

# Sochi games influenced by Lake Placid winter Olympics of 1932

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Eight crashes that sent more than a dozen competitors to the hospital marred bobsled practice runs leading up to the 1932 winter Olympic games in Lake Placid, N.Y., but as dramatic as those incidents were, they also provide insight into more ordinary factors that continue to influence the Olympics, according to a Penn State researcher.

"The crashes occurred on the Mt. Van Hoevenberg slide, which was specially built for the games at Lake Placid," said Peter Hopsicker, associate professor of kinesiology. "How that facility came to be established provides an historic precedent that has shaped the Olympics since then, including Sochi games."

The winter Olympics were first organized in 1924, and the Lake Placid games were the first to be held in the United States. The upstate New York location was chosen largely in response to the efforts of Godfrey Dewey, who held investments in Lake Placid as a recreational area and hoped to use the Olympics as a springboard for the region's development as an international winter sports resort.

"The bob-run was the centerpiece—you can't have a winter Olympics without it, it's expensive but essential," said Hopsicker, who describes the bob-run's planning and construction in the spring issue of the *Journal of Sport History*. "Dewey lobbied heavily to have it located proximate to the tourist villages of Lake Placid and Saranac Lake, yet the state's environmental policies protected the public Adirondack wilderness."

Dewey ran headlong into a conservation group, the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, which took legal steps to block his efforts to develop the bob-run on public land, triggering the first battle between developers of an Olympics host city and environmental stewards.

The issue became wrapped in politics when New York Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt balked at spending public funds to build the bob-run no matter where it was located. Dewey lost the battle with the environmentalists and built a world-class bob-run on a privately owned site christened Mt. Van Hoevenberg, but he did persuade Roosevelt to allocate state funds for the games.

The completed slide provided unique challenges for the athletes. "It had pronounced drops in the curves," Hopsicker said, "something new to the sport."

While Dewey provided bobsleds for all international teams, the Germans brought their own sleds built for a more European snow-covered surface. The Germans' unwillingness to use Dewey's sleds that were built with the qualities of the Lake Placid slide in mind contributed significantly to the subsequent German crashes during practice runs. Sochi's slide also has a unique design with sections that have upward slopes.

"The gamesmanship evident at Lake Placid has been present in all the Olympics since then," Hopsicker said.

Dewey failed in his attempt to use the Olympic games to make the Lake Placid a premier winter sports destination, although the bob-run was also used in the 1980 Lake Placid Olympic games.

The 1932 games have largely gone unnoticed by historians and in public memory, said Hopsicker, who grew up not far from Lake Placid.

"The 1932 games were overshadowed by the so-called Hitler games of the 1936 summer Olympics in Berlin," Hopsicker said, "And largely because of the worldwide economic depression, Lake Placid drew the fewest participating nations for any of the Winter Games. But it had a lasting influence on the Olympics that was out of proportion to its size."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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