

History Repeated

Living a parallel existence nearly three decades apart, women ski jumpers have something in common with women distance runners. Obviously, the commonalities are not the physical aspects of their events; they could not be more different. But both sets of athletes know what it's like to be discriminated against by their international governing bodies.

Both know what it's like to watch an Olympics (or two or three) go by without an opportunity to compete, no matter if you're the best in the world. Both wondered if they would have an Olympic opportunity in their relatively short athletic lifetimes.

Back in 2005, at the LA84 Foundation, we honored a young, outstanding ski jumper, Abby Hughes, at our National Women and Girls in Sports Day awards luncheon. She was very shy and modest, but in her few words she spoke volumes by stating that she wished she would be allowed to ski jump in the Olympics. My heart went out to her on the spot. Those words echoed my own back in 1974 after my first marathon world record, and again in 1975 after my second record.

As a 1500-meter runner, I would have had a clear path of opportunity available to me that led from a national championships, to an Olympic Trials and onto the Olympic team. In reality, this only occurred as of 1972. It was shocking to me at the time that this was the latest and longest event available to women runners.

I thought then that the situation could be remedied with lobbying, a letter-writing campaign or a petition-signing drive. I was naive beyond imagination. It was not to be, and the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games passed me by.

In 1979, my husband and I were founding members of an organization called the International Runners Committee, sponsored by Nike, created for lobbying purposes to seek the inclusion of the marathon, 5000- and 10,000-meter events into the Olympic Games. The fight was long and hard, and ultimately successful.

In 2006, the vice-president of the Women's Ski Jumping Foundation, Peter Jerome, walked into the LA84 Foundation, seeking advice and hopefully support for his daughter and her teammates to move their event forward onto the Olympic scene. He met with the president of LA84, Anita De Frantz, due to her position within the Olympic Committee.

She then introduced him to me as the person who had navigated this path before. I shared with him the story of how the women's distance events came into the Olympic Games, and about our battle for the marathon, 5000- and 10,000-meter races. I told him about the international class-action lawsuit against the IOC and related entities.

A year later, in September 2007, I was a guest in Park City, Utah, to witness an international competition of women ski jumpers – and, surprisingly to me, without snow. This suited me perfectly. I favor fine-weather competition like the Southern California climate I come from.

I tried to describe to my incredulous running friends that competitors can ski jump in warm weather on a hill covered with what looks like hundreds of hula skirts laid out in overlapping patterns, like shingles on a roof.

I made sure to experience every vantage point – from the bottom, side and top. I sat on the pole the jumpers launch themselves from, and it seemed to me like launching yourself out of an airplane. I watched from the sides, where the judges stand and could see jumpers literally in flight. I watched near that point where the coaches stand as athletes fly overhead. I watched from the bottom to see the incredible landings, where one fall could end a career. This sport requires helmets and padded gear for good reasons. My admiration for the jumpers grew. They are courageous and brave athletes, and they deserved the world stage.

In Park City, Peter Jerome introduced me to Deedee Corradini, former mayor of Salt Lake City who was instrumental in gaining the Winter Olympics for Utah in 2002. As president of the Women’s Ski Jumping Foundation, she spearheaded the women’s movement to gain inclusion in the Olympics. I gave interviews to the press on the jumpers’ behalf.

Lindsey Van, 2010 world ski jumping champion, had been working toward the Olympics since she was 12. She had been the point person among the athletes in the court case against the IOC – all the while leading the way by her example.

In February 2011, as defending champion, Lindsey did not make it to the finals in the World Championships. The weather was horrific, but all the women participated in solidarity, and their efforts sealed the fact that they were prepared to compete at the highest levels, whatever it took. Deedee Corradini described the importance of that event for the NPR program “Only a Game.” She painted the most comprehensive overview of the struggle, its meaning and what lay ahead.

On April 6, 2011, the women ski jumpers finally received their long overdue award of Olympic status for the 2014 Games in Sochi, Russia. It had taken nearly seven years of battling, including a lawsuit against the International Olympic Committee, to claim this great victory.

As I reflect on distance runners and ski jumpers, many parallels come to mind. Throughout the ski jumping efforts, I felt at once elated to be involved and to assist, but deeply saddened by the fact that more than 25 years after the women runners' case, discrimination continued. The IOC dragged its feet as long as possible, denying these women the opportunity of competing in the 2010 Vancouver Games.



With Abby Hughes in 2006 at Park City, Utah.