

And the Games Went on Without Them



At a White House reception, President Carter greets **SUE WALSH** and 1980 teammates, (outfitted by Levi Strauss) making the best of a disappointing year.

> **F**or a group of swimmers ascending in the late 1970s, the Summer Olympics of 1980 was an all-consuming dream. Some were looking to cap successful careers, others were up-and-coming long shots and many were about to miss a narrow window of Olympic opportunity.

When the U.S. Olympic Committee voted on April 22, 1980, to boycott the Moscow Summer Olympics, thus supporting President Carter in protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S. Olympic swim trials had not even been held, recalls backstroker Sue Walsh, then 18. "Obviously, it was upsetting," she says, recounting how she finished high school a semester early so she could train full time.

Susan von der Lippe (formerly Rapp) was 15 and angry. "I thought how dare those politicians take away so much from athletes who've trained so hard," she recalls.

"The boycott was pretty devastating," says Peter Rocca,

who was one year out of college and hanging tight for the Olympic trials.

Not every swimmer showed and some had tapered early, but nationals went on in Irvine, Calif., with Rocca winning first and second in the 100-meter and 200-meter backstroke, respectively, Walsh earning second in the 100-meter back and Rapp claiming third in the 200-meter breast. The trio made an Olympic team whose members would tour China, Hawaii and the White House, but not test its mettle in full competition.

Von der Lippe would go on to win silver in the 1984 Olympics, but Rocca and Walsh faced disappointment a second time. Walsh, who had set an American record in the 100-meter backstroke at the 1983 Pan-Am Games, missed out on the '84 team by 1/100ths of a second, placing third at the exact time the IOC rules changed to admit only the top-two finishers to the Olympic team. "I think that was the hardest thing, honestly," Walsh

says. "That was a bummer."

Rocca, who had staged a comeback in order "to go out on his own terms," also placed third at the trials. "The boycott hit me twice," he says, noting that the rule change was politically motivated against the U.S. By then 27, Rocca decided to retire.

Walsh, an eight-time NCAA champion at the University of North Carolina, reached a crossroad. "The thought of four more years of training and staying at that level was hard," she says. "When I was swimming, it was pretty much when you were done with college, you get a job and move on."

Twenty-six years later, Walsh, Rocca and von der Lippe have discovered Masters and are philosophical about swimming and occasionally competing. "Yes, making an Olympic team is a goal, but it's the process of getting there," Walsh says. "It's not the end of the journey." <<<

A DREAM DEFERRED

>>> The U.S.-led boycott of the Games of the XXII Olympiad—the first to be held in a Communist country—reduced the number of participating nations to 80, the lowest number since 1956. Television coverage of the Olympic Games in the U.S. was minimal.

>>> The Olympic Games were plagued by charges of rigged judging and poor sportsmanship by Moscow fans, who reportedly booed the Poles and East Germans.

>>> When the Olympics traveled to Los Angeles in 1984, Russia and 14 Eastern Bloc nations led a boycott of their own, citing safety concerns for their athletes and depriving U.S. swimmers of their toughest competitors.

>>> The 1980 Olympic swimming trials were the last year for the top-three finishers to earn a spot on the team. In 1984, an IOC rule change, that many believe was orchestrated to prevent U.S. medal sweeps, admitted only the top-two finishers to the Olympic team.

>>> A number of 1980 Olympians have participated in Masters swimming including Susan (Rapp) von der Lippe, Sue Walsh, Chris Cavanaugh, Brian Goodell, Ambrose "Rowdy" Gaines, Glenn Mills and Peter Rocca.

>>> In 1996, at the age of 35, Rowdy Gaines became the oldest swimmer at that time to qualify for the U.S. Olympic Trials, but ultimately chose not to compete.

>>> In 2005, Susan von der Lippe, 40, a member of Colorado Masters, became the oldest person to qualify for the Olympic Trials in 2008. "I wanted to earn a deck pass," she quips.

Sources: The International Olympic Committee, www.infoplease.com, CNN