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978-0-521-19477-8 - Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, the Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War
Nicholas Evan Sarantakes

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Miracle on Ice

MIKE ERUZIONE AS THE TEAM CAPTAIN STOOD ON THE PLATFORM, hand over his heart, with his Olympic gold medal hanging from his neck, as a series of cables attached to the roof of the arena pulled the U.S. flag in the air ahead of those of Finland and the Soviet Union. He was singing words to the “Star Spangled Banner,” leading the crowd in the song, as the music played during the medal ceremony. It is difficult to overstate what he and his nineteen teammates on the U.S. Olympic Hockey Team had done to reach this moment. Just in athletic terms, their victory was astonishing. They had defeated a Soviet team that had won the gold medal of the last four Olympiads. During that run, the goal differential between the Soviets and their opponents had been 175–44. After 1980, the Soviets would not lose to another U.S. team for another eleven years. In fact, they would not lose *any* game in international play for another five years.¹

As impressive as the hockey team’s success was in athletic terms – and it was extraordinary – their gold medal was far more significant to the psyche of the nation. “It was what America needed in troubled times,” an official of the U.S. Amateur Hockey Association explained a few weeks later. Their win produced “a release of emotion and national pride that swept a country searching for something to bolster its pride.”²

Their triumph was also of immense importance to the international Olympic movement. The national euphoria that those twenty men produced in the United States helped blunt the efforts of the Carter administration to destroy the modern incarnation of the Olympics.³

This significance would come into play in the days, weeks, and months that followed Lake Placid. At the time, though, the television cameras faded back to Eruzione from the three flags, he turned around pumped his fist in the air, and then waved his teammates, who were standing in a row behind him, onto the stand. All twenty managed to crowd onto the platform, hugging each other, thrusting their fingers in the air, declaring that they were number one. Then Eruzione led them in a victory parade around the rink, waving

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American flags and proudly showing their medals to the people in the stands. The crowd was cheering and chanting: "U.S.A! U.S.A! U.S.A!"⁴

The person most responsible for this moment was the team's coach, Herb Brooks. A member of the 1960 U.S. National Hockey Team, he was the last player cut before the United States won the gold medal at the Olympics that year. In the two decades that followed, Brooks won three national college championships as the head coach at the University of Minnesota. Convinced that the regular humiliation the United States suffered in international play could be reversed, he developed a new style of play that he dubbed "American hockey." His system combined the aggressive forechecking and improvisation common in North America – mainly Canada – with the open-ice tactics, poise, and heavy physical conditioning typical of the Soviet approach to the game.⁵

To find the right players for this type of hockey, Brooks held a two-week tryout in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He believed it was critical to assemble a team that was on the whole more powerful than the sum of its individual parts. The coach had to find players that would mesh together. He had no interest in putting together a college all-star team. Most of the players he selected, though, were college students; fourteen of them were twenty-two years old or younger. The U.S. team was the youngest that competed at the Olympics. "I think some of 'em are so young they still believe in Santa Claus," Brooks joked.⁶

This team had talent and potential even though it came from only four states: Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Steve Janaszak, one of the goaltenders, helped Brooks win two national titles at the University of Minnesota and had been named Most Valuable Player of the 1979 championship tournament. Every time the Americans had done well at the Olympics, they had the benefit of an exceptional talent in front of the net. Janaszak was good but he was never more than the backup and was the only player never to get on the ice during Olympic play because of the phenomenal work of Jim Craig, the starting goalie. As a goaltender at Boston University, Craig had earned All-American honors and helped his team win the national title. Another fellow Terrier was Jack O'Callahan. He had turned down admission to Harvard to play at Boston University (BU), where he became team captain, team Most Valuable Player (MVP), and an All-American. When the Terriers went to the national championship tournament, Dave Silk ended up on the All-Tournament team. The New York Rangers of the National Hockey League (NHL) drafted him after his sophomore year. Eruzione was another alumnus of BU. The all-time scoring leader in school history, Eruzione's talents were difficult to describe. He had certain intangibles that made him a valuable asset, but since he seemed to be a weak player in the measurable skills of a hockey player, his presence on the team always was a bit at risk.⁷

Unlike Eruzione, there was no question about Mark Johnson's talent. Johnson had been the College Player of the Year in 1978–79, and was the all-time scoring leader in hockey at the University of Wisconsin, where his father was the head coach. He even briefly made the 1976 U.S. National Hockey Team when he was 16, before the final cuts kept him from competing in the Olympics.⁸

Ken Morrow had played for Bowling Green State University, helping turn that Ohio school into a college hockey power by the end of the 1970s. Morrow made All-American, the first player in school history to receive that honor. In difficult financial circumstances following the death of his father, he nearly signed with the Islanders of the NHL. It was only when the Islanders and Morrow agreed to a complex arrangement that provided insurance coverage for his salary in case he became injured in the Olympics, that he agreed to join the team.⁹

Each of the twenty that made the final cut had talent: The real task Brooks faced was welding these players into a collective force, a team. This task was easier said than done. In 1976, during the national college championship playoffs, players from BU and Minnesota got into a brawl that emptied both benches and took an hour to bring to an end. Many of the Terriers gathered in Colorado Springs worried that Brooks and his Golden Gophers still harbored grudges from the fight. Despite his talent, Johnson went to the tryouts concerned as well. His father and Brooks were bitter rivals. The elder Johnson believed that Brooks had kept many of his players from trying out for the Olympics in 1976. Would the new coach of the U.S. national team give the son of his rival a fair evaluation?

Johnson and the others need not have worried. What all of them found was a coach focused solely on victory and creating a unified force that represented the entire nation. Nothing else, including history, mattered. "Don't get regional" was a Brooks catch phrase. He had a number of sayings that he repeated as he pushed his players during his long, brutal, and relentless practice sessions:

- Gentlemen, you don't have enough talent to win on talent alone.
- You guys looked like a monkey screwing a football out there.
- Go up to the tiger, spit in his eye, then shoot him.¹⁰

The team did indeed bond together. "Every team I played on for five years always felt a common bond," Janaszak remarked. "Twenty guys who all hated Herb. You knew the guy sitting next to you had been through all the same crap." When the players saw Brooks, they would remark, "Here comes the Ayatollah." Assistant Coach Craig Patrick was the bridge between the team and the head coach. It was his job to offer the players positive encouragement, while Brooks maintained an emotional distance. "The Ayatollah" was often

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abusive toward Patrick in front of the team, but this behavior was for show. The two men shared a room on the road.¹¹

Brooks had good reasons for this behavior. At the tryouts, he had selected twenty-six players, but he could only take twenty to the Olympics. Six more had to go. Having been cut from the 1960 squad just before the start of the Olympics to make way for another player, he promised that he would not bring in any outsiders at the last minute and would explain his decisions with the individuals being dismissed from the team. When he cut the last two players, he was in tears himself, remembering 1960 all too well.¹²

In addition to finding the right mix of players, Brooks had to teach them the new style he wanted to use in the Olympics. “We had to cram two or three years of experience playing this into five months of exhibition games,” he explained to a *Sports Illustrated* reporter. He had one goal: beating the Soviets. “I tried to develop a team that would throw their game right back at them.” A key element in this process was a long pre-Olympic exhibition season. Brooks had them play an eclectic mix of other national teams, American and European professionals, American colleges, minor leaguers, and all-stars. The players called the demanding physical training exercises that Brooks inflicted on the team “Herbies.” One of the most notorious Herbies came during a tour of Scandinavia. The Americans made a listless effort against the poorly regarded Norwegian National Team. “Hey, if you don’t skate tonight, gentlemen, we’ll skate after the game,” their coach warned them. After playing the Norwegians to a 3–3 tie, Brooks ordered the team back onto the ice and had them skate back and forth the length of the rink. The crowd stayed at first and cheered, thinking it was some kind of skating demonstration. When they realized it was a form of punishment, they booed. The team kept skating back and forth even after the custodial staff turned off the lights in the rink. The next night, the U.S. defeated Norway handily, 9–0.¹³

In 1979, there were two minor leagues that fed players into the NHL, and officials of the U.S. hockey federation and the Central Hockey League had arranged that the Olympians would play every CHL team twice, and that the games would count in the official standings. Brooks and his charges ended up with a final record of 14–3–1, which, combined with their victory over the champions of the American Hockey League, the other semi-pro circuit, made them for all practical purposes but name the best minor league team on the continent. The Americans also won the gold medal at a pre-Olympic international tournament held at Lake Placid, New York, where the Winter Games would be held in a few weeks. Most nations, though, sent their junior teams. Overall, the United States had a pre-Olympic record up to that point of 42–15–3. The team had done well, but the real question remained: Would they be good enough to take on the best team at the Olympics, the Soviets?¹⁴

The answer came three days before the start of Olympic play – and it was “No.” The Soviets humiliated the Americans in an exhibition game played

at Madison Square Garden, 10–3. Even that score fails to tell the full story. The Soviets scored four minutes into the game and had four goals in the first fifteen. The Americans had two power play opportunities during the game and at neither time were they even able to take a shot on goal. When the game ended, Viktor Tikhonov, the Soviet head coach, was gracious when he said, “I think the United States team has a very good future.”¹⁵

Far more devastating to the team than the score was an injured knee that O’Callahan suffered. A doctor from the U.S. Olympic Committee was saying that damage would require surgery to fix. His Olympics were over before they began, but a day later, a second doctor said the injury was less severe than originally thought. The physician thought O’Callahan should recover in time to compete in the medal round, if the Americans made it that far. Brooks had a difficult decision to make: go into the Olympics, possibly down one man, or cut a player that was critical to the cohesive chemistry of the team. To make matters worse, he only had a few hours to make his decision. The day before the Olympics began, Brooks walked into the locker room and said, “Jack, we’ve had a long talk and we don’t know if you’re going to be able to play, but we’re going to stick with you.” The team cheered. “Looking back on it,” Eurzione reflected a few months afterwards, “that was just about the best thing Herb could have done. The emotion in that locker room was a great way to start off the Olympics.”¹⁶

The team went into the Lake Placid Games believing they had a chance to win a medal. “If I didn’t think we could win the gold medal, I wouldn’t be here,” Rob McClanahan, a Left Wingman on the team, said. The first test of the Winter Olympics came even before the opening ceremonies. The opponent was Sweden, and getting a win would be difficult. No U.S. team had defeated the Swedes in twenty years. The game was a must-win, and the Americans let the pressure get to them; they were tense, tentative, and missing connections. Brooks decided he had to do something. McClanahan had pulled a muscle in the game, and during the break between periods, the coach stormed into the locker room, looked at him, said he was weak, and told him to suit up again. Hurt, insulted, and angry, McClanahan charged Brooks and started yelling at him. Morrow was dismayed at what he was watching. “I remember sitting there thinking, ‘Twenty minutes into the Olympics, and we’ve already imploded,’” he said. The former Bowling Green State star had company. “This is unreal,” Silk thought. “Francis Ford Coppola is going to come out in a minute and say, ‘Cut. Good,’” he said making a reference to a scene in the film *Apocalypse Now*.¹⁷

The stunt worked. The Americans were energized during the rest of the game. Still, Brooks had to make another gutsy call. In the last minute, he pulled Craig from the game giving the team another play on offense. With twenty-seven seconds left in the game, Bill Baker scored his only goal of the Olympics to give the United States a tie rather than a loss. Brooks never

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explained his actions in the locker room to McClanahan. Years passed before he could forgive his coach.¹⁸

The next game would be even tougher. Czechoslovakia had won the silver medal at the 1976 Innsbruck Olympics and the world championship twice in the 1970s. Olympic officials had arranged a schedule to keep the United States from facing the Soviets until the medal round, but the Americans had never lost to the Czechs and then gone on to win a medal in the Olympics. The Americans basically had to win this game. The visitors scored first and early, but the Americans responded quickly and then took the lead in the second period. They never looked back. The final score was 7–3. “Many people said that, that the Czechs were considered the second best team in the world and the only team that had a chance to beat the Soviets,” Eurziona explained. “Well, we pretty much dominated the Czechs.” Morrow described how: “The crowd got us going against the Czechs and it just snowballed.” O’Callahan agreed. “I think that may have been the best game we played all year, better than the game against Russia,” he said. “I can’t remember us ever being better than that night.” The crowd was chanting “U.S.A., U.S.A., U.S.A.” when the game ended. Public and media interest in the hockey team started to grow: the stands were only partially full for the game against Sweden – now they were full. Despite this popularity, Brooks enforced a rule that no players would attend press conferences. Uneven attention from the media could create jealousy on the team.¹⁹

The next game was against Norway. The Americans won, 5–1, but that score fails to reflect the difficulty the United States faced or the fact that they trailed 1–0 at the end of the first period. Despite the win, no one on the team was happy with the trouble they had against the less-than-stellar Norwegians. “It was kind of a brutal game,” Brooks observed. “We just weren’t motivated. We didn’t move the puck, we didn’t do a lot of things. We were drained from the Czech game.”²⁰

Two days later, the Americans faced the Romanians, another opponent that they took lightly. Romania had never garnered a medal in hockey. The United States won the game, 7–2. Again the score was misleading. The Americans missed a number of scoring opportunities and were starting to worry about the goal differential, which would determine entry into the medal round. If they had the same record as Sweden, goals would decide the awarding of medals. “When we came up here, people thought if we got through the first four games unbeaten it would be unbelievable,” Jim Craig observed. “And now, it’s not good enough. Beating somebody seven-two in the Olympics is not good enough.”²¹

The last game of the first round was against West Germany. If the Americans lost, their Olympics would be over, since it would be impossible for them to advance into the medal round. A simple win was also not good enough for the United States. The Americans wanted to win by at least seven to avoid having

to face the Soviets next. They also wanted to avenge a German victory in the 1976 Olympics that cost the United States the bronze. "I wanted to beat them especially bad because of '76," Buzz Schneider, the only member of the U.S. team from the previous Olympic squad, said. "You'd think something like that won't bother you, that you'd forget it. But I hadn't." The West Germans took an early 2–0 lead, before the Americans scored four straight goals. The final score was 4–2, which was good enough to get the team into the second round for the second consecutive Olympiad, but their next opponents would be the defending champions, the Soviets. "No team is invincible," Mike Ramsey, a U.S. defenseman explained, aware of the coming confrontation. "The Russians are close. But any team can be beaten. If we catch them on a bad day, who knows? We got a shot."²²

The game with the Soviets was daunting enough just in athletic terms. The visitors were clearly the best hockey team, amateur or professional, on the planet, but the American people were investing the game with a good deal of politics and social issues: Vietnam, Watergate, the decade of malaise, the high inflation of the 1970s, the humiliation of the Iranian hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter's efforts to boycott the Olympics, the slow, lingering death of détente, and the return of the Cold War. Hundreds of telegrams arrived for the team from around the country. One urged them to "Save us from the cancer of communism." *Newsweek* magazine called the contest "a morality play on ice." The players, for their part, found all these extra issues unsettling.²³

The Soviets entered this tournament expecting to win their fifth consecutive gold medal. Unlike the Americans, they rarely had much of a challenge. They destroyed the Japanese, 16–0, the Dutch, 17–4, and the Poles, 8–1. Trained to maintain their poise, they remained calm when the Finns took a 2–1 lead into the final five minutes of their game. The Soviets then scored three goals in 79 seconds, to take the victory. The Canadians gave them the toughest challenge at Lake Placid, taking the lead early in the game, then falling behind. The Canadians managed to tie the contest at four before ultimately falling, 6–4.

Brooks watched the game and realized something – the Soviets were bored. In their arrogance, they were sleepwalking through the tournament, which allowed the Finns and the Canadians to stay in the contest much longer than should have otherwise been the case. Soviet goaltender Vladislav Tretiak admitted as much: "We were way stronger, nobody ever doubted that. We were professionals and they were just students. Simply put, we did not respect their team and you can not do that in hockey." Their encounter with the Americans at Madison Square Garden did nothing to alter that attitude. "No matter what we tried we could not get that 10–3 game out of the players' minds," Soviet head coach Viktor Tikhonov said. "The players told me it would be no problem. It turned out to be a very big problem."²⁴

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Al Michaels of ABC Sports captured the significance of the game at the beginning of the broadcast of the game, “I’m sure there are a lot of people in this building who do not know the difference between a blue line and a clothes line. It’s irrelevant. It doesn’t matter, because what we have at hand is the rarest of sporting events. An event that needs no build up, no supercilious adjectives.”²⁵

The U.S. team responded with an energetic and forceful effort that was the product of Brooks’ heavy emphasis on physical conditioning. “The Americans were so strong in the first period,” Soviet defenseman Zinatula Bilyaletdinov recalled. “It was unexpected for us.”²⁶

It appeared to matter little, though. The Soviets scored nine minutes into the contest. Buzz Schneider responded charging down the left side of the ice, the one away from the television cameras, and fired a slap shot from a sharp angle that flew into the upper far corner of the net. The Soviets responded quickly with another score of their own. Then, just before the period came to an end, Mark Johnson sensed that the Russian defenders were letting up. “We relaxed a little bit. We felt that the period was over and the horn would sound,” Bilyaletdinov explained. “Unfortunately, that was a big mistake.” Johnson slid in between two defenders and skated wide to the left of the Soviet net, which created a huge gap between Tretiak and his station. The American blasted a slap shot past him to tie the game at two goals apiece.²⁷

Most hockey experts considered Tretiak the best goalie in the world at the time, but he had been playing poorly, and during the break between periods, Tikhonov decided to replace him with Vladimir Myshkin. “The whole team was not happy when Tikhonov made the switch,” Sergei Makarov, a Soviet winger, recalled. “It was the worst moment of Vlady’s career. Tikhonov was panicking. He couldn’t control himself. That’s what it was – panic.” Defenseman Sergei Starikov agreed, “It felt like a big hole had been put in our team.” Even Tikhonov later conceded that he was wrong: “The biggest mistake of my career was replacing Tretiak with Myshkin.” Tretiak always played better after giving up a goal, but the coach let his emotion get the better of him.²⁸

At first, though, this decision had no impact on the game. The Soviets dominated the second period, scoring the go-ahead goal less than two minutes after it started and outshooting the Americans, 30–10. Learning from his experience in the 10–3 game, Craig stayed back in the net, creating a smaller target and blocking most of these shots.²⁹

The Americans were trailing when the third period started, but they were still in the game, and had come from behind before, but these were the Soviets, the best team on the planet. Then the Americans had an opportunity: A Soviet penalty gave the U.S. a power play. The Russians held them off. As the power play ended, however, Dave Silk cut across the ice with the puck, passed it directly to Johnson who was standing in front of the Soviet net, and

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he slapped it right between the legs of Myshkin. The game was tied again, 3–3. The arena exploded in cheers. “The crowd was an unbelievable big help to us,” Brooks said. “The fans displayed excellent sportsmanship, even though we have different ways of life and government. There were no politics on behalf of the Russians and no politics by us. I don’t think the fans were an ugly lot. They were positive.” Eighty-one seconds later, Eruzione skated around a Soviet defenseman, using him as a screen to block Myshkin’s view, and snapped a twenty-five-foot wrist shot off the wrong foot, which went straight into the left side of the net. “And that’s when the building went crazy,” Al Michaels observed. “I mean that’s when sound had feel.”³⁰

The American players celebrated on the ice for a few seconds, but there were exactly ten minutes left in the game, and they were worried. The Soviets had more than enough time to take the lead back. No one needed to look any further than their three-goal rampage against Finland, which had taken all of seventy-nine seconds. “These are going to be the longest ten minutes of my life,” Morrow told himself. Brooks was telling his players not to get rattled, “Play your game.” His real message: relax and stay focused. It was a wasted effort. “God couldn’t have come down and got us relaxed,” Eruzione said.³¹

All the American players on the bench were standing, and the crowd was chanting: “USA! USA! USA!” Their teammates on the ice started to notice something; although none of them spoke Russian, they could tell that the Soviets were beginning to talk in angry and anxious tones, and began taking shots at random, reflecting a good deal of confusion. The American players were also surprised when, in the last sixty seconds, Tikhonov kept Myshkin in the game instead of pulling him and giving the Soviet team an extra skater. The reason: The Russians had never practiced this move. They had little reason to believe that they would ever be behind. Tretiak admitted: “Until the last minute, I thought we would beat them. To lose, that was not possible.”³²

The din of the crowd only grew louder as the seconds ticked off the clock. Al Michaels was screaming into his microphone: “Do you believe in miracles? Yes!” The horn sounded and the game ended. The Americans poured out onto the ice and danced around in ecstasy. “I don’t think you can put it into words,” Eruzione said. “It was twenty guys pulling for each other, never quitting, sixty minutes of good hockey. I don’t think we kicked their butts. We just won.”³³

The Soviets patiently stood on the ice, waiting for the traditional postgame handshake. They were smiling in amusement. The relentless practice sessions had sucked all the joy out of the game for the Soviet players. Tretiak later said he had practiced everyday for twenty-one years, including his wedding day. “It was more than hockey for those guys,” Makarov said. “We were happy for them.” That evening, several of the Soviet players toasted their American opponents.³⁴

The opposing coaches reacted quite differently to the game. Brooks left the floor of the arena, went back to the locker room, locked himself into a toilet

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stall, and cried. On the other side of the building, in the Soviet locker room, Tikhonov was yelling at his players: "This is your loss." On the plane back to the Soviet Union, the coach continued to rail at his players. Finally, defenseman Valery Vasiliev had enough; he grabbed Tikhonov by the neck and threatened to kill him. Vasiliev's teammates had to pull him off their coach.³⁵

After the Soviets left Lake Placid, cleanup workers at the Olympic village found 121 empty vodka bottles in the Soviets' rooms. None of the Russians turned in their silver medals to have their names inscribed on them. Not one. Several of them, in fact, threw their medals away.³⁶

Despite the victory, the U.S. team still had one game to play – and it was still a must-win. If they beat Finland, they would win the gold medal; if they lost, the goal differential would determine the medals, and they would finish in fourth place. It was altogether possible that the Soviets could still leave Lake Placid with the gold medal, if they won and the Americans lost. According to Eruzione, "Herb Brooks walked into the locker room, and he looked at us and said, 'If you lose this game you will take it to your fucking grave.' And he stopped, he walked a couple of steps, turned, looked at us again and said, 'Your fucking grave.'"

"He didn't have to say much more than that. We knew he was right," Mark Johnson said.³⁷

Throughout the Olympics, the Americans had been outscored in the first two periods. This pattern held again. Finland scored first, and Jorma Valtonen, the Finnish goaltender, was playing well, very well. He blocked fourteen shots in that first period. At the end of the second period, Finland was ahead, 2–1. The Americans had, however, outscored their opponents 27–6 in the third period, which was the product of heavy physical conditioning that Brooks had stressed during practices. That pattern held, as well, in this game. The Americans scored twice in the first six minutes of the third period to take the lead, 3–2. After some sloppy play that gave the Finns power plays, Johnson scored another goal. Now the score was 4–2. Three minutes and thirty five seconds remained in the game. The crowd counted as the last five seconds on the game clock ticked off, and Michaels was yelling into his microphone again: "This impossible dream comes true!"³⁸

At the medal ceremony, the Americans followed a superstition that they had developed during the pre-Olympic training. Craig always led the group out of the locker room, followed by John Harrington. Eruzione was always the last in line. They followed this practice one final time, before they watched the raising of the U.S. flag and the playing of the "Star Spangled Banner."³⁹

Two presidents watched the U.S. Hockey Team's success and had very different reactions. One was James Earl Carter, Junior, President of the United States. "It was one of the high spots of my year when the young Americans won – a very emotional moment," Carter remarked. He called and congratulated Brooks after the Soviet game, telling him that the team had made the