden who, at the opening of the Games, took the Athlete's Oath. Later, he traded speed skating for road cycling, but when he was inducted into the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame it was in recognition of his unparallelled success in speed skating.

All in all Lake Placid turned out to be a lucky venue for American athletes. They won there 14 gold medals in 1932 and 25 in 1980 bringing their Lake Placid total to thirty-nine gold medals out of the total of 156 gold medals that they have won in the Winter Olympics. Last, but not least, Lake Placid is remembered as the first Winter Games (1980) in which artificial snow was used.

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Watch "5 Minutes of the Miracle on Ice" on You Tube

From One Hotel to Olympic Village

In 1960, twenty-eight years and five Winter Olympic Games after the Winter Olympics were first held in Lake Placid, the United States hosted the event for the second time. Squaw Valley in California was the venue of the Eighth Winter Olympics. The author of the idea, Alexander Cushing, who was creator of the resort and at first its only inhabitant used a scale-model of his as yet unfinished resort to convince the Olympic Committee that a place with one chair lift, two rope tows and one hotel would be the right site for the worlds most important competition in winter sports. Within four years an Olympic village able to accommodate 750 participants from 30 countries was built together with speed skating track, ski lifts and a ski jumping hill. The only facility that was not constructed was a bobsled run as the organizers found it impractical to invest in a facility that would be used by contestants from just 9 countries. South Africa made its first and only - for the next thirty-four years - appearance at Olympic Games. Later, it was banned from Olympic competition until 1994 due to its apartheid policy. For the first time in history the Games had full television coverage (by American TV network, CBS), and, after a controversy over whether or not one of the skiers had missed a gate in the mens slalom, the replay of the moment was shown. The organization of the opening ceremonies was entrusted to Walt Disney. The Games are remembered for introduction of the biathlon and speed skating events for women as well as for the gold won by the American hockey team, a feat that would have to wait 20 years to be repeated.

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The Olympic Spirit Prevails in Salt Lake City

The most recent time that the Winter Olympic Games were held in the United States was 2002 in Salt Lake City, Utah. The honor of lighting the Olympic Flame fell to the 1980 U.S. hockey team, gold medal winners in Lake Placid, New York. The Games started amid concerns over terrorism, since they were held shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. They also suffered from controversies over bribery scandals related to the selection of the host city and of judging for the figure skating competition. In the pairs figure skating, two gold medals were awarded after the French judges scores were invalidated because of the bribery charge. Fortunately, the Olympic spirit prevailed and more countries than ever before participated in the winter games and more took home gold medals. American athlete Vonetta Flowers was the first black sportswoman to win a gold medal in the Winter Olympics. The skeleton event (featured on the cover page) was reintroduced and women's bobsleigh was introduced.

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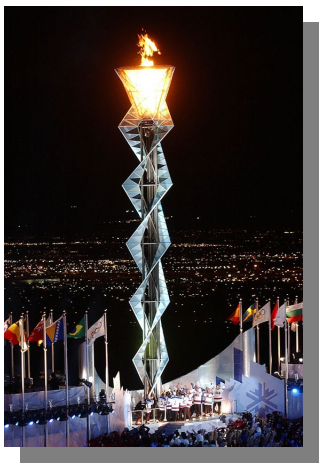


Olympic flame in Salt Lake City, Photo: Wikipedia

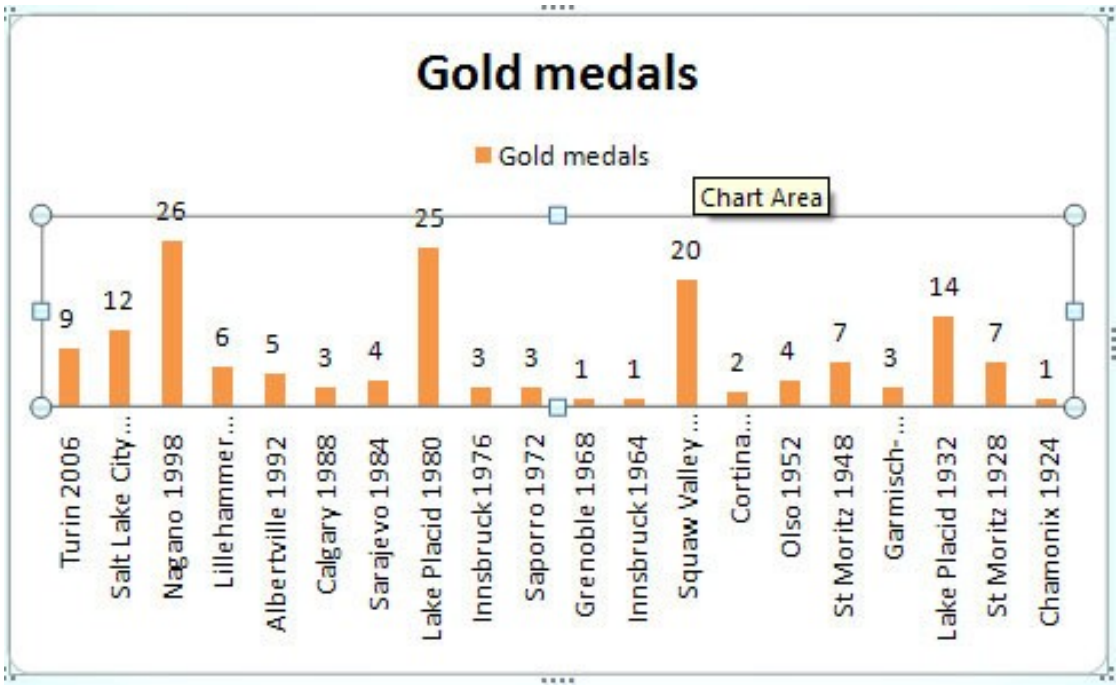
ACTIVITY PAGE

Exercise 1 Speaking

American athletes have won 156 gold medals in the 20 Olympic Games that have been had so far. Look at the chart below which shows you the number of gold medals. Then analyze the chart for your group.

e.g. American athletes won the most medals at the Olympic Games in Nagano.

(the chart was prepared on the basis of the data from Olympic.org, the official site of the Olympic Movement.)



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Exercise 2 Speaking

Work with another student. Tell him/her about your favorite winter sport. Describe the rules required for the sport as well as dress and equipment needed.

Exercise 3 Writing

Write a paragraph about the Winter Olympics which were the most memorable for the team representing your country.

Exercise 4 Survey

Do a class survey finding out who are your friends' favorite athletes. Ask them what they know about their life and achievements. Then tell the class what you have learned.