

Going For Gold

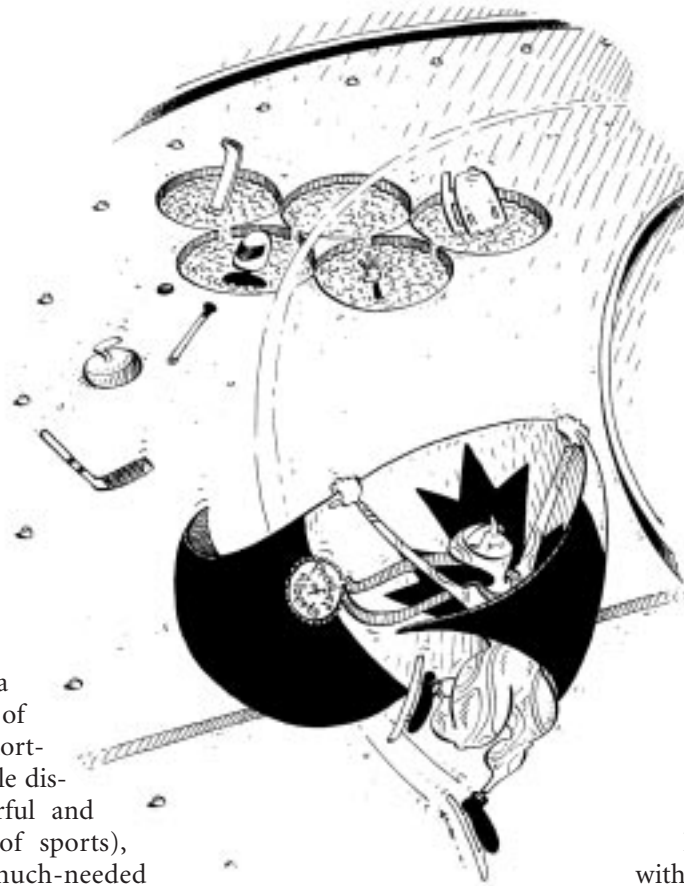
BY FRED STENSON

The victory of the men's and women's hockey teams at the Olympics this past winter, plus the much publicized Sale/Pelletier rise to gold in pairs figure skating, and (my own personal favourite) Catriona LeMay Doan's claiming of her rightful crown in short-track speed skating (while displaying the most cheerful and warming smile in all of sports), together provided a much-needed tonic to Canada's cyclical desire to bash itself to death.

Prior to those glorious victories, I had listened in dismay for months (since 9-11) as our national journalists found daily fault with something Canadian. They took turns portraying Canada as a weak kitten, a spoiled kitten, a kitten with a faltering currency, a kitten without claws (no military might or preparedness), dependent on the new Romans to the south for protection; with a porous, overly kind immigration policy that was an open invitation to passport printers and terrorists. What's wrong with this country? went the collective refrain until, thank goodness for

bread and circuses, the Olympics arrived.

As you'll recall, in the early days of the Olympics, the nay-sayers were hardly silent: they were striving for climax, going for their own personal best. The defeat of the men's hockey team at the hands of the Swedes in the first game meant that Canada's hockey power was ancient history. Every slip-up on ice or snow, every low finish, was trumpeted as proof that this country was a sporting failure, let's face it. And every time, the hint was there that it meant something bigger, something beyond the



arena and the slopes: a national flabbiness, a lack of grit, a lack of finish.

Then came the final days, when all was golden. The record for Canadian medals was eclipsed, and the chorus of grim-faced predictors of doom slunk back into the shadows, awaiting its next chance to come forward and wax miserable.

I agree something is sorely wrong with Canada. The moaning chorus, that's what. The ones who go to pieces in a shower of words every time they get the chance. Collectively, they make up what I will call "the old sow," in honour of James Joyce who once called Ireland "the old sow who eats her farrow." It's not a pretty phrase but it sums up that need to go masochistically ballistic, to tear yourself to the ground without fear or favour, to look beyond your borders and see a sea of green, the unrecognized reflection of your own envy.

I'm afraid Canada has this illness. Maybe we can change before it becomes an ingrained national habit, an ethnic characteristic.

Alberta could well be the salvation

of Canada, because of its unique freedom from the habit of self-mockery. One of the very fine things about being Albertan is that we are as confident of our abilities as the rest of Canada isn't. And we are good. Everything—from our curlers to our opera singers to our chemical engineers and artists—excels, and excels internationally (though it's another of my themes that you'll never excel internationally unless you do locally first). Excelling is an Albertan habit, made easier by a certain amount of gift-in-the-ground good fortune, but a habit nonetheless.

Does that sound arrogant? Of course it does. But that's something else we're good at and not too worried about. If the price of being good is being arrogant, well, let's pay it.

This turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy as people who want to live in an aura of brash self-confidence come to Alberta. So, if you didn't have enough success to start with, new Albertans keep coming and providing it. It's a "build it and they will come" thing, best exemplified by the winter athletes themselves. In order to host the '88 Winter Olympics, Calgary built the speed-skating oval and the various devices for getting down a hill fast at Canada Olympic Park. In order to train, the athletes pour in from all over Canada, live here, and we claim them. When I drive down Country Hills Boulevard in Calgary and read the sign at Home Depot that says Canadian Olympic hockey player Danielle Gauthier works there, it gives me a rush. I don't ask myself whether she is a native or an import. She's Calgaryan at the moment. Yahoo!

If this means that Albertans are chauvinistic, I welcome the charge. (I remind everyone that chauvinism is not about males, but was named for a soldier of Napoleon's famous for his pro-French extremism.) I am deeply suspicious of people who are not chauvinistic. Their emotional parsimony (I bet they're bad tippers too) is the kind that will not celebrate the local living author, preferring the

national or international or dead one instead. Alberta is blessedly free of this. As proof, I acknowledge and thank the fifteen or so Calgary book clubs that read my last novel and invited me out to visit them last winter. To those in the rest of the country who during the last great moan extended the weak-kitten theory to include Canadian literature, shame on you. It's a false sophistication indeed that has to be told by the so-called internationals that we are good before they believe it.

The other thing Albertans are good at, international stars in fact, is going gaga. Calgary got the Winter Olympics in 1988 at least in part because of its well-proven ability to go gaga on demand. We do it every summer for the Stampede. We're in practice. Edmonton is a bit quieter, but it votes with its feet. It proclaims itself the City of Festivals, and indeed has so many that, come summer, you might have to attend two a day. There is not much point in being excellent if no one notices, and that's where the enthusiasts come in.

Is the situation perfect, then, in Alberta? Unfortunately no. The empty seats at the Saddledome, causing Calgary Flames' ownership to announce an unwillingness to lose money indefinitely, are a concern. The lame Loon is blamed, but that sounds like an excuse, especially when the league's highest scoring player of 2001-2, Jerome Iginla, was on our team. Buy the local product at the local cost is an anthem the globalizers scoff at, but it did all right for the French, Australian and California wine industries, all of whom had to be local successes before they could be international ones. Don't falter now, Calgary. Buy some Flames tickets as opposed to joining in when the next national whine starts smashing crystal. Let the short-pour, bad-tip brigade pass us by. They're un-Albertan, and, if we have our way, they'll be un-Canadian too.

Fred Stenson has written more than 130 produced films and videos, and eight published books of fiction and non-fiction.