

Australia at the Olympic Winter Games: "A Late Bloomer"*

By Richard Baka

Australia has made significant contributions to the modern Olympic Movement. Notably in hosting the Summer Games on two occasions – Melbourne in 1956 and Sydney in 2000. In addition, its athletes have performed to a very high standard, especially considering the nation's relatively small population of 23 million. In the modern period Australia has won a total of 444 medals in the Summer Olympics from 1896 to 2008. It is one of a select group of nations to have competed in every Summer Olympic Games. In contrast, a review of the Winter Olympics (see Table 1) shows that Australians won only nine medals a relatively modest figure. These medals have only come in the last 16 years illustrating to some extent that Australia has been a "late bloomer" in terms of its Olympic Winter Games' success.¹ The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief historical overview of Australia at the Olympic Winter Games and to acknowledge the accomplishments of its five gold medal winners in this major international event. Furthermore, it presents an analysis of the reasons for this recent success.

Table 1:
Australian Olympic
Winter Medal Tally:
1936-2010

Years	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1936 – 92 Various	0	0	0	0
1994 Lillehammer	0	0	1	1
1998 Nagano	0	0	1	1
2002 Salt Lake City	2	0	0	2
2006 Turin	1	0	1	2
2010 Vancouver	2	1	0	3

Overview of Australia's Winter Olympics History

In many respects, the Olympic Winter Games have always been the poor relation of their summer counterpart. Kristine Toohey and Tony Veal suggest that Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympic Games, was – at best – ambivalent towards the inclusion of winter sports in the Olympic program. Citing Kruger, Toohey and Veal also emphasize the fact that few cities were able to host both summer and winter competitions at the same venues, let alone at the same time of year. Furthermore, the successful Nordic Games seemed to overshadow any attempts to introduce winter sports into the summer program of

the Olympics during the early part of the 20th century.² While ice skating was introduced in London in 1908 and ice hockey was added at the 1920 Antwerp Olympic Games, it was not until 1921 that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) agreed that host countries should organize both winter and summer competitions, with the first official Olympic Winter Games taking place in Chamonix, France, in 1924. It was only later that the IOC conceded that, if the host of the Summer Olympic Games was not in a position to stage winter competitions, then the Olympic Winter Games could be awarded to another country.^{3/4}

Despite continuous involvement in the Summer Olympic Games from their inception in 1896, Australia's participation in the Winter Games has been somewhat low-key and sporadic. In some ways, this patchy involvement is understandable, and perhaps reflects a common belief that Australia, because of its geography and climate, is devoid of history and tradition in winter sports. However, as Harry Gordon points out, snow and ice sports do have a heritage in Australia, with one of the oldest ski clubs in the world founded at Kiandra, New South Wales, in 1870.⁵

John Deane has documented much of the early history of winter sports in Australia. His pioneering work has helped to contextualize the careers of Kenneth Kennedy, the first person chosen to represent Australia in the Olympic Winter Games, and Freddie McEvoy, an Australian who was captain of the British bobsled team, both of whom competed at the 1936 Olympic Winter Games, held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany.⁶ Gordon and Deane also provide a brief overview of subsequent Australian involvement in the Olympic Winter Games, noting that small teams of 9 and 10 were sent to Oslo, Norway in 1952 and Cortina, Italy in 1956 respectively. In each case, very little in the way of government support or funding was provided. A slightly larger contingent, boosted by the inclusion of an 18 member ice hockey team, attended the Games at Squaw Valley, USA in 1960, but until the Games at Albertville, France in 1992 (when numbers were substantially boosted), teams were usually quite small and varied in size between 3 and 15 members.⁷

In the face of a relatively low level of participation and minimal government support, it is not surprising

that Australia's medal tally at the Olympic Winter Games from 1924 to 1992 was an unflattering zero. The 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics brought Australia its first Winter Games medal won in the 5000 m relay by the men's short track speed skating team. Another bronze was won in 1998 in Nagano by Zali Steggall in down-hill skiing. By the 2002 Salt Lake Games, this tally was added to with gold medals by Steven Bradbury in short track speed skating and another by Alisa Camplin in women's aerial skiing. The total increased to six at the Turin Games in 2006 with a gold to Dale Begg-Smith in mogul skiing and a bronze to Alisa Camplin in women's aerial skiing.⁸

Then at the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games Australia experienced its best ever result: a gold to Lydia Lassila in the women's aerial skiing, a gold to Torah Bright in the women's snowboarding half-pipe and a silver to Dale Begg-Smith in the men's mogul skiing event. The President of the AOC, John Coates, summarized the Australian performance in Vancouver:

The accomplishment of the Australian Team in Vancouver has been rightfully hailed as our "best ever". The medal haul of two gold and one silver medal placed Australia 18th on the total medal standings – the most successful result for Australia at a Winter Olympics and the fifth consecutive Winter Games at which Australia has won medals.⁹

The five Australian Olympic Winter Games champions take their place alongside the numerous Australian Summer gold medallists as sporting heroes. Several common features exist among these winter athletes. All overcame adversity including significant serious injuries at some point in their careers. All of them had a strong "international link" to the northern hemisphere: some of them married a foreign athlete as did Bright and Lassila; all of them located temporarily or permanently at an overseas base during their training and competition; several utilized foreign coaches as did Begg-Smith; or, they relocated to Australia from another country and became citizens as in the case of Begg-Smith. The stories of these five athletes provide compelling reading and this adds to the significant international success within Australia's sporting history especially regarding the Olympics.



The memorable and unusual gold won by **Steven Bradbury** in 2002 is well documented not only as the first Australian Winter Games gold medal but also because of the manner in which it was won. Bradbury had barely made the 1000 metre short track speed skating final and was definitely ranked well below the other three finalists. In the sometimes unpredictable nature of short track speed skating, the favoured American, Canadian and Japanese skaters had a collision on the last lap and, when they all fell, Bradbury skated past them to a gold medal. It was an unexpected but well-celebrated victory for all of Australia.¹⁰ The respected sports tabloid *Sports Illustrated* nicknamed him the "accidental hero" and *The Age* newspaper in Melbourne referred to his victory as "The Miracle on Ice". What emerged was a unique and widely-known phrase in Australian folklore and culture. To "Do a Bradbury" is now synonymous with winning in unusual or lucky circumstances. Such was the excitement over his unexpected win that Bradbury even had a postage stamp commissioned in his honour, was featured in the Australian Gallery of Sport and received several sponsorships and commercial opportunities.¹¹

Bradbury's gold brought publicity to winter sports previously given only minor attention. John Lingard noted the sudden public profile accorded Bradbury's historic victory:

*"An army of daredevil kids, inspired by Winter Olympics cult hero Steven Bradbury, has transformed speed skating on ice into the nation's latest boom sport. Not in his wildest dreams did Australia's accidental hero of the Salt Lake City Games anticipate the impact his gold medal would have back home. The popularity engulfing him and his sport has created some embarrassment with dozens of youngsters being turned away due to insufficient coaches, rental skates and lack of ice time. The Australian Amateur Ice Skating Association president, Sydney-based Jim Hewish, said skate schools on the eastern seaboard had been inundated with enrolments."*¹²

After four Winter Olympics and two medals – the gold in Salt Lake City followed an earlier bronze in team short track speed skating in Lillehammer – Bradbury retired at the age of 28. His career had been one of near misses at events in the 1990's when he was at his peak and he was plagued by injuries including a serious injury caused by a skate cutting his neck at an event in Montreal.

His gold medal in Salt Lake City was "one for the ages" and forever changed the history of Australia's involvement in the Olympic Winter Games. Earlier in his career, Bradbury had won a bronze medal as part of the short-track speed skating relay team in 1994, yet he did not win an individual medal when he was a much higher ranked speed skater than he was in 2002 during his gold



Short track skater Steven Bradbury, who in 1994 won Australia's first Winter Games medal in the relay, had amazing luck in 2002. In the quarter-final over 1000 m he was only third, but reached the semi-final because the Canadian Marc Gagnon was disqualified. In the next round as well he was lying in a hopeless last place, when suddenly all the rest fell down. His luck was repeated in the final. On the last bend the favourites fell, while Bradbury – until then last – reached the line in a good state, where the gold medal awaited him. Above: special issue stamp of the Australian post office from 2002.



medal win. This is another unusual detail behind the story of Australia's first ever Winter Olympics gold medal winner.^{13/14}

Since his retirement, Bradbury has served as a Director on the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia (OWI) Executive and he was elected at the Turin Games to the AOC's Athletes' Commission. He has been awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (AOM) and he has been a television commentator for short track speed skating at Olympic Winter Games since his 2002 victory. Bradbury also had the distinction of having one of the double rinks at the Medibank Icehouse – the National Ice Sports Centre and the home of the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia – named after him in 2010.¹⁵

With her Olympic freestyle victory Alisa Camplin set off a winter sports boom in 2002 in Australia together with Steven Bradbury. As with the short track racer a special stamp was issued in her honour. A year later she also became world champion. In 2006 she won the Olympic bronze medal.

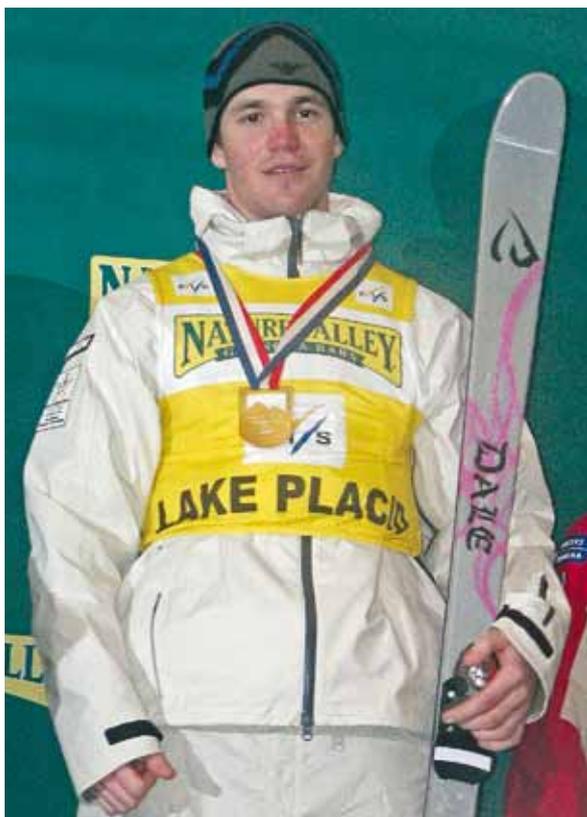


Alisa Camplin won Australia's second gold medal at Salt Lake City in 2002, a few days after Bradbury's victory. Her medal was welcomed but came as no surprise due to the large international success of the "Flying Kangaroos" (the name given to the Australian aerial ski team) over a period from the late 1990's to the early 2000's in World Cup and World Championship events. Another interesting feature of her career was the extensive training she did in Canada which no doubt contributed to her being partnered up for many years with her then Canadian boyfriend and fellow Winter Olympian, Steve Omischl. The fact that Camplin was a former elite gymnast, specifically recruited to train in the winter aerial skiing event, was another unique characteristic in her status as a Winter Games gold medalist.¹⁶

Like Bradbury after her gold medal win, she received sponsorship offers, was featured in numerous media interviews, had her memorabilia and medals put on display in the Australian Gallery of Sport and experienced a dramatic change in her life literally over night. But it was Camplin's somewhat surprising bronze medal in Turin that gave her the title of Australia's first back-to-back Olympic Games medalist. The bronze medal had a "lucky" tag associated with it, considering major injuries she received in 2004-05 that set her career back. According to Australian team doctor, Dr. Peter Braun, she underwent "radical surgery" by having the tendon of a cadaver grafted onto her injured knee only four months out from the 2006 Turin Games. The bronze medal exceeded expectations and it was very fortunate as she just qualified for the final round and the knee held together through the completion of all of her jumps. An ecstatic Camplin – who had been the Australian flag-bearer at the Turin Opening Ceremony reflected that: "For me, the bronze feels every good as the gold."¹⁷ In July of 2006, she announced her retirement, noting that "Turin was a fairytale ending, so it seems the perfect place to finish".¹⁸

Since her retirement Camplin has had a busy career. She was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM), sits on the OWI Board of Directors and became a Board Member of the Collingwood Football Club of the Australian Football League in 2009. She has had advertising contracts to promote Wrigley's Extra chewing gum and runs the Alisa Camplin Ski Tours. She did television commentary on the women's aerial event at the Vancouver Games and she was appointed as Chef de Mission for the Australian team at the First Youth Olympic Winter Games in Innsbruck in 2012.¹⁹ Camplin married Oliver Warner in 2010 but in an unfortunate personal tragedy, a son, Finnan – born six weeks prematurely in March 2011 – died of a congenital heart condition, prompting to her setting up a charity called Finnan's Gift in order to buy heart-detection equipment for babies at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne.²⁰

Dale Begg-Smith's gold medal in Turin in men's mogul skiing was won in more conventional circumstances as he was actually a favourite in this event and also came from a skiing background. By late 2005, he was ranked second in the world so a medal in Turin was considered a strong possibility. Even so, there were still some "lucky" turns and twists on his journey to gold. Begg-Smith was a transplanted Canadian who ended up in Australia after becoming disenchanted with the high demands of the Canadian ski system. As a promising junior mogul skier, he also had a burgeoning computer business. Unable to balance both work and skiing in Canada to his satisfaction, Begg-Smith followed Steve Desovich, a former coach in Canada, to Australia.



When he emigrated from Canada to Australia in 2001, he continued to ski and improve in a less pressured atmosphere; at the same time, his computer business flourished, turning him into a self-made millionaire. After he gained Australian citizenship and began competing for his “adopted” country in 2003–04, Begg-Smith’s performances on the world circuit quickly improved and, in addition to his Turin gold medal, he won the World Cup mogul title in 2005–06.²¹ At the news conference after his Olympic gold medal win, he replied to a question about his internet ad-tracking business that he founded with his brother: “It’s complicated. When I was younger, I needed to make a way to fund my skiing ... I don’t know why we are talking about the company – I just won Olympic gold.”²² There was also a running joke that struggling Australian winter athletes should approach him for sponsorship.²³ While Begg-Smith’s gold medal is legitimate, there could be a footnote due to the unusual situation leading to his eventual representation of and gold win for Australia.

Begg-Smith’s Olympic story continued when he represented Australia in the country of his birth at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. In contrast to Turin, he did not enter the Games as a leading contender as he had a total knee reconstruction in 2009 just 16 months before the Vancouver Games and so he was not going into the event as a top favourite.²⁴ His silver medal was not without some controversy. There were several Australian coaches and support staff who there had perhaps home judging bias in favour of Canadian



Lydia Lassila, née Lerodiacou, had hoped to compete at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney as a gymnast, but years of injuries forced her to change sports. Ten years later – now married to the Finnish freestyler Lauri Lassila – she became Winter Olympic champion in freestyle (aerials). Far left: Dale Begg-Smith, a specialist in the moguls discipline, was born in Vancouver. But in 2001 he emigrated with his brother Jason to Australia, for whose team he was able to compete after a two year ban. In 2006 he became Olympic champion and in 2007 world champion. In 2010 he returned to his native city to win Olympic silver – behind the Canadian Alexandre Bilodeau.

winner Alex Bilodeau. While Begg-Smith seemed quite satisfied with his silver medal performance, there was criticism by some of the Australian press at Begg-Smith’s perceived joyless approach and lack of enthusiasm at winning medals for Australia.²⁵ During the medal ceremony there was also quite notable “booning” from the pro-Canadian crowd, no doubt to demonstrate their dislike of him abandoning his “native” land in order to compete for Australia. The 2009/10 season for well for Begg-Smith. In March he went on to win the World Cup title in mogul skiing. Currently he is on a break from competition to rehabilitate various injuries but he has plans to compete again in the future.

As one of the famous Australian Olympic aerial skiers known as the “Flying Kangaroos” **Lydia Lassila (née Lerodiacou)**, like other athletes recruited for this sport, was involved in gymnastics before her move to skiing. She had also earned a bachelor’s degree in Applied Science (Human Movement) and married a former Finnish professional freestyle skier Lauri Lassila. Lassila was a seasoned competitor and she had the distinction of competing in both the 2002 and 2006 Winter Olympics prior to her gold medal victory in Vancouver. However, the road to glory was not without its ups and downs. In June 2005, Lassila ruptured her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and had a cadaver achilles tendon grafted into her knee as a replacement for her ACL, similar to Camplin. The reason for this radical knee reconstruction procedure was to have a faster

recovery and hopefully a quicker return to skiing with participation in the 2006 Olympic Winter Games as the ultimate goal. However, in Turin she had another bad fall, re-ruptured her ACL and had to withdraw.²⁶

After further surgery and rehabilitation, she returned to World Cup competition in 2007 and by the 2008/09 season she went on to win her first World Cup title. Going into the 2010 Vancouver Games as the world-ranked number one in her discipline, there were high expectations from the Australian press for her to win a medal. Fortunately she remained injury-free in Vancouver and took out the gold. As a result of her success, Lassila was sponsored by Acer, Cadbury and Bolle appearing in television endorsements and gaining widespread public exposure. In 2010 Lassila was awarded the Australian Sporting Hall of Fame Don Award for her ability to inspire and for her sporting achievements. She gave birth to boy in May 2011 and did not compete in the 2010/11 season but has plans to resume after a short hiatus.²⁷

A winter child: snowboarder Torah Bright, who found a second home in Salt Lake City, won the fourth Australian gold medal in 2010 in the half-pipe competition. She experiences winter alternately in the southern and northern hemispheres.



The winner of one of Australia's two gold medals at the Vancouver Games was **Torah Bright**, a snowboarder in the half-pipe event. A family interest in sport is reflected by the fact that an older sister, Rowena, competed in the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympics in skiing. A native of Cooma, New South Wales, Bright had turned professional at the age of 14 and boasted an impressive record, including a fifth placing at the Turin Winter Olympics, a first place in the super-pipe in the EXPN Winter Games in 2009 and numerous other titles dating back to the

2003–04 season as runner up for the World Cup title.²⁸ This consistent international success had made Bright a favourite to take out gold at the Vancouver Games, visible by the fact that she was chosen to be the flag bearer at the Opening Ceremonies. Injury problems including two concussions plagued her just prior to the Vancouver Games and there was a huge amount of Australian media and public pressure on her to medal as she was one of leading snowboard half-pipe athletes in the lead-up to the 2010 Winter Games. Her gold medal win was the culmination of skill, determination and consistent international performances in her sport.²⁹

Similar to several of the other Australian winter gold medallists, Bright had a strong international connection since she lives and trains for much of the year in Salt Lake City, USA and has done so for several years. She also married an American snowboarder, Jake Welch, in June 2010 shortly after her Vancouver success. As an athlete she operates independent of support from the athlete support program operated by the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia. This is a result of quite lucrative sponsorship with Roxy and Quiksilver, driven by both her overseas location and undoubtedly by her "photogenic appeal" with the media as an attractive and successful female athlete.³⁰ Another interesting feature is her strong religious and moral beliefs as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (i.e. Mormon Church). Her manager of many years, Mark Jones commented that "She's always been such a grounded girl, so secure in herself and her beliefs. Her moral compass has been set from such a young age, and I think that's certainly served her, and helped her to know exactly why she's doing her sport and where she's coming from with it".³¹ As the reigning Olympic Champion, she is currently still competing and could very well win a medal at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

Reasons for the Recent Winter Olympics Success by Australia

There have been a number of research studies exploring the reasons for Australian success in the Olympics. In a very informative paper entitled "Australia from Montreal to Sydney: A History of a Change of Model", authors Frank Pyke and Ken Norris outline seven factors contributing to the Australian resurgence in the Summer Olympic Games. These included the two key areas of increased funding and the development of a new sporting infrastructure with the emergence of the AIS, state institutes of sport and the Australian Sports Commission. Three other reasons they note with respect to summer sports also have a direct relationship to winter activities. Improved coaching expertise in Australia is one important factor – the result of the establishment of a national coaching accreditation scheme, special

coaching and mentor programs and the use of imported coaches from overseas to provide technical and tactical expertise. Another factor they highlight is the use of support services for athletes in the application of scientific, medical and educational practices in high performance sport. And, finally, they present a case for improved cooperative relationships and partnerships not only between the institutes and academies of sport, but also among the ASC, AOC and national sporting organizations.³²

In another paper on the Australian sports system by Alex Baumann, entitled "Developing Sustained High Performance Services and Systems That Have Quality Outcome", the author outlines ten ingredients contributing to success in high performance sport in Australia (see Table 2).

He emphasizes many of the same points (e.g. funding, partnerships, coaching, etc.) as Norris and Pyke, but in both papers very little mention was made of winter sports. Nevertheless, most of these factors can still be used to explain the country's recent Winter Games success and overall improved performances across the board.

Another author has written a number of papers examining the reasons for Australian success in the Olympics and international sport, including an examination of the Olympic Winter Games.³⁴ In summary, Baka's conclusions (see Table 3) mirror those of Baumann as well as Pkye and Norris. He believes the answer to the Australian success can be narrowed down to five key points.³⁵

A much larger financial commitment from both the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) of the Australian Commonwealth Government and the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) was one major reason for the improved performance. Government funding to sport in Australia increased dramatically in 1972 under the new Labor Government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, which introduced the first major government funding of sport and recreation programs. The initial funding was fairly meagre, but a poor showing at the 1976 Montreal Olympics – Australia won no gold medals and placed a disappointing 32nd – precipitated a substantial transformation in national sport policy. This resulted in the building of the Australian Institute of Sport in 1981, the emergence of the Australian Sports Commission in 1985 and ever-increasing expenditures on elite sport programs.³⁶ For example, approximately \$135 million dollars was allocated to elite sport between 1990 and 1994 through two programs – Maintain the Momentum and the Next Step.³⁷

In 1993, after Australia won the rights to host the summer Olympics, the ASC – in cooperation with the AOC, national sporting organisations and the National Elite Sports Council of Australia – instituted the Olympic

Athlete Program. This new funding scheme was aimed primarily at performance-based results in targeted Olympic sports. When combined with the existing funding, the total contributed was in the range of \$327 million for elite sport development over the six-year period from 1995 to 2001. While such popular summer sports such as swimming, cycling, athletics and rowing were the major beneficiaries of "targeted" monetary support, some winter sports such as freestyle skiing,

Funding
Institute/Academy Network
Leadership/Accountability
Prioritisation of Resources
Coaching Expertise
Decentralisation/Regionalisation
Leading Edge Support Services
Partnerships
Talent Search
Interventionism

Table 2: Ingredients for Success in High Performance Sport³³

alpine skiing, snowboarding and short track speed skating also received an increase in funding due to improved performances on the world stage by Australian athletes.³⁸

Following Australia's fourth place and 58-medal tally at the 2000 Sydney Olympics (proclaimed by Juan Antonio Samaranch as the "best games ever") in 2001, the Commonwealth Government further increased its financial commitment towards sport. From 2001

1. A Proactive AOC and Australian Government (i.e. ASC): "Money Can Buy Medals"
2. Improved Coaching, Competition and Infrastructure: "Getting the Mix Right"
3. Historical, Geographical and Cultural Factors: "The Importance of Sport Down Under"
4. Improved Cooperative Relationships and Partnerships: "The Team Approach"
5. An Excellent High Performance Sports Model and the Development of International Standard Facilities: "Going First Class"

Table 3: An Analysis of the Reasons for Australian Success at the Olympics³⁵

to 2005, the new Backing Australia's Sporting Ability (BASA) national sport policy promised a total expenditure of \$547 million – an injection of an additional \$161.6 million in this four-year period. Approximately 75% (\$408 million) of this total was aimed at Sports Excellence-Backing Australian Athletes.³⁹ In the 2002 budget announcement, the Commonwealth Government and the ASC allocated a further \$65.4 million dollars towards an upgrading and expansion of facilities at the AIS in Canberra.⁴⁰ Then in May 2010 a new sport policy was implemented referred to as Australian Sport: The Pathway to Success. The Minister for Sport, Kate Ellis announced a record \$1.2 billion over the next four years including \$325 million in additional funding for the ASC and incorporating \$195 million in new funding for sport.^{41/42} Throughout this growth of government sport funding, support to high performance winter sports disciplines

increased dramatically although understandably the bulk of funds still went to summer-based Olympic sports.

Olympic Winter Games athletes definitely benefited from the new funding policies by the Australian Government. Surprisingly, the AOC had given only token attention and support to Winter Games athletes up until the 1980s, preferring to concentrate on summer sports.⁴³ With the new government funding schemes in place, the AOC was in some ways forced to rethink its philosophy on winter sports' support and it began to cooperatively fund Olympic athletes in both summer and winter disciplines. It seemed no coincidence that Australia's Winter Games Olympic athletes soon won their first medals – a bronze in Lillehammer, in 1994, another bronze in Nagano in 1998 and then two golds in Salt Lake City in 2002, the two medals in Turin and the three in Vancouver. The initial success transpired during the funding period of the Olympic Athlete Program, which leaves one to ponder the often-stated hypothesis that "money can buy medals"!

Tied directly with the increased financial aid to elite athletes was the provision of better coaching, improved training facilities and greater opportunities for competition. For example, monetary assistance meant that Australian winter sports athletes could relocate to Europe and North America during the northern hemisphere winter. Overseas they had access to world class facilities, the best coaching, state-of-the-art training techniques and top-level competition. These opportunities led to improved results. Virtually all of Australia's gold medallists had set up training headquarters in Canada or Europe during the Northern Hemisphere winter. Their situations were similar to other Australian winter sports athletes and, while the new government financial programs did not pay all the bills, there was substantial performance-based assistance.

A major development for Winter Olympic sports was the Australian Olympic Committee's formation of the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia (OWI) in 1998. The purpose of this new body was to specifically develop elite performances in winter sports by Australian athletes through the provision of adequate funding, world-class sports programming and technical coaching. Although initially heavily funded by the AOC and the private sector, the new institute received substantial financial support from Australian Institute of Sport and the Australian Sports Commission. For example, in May 2002 shortly after the impressive Salt Lake City results, in response to the AOC Winter Sports Development Plan, the Commonwealth Government gave the OWI a four year grant of \$1.6 million or \$400,000 per year on top of other assistance it had committed to previously.^{44/45}

The other major contributor to the OWI budget is the Australian Olympic Committee which is now committing

\$1 million per year (from 2010 to 2014), a total which was increased shortly after success in Turin. The latest revenues in the 2011 OWI Annual Report show a total in excess of \$3.5 million, with contributions of approximately 1/3rd coming from the ASC/AIS via a number of different grant programs and close to a similar 1/3rd coming from the AOC, with the remainder coming from financial and contra support from sponsors and other the private sector sources (e.g. Australian Sports Foundation). Besides the \$1 million of funds given directly to the OWI by the AOC, and the base grant given to the OWI by the ASC, winter athletes and coaches also benefit from the AOC's adidas medal incentive funding scheme, other AOC grants (e.g. Olympic Solidarity, IOC Scholarships) and money given by the ASC direct to winter national sport federations (i.e. Ski and Snowboard Australia, Australian Ice Racing, Ice Skating Australia and the Australian Bobsleigh and Skeleton Association) with some of this passed on to the OWI for international competition training, national talent identification and development and other special programs.⁴⁶

The OWI is also linked closely with State Institutes of Sport, especially those in Victoria and New South Wales and national winter sport federations, to supply an overall national technical direction for the individual sport throughout the athlete pathway in Australia. For example, several alpine resorts including Thredbo (alpine skiing) and Perisher (mogul skiing and snowboard half-pipe) in NSW and Mt. Buller (aerial skiing) in Victoria serve as the home bases for many of the winter disciplines. The OWI has definitely been a major factor in Australian success in the world stage at Olympic, World Cup and other international events. A "partnership philosophy of linking together key players" has permeated this extremely successful model.⁴⁷

With the move of the OWI headquarters into the \$60 Million Medibank Icehouse (National Ice Sports Centre) in early 2010, this key organization's role in high performance programs for winter sports moved to a new era of professionalism. This impressive facility boasts two full size ice rinks with spectator seating for 1000 people. One rink is named after winter gold medalist Steven Bradbury who often does television ads to promote the venue and the other rink is named after Geoff Henke, renowned for his outstanding contribution to winter sports including: serving as Chef de Mission on six Australian Winter Games Teams from 1996 to 1994; the development of the OWI; and, a driving force behind the development of the Medibank Icehouse. The facility also boasts a fitness centre open to the public, change rooms, a café, pro shop and players lounge with room for functions. On the upper level, there are administrative offices for the OWI and a planned sports medicine clinic and other athlete support facilities. The sports involved in the facility include ice hockey, figure skating,

short track speed skating and curling. Besides assisting elite winter athletes there is also a large component of recreational sport involvement primarily in the area of skating and hockey.⁴⁸

In other recent developments related to improvements in winter facilities, a year round National Water Jump training facility for aerial skiing has been approved to be built in Brisbane, Queensland and negotiations are under way to build a snowboard half-pipe being at the Perisher Resort, NSW.⁴⁹ Furthermore, in 2010 the ASC opened its European Training Centre (ETC) in Varese, Italy. Part of a very unique arrangement, this facility was built by the Italians and leased to the ASC. Boasting accommodation, offices and medical facilities, as well as a host of nearby local sports facilities, it is designed to be a home away from home for Australian athletes competing in Europe and therefore it can reduce large transportation and living costs for Australian athletes, coaches and support staff. Initially it has been set up only for summer sports but a move to looking after winter sports is a possibility.⁵⁰ Thus the ETC combines with the existing Sports' Institute model within Australia (i.e. the AIS along with the other state and territory institutes and assemblies and the OWI) to make for an extremely well supported network of high performance training facilities.

Another reason behind Australia's improvement at the Winter Olympics was an IOC initiative. The new Olympic cycle adopted in the 1990s with the Summer and Winter Games alternating in even years resulted in a greater profile for the Winter Games from many different perspectives – the media, the public, sponsors and so forth. In particular, the media profile for the Winter Games improved at both the international level and within Australia. Australian television, radio, the internet and the print media became much more interested in the Olympic Winter Games when they no longer shared the same year as the Summer Games. Starting with the 1994 Lillehammer Games, Australian television coverage improved dramatically in quantity and quality. With Australia's first medal coming at the 1994 Games, subsequent winter games brought renewed interest among the media and the public, anxious to see if the country could perform at world-class levels and add to its medal tally. The emergence of pay television providers such as Foxtel also dramatically increased the media's coverage of the Winter Olympics with the consumer able to watch the games in Vancouver not only on Channel 9 – a free-to-air television station – but to buy special Foxtel packages with live coverage related to the various winter sports at the Vancouver Olympics.⁵¹

A second IOC initiative also directly contributed to a growing interest in the Olympic Winter Games in Australia. The adoption of new Winter Games events

such as short track speed skating and "extreme style" sports such as freestyle skiing and snowboarding appealed to a new and generally younger generation of Australians accustomed to a traditional surfing, water sports and summer beach culture. As Bob Stewart and Matthew Nicholson point out: "Australian sport became even more varied and diverse during the 1990s ... A number of outdoor adventure sports, especially rock-climbing, mountain-biking, downhill skiing, snowboarding, paragliding, and skydiving, attracted a lot of attention, and serious participants were able to compete in organized competitions that are now called extreme sports."⁵² Suddenly, it became "cool" for many young Australians to spend time in a winter sports setting. The surf and sea now had to share the limelight with the snow and slopes. The attraction to new winter sports by a large number of participants meant a much greater pool of talent from which elite athletes could emerge. It is interesting to note that most of Australia's medal successes have come in the so-called extreme sports of aerial freestyle skiing, mogul skiing, short track speed skating and snowboarding.⁵³

An improvement in winter sports facilities, hosting of international competitions and the development of an elite athlete club infrastructure in Australia are further reasons behind the recent Australian success at the Olympic Winter Games. While the Australian Alps are not nearly of the same calibre as such well-known winter areas as the Rockies in North America and the Alps in Europe, the emergence of top-class resorts at Thredbo, Mt. Hotham, Mt. Buller and Perisher have contributed to the growth of winter sporting activities in Australia. A very important "key player" in the total picture is the Mt. Buller Ski Lifts. Under the leadership of Rino Grollo, this privately owned company helped to develop the Mt. Buller Resort and also financially jump-started many programs such as the OWI, the Australian Alpine Institute and the highly successful winter sports club known as Team Buller which includes a large number of Australian Winter Olympic athletes. Rino Grollo was awarded the 2002 Order of Merit by the AOC for his enormous contribution to the development and success of winter sports in Australia. This achievement highlighted the important contribution of private sector concerns in the development of winter sports in the land "Down Under".⁵⁴

The southern hemisphere represented by Australia and New Zealand have also been added to the list of World Cup alpine and freestyle skiing events, particularly in snowboarding and aerial freestyle skiing. Having competitions such as these in the southern hemisphere has undoubtedly aided the development of winter sports in Australia. To a certain extent, the fact that the Australian winter season is the opposite of the northern hemisphere has meant that Australian winter sports

athletes can almost train and compete year round, using both overseas and domestic settings.⁵⁵

A very important reason for the Australian recent success in winter sports has been a philosophy of using the limited financial resources and targeting sport disciplines most likely to elicit positive results rather than taking a broad brush approach of sprinkling money to lots of different sports. From its inception, the OWI has basically tried to fund athletes and coaches in a very limited number of winter sports including alpine skiing (downhill and cross country), figure skating, short track speed skating as well as snowboarding, aerial skiing and mogul skiing. This approach seems to have worked and of the nine winter medals won to date there have been three in aerial skiing, two in short track speed skating, two in mogul skiing and one each in snowboarding, and downhill skiing. This “targeted” approach has even been a feature of summer sports with the ASC and the AOC high performance sports funding directed at swimming, cycling, rowing and other activities where there is a likelihood of medals.

Finally, Australia’s success in the Summer Games has undoubtedly had a spin-off impact on the Winter Games. The notion that “success breeds success” seems applicable. Winter Olympic sports became eligible for some of the government assistance programs for high performance sport. The large number of medals in Sydney and then again in Athens in 2004 as well as the two gold medals in Turin literally “fired up” the media and public at large to expect “big things” from Australian athletes wherever and whenever they compete. When Australia won a bronze medal in Lillehammer in 1994, followed by another bronze in Nagano in 1998, the expectations for Salt Lake City were higher. To some extent, the two gold medals won in Salt Lake City and the two in Turin were a continuation of the “resurgence cycle” which embraced both the Summer and Olympic Winter Games. The Vancouver Games continued this cycle of success with Australia’s best Winter Olympics result ever of two gold medals and one silver medal and a ranking of 14th when gold medals won are used as the indicator and 18th in terms of total medals won.

The expectations of success by the AOC at the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games remain high with AOC President John Coates claiming that the performance objective for the Australian Sochi team is “To place within the top 15 nations on the total medal standings (for which it is anticipated four or more medals will be required); and win medals in more than the two sports disciplines in which the Australian Olympic Team won medals in 2010”.⁵⁶

Indications from Australian success in World Cup and other international results in the 2011/12 season point to a strong probability that this nation will be able to win more medals and maintain its world ranking in winter sports by the time of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.

Although somewhat of a “Late Bloomer” it appears that Australia has had a relatively consistent and slowly improving Olympic Winter Games record since 1994 and it also reflected by the fact that since 1969 it has won a total of over 250 winter sports medals in the Olympic Games, World Championships and World Cup events.⁵⁷ While it is doubtful Australia will ever become a power force in the Winter Games, it has recorded a significant improvement over the last 20 years and added to its overall reputation as one of the great Olympic nations. ■

- 1 BAKA, Richard: “Australian Winter Olympic Games Gold Medallists: Three Unique Stories” in BAKA, Richard and KING, Jan. (EDS.): Sport, Communities and Engagement, Proceedings of the 15th Biennial Conference of the International Society for Physical Education and Sport. Victoria University, Melbourne Australia, March 6-8 2006. Melbourne 2006.
- 2 TOOHEY, Kristine & VEAL, Tony: The Olympic Games: A Social Science Perspective. New York: CABI Publishing, 2000. p. 61.
- 3 IBID, p. 62. The events at Chamonix only received retrospective status as Olympic Games in May 1926. See MACDONALD, Gordon, “Going Downhill: Relations Between the IOC and Federation Internationale de Ski in the Late 1930s”, in WAMSLEY, K. B., MARTYN, S. G., MACDONALD, G. H. & BARNEY, Robert. (EDS.): Bridging Three Centuries: Intellectual Crossroads and the Modern Olympic Movement: Fifth International Symposium for Olympic Research. University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario 2000, p. 105. For a more comprehensive analysis of historical aspects of the Olympic Winter Games, see GOKSOYR, M. VON DER LIPPE. G. and MO, K. (EDS.): Winter Games, Warm Traditions Sankt Augustin, Norway: Academia Verlag, 1996, and ZECEVIC, Ljubisa, “The Winter Games: Their Contributions to Worldwide Olympic Consciousness”, in WAMSLEY, Kevin, MARTYN, Scott, MACDONALD, Gordon & BARNEY, Robert (EDS.): Olympic Perspectives: Third International Symposium for Olympic Research. University of Western Ontario, London, 1996, pp. 267-275.
- 4 BAKA, Richard “Australian Winter Olympic Games Gold Medallists: Three Unique Stories” pp. 2-3
- 5 GORDON, Harry: Australia and the Olympic Games. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994, p. 412. Australia had athletes at the Olympic Winter Games starting in 1936 and then continuously from 1952 to the present.
- 6 DEANE, John: “Australia at the Winter Olympics”, Paper presented at Sporting Traditions, the biennial conference of the Australian Society for Sports History, Launceston, 2 July 1993. See also GORDON: Australia and the Olympic Games, pp. 413-415.
- 7 DEANE, John: “Olympic Winter Games”, in VAMPLEW, Wray et al. (EDS): The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport. Second Edition. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997. pp. 321-324, and GORDON Australia and the Olympic Games, pp. 415-427. See also the lists of Australian participants and results, IBID, pp. 522-526.
- 8 BAKA, Richard: “The Olympic Winter Institute of Australia: A Unique Partnership Model for High Performance Sport” in CROWTHER, Nigel, WAMSLEY, Kevin. & BARNEY, Robert (EDS.): Cultural Imperialism in Action: Critiques in the Global Olympic Trust: Sixth International Symposium for Olympic Research. University of Western Ontario, London, 2006, 127 - 139, pp. 133-134.
- 9 COATES, John: President’s Address, Australian Olympic Committee Annual General Meeting, May 15, 2010, p. 5. An interesting story out of the Vancouver Games besides Australia’s three medals was its “spat” with the IOC in wanting to fly the Boxing Kangaroo flag in the Olympic Village as it had done in previous Olympic Games. Some IOC officials felt it was too commercial and also it was not the official Australian flag which was already on display in the Village along with other national flags. Eventually the AOC resolved this argument on the proviso that they seek and gain special permission from the IOC for this Australian Olympic “symbol” to be used (which they did) and the flag remained.
- 10 For Bradbury’s own reflections on his victory see WILSHIRE, Jeremy: One of Those Days: The Triumphs and Tragedies of Australian Sporting Heroes. Melbourne Books, 2002. 251-260.

- 11 BAUM, Greg "My Favourite Moment, 2002", *The Age*, December 12, 2002, p. 8 (Sport).
- 12 LINGARD, John: "Bradbury Makes Skating Cool", *Sunday Age*, April 28, 2002, p. 16.
- 13 BAKA, Richard & HESS, Rob: "Doing a Bradbury! An Analysis of Recent Australian Success at the Winter Olympic Games" in WAMSLEY, Kevin, BARNEY, Robert & MARTYN, Scott (EDS.): *The Global Nexus Engaged: Past, Present, Future Interdisciplinary Olympic Studies: Sixth International Symposium for Olympic Research*. The University of Western Ontario, London, 2002, 167 – 184, p. 169.
- 14 CAZENEUVE, Brian: "The Accidental Hero", *Sports Illustrated*, April 15, 2002, p. 30.
- 15 WIKIPEDIA: Steven Bradbury.
- 16 BAKA: "Australian Winter Olympic Games Gold Medallists" p. 5.
- 17 PASQUARIELLE, Alex: "Women's Aerials: New Life For Aussies" *Ski Racing: The Journal of Snowsport Competition*, April 10, 2006, p. 35.
- 18 AAP: "No More Jumps For Retiring Camplin" *The Age*, July 17, 2006.
- 19 COATES, John: President's Address, Australian Olympic Committee Annual General Meeting, May 14, 2011, p. 10.
- 20 WIKIPEDIA. Alisa Camplin
- 21 MAGNAY, Jacqueline: "Faster, Higher, Colder", *The Age Good Weekend Magazine*, October 1, 2005, p. 34.
- 22 VINTON, Nathaniel: "Bumps in the Night: Begg-Smith Lands on Top of Moguls Podium" *Ski Racing: The Journal of Snowsport Competition*, March 7, 2006, p. 27.
- 23 MAGNAY: "Faster, Higher, Colder" p. 34. Dale's brother Jason also immigrated to Australia and competed for Australia at Turin in mogul skiing but finished out of the medals. He too was involved with the successful computer business along with his brother.
- 24 WIKIPEDIA: Dale Begg-Smith.
- 25 FITZSIMONS, Peter: "Why Mr. Miserable Leaves Us Icy Cold", in <http://smh.com.au/sport/winter-olympics/why-mr-miserable-leaves-us-icy-cold-2>.
- 26 www.owia.org.
- 27 www.lydialassila.com.au
- 28 www.torahbright.com/biography.php.
- 29 WIKIPEDIA: Torah Bright.
- 30 KARNIKOWSKI, Nina. "Torah Bright" *Sport & Style Supplement: The Age Newspaper*. February 2010.
- 31 IBID.
- 32 PYKE, Frank and NORRIS, Ken, "Australia from Montreal to Sydney: A History of a Change in Model", Paper presented at the Second International Forum on Elite Sport, Spain, September 2001, pp. 3–10. The seven factors identified by the authors as contributing to the resurgence were institute/academy network, adequate funding, targeted support, program decentralization, coaching expertise, utilization of support services and cooperative relationships.
- 33 BAUMANN, Alex: "Developing Sustained High Performance Services and Systems That Have Quality Outcomes", Paper presented at the 12th Commonwealth International Sport Conference, Manchester, July 21, 2002. pp. 7–10.
- 34 These five research articles include BAKA, Richard & DEANE, John: "Australia at the Winter Olympic Games: A Post Turin Review" in BAKA, Richard and KING, Jan. (EDS.): *Sport, Communities and Engagement: 15th Biennial Conference of the International Society for Comparative Physical Education and Sport* (CD Rom). Victoria University, Melbourne, March 6–8, 2006, Melbourne 2006; BAKA, Richard & OSLER, Brett: "Golden Opportunities: Australia's Next Generation of High Performance Training Centres", in BAKA, Richard, CHURCH, Anthony & SEMOTIUK, Darwin. (EDS.): *Leveraging Legacies: The Future of Sport and Physical Activity*, Proceedings of the Regional Conference of the International Society for Physical Education and Sport (CD Rom). The University of British Columbia, Canada, June 21–24, 2009. Melbourne 2009 as well as previously cited research: BAKA: "Australian Winter Olympic Games Gold Medallists"; BAKA & HESS: "Doing a Bradbury!"; and, BAKA: "The Olympic Winter Institute of Australia"
- 35 BAKA, Richard: "Olympic Glory: An Analysis of Australia's Success at the Summer Olympics", in *Journal of Olympic History*, 18, (December, 2010), 6 –16, Number 3.
- 36 HOGAN, Kieran & NORTON, Kevin: "The Price of Olympic Gold", *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* 3 (2), pp. 204–206. See also BAKA, Richard: "Australian Government Involvement in Sport: A Delayed, Eclectic Approach", in REDMOND, Gerald (ED.): *The 1984 Olympic Scientific Congress Proceedings* (Volume 7): Sports and Politics. Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1986. pp. 27–32 and ARMSTRONG, Thomas: "Gold Lust: Federal Sports Policy Since 1975", Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Macquarie University, 1988.
- 37 www.ausport.gov.au/asc/media.news6.html, Australian Sports Commission Website, "Commitment to Sport", Media Release, April 24, 2001, pp. 1–4.
- 38 IBID.
- 39 www.isr.gov.au/sport_tourism/SportRecreation/sportstrategy.html, Australian Sports Commission Website, "Backing Australia's Sporting Ability – A More Active Australia", 2001, pp. 1–11.
- 40 www.ausport.gov.au/asc/media.html, Australian Sports Commission Website, "\$65 Million Announced for AIS Upgrading and Expansion", Media Release, May 14, 2002.
- 41 BAKA: "Olympic Glory", pp. 10–12. Refer to this article for a more in-depth review of increased government funding starting in 2010. Interestingly, the AOC heavily lobbied for a continuation of substantial federal funding to elite sport after the release in late 2009 of the Crawford Report which had recommended cutbacks to elite sport funding in some areas including Olympic sports and instead the promotion of more grass roots sport development. The AOC lobbying was successful with Sports Minister Kate Ellis actually increasing funding for high performance sport but still recognizing mass participation programs. Not everyone has been pleased with such substantial funding to chase medals in winter sports some of which have very little public participation and a total cost per medal being considered exorbitant. See HINDS, Richard; "Cold Gold" in *Sport & Style*, February, 2010, p. 20 and COULTER, Michael: "Buying Gold Medal Glory Cuts No Ice" in the *Sunday Age*, March 7, 2010, p. 19. There has also been some criticism of such a large amount of money from the OWI budget being directed at alpine skiing (alpine and downhill) with only a return of one bronze medal. Refer to BAKA: "The Olympic Winter Institute of Australia" p. 130.
- 42 ELLIS, Kate: Media Release: \$325 Million Boost to Sport and Getting More Australians Active.
- 43 GORDON: *Australia and the Olympic Games*, pp. 415–427.
- 44 BAKA: "The Winter Olympic Institute of Australia", p. 134.
- 45 Olympic Winter Institute of Australia. Chairman's Newsletter, August 2002. The Australian Institute of Winter Sports was formed by the AOC in 1998 just after the Nagano Olympic Winter Games. It was renamed the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia and received a \$100,000 grant from the Australian Institute of Sport when it was officially launched under its new name in October, 2001. Commencing in 1995 Rino Grollo and Mt Buller Ski Lifts gave the Australian Ski Institute (an early forerunner to the OWIA) \$2 million dollars and his generous contributions have continued to the OWIA.
- 46 For a detailed report on funding to winter sports refer to the 2011 Australian Olympic Committee Annual Report and the 2011 Annual Report of the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia.
- 47 2011 Annual Report of the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia, pp. 17–21.
- 48 BAKA, Richard & OSLER, Brett. "Golden Opportunities", p. 7.
- 49 COATES, John: President's Address, Australian Olympic Committee Annual General Meeting, May 14, 2011, p.11; See also the 2010 Australian Olympic Committee Annual Report, p. 6
- 50 BAKA & OSLER: "Golden Opportunities" pp. 8–13.
- 51 COATES, John: President's Address, Australian Olympic Committee Annual General Meeting, May 15, 2010, p. 5.
- 52 STEWART, Bob & NICHOLSON, Matthew: "Australia: Building on a Sport for All Culture" in DACOSTA, L. & MIRAGAVA A. (EDS.): *World-wide Experiences and Trends in Sport For All*. Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport, UK, 2002, p. 41.
- 53 BAKA: "The Winter Olympic Institute of Australia", pp. 134–136.
- 54 Interview with Kym Henderson, Acting Head of Department, Australian Alpine Institute, Latrobe University, Mt Buller, 27/09/02; Interview with Michael Kennedy, Program Manager (Moguls and Aerial Team), Olympic Winter Institute of Australia and also Team Manager of Team Buller, 1/10/02; Interview with Alex Bunting, Office Manager of the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia, 1/10/02; Olympic Winter Institute of Australia, Chairman's Newsletter, August 2002.
- 55 BAKA & HESS: "Doing a Bradbury", p. 180.
- 56 COATES, John: President's Address, Australian Olympic Committee Annual General Meeting, May 14, 2011, p. 12
- 57 www.owia.org

Opening ceremony of Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, Feb. 7, 2014At the opening ceremonies (February 7) of the 2014 Sochi (Russia) Olympic Winter Games, giant helium inflatables provided the elements of Moscow's St. Basil's Cathedral as dancers entertained the audience at Fisht Olympic Stadium. Michael Kappelerâ€”picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images. Sochi Olympics freestyle skier Maddie BowmanAt the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, gold medalist Maddie Bowman of the U.S. displays her moves in the freestyle skiing halfpipe, one of the 12 medal events that were new to the Olympics in 2014. Michael Kappelerâ€”picture-alliance/dpa/AP Images.