



By Caryn Sullivan

## **THE OLYMPICS: THE THRILL OF FAMILY-FRIENDLY TV, IN CONTRAST TO THE AGONY OF REGULAR PROGRAMMING**

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As summer comes to a halt, so does the best TV entertainment I've seen in years. The Olympics coverage is family-friendly reality TV, complete with accusations about the Chinese fudging on gymnasts' ages and breath-taking athleticism in too many sports to mention.

For a couple of weeks, it's been refreshing to watch something on TV with my athletic teen-age daughter that doesn't make one or both of us squirm with discomfort. I'm reminded of the good old days (when I was her age) and my family would gather in front of the tube for Sunday night's Wonderful World of Disney, when the flying monkeys on the Wizard of Oz were the most disturbing image displayed on the screen.

Those days are gone. Other than Fox's "American Idol," the Food Network's "Iron Chef America" or the Discovery Channel's "MythBusters," there are few options we enjoy watching together. While the Olympics programming is loaded with drama, it's real and it's generally rated PG (notwithstanding the beach volleyball my husband has followed so closely). It's not another grotesquely graphic CSI show. It's not Grey's Anatomy, which began with clever story lines but eventually focused so much on the cast members' "anatomy" that I wondered whether we were still in primetime.

I'm delighted that for a few weeks my daughter has watched exceptional international athletes compete, instead of tuning in to watch Tyra Banks, host of America's Next Top Model, coach young gals on how to compete for the cover of Seventeen Magazine. It's been refreshing to have media attention shifted from important stories like who gets the first photos of the out-of-wedlock Jolie-Pitt twins; whether Lindsay Lohan prefers girls or boys; and whether the father of 17-year-old Jamie Lynn Spears' newborn was unfaithful during her pregnancy, to accomplishments of young women like gymnasts Shawn Johnson and Nastia Lukin, the role models I'd choose for my daughter.

The rich personal stories of the Olympic athletes and their families are as inspiring as the competition. There is much more to the Michael Phelps story than his shattering Mark Spitz's record and consuming an astonishing number of calories. It's hard not to notice the presence of his mom and sisters in Beijing but the glaring absence of a father to share his historic accomplishments with him. I'm struck by the way Johnson's parents took out three mortgages to pay for their daughter's gymnastics training but told her she could quit anytime she wanted. I love how her persistent optimism and exceptional talent carried Johnson to a gold medal in her final event.

Yet for many, the Olympic experience is about coping with disappointments as much as it's about celebrating success. It's instructive to watch athletes fail to overcome the powerful stressors of international competition, like our female gymnasts who waited so long to perform they lost their concentration. As one after another stepped over the line

on the floor-exercise competition. I could feel the gold medal slipping through their fingers. We all got a lesson in how not to behave from the Swedish wrestler who cast off his bronze medal because he wanted only a gold. And no one was more shocked (or humbled) than the U.S. sprinters when both the men's and women's teams dropped the batons during the relays, rendering them medal-less for the first time in Olympics history. And as fabulous as the Michael Phelps story is, what about all the untold stories of athletes who worked so hard but have been overshadowed by his historic accomplishments?

There are valuable life lessons to be gleaned from the hours spent watching others strive to achieve their dreams. While I view the Olympic competitions as a metaphor for life, my daughter sees them strictly as something fun to watch. Either way, they've provided great entertainment that's otherwise lacking on TV and given us something we can enjoy together in the waning days of summer.

Now for the convention coverage...

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