

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/02/09/AR2006020902213_2.html

For Some, Bearing the Flag Is No Light Moment

An Exhausting Experience Can Also Provide a Memorable Thrill

By Les Carpenter
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, February 10, 2006; Page E09

TURIN, Italy, Feb. 9 -- They were looking at the flag, not at Cynthia Nelson, but the roar that smacked into her face that night now 30 years ago nearly knocked her off her feet. This was the Opening Ceremonies of the Innsbruck Olympics and someone had just handed Nelson, a young blond skier from Minnesota, the American flag she would have to carry step by delicate step down into the stadium, a converted ski jump venue.

One misplaced foot and she would go tumbling through the stands. Her hands felt heavy, the flag weighed far more than she expected and the crowd screamed so loudly for the U.S. colors that she wasn't sure she could still stand up. She was supposed to ski the next morning, a medal at stake. But down she walked.

Through perhaps the most anxious 10 minutes of her life.

And into the greatest experience she would ever remember.

"I had no idea how inspiring it was to me the rest of my life," she said this week from her home in Vail, Colo. "Now in hindsight I see how privileged I felt to do this. It's even greater than having the medals hang around your neck."

Friday, another Olympics will begin and 80 flag-bearers, including U.S. speedskater Chris Witty, will march around the circle of the Olympic Stadium. For most it will undoubtedly be as stirring a moment as Nelson recalls. "I'm getting goose bumps just talking about it," she said with a laugh.

Yet it also might be one of the most exhausting days of their lives. It will begin with a bus ride to the stadium, a three-hour wait to march inside, another two hours of standing with the flag in hand and then more bus rides that could make the whole experience a six-hour ordeal.

Already a great stir has arisen in Canada where cross-country skier Beckie Scott, her event less than two full days after the end of the Opening Ceremonies, told the Canadian Olympic Committee that she didn't want to be chosen to carry the flag, opting to concentrate on her performance. Three other Canadians -- speedskaters Cindy Klassen and Clara Hughes and bobsled world champion Pierre Lueders -- also reportedly asked to be dropped from consideration for the same reason.

The news might have slipped past most Canadians' awareness had not hockey broadcaster Don Cherry, one of the country's most obstreperous voices, seized upon it during a recent telecast.

"The thing is they don't care," he said. "That nonsense about getting prepared? How long does it take? A little walk around? Come out and say you don't care but don't say 'it will upset my performance,' that's ridiculous."

The resulting public quarrel lasted for days until late last month when Canada ultimately named women's hockey player Danielle Goyette as its flag-bearer. Goyette accepted her task, expressed appreciation and the controversy slowly died away.

But the question remained: Just how hard is it to carry a flag in the Opening Ceremonies?

"My event was the next day and when you train for your sport you get into a routine so that when that event comes to the month, to the day, to the hour, you have to be your best," said Frank Masley, who carried the American flag into the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics and competed in the luge the next day. "So you learn how to do that routine for your body. The day before you don't want to be waiting three hours outside the stadium and then be bused somewhere."

Then he paused.

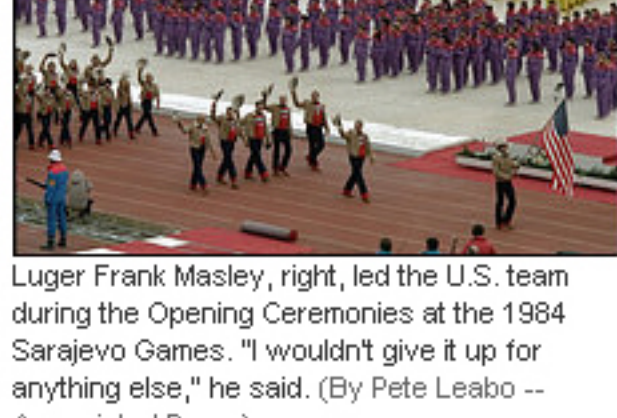
"But I wouldn't give it up for anything else," said Masley, who now lives in Delaware, where he runs a company that makes gloves for the military. "The thrill will take you a long way, too."

The wait might be interminable, the standing around might wear on the knees and the flag, at least in Nelson's case, can be surprisingly heavy, but to the people who have carried it, the experience was so magical they hardly seemed to mind.

Like Masley, Nelson's event -- the downhill race -- was the next day and she won a bronze, which met her wildest expectations. When asked whether the previous night's activities kept her from gold or silver, she laughed.

"The Olympics are so much bigger than the individual's performance," Nelson said. "You are representing your country and you are representing your country's athletes. What you achieve when you win gold, silver or bronze, it's a personal achievement. It's not the same thing as the honor of being the flag-bearer."

[Enlarge This Photo](#)



Luger Frank Masley, right, led the U.S. team during the Opening Ceremonies at the 1984 Sarajevo Games. "I wouldn't give it up for anything else," he said. (By Pete Leabo -- Associated Press)

LATEST FROM THE WIRES

- [IOC OKs Way to Change Olympic Sports](#)
- [Dope Rules May Cost Sports Olympic Spots](#)
- [Russia's St Petersburg to bid for 2020 Games](#)
- [Olympics Highlight Human Rights in China](#)
- [IOC to Kick Off Youth Olympics in 2010](#)

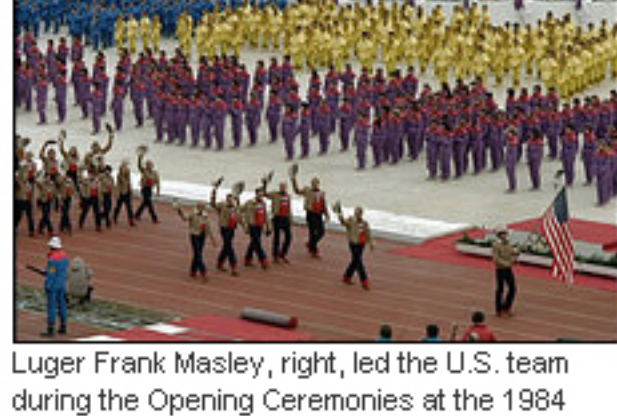
[More News](#)

SAVE & SHARE ARTICLE [What's This?](#)

[Digg](#) [Google](#)
[del.icio.us](#) [Yahoo!](#)
[Reddit](#) [Facebook](#)

Advertisement

[Enlarge This Photo](#)



Luger Frank Masley, right, led the U.S. team during the Opening Ceremonies at the 1984 Sarajevo Games. "I wouldn't give it up for anything else," he said. (By Pete Leabo -- Associated Press)

LATEST FROM THE WIRES

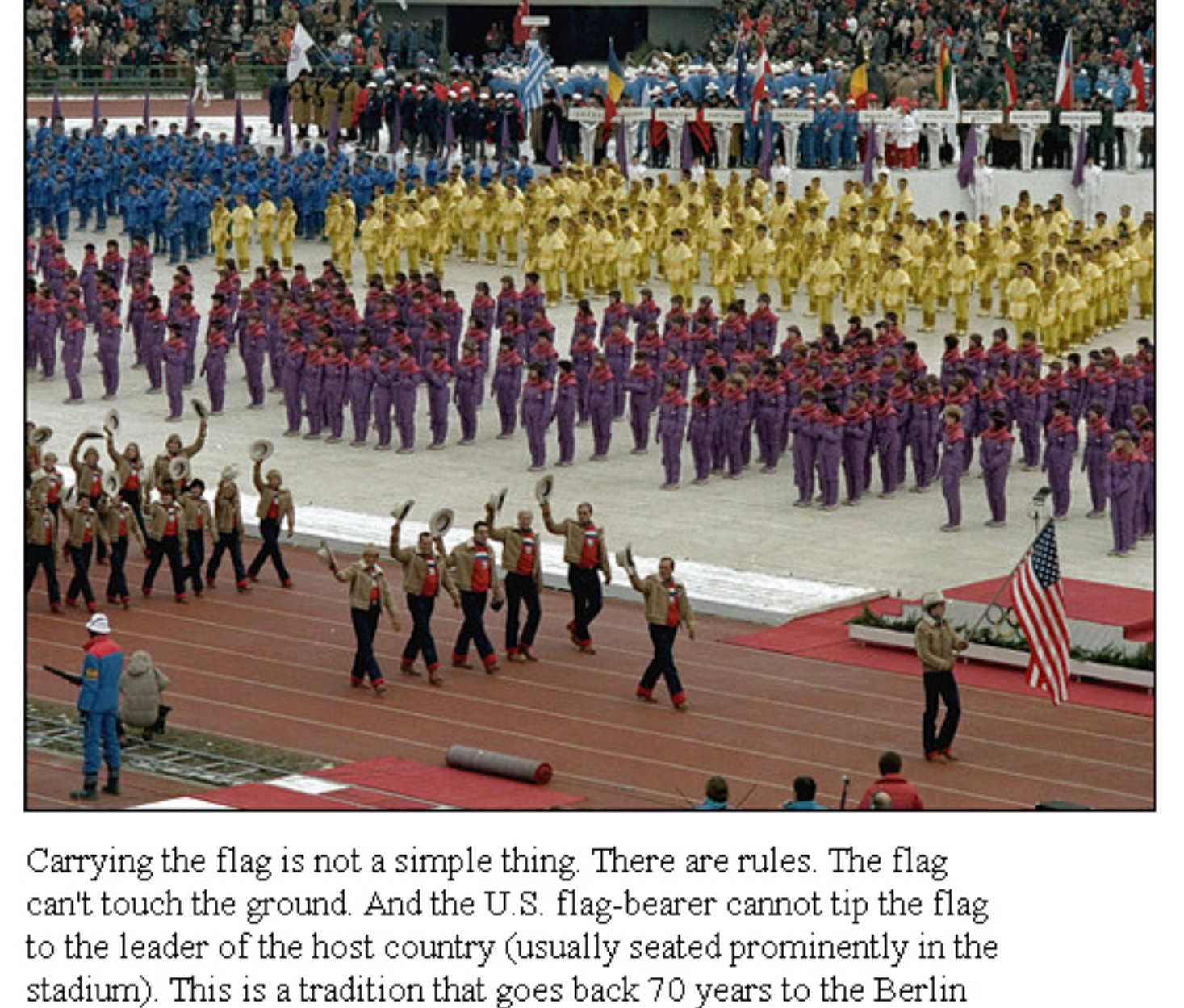
- [IOC OKs Way to Change Olympic Sports](#)
- [Dope Rules May Cost Sports Olympic Spots](#)
- [Russia's St Petersburg to bid for 2020 Games](#)
- [Olympics Highlight Human Rights in China](#)
- [IOC to Kick Off Youth Olympics in 2010](#)

[More News](#)

SAVE & SHARE ARTICLE [What's This?](#)

[Digg](#) [Google](#)
[del.icio.us](#) [Yahoo!](#)
[Reddit](#) [Facebook](#)

Advertisement



Carrying the flag is not a simple thing. There are rules. The flag can't touch the ground. And the U.S. flag-bearer cannot tip the flag to the leader of the host country (usually seated prominently in the stadium). This is a tradition that goes back 70 years to the Berlin Olympics when the U.S. delegation refused to acknowledge Germany's Adolf Hitler.

But the instructions for this don't seem to be consistent. Masley remembers U.S. Olympic Committee officials simply telling him "to have fun." But Cammy Myler, the 1994 flag-bearer, said she was given specific directions. The most important: Don't tip it.

Of course instructions are quickly forgotten in the frenzy of the moment. Masley was so thrilled in Sarajevo that he forgot to nod to the Yugoslavian leader in lieu of tipping the flag.

"I felt funny carrying [the flag] with two hands because it was so light," he said. "But I thought it was more dignified to carry it with two."

He had a race in a matter of hours. There was a bus ride the next morning to the mountains and he had drawn the first run. His training routine had been blown to pieces but still he didn't want to leave. He wanted something more, something to prove he was there. He clutched his flag in a vise grip.

For a moment he thought he was going to get out of the stadium with the Stars and Stripes but there was a volunteer from the Olympics chasing him down. Please, she begged, she was supposed to collect all the flags from the marchers.

Masley said "no." Then he saw the frantic look in the volunteer's eyes.

"I broke," he said.

He handed his flag to the woman, leaving him to live the next 22 years with the memory of the longest but greatest day of his life.