At the Salt Lake City Olympics in 2002, Norwegian sports fans seemingly could not allow their arms to drop for more than a few seconds. Their athletes had a good Olympics, winning one medal after another, many of them gold. In contrast, Sweden had to be ‘content’ with two silvers and four bronze medals.

When the Norwegians were certain that their triumph over their closest neighbour was assured, the nation’s tabloids began to enjoy themselves. One newspaper, Dagbladet began a daily briefing detailing the length of time since Sweden had won a gold. Another, VG, noted that Sweden had set up a telephone helpline for depressed sports fans. Later, the newspaper suggested sending a group of bishops to Salt Lake City to offer the Swedes some much-needed divine intervention. And so it went on.

'To lose to a Swede is seen as the worst thing that can happen to a Norwegian sportsman' sociologist Gerd von der Lippe tells Play the game. A Norwegian herself, von der Lippe views the rivalry in partly historical terms. 'To beat Sweden or to see that nation do badly is seen as compensation for Norway's political subservience to Sweden between 1814 and 1905,' she says.

Moreover, she claims, 'Norway's anti-Swedish euphoria could be an attempt to compensate for the fact that Sweden boasts greater political and economic influence on the world stage. 'In today's world of global issues and international business mergers, Norwegians are left with the impression that their country lacks influence,' she continues.

'When the Norwegian media holds the Swedes up to ridicule and scorn,' she adds, 'they are attempting to create a national identity at the expense of their neighbours. 'First and foremost, the construction of a national identity is about what a nation is lacking. Only afterwards is it about what a nation can celebrate. Most Norwegians prefer to see themselves as ‘special’ people – ‘we’ as opposed to Sweden – ‘the others.’"

Clean and honest

Norway’s athletes won a total of 11 gold medals in Salt Lake City. And if two gold medal-winners had not tested positive for drugs, the tally would have been 13.

'Take their medals' and 'The people demand the medals back' read some of the headlines the day after the positive tests were confirmed. Speaking to Norwegian TV2, Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik joined the clamour by expressing his opinion that the ‘cheats’ should lose their medals. However, although they had been officially disqualified, IOC president Jacques Rogge did not bow to demands that the athletes physically return their medals.

The media portrayed the drama in clear terms of right and wrong, stating: 'Bondevik is representative of Norwegian honesty, while, in contrast, Jaques Rogge and the rest of the IOC are cowards who shirk from their responsibili-

ties.'

However, according to Gerd von der Lippe, the Norwegian media neglected to mention two things:

«Norwegian athletes were doped during the Sydney Olympics» she says. «At the time, the chairman of the Norwegian Confederation of Sport supported the supposed justification that the athletes had taken the substances for medical reasons.»

She adds that the media neglects to mention how much money the Norwegian state and sponsors pour into sport when compared to poorer countries. «As one of the richest nations in the world, it is easier for Norwegian athletes to win medals than those from the world’s poorer nations» she continues. «This fact is conveniently hidden when the media assesses Norway’s success.»

With a smile, she concludes with a cutting swipe at his country’s medal-euphoria. «As one of Europe’s peripheral nations, out of the world’s political centre and with just 4.4 million inhabitants, Norway needs gold medals in order to feel honourable and important,' she says. «We don’t have much else to boast about except mountains, rivers and fjords.»

Fair game for nationalism?

During the 2002 Olympics, Norway reinforced its national identity through an orgy of uncritical euphoria

By Bente Mikkelsen

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