

Mesmerized By A Miracle

Written by {ga=skatingtripods}
Thursday, February 21 2008 7:00 PM -

There are few moments in the history of the United States where people remember where they were to the exact, including time and place. 9/11, the Challenger explosion, the assassination of JFK just to name a few. All of those have one thing in common; they are events that nobody wants to reminisce about. But 28 years ago today, a ragtag bunch of American college students gave us all a positive memory we will never forget. Adam Burke celebrates the anniversary of the greatest upset in sports history.



There are few moments in the history of the United States where people remember where they were to the exact, including time and place. 9/11, the *Challenger* explosion, the assassination of JFK just to name a few. All of those have one thing in common; they are events that nobody wants to reminisce about.

Twenty eight years ago, a ragtag bunch of American college students gave all Americans (and Soviets) something that will never be forgotten. It was the stuff that fairy tales are made of. A severe underdog slaying the almighty dragon. In a quaint little New York town, hidden in the sanctity of the Adirondack Mountains, politics met head on with skates, sticks and pucks. The greatest miracle the sports world has ever seen, and nobody saw it live on television. The game was tape delayed at 5 p.m. because the Russians refused to move the game to 8 p.m. and into primetime.

On February 22, 1980, in Lake Placid, New York, the United States of America Men's Olympic hockey team faced the Soviet Red Army Olympians for the second time in two weeks. After being completely drubbed at Madison Square Garden 10-3, nobody gave the Americans a chance. The drama had been building throughout the tournament. An unlikely last-minute tie with Sweden, a blowout of the consensus #2 team in the world, Czechoslovakia, and methodical wins over

Mesmerized By A Miracle

Written by {ga=skatingtripods}
Thursday, February 21 2008 7:00 PM -

Norway and West Germany led to the medal round matchup of the Stars and Stripes and the Hammer and Sickle.

With Cold War tensions and the Iran Hostage Crisis casting a dark pall over the games, the U.S. needed something to be proud about. Legendary coach Herb Brooks and his tenacious team of twenty did just that. Armed with telegrams, one from Texas encouraging them to "Beat those Commie bastards", and the fighting spirit of a team that believed in itself, the 1980 United States hockey team pulled off the impossible.

The U.S team had come from behind in every game of the Olympics. This one was no different. The Americans fell behind 1-0 before Buzz Schneider ripped a slapshot past Vladislav Tretiak's glove side to tie the game. Three and a half minutes later, the Soviets scored again. Hopes remained high, though. The U.S. team was actually in the game after the first period. Then, lightning unexpectedly struck. Mark Johnson personified the American drive to play until the buzzer, slid between two Soviet defensemen and put a rebound past Tretiak with one second remaining.

To start the second period, Soviet coach Viktor Tikhonov benched all-world goaltender Vladislav Tretiak. The move energized his team, and led to a 12-2 shots on goal advantage, with the Soviet Union taking a 3-2 lead at the end of 40 minutes. The shots on goal after two periods - 30-10.

To say that this final 20 minutes of hockey is legendary is an understatement. To say that it is the greatest sports moment of all time can be debated, but to those that saw it, those that lived it, or the American hockey fans that were too young to be a part of it will never dispute the immense importance of this game to the world of hockey and the American spirit.

A broken play tied the game. Dave Silk got upended at the Soviet blue line and on his way down pushed the puck towards the net. Mark Johnson picked up the loose puck and snapped it past Vladimir Myshkin to tie the game at three. The powerplay goal, at the 8:39 mark of the third period, energized a team, a building, an Olympic village, and would energize the country when the game was finally shown.

Coach Herb Brooks was the final player cut from the 1960 gold medal winning team at the Squaw Valley Winter Games. The 1980 team captain, Mike Eruzione,

Mesmerized By A Miracle

Written by {ga=skatingtripods}
Thursday, February 21 2008 7:00 PM -

was nearly the last cut from the 1980 team. Eruzione, kept because of his leadership, scored the biggest goal in United States Olympic hockey history. His name in Italian means eruption. The tiny town of Lake Placid saw one at the 10:00 mark of the third period. Eruzione took a fantastic pass from Mark Pavelich and, using the Soviet defenseman as a screen, beat Myshkin to trigger complete jubilation.

The game was now up to Boston University stud Jim Craig. Craig, who had lost his mother to an illness just months before the games, had been the team's backbone throughout the games. En route to making 36 saves in the game, Craig shut the door for the final ten minutes, aided by some outstanding play by his teammates. Brooks wanted to piece together a team that could outwork anybody and their work ethic shined in that final half a period.

As Al Michaels noted in the HBO special, "Do You Believe In Miracles?", the only word that came to mind during the final half minute was "miraculous". That phrase will forever live in sports lore. Possibly the purest celebration in sports ensued. Herb Brooks threw his hands in the air and then disappeared down the tunnel. Assistant coach Craig Patrick met Mark Johnson and they embraced. Defenseman Jack O'Callahan, injured in the first game against the Soviets, jumped a fellow teammate, launching his arms to the heavens. Teammates piled on to goaltender Jim Craig.

The chain reaction began shortly thereafter. The game played at 8 on ABC and, though some people already knew the outcome, it did not matter. For a country so desperate for some good news, especially good news to occur on American soil, this game was a respite from the troubles at home and abroad. For one night, inflation did not matter. Fuel shortages and Cold War fears were dwarfed in comparison to the miracle they had witnessed.

Many people forget that this game did not win the gold medal for the Americans. In fact, if the Americans lost badly enough to Finland, it was possible for them to not even medal. But coming from behind again, the Americans scored three unanswered goals on February 24, 1980, to win 4-2 and celebrate the first United States Men's Olympic Hockey Gold Medal in 20 years.

Often times, in sports, it is impossible to measure the effect of the game on the population. For some of us, baseball coming back after 9/11 put the magnitude of sports into perspective, and that's all we can draw from. Personally, I was born six

Mesmerized By A Miracle

Written by {ga=skatingtripods}

Thursday, February 21 2008 7:00 PM -

years after the miracle. As a hockey fan, it touches me more than any other hockey moment ever, and I was not even alive to witness it. I cry out of sheer joy any time I see the game replayed. For me to try and put this game into perspective is the greatest service I can do the game of hockey in America. For those that lived it and experienced it, can remember where they were when they heard, or where they watched the game, it is probably impractical for any piece of writing to do it justice.

The game did not solve the Cold War. It did not end the Hostage Crisis. The population's finances were still shaky and there were long lines at the gas pumps on days when fuel was available. Even still, Americans were once again able to be proud. As one sportswriter once noted, "It wasn't that they [the 1980 U.S. Team] beat the Russians. We beat the Russians."

At the medal ceremony, twenty young men received their gold medals. After the national anthem finished, Captain Mike Eruzione motioned for his teammates to join him on the podium. All twenty inexplicably fit on the platform, maybe a miracle in and of itself. For those men, many of whom did not taste an ounce of professional success in the NHL, they did their country proud. As Kurt Russell's character Herb Brooks says at the end of the Disney movie "Miracle", "But on one weekend, as America and the world watched, a group of remarkable young men gave the nation what it needed most - a chance, for one night, not only to dream, but a chance, once again, to believe."

I believe in miracles. And you should too.