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# LOCAL SPORTS



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## Johnson: Winter Olympics sure to create some magic moments

I am planning my February around watching the events

Phil Johnson/For The Daily Gazette | February 1, 2018



Lowell Bailey crosses the finish line in the men's 15km mass start biathlon at the Sochi Olympics in 2014.

PHOTOGRAPHER: KYLE TERADA/USA TODAY SPORTS

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The Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea

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Johnson: The calm of the face by Bob Beattie and Hank Shiro is still striking more than 40 years later. (Check it out on YouTube.)



Then came the Lake Placid Games, in which only the "Miracle on Ice" U.S. hockey team could overshadow what I still believe is the greatest individual performance in any Olympics, winter or summer, by American Eric Heiden with gold medals in all five speedskating events, from 500 to 10,000 meters. No one even attempts that anymore.

Great Olympic moments have involved area athletes, too: Union College graduate Nikki Stone winning the first gold medal awarded in women's aerial freestyle in 1998 and Billy Demong from tiny Vermontville, outside Saranac Lake, who in 2010 won the first gold medal ever by an American in the Nordic Combined discipline.

So what will capture our attention in the coming games?

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Following are some of the athletes and events I will be watching closely:

With the sudden death of world champion and 2010 Games gold medalist Steve Holcomb last spring, 23-year-old Olympic rookie Codie Bascue from Whitehall has suddenly become the top U.S. hope for a medal in bobsled. With former Michigan and NFL running back Sam McGuffie as a pusher, Bascue is a legitimate medal contender.

No American has ever won an Olympic medal in men's luge. Union College sophomore Tucker West has one of the fastest starts in the sport and he has won at the World Cup level. If he can steer four clean runs, he can wind up on the podium.

If putting in your time counts, then Tim Burke from Paul Smiths and Lowell Bailey from Lake Placid should become the first Americans ever to medal in biathlon, the combination of cross country skiing and target shooting that I believe is the most demanding of all individual sports. Both men are in their mid-30s and have been multitime Olympians in a sport in which no American has ever won a medal. Both are expected to retire after the games, and it would be great to see them go out with medals in what I think is the most dramatic sport to watch on TV.

In 2010, Lake Placid's Andrew Weibrecht went from a "who's he" on the World Cup circuit to winning a bronze medal in the Super G alpine event. Four years ago, he topped that with a silver medal in the same event at Sochi, Russia. As in the past, he has not been among the pre-competition favorites, but this 32-year-old seems to thrive on Olympic pressure. Also in the same event will be first-time Olympian Tommy Biesemeyer of Keene, who grew up competing at Whiteface with Weibrecht's younger brother Ethan.

U.S. women's cross country ski athletes have never won an Olympic medal. The team went to Sochi four years ago with high hopes but produced disappointing results. Expectations are high once again. Team leader Kikkan Randall in her fifth Olympics is the one to watch, but also keep an eye on Sophie Caldwell of Peru, Vermont, granddaughter of legendary Nordic coach and author John Caldwell.

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Mikaela Shiffrin has Berkshire County family roots and has been nearly unbeatable this winter, especially in the slalom. She won gold in that event four years ago. She has been so good that the greatest women's skier of all time, Lindsey Vonn, has been almost overlooked. I'll be watching Vonn, whose camera-friendly appearance sometimes overshadows what a tough competitor she is. Vonn has won 79 World Cup competitions, more than any other woman racer and, after many ski-related surgeries in past years, she is healthy again and thus a favorite in the downhill and Super G events.

I will watch snowboard superstar Shaun White compete in his fourth Olympics just so I can say I've seen his "cab double cork 1440" move that helped him score a perfect 100 in the Olympic qualifying event. I'll rely on the announcers to dissect the maneuver. Also, competing in her fifth Olympics will be former gold medalist Kelly Clark, who grew up at Mt. Snow, Vermont.

The Olympics will include 102 events in seven sports. The U.S. will field a team of 242 athletes — 135 men, 107 women — and there will be 92 countries sending competitors. Russia is banned from these Olympics, but there will be Russian athletes not implicated in the doping scandals from 2014. They will be competing under an Olympic flag.

NBC has the broadcast rights and is using its various networks to provide real-time coverage of events. PyeongChang is 14 hours ahead of our time. The opening ceremonies are on Friday, Feb. 9. The closing ceremonies will take place Sunday, Feb 25.

**No drought there**

It has been dry in much of the West this winter, but there was no lack of snow at Schweitzer in northern Idaho or at Whitewater and Red Mountains just over the Canadian border in British Columbia last week. These are not places for those who want easy cruisers. If you want a real test of your skills, put this loop north of Spokane, Washington, on your bucket list.

**Warren Miller**

For more than half a century, Warren Miller films released each fall signaled the start of the ski season in our area. He began his well-chronicled filmmaking career in the late 1940s while living in the parking lot at Sun Valley, Idaho. He has not been involved with the films for years, but the Ski Company continued to bear his name and the annual production remained a favorite among skiers. Miller, whose work did much to popularize skiing throughout the country, died last week at age 93.

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**Council results**

The results are in from the first New York Capital District Ski Council races held recently at Oak Mountain in Speculator, and the posting includes a lot of familiar names. Dave Vanderzee edged longtime Albany Ski Club rival Alfie Merchant to win the men's open division, while Sally Vanderzee took the Open Women's competition.

Other category winners were Mark Pavlus and Tim Jansen on the men's side and Deb Pavlus and Deb Scuderi for the women. Madison Wakefield won the juniors race. The Albany Ski Club's men and women won the team competition with the OC Ski Club second in both.

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