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Learning to Be 2nd-Rate, Gracefully

By Richard Lourie

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Ideally, the Olympics celebrate youth, energy and excellence. But, of course, the games are never free of economics and politics. An obvious example is the slaughter of Israeli athletes by Black September during the 1972 Munich Summer Olympics. The games had a definite Cold War tinge to them in the 1980s, with the United States and 64 other countries boycotting the 1980 Moscow Olympics to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979. In retaliation, the Soviet Union and 17 other countries boycotted the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics.

The Cold War was a rivalry that permeated everything from sports to space. Success in the Olympics was proof of a country's superiority. In those years, it was always the United States and the Soviet Union vying for the greatest number of golds and total medals. More often than not, that victory went to the Soviet Union by a clear margin, although that proved scant proof of any superiority, not to mention longevity.

China was not even among the top 10 in 1988, but four years later it leaped to fourth place. By 2004, it was No. 2, and with the home-court advantage at the 2008 Beijing Games it won

the most gold medals, although the U.S. team still took the greatest overall number of medals. China has now replaced the Soviet Union as the United States' principal rival in nearly every sphere.

The games reflect the power arrangements of the world. The top four countries in the 2012 games — the United States, China, Russia and Britain — are four of the five members of the UN Security Council.

One suspects that the 2014 Sochi Winter Games will be more important for Russia than, say, the 2010 games in Vancouver were for Canada. The 2014 Sochi Winter Games are Russia's chance to rebrand itself after years of mostly well-deserved bad publicity. They can choose to overwhelm with spectacle as the Chinese did, or play creatively with its own culture and history as the Brits did. It is a once-in-a-generation PR opportunity. What Moscow makes of it will show how it wants to be perceived and how adept it is at promoting that image, not to mention how well it runs the actual games themselves, a logistical challenge to say the least.

There was some flap in the world press about London not being ready for security at the games, but James Bond and the queen had their eye on things and there were no troubles to speak of.

Russia might not be so lucky. Putin is only increasing the number of his enemies by his recent actions: harsh laws, harsh arrests and harsh sentences. The world's media will attend the games, making them a perfect venue for protests, demonstration and political street theater. The North Caucasus, which abuts Sochi, is "pacified" but still rife with Islamist militants who have to view the 2014 Winter Games as the perfect opportunity to discredit and disgrace Putin.

It would be nice if the Russians used the games to show off their history and culture: enactments of the "1812 Overture," the Battle of Stalingrad or the Bolshoi on skates. It would also be nice if the Russians learned from the Brits how to become second-rate, gracefully. But little of that is likely to happen.

The Sochi Games could be the moment of truth for the Putin regime as a target for protest and terrorism. The games begin on Feb. 7, 2014. Putin has 17 months to get his house in order.

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