

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

And the winner is...

Since the Olympic Winter Games are being held in the United States, they are particularly interesting this year. I've joined millions of couch potatoes all over the world and watched as much as I can. The competition of teams from 77 countries, with all the accompanying ramifications of politics and humanity has been fascinating, exciting, horrifying and at times, hilarious.

We have a goofy notion in this country that winners of contests and elections are always the most qualified, the fastest, the best. Anyone carefully watching the games, or most elections, would see the flaw in that thinking. In the men's 1000 meter short-track speed-skating race, the top four skaters tripped each other and crashed, one by one, into the soft barrier on the right side of the track, only to make clear sailing for the fifth and last skater, Australia's Steven Bradbury. With a startled grin spreading on his face, he sailed across the finish line to get the gold medal. After the shock of the awful crash, I had to laugh at Bradbury's totally unexpected joy.

It was hilarious. Every time I watched the tape of the event, which of course was played about 92 times, I laughed again. All of a sudden, speed wasn't the issue. As Bradbury said later, "I was the only one still standing." There's a lot to be said for that.

Included in the chaos on the ice was the American, Apolo Anton Ohno, who was expected to win the gold and still may win three gold medals. Ohno won the silver medal because he had the presence of mind to pull himself up and slither across the finish line like the physically and mentally wounded skater he was.

Consider the controversy over the medal standings of the pairs skating competition, which the Russians had dominated for nearly a decade. The Russian pair won the gold medal, even though the pair from Canada skated better. It was about that simple. The International Olympic Committee found that the French judge was pressured and influenced in favor of the Russians, she was kicked out, and the Canadian couple received the gold medal along with the Russians. I'm not convinced this was the right solution, but maybe it was



a wake-up call for the judges.

I compare the mentality of the judges to college professors and teachers, who regularly give straight A students the benefit of the doubt and those of us with B and C's would have to perform a miracle to get an A. But whenever there are humans involved, the judging is subjective.

And then there are elections. There's no doubt that well over half of

American voters know that U.S. presidential candidate Al Gore got the most votes and if all the Florida votes had been recounted, he would have won the Electoral College vote and become president. But the Supreme Court stepped in and that was that. George W. became president. So much for the best and brightest winning elections. (And please don't mention John Kennedy's election in 1960. The electoral vote wasn't even close and he didn't need Illinois' electoral votes to win.)

As the election machinery gets into gear this year, it's obvious once again that many other factors determine who wins. Money, clout, party affiliation, looks, geography, personality. Qualifications for the job get lost in the fight for who gets the most television commercial time. This is our fault. We don't do our homework and expect to be spoon-fed by those who make the commercials.

We've had Galesburg city council elections decided by a coin toss when there was a tie. Before the 2000 election one United States senatorial candidate from Missouri died in a plane crash. There are many reasons why someone wins a contest besides being the fastest or the best.

If medals and recognition are given for a life of hard work and persistence, we can all relate to Australian skater Steven Bradbury, who has skated in the Olympics since 1992 and has won other medals along with suffering serious injuries. Those who know him say he deserved his gold medal. Now at the end of his skating career, Bradbury said, "I'll take it as the last decade of the hard slog that I've put in and a reward for the effort." Besides, he was the only one left standing. There's a lot to be said for that.

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Feb 22, 2002