

“Heckling America’s Heroes: Interactivity and Olympic Heroism in the Digital Age”

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When pitching this response prior to the Olympic Games, I had hoped to forge a discussion of the altered state of Olympic heroism in the digital age. In the past, Olympic stars such as Bruce Jenner (pre-*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*), Carl Lewis, Mary Lou Retton, and Karri Strug (with her amazing one-leg landing) had run, jumped, flipped, and flopped into the hearts of Americans. America loves (or at least loved) a hero—the more hometown the better—and televised Olympic coverage had been happy to oblige. For decades the Olympic Games had stood as one of America’s most heralded televised events. Like (once upon a time) the Oscars and the annual airing of *The Sound of Music*, they brought Americans to their televisions in droves and with communal anticipation. Stars were born and quickly splashed across much-coveted Wheaties boxes. Prior to these Games, NBC had held out promises of a new democratized Olympic experience and path to stardom, ushered in by the integration of various forms of new media.

Much of the pre-buzz around NBC’s coverage of the 2012 Summer Olympics focused on a comprehensive Olympic experience that would emerge from a wealth of broadcast and niche channels (NBC, CNBC, NBC Sports, Bravo, and Univision) and NBC’s live mobile interface *LiveExtra*, which would stream *all* events in real time, allowing the mobile viewer to program his/her own Olympic Games. *LiveExtra* fell somewhat flat by (a) providing non-commentator-driven, fly-on-the-not-so-interesting-wall footage that truly worked against star creation (as no commentators were around to create them) and (b) contributing to a never-ending spoiler as viewers tweeted results prior to their broadcast airing. Boring coverage 1 – Innovative star creation 0.

A couple weeks prior to the Games, *The New York Times* announced an historic *Facebook*/NBC partnership that would supposedly put star creation in the hands of the viewer. The *Facebook* staff would crunch data and integrate the site’s hot chat topics into televised primetime spots. Despite my obsessive Olympic viewing, I only spotted the *Facebook* content through intermittent appearances by Ryan Seacrest who would note who had garnered the most chat action. Invariably, they were the usual suspects: Michael Phelps, Ryan Lochte, LeBron James, etc. Both untelevisual and distanced from its social media origins, this content brought little to the broadcast and ultimately reinforced established notions of Olympic stardom: high profile, somewhat predictable, and marketable. Boring coverage 2 – innovative star creation 0.

While NBC’s nod toward content democratization provided little innovation in the realm of star creation, user-driven outlets reflected perhaps the more significant contribution of social media

to the Olympics and its participants: snark. Social media's most significant Olympic role may have been the tearing down of heroes before they had even been crowned. Instead of providing a coronation, these sites heckled would-be-heroes before their sweat had dried. While NBC and *Facebook* contributed little, bloggers and meme contributors made sure these elite athletes didn't get too full of themselves.

Popular examples put two gold medalists in their sights: swimmer Lochte and gymnast McKayla Muloney. The Lochte/Phelps rivalry had been one of the biggest stories of the Games. Instead of receiving the star treatment often linked to Phelps (and his mom), Lochte, his "jeah dude" demeanor, and his diamond American flag custom grill inspired *Jezebel's* "10 Reasons Why Ryan Lochte is America's Sexiest Douchebag" just a few days after he took the gold and upset Phelps in the 400IM. Marginalizing his swimming prowess and heralded philanthropic history, the article focused on his giant shoe collection, misogynistic tendencies, and less-than-Einsteinian demeanor. Lochte was an online laughing stock as he was swimming his way to the gold. Similarly, after the predicted gold medal vaulter Maroney fell during her final performance, she looked less than thrilled while receiving her silver medal. The meme "McKayla is Not Impressed" almost immediately went viral, depicting the put-out, medal-winning teen in a number of exciting situations looking "not impressed" (e.g. in front of a double rainbow, at the Mars landing, with Magic Mike). Like Lochte, her Olympic star was doused prior to it truly shining.

While social media—or even gossip rags—had already put serious dents in our reverence for most celebrities (including run-of-the-mill sports stars), I believe the Olympic athletes of prior Games had retained some vestige of otherworldliness. Perhaps it was because they only emerge every four years, and like Brigadoon would disappear until their next miraculous appearance. Sure, they too had been touched by the overall burgeoning sense of celebrity apprehension (e.g. Greg Louganis's sexuality and HIV, Michael Phelps and his bong, etc.), but **during** the actual Games they seemed to have retained a "can't touch this" sheen absent from the London Olympics. Has the democratizing power of the Internet knocked down one of our last sources for American heroes?