

*Precis: After watching the media's coverage of the lead up to and including the competition of the recent Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy, I was moved to write this essay on Bode Miller, a person I find incredibly intriguing.*

## Deconstructing Bode

American sport fans are many things. But most of all they are opportunist. The paradigm of sport fanaticism is complicating and compelling. Every journalist with a Blackberry, a laminated credential and an opinion thinks they have it all figured out. They *know* why Americans failed to finish atop the patriotic medal haul in Torino. They *know* why Lindsey Jacobellis altered her snowboard's angle of attack. And they *know* Bode.

So many of American sport journalists of late have become like water running downhill, taking the path of least resistance. To peel back the layers of a sport's evolving culture or the psychosocial intricacies of its stars is to step away from the paint-by-number narratives that are prescribed by the those who benefit from the reinforcement of such traditional American themes as patriotism, sacrifice, deferred gratification, the Protestant work ethic and victory above all else. Accessible and relative story lines are easy to write, easy to read and rarely ruffle any media mogul feathers.

But as the media technosphere expands, so does its insatiable thirst for content. The collateralization of truth has become a discursive sidebar. If the ducks are quacking, feed them. And give it to them in small, easy to chew bites.

But what happens when someone like Bode Miller comes along and, regardless of how his image is shape-shifted by those profiting off his refreshing candor, he just doesn't fit any preconceived mold? Going into the Winter Olympics, everyone loved Bode for his, "Do it my way" approach. That much we could get a handle. And even when he admitted to the heinous crime of skiing down a snow-covered mountain after a night of celebratory excess, he was forgiven. His penance, as brought down by the American public and forged in stone by its mouthpiece sports journalist, was simply an Olympic medal for each finger, for each pint of debauchery he must've ingested.

Does it really matter whether his agent secured the interviews and sponsors? In all honesty, does Miller come off as a "media-hound?"

Immediately after I won my first Ironman World Triathlon Championship in 1982, ABC's Jim Lampley pulled me into the camera's frame and asked what I'd done different from the previous year when I'd lost chunks of time to my neophyte cycling skills.

"I learned how to ride a bike," I quipped without consideration or motive. I was tired and had no need for his Wide World of Sports. There was a job I would be at come Monday morning. Fame had no purchase on my comment nor my soul. I was telling the truth, succinctly and without pretense. But I sounded arrogant. The network cut to the women's race and I was subjugated to the editing room payback. Months later when I looked at finding a sponsor to enable a full-time commitment to training and racing, I had companies tell me that I wasn't a "good fit." Translation: You're a risk we can't afford.

Bode Miller told the world he wasn't that excited about Olympic medals; that he skied for his own personal edification; his own validation; his own simple, home-schooled joy.

"Those are other's expectations," he said when asked about his chances for medals. And the public thought it was all some self-constructed psych job, a simple case of pre-Olympic posturing. Brilliant tactic, the journalists said, a great way to reduce the pressure. The kid is as smart as he appears to be.

Until he was true to his word. Things that bode well did not end well.

It appears that it was our own projected narrative, a beguiling disappointment. It was our own media-fueled aggrandizing that crept into our collective psyches and confounded the hell out of us. Bode didn't get the job done. For himself or for us. Was it lack of commitment, late night distractions or the vicissitudes of competitive skiing—stuff just happens?

Now, with our egos too fragile to blame, we point the proverbial finger at those who might absorb our Pontius Piloted-wrath. Bode Miller should have opted out, the journos are claiming, should've let someone more wanting, take his spot. The coaches should've known this would happen. Of course, we all saw it coming. Didn't we?

But did we really see? We saw a young man, lacking but not wanting savvy PR skills, approach his sport no different than he always has—with a liberating kind of desire to ski fast, to ski raw and to create his own meaning through it all. We saw it in his eyes as he stood in the gatehouse awaiting his run. He, more than all of us, wanted badly to do what he was capable of. It just had nothing to do with scores and results and remuneration.

Indeed, there was no denying the look of disappointment when he failed to meet his own set of standards. Even as his words were twisted and

turned back on him and he assigned no responsibility for something that he never promised to deliver, there was a kind of pathos permeating the air. We couldn't feel sorry for Bode because he seemed above the pain of loss. But we weren't. And when America gets its ass kicked, someone has to pay.

So, we allowed Bode Miller to be publicly crucified by every sports journalist who may have felt jilted when Miller wouldn't invite them in and explain his enigmatic intellect to them in plain speak. Miller had become not only a prisoner of his own success but a victim of the dark culture of popular aristocracy.

He was, as his altruistic father, Woody said, "In a double bind."

Therein lay the duel-sided dilemma—Bode's approach to competition is a story we are not familiar with. We may covet his orgiastic potency, his *jouissance* for life, but there are conditions. His is a narrative we will never be shown in the mainstream press because it is counterproductive to our capitalistic ideologies. General George Custer did not turn around at the Dakota border, stating, "This is plenty of land for the people of our country. There are others here who have a different philosophy about the hills." Americans don't stand in their stadium seats and chant, "We're number Two!"

Sports reportage now leads the way in media's situational ethics. The fans want the real deal, so long as it's not too real; like cast members from *Survivor* eating bugs...but they're cute bugs without 16 legs and antennae. Is there a person among us who would dispute the thought that, had Lindsey Jacobellis landed her penultimate jump, her "show boating" Method Air and retained the gold medal, the descriptive would instead be, "display of skill," "artistic panache" or "America's fanciful youth?"

If Bode Miller had won an Olympic gold medal, something that might've been decided by inches and mille-seconds, how secretly proud would Americans have been of a "guy who can drink beer at night and kick the world's ass in the morning."

How could he ever expect to simultaneously fulfill his own and a country's dichotomous expectations? Maybe he should have stayed home and allowed us to berate him for a far worse crime—failure to try on *anyone's* terms. But he seems above that. Even if we are not below it.

In near predictable irony, the plot thickens. Nike, in its own iconoclastic genius, has cherry-picked Bode's valid attempt at self-revelation and woven it into brilliantly-edited commercials that both offer us a teasing hint at the reluctant skier and tempt us to do our own thing by buying their things.

And quite possibly Miller knows that money is freedom. Okay, so the system paid him for his image and his likeness. We celebrate capitalism but shoot the down the capitalist.

But if Bode continues to ski competitively, and we must hope that he does, the hungry masses will forgive him as we've forgiven Kobe, and Tyson and Bonds and any athlete/hero figure that can offer us something that we covet—the ability to be one of the very best and something altogether different from the norm.

Without a tangible narrative from Mr. Miller, we will create our own, persuading the subconscious to think he really did want to make America proud. The timing was just off. And those new skis weren't quite right.

Or maybe at some point in the distant future, the “Miller Chronicles” will become a parable of sorts where his acculturated name will morph from pronoun to verb—to *Bode* is to pull a *Thoreau*, to live on one's own terms and the hell with the rest. Quite possibly even Miller doesn't understand his place in the immediate and distant future of sport and popular culture. If Bode Miller is to ever achieve the iconoclastic verve that was so attractive to us before it was torpedoed by falsely-perceived failure, he will need to drop the sponsors and magazine covers and disappear into his thickly-forested youth. Yoda might've enjoyed “socializing at on Olympic level,” but he never had a slick website.

Regardless of how we feel about Bode Miller's Olympic experience, if we wanted to embody the best part of his home-schooled wisdom we'd turn off the TV, run naked through the snow and use the sport pages for other woodsy activities that are befitting of the way he's been treated. To know Bode Miller is wonder what ever happened to him.

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