

On the Ball and Off the Wall: Losses at home and abroad

This column is for non-sports fans who would like some enlightenment and hopefully humor without being sports fanatics.

War and Piste

The Winter Olympics in China are set to start February 4, and the sporting aspects of this global event will likely be overshadowed by all the ancillary issues (read: fuck-ups).

Yes, we all want to see downhill racers wipe out at 60+ mph. And we cringe and exult at those crash landings in the ski jump that look like the flier has been thrown off the top of a 20-story high-rise by mobsters. Kinda like watching NASCAR with humans instead of cars. You go, Eddie Eagle!

For China and its emperor, oops, “President,” Xi Jinping, this is an ambitious public relations chance to get worldwide approval for his hideous dictatorship via the Chinese People’s Party. He is an authoritarian who makes the likes of Donald Trump whinny in envy. Bet there won’t be many Uighurs in the stands, just playing a hunch.

But while Xi has been out tooting his horn about how successful this Olympics will be, he can be blindsided from many directions.

He went to war with the U.S. decision to head a “diplomatic boycott” of the Games, joined by other democratic governments. Small cheese to you and I, but on the international stage, Xi took an embarrassing Mike Tyson-level slap in the face.

Then we have Omicron. Welcome to the funhouse.

We are already talking about 2,000 athletes coming together in close quarters in a country that has almost no control over their recent outbreaks. The top U.S. skier, Mikaela Shiffrin, who rules the skiing world, has already once tested positive for Covid in the US. China continues to be overrun by the virus, their vaccine exposed as a joke. The National Hockey League has forbidden its players to participate, which is a shame, and has drawn criticism from such names as Boston’s Canadian star Brad Marchand and Washington and Russia’s main man Alex Ovechkin.

And wait until the details of the disappearance of Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai after she accused a high-ranking member of Chinese People’s Party elite of sexual assault are exposed, after she did what was essentially a hostage tape saying she was fine and dandy, and then did what the Brits call a “reverse ferret,” saying she was “misunderstood” to be further examined while Games go on.

The warring and obdurate Xi Jinping and his totalitarian buddies are on a slippery *piste*. And ready to go off the edge.

John Madden

While I hate “I, I, me, me” items, here goes – I had the chance on two occasions to interview the

incredible former NFL coach (and Super Bowl winner as head honcho with the Oakland Raiders), Hall of Famer and hugely popular broadcaster John Madden, who sadly popped his clogs just before the new year.

The first, and most fun, was at a Brown football game ages ago. I saw him sitting alone in a corner of the Brown stands, (as his son was on the football team,) wearing an all-white tracksuit that made him look like a giant snowball. Since I had a cameraman with me to tape my sports spot on Channel 6, I walked up to his perch and asked if he would do an interview with me at halftime for that evening's news. He growled a bit, but agreed. But when the camera started rolling, he lit up and gave a spirited and upbeat discourse on football you couldn't have paid for.

The second time was via phone for an article on video games for *TV Guide*, and his red-hot "John Madden Football" (now "John Madden NFL"). I reminded him of our encounter at the Brown game, and that was the key to him taking off on a roll about the video game, but graciously giving the bulk of the credit for its success and constant upgrading to his two sons. He also laughingly explained that he got calls after every new edition came out from NFL players complaining that they hadn't been given high enough rankings.

Having Madden act and speak like a happy, generous human being was delightful, vis-à-vis some of my other interviewees (see: Knight, Bobby) was a joy. What you saw was what you got, so many thanks *in absentia*, good sir.

Vocabulary corner - A "piste" (pronounced "peest") is a ski run or ski trail, anything from a Black Diamond to the bunny slope. You're welcome.