



Medal ceremony photograph from the Lake Placid Olympic Museum

# Saved by a Miracle



Looking back—40 years later—  
at the good, the bad and the ugly  
of the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics

★  
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\*unless otherwise noted



# Blink and you'll miss it,

an almost throwaway line in the 2004 film *Miracle*, one that hints at what Adirondack locals know about the 1980 Winter Olympics. Or at least knew 40 years ago.

The American hockey coach Herb Brooks, played by Kurt Russell, is strolling through snowy Lake Placid with Walter Bush, of the U.S. hockey association, who's explaining why so many reporters are suddenly interested in the American team less than a week into the Games. "Think about what they've had to write about the last couple of months: the hostages, Afghanistan, the transportation chaos," Bush says, glancing over his shoulder at buses crawling down a gridlocked street.

Hollywood notoriously stretches the truth, but this was no exaggeration: During the early days of the 1980 Games, buses caused as much angst locally as the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan did globally.

People waited hours in frigid temperatures for buses that never came, leaving fans stranded, tourists cut off from the village of Lake Placid, and restaurants, bars and shops bereft of customers. Placid Memorial Hospital's emergency room, meanwhile, filled with Opening Ceremonies spectators suffering from exposure to the cold. One Games attendee filed suit against the local organizers, claiming that on day two of the event she was "trampled upon and severely injured" by a "vast and oppressive" crowd as she attempted to board a bus to Whiteface.

"A clusterf\*\*k," says Dick Pound, a



Tickets to the legendary USA versus USSR hockey semifinal. ABOVE: Opening Ceremonies—and Olympic flame—for Lake Placid's 1980 Games.

Olympic flame and Opening Ceremony photographs from the Lake Placid Olympic Museum

Montreal attorney, International Olympic Committee (IOC) delegate and former IOC vice-president who in 1980 was president of the Canadian Olympic Committee.

The transit fiasco was but a rivulet in a cascade of bad news emanating from the Lake Placid Olympics. In the years before the Games and well into the first week, the cold-weather fest was a hot mess, with a chronically underfunded, in-over-its-head community of 2,500 souls forced to cope with hassles, cock-ups and near catastrophes—many of its own creation. There was disarray on the organizing committee, accusations of corrupt contracting, behind-the-scenes fights over TV rights, and never enough money for an ever-escalating tab. "As you probably know, the Olympic Organization is in a very critical financial position," wrote Petr L. Spurney, the local organizing committee's general manager, to an irked bus contractor in April of 1980, two months after the Games' end. "In all likelihood we will not be able to pay all the liabilities we have incurred."

But there was also one magnificent, heart-tugging, tear-jerking Olympic

moment: USA 4, USSR 3, in the hockey semifinal, cited as the greatest American sporting event of the 20th century. And then the cherry on top, the championship game against Finland on the final day of the Games, where the plucky squad made up mostly of college kids came from behind yet again to fulfill its gold-medal destiny.

The triumph lifted an America beset by spiking unemployment, gasoline shortages and international humiliations, and in the decades since has enabled Lake Placid to prosper as a one-of-a-kind tourism mecca.

Forty years on, it's clear that one *Miracle* absolved a multitude of sins.



Let's start with a sin in the St. Agnes Church basement. Pinkerton's Inc., the Games' security contractor, needed storage space for uniforms and equipment, and just weeks before the torch was lit, St. Agnes offered sanctuary, assured that the global firm would have a low impact on the church.

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Olympic organizers marketed hundreds of '80s Games-branded souvenirs. FACING PAGE: A shortage of bus drivers, among other issues, forced ticket holders to miss events and reporters to blow deadlines.

St. Agnes Pastor Philip Allen wrote to Philip Wolff, the chief of staff of the Lake Placid Olympic Organizing Committee, reporting that Pinkerton employees trashed the place. They clogged plumbing fixtures and broke a pipe when someone sat on a sink. They took up as many as a dozen parking spaces each day, crowding out parishioners. They left the lights on 24 hours a day for five weeks and frequently left outside doors open. "The utility bills will be extraordinary," Father Allen wrote. "They used the facilities heavily and hard. It was a real inconvenience and it was costly."

The priest wasn't the only displeased donor. Bernice Steinbaum, a New York City gallery owner, lent several paintings to brighten up the athlete's village, but four of them were stolen, forcing the organizing committee's insurers to pay out \$5,600—a check that didn't arrive until nearly six months after the Games ended. "I hope that you will accept our apology for the delay," Wolff wrote Steinbaum, "but you can not imagine [sic] the amount of claims that we have had to process."

Cheering crowd and Main Street photographs from the Lake Placid Olympic Museum

Money was scarce, before and after the Games. When Lake Placid, which had played host to the Olympics in 1932, was bidding for the 1980 Games, organizers initially proposed a budget of \$30 million. The final number was \$169 million.

The '80 Games relied heavily on state and federal funding. One example: the U.S. government built the athletes' village in Ray Brook, then repurposed it as the federal prison that still operates today.

Organizers also hustled to round up 231 U.S.-based sponsors, raising \$30 million. Sounds good, but Lake Placid hadn't learned what other Games would: limiting sponsors means more exclusivity and thus more money. An IOC marketing report noted the 2002 Salt Lake Games had only 61 sponsors—but made \$876 million off them.

TV rights offered another teachable moment. Writing in the Spring 1998 *Journal of Sport History*, Stephen R. Wenn observed that local organizers "found themselves in a cash flow crisis" and "buckled under the weight of the responsibilities inherent in hosting an Olympic festival. Feeling ignored by NBC and CBS executives ... Lake Placid organizers quickly negotiated a television rights deal with ABC's Boone Arledge in order to ease their financial difficulties."

The committee struck a hasty \$10 million rights pact with ABC, but didn't bother to tell NBC, CBS or the IOC. When word got out, ABC's incensed network rivals complained to Congress, and the







After tying Sweden and then beating Czechoslovakia—regarded as the world's second-best team behind the Soviets—the U.S. players began to believe.

IOC rejected the agreement. Rather than sue for breach of the initial contract, ABC matched the highest rival bid, and got the rights for \$15.5 million. “Back then, Arledge was the king of sports television,” says Pound, who negotiated several subsequent TV contracts for the IOC, “and ABC clearly had an inside track.”

Over the next decade, the IOC wrested total control over TV rights from local organizing committees such as Lake Placid’s, and with more deliberate, open bidding, rights fees skyrocketed into the billions of dollars we see today.

The Lake Placid Olympic Organizing

Committee consisted of the same core group, mostly small businessmen, who successfully bid for the Games in 1974. “None of these individuals were heads of major not-for-profit or for-profit companies,” recalls Sergio Mendez, who served as the deputy director of marketing for the committee until 1979. “So one could argue, ‘What the heck do they know about putting together this kind of a show?’ That was a critique that was levied.”

Expensive, embarrassing problems kept cropping up. The new ice arena needed design changes because the arena’s construction firm had supervised

the building of the Hartford Civic Center, the roof of which collapsed under an eight-inch snowfall in 1978. When some countries refused to allow their athletes to double up in the soon-to-be prison cells at the Olympic Village, organizers scrambled to bring in modular homes to avoid a housing crisis. Just before the Games, the electrical system overloaded, causing blackouts and nearly frying ABC’s equipment.

And then there were the ethical issues. A local attorney serving as both counsel to and member of the organizing committee resigned after being charged and

later convicted of federal income-tax violations. A state transportation engineer was removed after being accused of “double-dipping” on his expense account. Local and national media pointed out the organizing committee’s several potential conflicts of interest. A half-dozen local elected officials, for instance, served on the organizing committee. One of them, Chris Ortloff, ran for Lake Placid village trustee on a promise that he would not join the committee, then took a \$15,000 salary to work for it. (Decades later, Ortloff served as a state assemblyman, then served federal prison time after being caught in a pedophile sting in 2008.)

The biggest lightning rod was Jack Wilkins, a local Realtor, landlord and owner of an insurance agency. He accepted a contract to insure the Games while serving on the organizing committee, a deal struck down by the federal Economic Development Administration. But Wilkins and the committee subsequently funneled another insurance contract worth \$800,000 to a firm owned by two of Wilkins’s nephews. Later, a *New York Times* story accused Wilkins of pushing out poor tenants to make room for well-heeled Olympic renters.

As organizational issues mushroomed, the Games hired Spurney, an outsider, as general manager. He fired Wilkins, who was often blamed for problems in the runup to the Games.

Mendez, who worked closely with Wilkins, says that’s unfair. “Everyone painted Jack as a pirate and a rapacious individual, but from what I could observe, that was the last thing he was,” Mendez says. “He was a straight-up guy whose only interest was to magnify the athletes and magnify the interest in this jewel in the Adirondack Mountains.... But that didn’t mean his business was not going to grow.”

Spurney, a veteran of major events including the 1974 World’s Fair, is acknowledged to have improved the Games’ management after taking over in 1978. But he made few friends, dismissing local critics by telling the *Toronto Globe and Mail* in 1979: “There’s a saying around here, ‘The narrower the valley, the narrower the mind.’ This is a small,

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isolated community that thrives on negativism.” Matt Clark, a North Elba town clerk who opposed the Olympics, became something of a national media darling for his principled stance and wry humor. He told *Washington Post* reporter Jane Leavy how to get to his home, which was adjacent to the Opening Ceremonies site: “You can’t miss it. It’s the blue house just beyond the debacle.”

Nobody could argue with Clark’s assessment that first week of the Games. A shortage of bus drivers, among other issues, forced ticket holders to miss events and reporters to blow deadlines. A story made the rounds about an Italian journalist who confronted an Olympic official, saying that while he understood nobody could be in two places at once, “in Lake Placid, you’ve made it impossible for us to be in one place at once.”

A few days in, Governor Hugh Carey declared a state of emergency that allowed for more drivers and organizational aid from the state department of transportation. The crisis eased, and by



Miracle on Ice photograph from the Lake Placid Olympic Museum





the end of the first week, Lake Placid began to fill with people and feel like a carnival.



Like the buses, the hockey team got off to a slow start. In the opening game against Sweden, played the day before the Opening Ceremonies, the Americans skated desultorily through the first period and trailed 1-0. Thanks to the bus issues, the arena was little more than half-filled.

"There was really zero buzz about the Sweden game," says author Wayne Coffey, a writer whose 2005 book, *The Boys of Winter*, chronicles the fabled U.S.-Soviet game and its effect on the lives of the players.

Rob McClanahan, a tough, talented star, sustained a wicked thigh bruise in the first period and looked to be out of the game. At the first intermission, Coach Brooks sparked a near mutiny when he labeled McClanahan a "candy-ass" for not playing hurt. "It really did feel like it was completely unraveling before the tournament had even started," Coffey says. "Brooks basically assails the manhood of

the most popular, hardest-working guy on the team. I remember Ken Morrow [a defenseman] saying, 'We're 20 minutes into the Olympics, and we're all actually ready to kill each other.'"

But Brooks's ploy worked; his fuming young players played better. Still, the U.S. trailed late in the game, and it took defenseman Bill Baker's improbable slapshot with just 27 seconds left to salvage a 2-2 tie.

After escaping against Sweden, the U.S. excelled in a 7-3 rout of Czechoslovakia, regarded as the world's second-best team behind the Soviets. That's when the U.S. players began to believe, Coffey says. "If they had lost to Sweden, would they have gone into that Czechoslovakia game with the same mindset? I don't know. It absolutely could have gone the other way. There could have been backbiting, and if they don't get this semi-miraculous late goal from Bill Baker, who knows where those Games go?"

But Baker's semi-miracle found the net, paving the way for the real Miracle and its formidable legacy.

Today, members of the 1980 Olympic hockey squad are frequent visitors to Lake Placid, and fans show up to skate with them at hockey camps at the site of the Miracle.

## Would any of this have happened without the Miracle on Ice?

The Americans' final two victories over the USSR and Finland proved a ratings bonanza for ABC and remain the two most-watched hockey games in U.S. television history. The positive vibes surrounding those kids haven't faded. Members of the 1980 squad are frequent visitors to Lake Placid, and fans show up every year to skate with them at hockey camps at the site of the Miracle, what's now known as the Herb Brooks Arena.

That gold medal had a far bigger local impact than fantasy camps. With a debt of \$6.5 million hanging over it nearly a year after the Games, the Lake Placid organizing committee faced bankruptcy. In 1981, Governor Carey stepped in once again, using state funds to pay off Games creditors and forming the Olympic Regional Development Authority (ORDA) to maintain and market venues such as Whiteface and the bobsled run. In 1982, the U.S. set up an official Olympic Training Center in the area. While over the last decade ORDA has run deficits in the tens of millions of dollars, most agree it helped the region brand itself as a recreation and tourism haven.

Would any of this have happened without the Miracle on Ice?

"No," says Mendez, flatly. He thinks the hockey triumph gave the state political cover to assume Lake Placid's debt, setting the stage for decades of growth. Mendez is quick to note that before the 1980 Olympics, there was 20 percent unemployment in Essex County. In August of

2019, the jobless rate was 3.9 percent. There's no measuring the indelible memories. Cora Clark preceded her regular 3-to-11 nursing shift by working as a volunteer every day of the 1980 Games. "And then we'd go out with friends every night just to gather and feel the spirit of it," she says. "We met so many people, had so much fun." She fondly recalls the fortnight of 20-hour days, even if her dad, the vocal Olympics critic Matt Clark, who died in 2012, had initially thought the Games were a mistake.

Sandy Caligiore, who went on to work for ORDA and USA Luge, covered the Olympics for WNBZ radio in Saranac Lake and did play-by-play for the U.S.-Soviet game. The production isn't as slick as the iconic Al Michaels countdown, but Caligiore's call is every bit as exciting, inducing chills even 40 years later. "This is a miracle!" he hollers over the deafening crowd, joyful, incredulous. "I can't believe it!"

On a perfect September afternoon, Harvey Thornton and David Speak step into the Lake Placid Olympic Museum, saying hello in their gentle Yorkshire accents.

The pair of Englishmen from Leeds are in the States for a "300-miler," a hiking-cycling-kayaking journey up and over Mount Marcy and down the length of the Hudson River to the southern tip of Manhattan. They got here a day early. "We're regrettin' it now," Thornton says. "We wish we would have come here for at least three or four more days."

What brought them to Lake Placid? "Lake Placid," says Speak, as if the answer were obvious. "I couldn't even tell you about the recent Olympic Games, where they were. But Lake Placid does stick in my mind. Maybe it was the USA-Russia scenario. Maybe the name. But Lake Placid, the Olympics has put it on the map."

Which, for all the hassles and squabbles and lapses, was supposed to be the whole point. ▲

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