

Nagano - 1998

Tales from Olympia - Unpublished

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This was the one I wasn't going to go too. Japan - much too far away. The other side of the world. Ridiculously far. But the next chapter had to unfold, regardless of where it was. The trip to the Winter Olympics was no longer just a spur of the moment adventure. It has now become a pilgrimage - a trip bigger than anything I can control. In fact, it's more of a ride; rough at times, but the hands of fate always seem to show up (the ones with the five rings on their fingers).

Yes, the Olympics are important, but not the most important thing in my life.

Thursday, February 12, 1998 - 9:00 am

I am in a relationship. I live for more than myself, and therefore do not have the luxury of ejecting into faraway lands, nor the desire when faced with circumstances as crucial as cancer surgery for my girlfriend's father. Charlie had been diagnosed with prostate cancer a few weeks before and surgery day fell on the very morning that I had anticipated leaving. After a few hours the previous weekend of coming to terms with my priorities, the choice was clear. I would not go to Japan. Though this was tragically disappointing, it was an easy and obvious choice. Still, if all went well, there was always the outside chance that I could possibly leave a day later, but only under the best of circumstances. Not worth thinking about on this day.

We spent the day at Emory Hospital with Millie, Charlie's girlfriend. Charlie doesn't give up much, but his daughter knows what he's feeling, and I've picked up a lot of signals myself. He was glad we were there, and that truly meant more than another Olympics. When he came out of surgery in the late afternoon, the doctor shared his observations: Charlie had done great, and the surgery appeared to be a total success. He crawled out of the anesthesia, happy to see us and glad it was over. And I was glad I was there with Suzanne.

"What would you like from Japan?", I dared ask. "Ah, get me a shirt". Now I had a pilgrimage with a mission.

The stage had already been set - I just didn't know if I would be on it. Just as had been the case in previous Olympics, things seemed to be coming together. My old boss, Terrence - now employed by the IOC - had gotten us a room at the Matsushiro Royale Hotel just south of Nagano. Greg, Mike and Travis would be fellow pilgrims on this adventure. Travis and Mike had left the day before; Greg would come with me. Unfortunately, on Friday, the flights to Tokyo looked horrible. There were still so many things that could go wrong.

Friday, February 13, 1998 - 5:30 am

This is the kind of trip that is so long, that its better to think of it as several little trips tied together. We were, after all, going to the other side of the planet. And as it turned out, we created our own event: The hurdles. I picked Greg up in time to slip out ahead of a Friday morning rush hour through a still dark Atlanta. We cruised past the airport and on to our nearby employee parking lot. Unfortunately, Greg forgot his airline Identification, necessitating some heated negotiations with the attendants that (rightfully) were prohibiting our access. Fortunately, we were “cleared for parking”. Hurdle number one was history.

6:15 am

The employee bus dropped us at the terminal with plenty of time to spare before our 7:30 flight. The flight to LAX looked good. But alas, it was then that I noticed that Greg had opted for a denim shirt that day - a non rev no-no for our conservative southern airline. This, of course, necessitated the acquisition of slightly more formal attire if we were to ever get off the ground. With a standard of resourcefulness that only Greg can muster during these needlessly stressful moments, he successfully managed to commandeer a crisp white dress shirt from a nearby pilot lounge and make a “quick-change” just as the boarding began. Hurdle number two was history.

7:20 am

I was cleared from the standby list and my name was called. So were many others. But what about Greg? Why hadn't they called his name? I cautiously approached the gate and made an inquiry. A few tense moments passed before the gate agent said, “Oh, here it is”. He had printed Greg's boarding pass several moments before, but had failed to call his name. But we were on our way, cleared for departure, clearing hurdle number three.

“You do know the deal” said the agent at the jetway. Greg seemed perplexed. Sure, he thought . . . a backpack with a sleeping bag would certainly fit in the overhead. Right?

Wrong. But we could still gate check the bag, and get on the flight. Hurdle number four cleared, and we were still on the ground.

7:30 am

But we did make it off the ground. Our ancient Lockheed 1011 rattled its way into the sky, chattering and shaking with the ghosts of commercial aviation nearly falling from the ceiling. The L-10 is our oldest plane. They stopped making them two decades ago. Most of them are rotting in an Arizona Dessert. Our L1011's are unique in that they are rotting while they still fly. But we were off the ground surprisingly on time.

10:20 - pacific standard time - Los Angeles

And believe it or not, we arrived on time. Hurdle number five swiftly cleared. With an hour and 20 minutes to get our bags and find our way through LAX to the international terminal, we couldn't help but be pleased.

10:40am

It's like "Let's make a deal". Hundreds of us wait next to a hulking dragon of crawling sheet metal spines and watch with hope as the rubber curtain parts and we see if we "win" our bags. After about 20 minutes, I'm happy to say that we won a backpack, with Greg's clothes in it. Hurdle number six gone. And onward to the International terminal.

11:00am

All Nippon Airlines. With a meek request to a distant friend, I had the good fortune of securing authority to travel on this venerable airline of the rising sun. Little did I know that they would provide us with two confirmed business class tickets on their massive 747-400 to the far side of the earth. Hurdle number seven cleared, and so much easier than I thought. A few phone calls before our great leap across the biggest of ponds, and it was time for us to board.

11:45am

When we walked on, two massive reclining leather seats awaited us. This was the beginning of our cultural experience. We are both "90's" men, attracted to the strength and beauty of a woman of integrity, ambition and independence. Surely we would not fall for the seductive anachronism of formalized subservience, the ever present bowing and smiling and crisp pinstriped Asian beauty, the perfection, the rapture, the wine, the warmth, the womb in the sky that was our flight. . . . where was I.

4:10p - Tokyo Japan

Ten hours in the sky can't be good for your body. Your feet get so big they barely fit "under the seat in front of you". It was now 2:00 am Atlanta time. I decided to change my watch, while Greg kept his the same. This was a ridiculous time change for anyone, but we were reasonably prepared to take on more hurdles. Narita airport is massive. We followed the crowd through customs relatively quickly, and got to another baggage belt. This time it was pretty quick. Another hurdle gone (#8).

Money. We needed money, but what was it here? I could use my cash card, but how many thousands of yen was \$300? I didn't want to accidentally take out \$3000. I also feared I could end up with \$3 if I screwed up the zeros. I spun the

wheel and came away with 30,000 yen. The symbol for a yen is a capital Y being stabbed to death.

4:45 pm

Now we were moving into completely uncharted territory: trains. And not just any trains, BULLET trains. After about a half-hour of haggling out the most inexpensive of ways to get to Nagano, we managed to extract a reasonable combination of fares from the mono-literate Japanese train people. Now was the time to learn that most important of words: Oragoto (Thank You). Just like “Toosin tak”, it took a bit of time to get this into long term memory, but we did it, and its a good thing, because we would really need it over the next most arduous hours of our journey.

In the back of my mind, I had doubts that we would get as far as we did. Our stamina was beginning to come into play however, and we would have to keep up the drive to the bed that we knew was waiting somewhere in Nagano. And now, just in time, we began to see the “angels of the Olympics” as we eventually called them. Who are these people? They are the ones who carry you through the bumps in the road on the way to the flame. They are part of the pilgrimage, and that is why I kept a healthy supply of pins with me.

We were somewhere in the bowels of the Tokyo subway system when we met a wonderful woman who re-assured us that we were headed in the right direction. How could we be sure that our tickets were the right ones? We just didn’t know, at least not without our first angel to smile and say “this is right”.

6:55 pm

We rolled into the center of Tokyo with about 15 minutes to get tickets and get to our bullet train. Which train were we looking for? The BULLET train. I loved saying that.

The massive terminal was full of angels. Rare Caucasian faces in a sea of Asians could only be going to one destination, and as we wandered through the circuitous corridors, random smiling faces would point the way without solicitation. “Shinkansan line” is what we wanted, and everyone knew it. The usually stoic Tokyo commuters parted and pointed our way to the flame.

We got our tickets and found our bullet train. We shot out of Tokyo with a Samurai bang.

7:30 pm

In Japan, you need your ticket to *get off* the train. Its very disorienting, considering that most American’s lose track of their tickets once they’ve been punched. When

the conductor came by for us, Greg was sadly missing one of his tickets (apparently we needed two tickets). One of the bullet train “flight attendants” graciously served as our next angel, translating the circumstances of the missing ticket to the satisfaction of the conductor. After saying the same thing many many times, the conductor agreed to assist us with our escape from the train station on arrival.

8:30 pm

This was not uneventful. The conductor was no where to be found immediately after our arrival, but eventually he did turn up. And after much unforeseen congestion at the station exit, we were free to go, but not without the help of our third angel, a fluently Japanese Australian named Shawna who came to our rescue and set us comfortably in a cab to the Matsushiro Royale Hotel in the midst of the central Nagano bustle. And it was a bustle, with banners and scalpers flapping in the Olympic winds all around us.

9:30 pm

We were in the Olympic town and it was obvious. People walked the streets with flags unfurled, color, banners, logos, tents, pins and Coca-Cola - the sounds of the Olympics everywhere we looked.

They drive on the left in Japan. They also drive very slowly and politely. This was not an Atlanta rush hour. I immediately felt as though we had landed on a planet with a higher form of life.

10:00 pm

The hotel stood solitary at the southern edge of Nagano City. It was obviously the only hotel around. I did not have a good feeling about this, for some reason. Maybe it was because we had traveled so far by this point and leaped so many hurdles. Sure enough, the desk clerk told me there was no room for me. Greg went over to a chair to put his head in his hands and sulk. The clerk’s explanation was barely intelligible, his alternatives unacceptable. It wasn’t until I called Terrence on his Cell phone that it all became clear. My room was downtown - it had been changed. The clerk suddenly clued in that I was “Meester Donovan”. “You were not supposed to come in tonight. They told me you not come tonight”.

“Yeah, well here I am”, I said. “Mr. Pewther take your room downtown because you not supposed to come in tonight”. Mr. Pewther, Mike, had stolen my room, that bastard! I called him and said we were on our way. We were going to the Mielpark Hotel

11:30pm

Suddenly we were back at the Nagano train station. We had been up for a solid 26 hours and we needed some rest. Mike and Travis were tucked snugly into our room. Fortunately, the hotel was palatial, and the accommodations spacious enough for all four of us. We had made it. We were so wired we couldn't sleep, as if our instincts were telling us that sleep would kill and we had to keep moving. We had left Friday Morning. It was now late Saturday night.

I could feel my heart beating. Slowly, eventually, we drifted off to sleep in a Japanese dreamland

9:15am - Sunday - February 15

I felt fine. We all felt fine. A light snow was falling outside, and we were awake and alive in Japan, ready to thrive in the spiritual center of the world. Travis, Mike, Greg and I found our way to breakfast and set about planning our day. With four people, a trip can be somewhat hazardous. Usually, four people means two couples, with each one exerting bipolar pressure on the other, making consensus somewhat reachable. With four non-coupled people, such agreement is considerably more challenging, as Travis and Mike had experienced on their previous day with some other sojourners, who had since returned to Tokyo in relative failure.

We were fortunate in that, for the most part, all of us shared the same degree of comfort with the unknown. One needs a good dose of tolerance, resilience and "laid-back-ness" in these situations. We were all prepared to go with the flow on things, and that proved to be one of the greatest contributors to our success.

The agreed upon plan: we would complete the formal part of our pilgrimage and head up the hill to the Zenkoji Temple. We would be back by early afternoon to catch the bus to bobsledding.

11:00am

We figured the coins for the bus and weaved our way up the ever-narrowing streets to the hill on which the temple sat. We had seen the temple for many days leading up to our arrival. This was the focal point of Games, and therefore -for these two weeks - all of humanity. The bus dropped us at the base of the final ascent, and we continued on through the street markets with the largest apples in the world.

It is a Buddhist temple of ancient arced wood laced with intricate sculpture. Moments after our arrival, the high priestess appeared on our left and began her slow walk up through the main part of the temple. We had no clue what was going on, and it was only after the completion of our trip that I learned what this was all about. The ceremony involved a blessing of the pilgrims who had come to visit from faraway lands. I had halfway joked about the "pilgrimage" that I had come to adopt every four years, but this was no joke. In fact, this somber ritual demanded the utmost respect from all who witnessed it, and especially those who took part.

Mike, Greg, Travis and I found our position to be right in line with the path of the priestess. We dropped to our knees, bowed our heads and felt the soft brush of the pearls across our heads, as she made her way past us, blessing our arrival with the quiet but awe-inspiring power of Buddha.

It may have taken us 24 hours to get there, but we were right on time.

The grounds of the temple are dreamlike, as if everything is exactly where it is meant to be, and always has been. The city fades into the background as the incense wafts on the chilly air, and the gong sounds with the snap of a rope.

But sure enough, the western world literally peers over the parted trees in the form of the CBS studios, a joke of a plywood building painted chocolate brown to match. Only here could one witness the accidental beheading of a Bonsai tree by a camera boom. Time to go.

12:15pm

It was a quicker ride back, and soon we were at the bus stop and ready to board. Scalping is legal in Japan, so a hearty contingent of multicultural scalpers could be found at the train station every day, hawking tickets for outrageous sums of yen. We would be smart, we thought, and get our Bobsledding tickets up at the venue. We were going to a place called “Spiral” - named after the newly constructed highway that our bus traversed - but not before we had the “luxury” of several sumo wrestler’s asses in our face in the bus next to us. It was a bizarre sight, and worthy of a picture (but only because it’s bizarre). Ironically, all four of us had shared our picture taking to ensure that we would minimize duplicates. Funny how we ended up with three pictures of the infamous “bus full of asses.”

Spiral actually does “spiral”. The mountain itself is apparently so steep that the road goes around in big circles, a giant concrete slinky heading up to Igogen, the Bobsled venue.

1:15pm

We had a problem. When we arrived, we found out that no tickets were sold at the venue. Fortunately, Travis was prepared. Not only had he had someone craft the words “I need tickets” on a piece of paper in Japanese, he also learned how to say it in Japanese without the least bit of self-consciousness. This was going to be one of those times where our Buddhist blessing would pay off. “Domoo Ticketo Heo” or something like that, was what we said. While Greg and Mike planted themselves at the main entrance, Travis and I worked the bus arrival point, positioning ourselves just inside the ruffled feathers of the professional scalpers. First we got one for face value. Then another. Then Greg got one handed to him for free. Then one more for just below face, and we were in. WE WERE IN! It was time to bobsled.

3:00pm

It hadn't changed. Bobsledding is the best event because it is truly a festival of nations, from Jamaica to Ireland to Monaco, to Taipei. Swiss, Australian, British, Virgin Islands. And all along the course we would talk to people. We met people from all over the world, sharing our nervous laughter as a parade of international lunatics barreled down the path of sheer ice within inches of our American flags in their brightly colored BULLET TRAINS (sorry, had to say it again).

Halfway down the run, one first hears the "Bob on track", then the rumble, then the roar, then the laughter as the thing goes by with a blur in a blink.

During the festivities, we met exotic dancers from Vancouver, Navy contingents stationed in the Orient, a pair of women from Motown, and lots of Japanese people who wanted to take our picture with the American flag. Funny how this happened. We were such novelties in this part of the world that we soon took on the demeanor of the yawning lion at the zoo. Yeah sure, you can take our picture.

5:10pm

But it was cold up there on the mountain, and after the first run, we were more than ready to head back. The line to the bus was a long one, but we had plenty of people to pass the time with. And soon we were on our bus, rolling down the spiral and back to our hotel in the heart of Nagano City.

7:20pm

There was no doubt that we had to keep moving or we would collapse. After all, it was now after 3:00am Eastern Time. We had to push ourselves.

We had dinner at the Kirin Beer pub, probably the cleanest version of a pub I'd ever seen. In fact, not really "pub-ish" enough to be considered one. This is where we learned that the Japanese don't like to be tipped. Fine with us. The locals craned their necks to view the overhead TV's and watch one of their countryman receive the gold at the festival square, just a few hundred yards from our table.

The Japanese National Anthem is easily the most depressing string of musical notes I have ever heard. You'd think they wrote it right after the bomb dropped. They need a new one.

9:00pm

We had gotten some intelligence information that led us to a large, apparently smoky restaurant overlooking Chuo Street, the "Storgata" of these games. The smoke turned out to be steam from the giant Mongolian Barbecue being tended by a blade-wielding samurai of gastronomy. This was a popular place with the

accredited “in” people. We were simply pilgrims, and thus, we lacked the plastic document filled lanyards that mark the Olympic caste system.

The beer. Kirin beer from the tap, was as expected. Fresh, cold, delicious, with no American side effects. Why can't we make beer like this at home? We had a couple of pitchers and pushed onward.

10:10pm

We slipped out and headed further up the road toward the temple. We didn't have any recommendations at this point. To our right, we noticed one of those gaping doors that leads downward, often into decadence. A swath of pink light escaped, inviting us down. We went in too quickly to let maturity overcome curiosity, thinking that we could possibly run into some swaying trio of disease carrying transvestites. Fortunately we did not.

It was only a trio Japanese college girls from Rutgers. Miko sat with me at the bar and explained the constant pressure that distinguishes the Japanese from the American woman. “They have so much power” she said. “Power”, was actually the closest word she could find to mean freedom. Freedom to not get married, to not have children, to not spend their life serving their man. Her experience in the U.S. had given her a keen sense of the powerlessness that women have in the Japanese culture.

I had heard of the trend toward independence among many Japanese woman, but its clear that those who do venture beyond the boundaries of traditional culture are still considered rebels, stigmatized by their society and pressured to conform. Though western cultures have formally blessed the empowerment of women, we are only at the next stage, where the pressure and stigma is simply covert. And even worse, it comes from all directions.

Conversely, as Miko put it, the pressure is obvious and much more in the forefront of consciousness of most every Japanese woman. Hard to say whether its easier to deal with an enemy you can see versus the guerrilla that ambushes the better half of western civilization. Miko's struggle is not all that different, just more obvious.

10:40pm

Greg and Mike had had enough. That left Travis and I still standing, but we were going to fix that.

We ventured further up the road, temple bound, to the Pink Elephant. Small, crowded and uncomfortable, we wouldn't have stayed more than a few minutes if we hadn't been fortunate enough to share a table with a few other people. It turned out to be a great table too, in fact one of only two in the establishment, with a people watching vantage point that could not be beat. We sat with Elizabeth and

Lawana, a couple of American “event marketeers” from Washington D.C. representing their 2012 Olympic bid.

Elizabeth surveyed the crushing crowd with contempt. These, she said, were the novice visitors, waving their credentials around as if they were the most important of VIPs. Travis was able to articulate this feeling with perfection to Elizabeth’s satisfaction. I was growing less and less articulate. From where we were, it was like watching an overly crowded fish tank at feeding time in the comfort of our living room.

We also had the benefit of “being approached” by various networked friends, including the head driver of the four-man Hungarian Bobsled team, various members of the Salt Lake City Contingent, and broadcast personnel from TNT. But soon it was time to move on.

11:30pm

Our next stop was a weak imitation of a New York Pizza joint. There were only a few people remaining, but still enough for a party. Travis, who had grown fixated on Olympic pins - a common and highly contagious disease that causes whirligig eyes - spotted a pin festooned Susan McDermott of Coca-Cola, and the trading began.

I had had it with pins. This whole pin thing is undeniably a fetish, praying on people’s strange obsession with small shiny objects that have corporate logos on them. For me, pins provided an excellent form of alternate currency, always handy for getting or rewarding a favor, and we needed plenty of them along the way. But Travis had been sucked into the depths of pinhead possession, and I could only look on with sympathy.

Susan worked on the media for Coke. I think she said a lot of important things but I don’t remember any of it. We left after one beer. The Hungarian Bobsled driver had told us to seek out the Italian house, and we were not to be denied.

12:15 am

Still, we were nearing the end of the trail. The streets were beginning to empty.

We spotted a sign down one narrow street that said something like “Casa Italia - this way”. When we got in there, all that remained was one lone Italian. And some day I’m going to remember his name. He stood at the entrance, welcoming us as if the place was still teeming with hot-blooded Latins. The effects were obvious - a party had taken place.

He offered us a beer and invited us back for the next evening’s festivities. We talked of Italy as if we had just gotten off the boat. The way we were walking at this point, he probably thought we were still on the boat. After a short time, we said “grazie” and we were on our way.

12:40 am

We were on our way back when one final door beckoned. Actually, it was a toilet that beckoned, but there happened to be a bar built around it. And before we knew it, we were having still another conversation, this time with a male Lithuanian downhiller, a female Australian luger, and a rabid New Jersey Devils fan from somewhere off the Garden State Parkway. The night ended with us talking to a couple of insecure German girls, one of which was being heavily and somewhat obnoxiously pursued by a Romanian bobsledder. But we did not stay long enough to care.

1:30 am

Out on the street, Travis and I experienced a slight disagreement on the direction back to the Mielpark hotel. Accordingly, we took different paths home. My route home was considerably more scenic, although I don't have an exact recollection of all the scenes. He was already asleep when I arrived. They left me a bed, and soon I was in my sweats and drifting away in the land of the rising sun.

The Olympics had traveled from a city that had once been destroyed by war to a country that had more recently been destroyed by bigger war. Both Atlanta and Japan, had demonstrated a resurrection of the psyche; coming to terms with past evils and rebuilding the collective identity as they did their infrastructure. Based on their individual experiences, one can easily make the case that strength comes from failure; that the most profound state of self-reflection unfolds as a society or an individual ascends from the depths of utter destruction.

The loss of a civilization presents a clean slate, and an even greater need to create a better place, a more civilized being - a gentler, wiser and morally advanced society. It is the "macro" version of the life force, reaching to greater heights and higher standards. Failure makes hubris impossible, at least in the short term.

Advanced civilization need not have anything to do with technology and its related comforts. The simple state of living in harmony is in itself the best example of advancement that any people can hope to attain. Who is to say that the most primitive tribes are less advanced if they are more happy? Isn't happiness the true goal?

But the conflict arises out of the violent collision of individual vs. collective needs. Ours is a mosaic of cultures overwhelmed by the land rush of individualism. Theirs is a mountainous island of individuals tightly bound by a homogeneous culture. And woven through their culture are shared "civilities" that grant a quiet, unthreatening respect to every human being, as part of the human race.

But when one starts to socially transcend their fellow humans this respect begins to wane. For better or worse, there is no word for “I” in the Japanese language. Where Americans achieve honor by a celebration of their individual success, Japanese achieve honor by avoiding the shame of individual failure. Two different sides of the same planet.

As Miko, our friend from Rutgers, spoke of the stigma of independence, she sketched out her desire to have the same “individualism” of her western counterparts. Clearly, the great danger of homogeneity is the death it brings to innovation. Only in America are the powerful forces of orthodox innovation fully unleashed. It is the incomparable diversity of people and their ideas that has turned our melting pot into a gold mine. But that’s only half the answer. We are not always the best at making things better.

And thus, its fare to say that nearly every meaningful invention of our modern day society was invented by Americans and perfected by Japanese. Together, we make an excellent team.

Monday, February 1998 - 8:30am

This time we slept. I couldn’t quite understand the complete lack of jet lag at this point. It could only be attributed to adrenaline. Mike and Greg returned with some Japanese egg McMuffins, and after an invigorating shower, we were ready to start our trek to the next event.

9:45am

We had just enough time to take a quick stroll into the center of town before we were to catch the bus up to Hakuba. We got a break from the hordes of scalpers stationed on the bus station overpass and got some tickets to the Woman’s downhill for face value. Then through the square and up the road to see what every place looked like with sober eyes.

10:30am

The bus to Hakuba was nice and spacious. We had tickets in hand and no worries this time, and that was a good thing because this was a bit of a ride. 90 minutes through mountain passes, tunnels and into the heart of the “Japanese Alps”. Only the swept up roofs of Asian architecture under the blankets of snow distinguished this beautiful country from Appalachia, the Rockies, or any other string of cabins along a mountain stream. It was a rare sunny day in the mountains, and we had caught it just right.

12:00noon

The bus entered a high valley opening up to a range of “Olympic” sculpted mountains. Several ski runs and two massive ski jumps could be seen in the distance. The bus parked in a clearing and we hiked the requisite two miles toward the mountain that would host the Women’s downhill portion of the combined event. This was the hike we needed to shake all the cobwebs loose from the previous night, and it seemed to work.

1:00pm

There was a twinge of doubt when we finally made it to the entrance. It appeared as though our tickets were for the event that had just been completed, but in fact, they were good for the day and we were waved in. A temporary stadium had been erected at the finish of the run, but most of the people were scattered along the hillside leading up to the mountain. Greg, Travis and I decided to begin climbing.

1:30pm

We broke a sweat, and then nearly broke our necks as the hill steepened, the paths deteriorated, and our boots lost their grip. Mine especially, had seen their best days, cracking open in the sole and letting in the dampness of the melting snow. But we made it as far as we could, and got a good vantage point of the women as they came barreling down the mountain, faster than anything we could grasp from watching on TV. In fact, so fast, that the event was nearly over by the time we got up there. Due to the many delays that had occurred over the last few days (too many answered prayers for too much snow), the organizers had elected to cram the women’s downhill, and the downhill portion of the combined event into one day. This meant they were starting each woman before the one proceeding them had made it down the mountain.

One after another they plummeted past us, and before we knew it, the event was over.

3:00pm

But at least we got what we came for. We caught up with Mike at the bottom of the hill and, after a little souvenir shopping, began the trek back to the bus.

4:00pm

It was still a sunny day in the mountains, but a mist seemed to fall over the distant ski jump as it passed out of sight. We had talked about trying to get in to see a

hockey game that night, but now we were finally starting to feel the fatigue. The hot bath was waiting.

5:30pm

Back in the hotel. Our rooms came fully equipped with “Yakutas”, Japanese bathrobes for those transitions between hot bath and the real world. We all looked pretty spiffy in them.

Travis stayed behind as we went up to the glass enclosed top floor, and after a failed attempt by Mike and Greg to convince me that kissing the floor was some kind of required Japanese “pre-bathing” ritual, we were in the bath. One wall was all window, overlooking the city of Nagano and the other venues in the distance.

The American version of the hot bath almost always has loud and powerful streams of bubbles. Jets of percolating, torrential steaming water bearing down on your muscles in a haphazard manner as the whir of the motors wipes out conversation. But this bath was all about peace. No motors, jets or bubbles; the water does the work all by itself. The challenge is to sit quietly and let the outer peace soak in. It wasn't hard.

Mike took a couple of classic “Three guys from America after the hot Japanese bath” pictures. Time for a nap.

7:30pm

But I still couldn't sleep. We were trying to watch CNN, but they had dubbed it all in Japanese. A plane had crashed the night before in Taiwan

8:00pm

Time to begin our last night on the town, and from the way we were feeling, it would be nothing like the night before. Tonight we would eat the Mongolian Beef. We headed up our favorite street and found the steaming environs. From watching the other customers, eating here seemed to be a test of skill. It was all you could eat, with one important condition. You had to be able to get all your food into one bowl. The frozen cylinders of Pork, Lamb, Beef and Mutton could be assembled like a house of cards as high as you could balance it. Then, as you made it to the front of the line, the cook would pour it all out on to the sizzling “grill” - a giant scorching round slab of iron about six inches thick and three feet in diameter. Our food shrunk before our very eyes, but not too much fortunately. It was a great meal, for only about six hundred yen. If you find the right establishments, a little yen goes a long way.

8:50pm

Mike struck up a conversation with a few of the Salt Lake City television reporters who were visiting on assignment. In fact, there were lots of Salt Lake people floating around. The only thing they share with Japan, so far, is homogeneity.

9:30pm

The restaurant was far from running out of steam, but we had. We took a short walk up to the plaza where they do the medal ceremonies. Through the glass of one of the media booths, there was Susan McDermott hard at work. We then slipped into the Coca-Cola pavilion to buy some merchandise since our time was running short. Unfortunately, Travis got stuck in a catatonic pin freeze - another one. So as we waited, we watched the parade of visitors up and down the block. At one point, a few giggly Japanese teenage girls stopped Mike for an interview. He was, after all, the tallest, and the one with the goofy cowboy hat, thus announcing, I am a goofy tall American. The survey questions seemed to be the kind one might ask if they were planning another Olympics. I would not be surprised to see Mike's answers surfacing in Salt Lake.

10:00pm

We were tired, it was dark and cold, and my feet were wet again. That would do it. Travis still had some youth to get out of his system. The rest of us headed back, and on this night, I was asleep in minutes.

Tuesday February 17 - 8:30am

All through our stay, there was that very slight nagging possibility that we would have to pay for this spectacular hotel. Had Terrence had the chance to put me under the IOC umbrella with the rest of the "royal" Olympic Family? I couldn't be absolutely certain.

But then, when I did check us out, they smiled, waved and said as best as their English would let them, "its all taken care of".

Now we just had to get home. But first, the obligatory shopping. Travis and I covered many of the same streets we had two nights before, this time in the overcast light of day. In every store we entered, we were greeted by unfathomable politeness from the store owners as they bowed and assisted us. "Origato, origato" is all we could say. We got the stuff we needed, and yes, even a few pins to take in and give out. We would meet Mike and Greg at the station.

11:30am

Everything packed, tickets in hand (which we were smart enough to purchase the night before), we bid farewell the always-raucous train station and found our bullet

train. This was one of the new ones built especially for the Olympics, and suddenly we were moving faster than any of us had ever moved without flying. Fast enough to blast through a mountain and out of the valley of Nagano.

1:00pm - Tokyo

It felt like we'd been gone for a week. Travis, Greg and I saved a few hundred yen and took the local while the rich and famous boarded the faster train to Narita. Kristi Yamaguchi was one of those rich and famous, but still nice enough to pose with Travis for a picture.

2:30pm

Tokyo is a city that goes on forever. Now that we could see it in the day, the vastness of it all was absolutely amazing, not so much in the view but in the realization that a population packed so densely would have no choice but to *find* new levels of civility. And they appeared to have done it. And strangely, I felt perfectly comfortable. Our train rolled into Narita on time. Now to get on a flight.

4:30pm

First, I had to make my quick change, opting for the casual travel clothes for the duration of the train rides. Except for the fact that its forty miles away from the city it serves, the airport was extremely user friendly, and when I checked in, I was immediately cleared. The others ahead of me had already taken the last Japanese train ride - this one going across the massive tarmac of what probably is the largest airport ever built.

6:00pm

Mike had taken a flight to Los Angeles, so it was just Greg, Travis and I waiting to board our Delta flight to Portland Oregon. We had some time, and spent much of it chatting with a couple of mind boggled visitors from Salt Lake. They had caught the Olympic fever and couldn't wait to get home and tell everyone how great it was. It reminded me of my days in Salt Lake, chaperoning timid and innocent Mormon women to hotbeds of sin like San Francisco and New Orleans. The majority were content to lock themselves in their hotel rooms, but for those with enough courage to be open to diversity, they would never forget it. It was an enlightening experience.

6:25pm

Greg and I watched a giant Air New Zealand 747 push back from the gate and turn slowly toward the runways. Out on the tarmac, hundreds of yards away, dwarfed

by the giant aircraft, there stood a woman, prim and tiny in shorts with a cap, guiding the behemoth with her outstretched arms. Ramp workers take on many of the gestures of orchestra conductors, and this woman was certainly a maestro.

The sun was just setting behind the other terminal building as the jet lined up with the taxi -way. Her hands stayed aloft in the fading light while the tug uncoupled from the nose wheel. The equipment moved from the stage, leaving just her and the monster. She lowered her hands.

And then in typical Japanese fashion, she bowed, wishing the aircraft a safe trip across the ocean.

6:50pm

Our MD11 climbed into the Japanese night, back toward the other side of the world, with 200 mile per hour tail winds to push us along. We were already out of the country when we got on the plane, back to our version of civilization, our concept of “service”, but more than happy to be heading home. We would eat and drink until we passed out.

9:30am - Tuesday, February 17, 1998 - Portland, Oregon

Only six hours later and we were in Portland. And then a few hours more, and we were upgraded and on the nonstop to Atlanta. We had cleared all the hurdles coming home with relative ease.

8:30 pm - Atlanta

And that just shows you how joyously uneventful the return from Japan turned out to be. We floated easily into Atlanta, I got the car while Greg got the bags, and soon he was home, and then so was I.

We had succeeded, with the help of the angels and our own perseverance. Although I’m somewhat ashamed to admit it, I was not surprised. First Calgary, then Lillhammer, and now Nagano. How could I be surprised? It was every bit the adventure I expected.

When I walked in the door, I got a big hug from Suzanne. She had missed me. And a few days later, I completed my mission.

Charlie looks great in his new shirt.