

A GOLD MEDAL

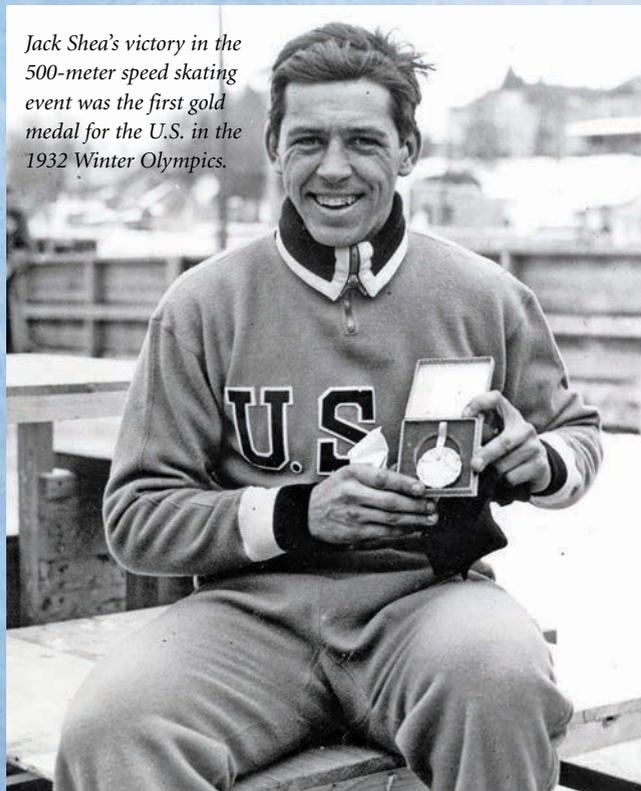
FOR

BY MICHAEL BURGESS

Refusing to attend the Olympics in Nazi Germany won Jack Shea a different kind of respect.

CONSCIENCE

Jack Shea's victory in the 500-meter speed skating event was the first gold medal for the U.S. in the 1932 Winter Olympics.



LAKE PLACID OLYMPIC MUSEUM

In 1932, Jack Shea had the thrill of his life, winning two speed skating gold medals in front of friends and family in Lake Placid, New York. Winning gold had been Shea's dream since childhood, when Lake Placid native Charles Jewtraw won the first gold medal in speed skating at the first Winter Olympic Games in Chamonix, France, in 1924.

"Charlie Jewtraw put Lake Placid on the map," Shea told *Sports Illustrated* years later. "Speed skating was here in the wintertime, and every kid between Lake Placid and Saranac Lake wanted to be like him. ... When I said my prayers before bed, I ended the same way every night: 'Lord give me the opportunity to repeat what Charles Jewtraw

did in the Olympic Games.'"

Little did he know then that his prayer would be answered in his hometown just a few years later. By 1929, Shea, a student at Lake Placid High School, had won the North American championships, repeating the feat in 1930. He was called "the Lake Placid Phenom." When Governor Franklin Roosevelt visited Lake Placid in September 1929, Shea was asked to show the governor the new speed skating oval. "He drove up in a big open Packard," Shea recalled, "with that famous smile and his distinctive cigarette holder, and after we had talked, he said, 'Young man, maybe I'll see you here two years from now.' That's one thing that sticks out in my mind,



Shea skating in a 1932 Olympic event

because when I crossed the line first, I turned and waved to him in the stands. It was like history coming true."

A Hero's Welcome

At the Olympics in 1932, Shea again rubbed elbows with the governor when he had the honor of reciting the Olympic oath at the opening ceremonies. He sat on the dais near Governor Roosevelt and next to Avery Brundage, head of the American Olympic Committee (AOC). Shea went back to college and got a hero's welcome at Dartmouth where he helped win collegiate skating competitions and prepared for the next winter Olympic games.

In 1931, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded the 1936 summer games to Berlin and in 1933, the winter games were awarded to Garmisch-Partenkrchen, Germany. By March 1933, Adolf Hitler had gained power as Chancellor of Germany and quickly consolidated control, turning a

democracy into a dictatorship. A boycott of Jewish-owned businesses swiftly began. His racist policies of Aryan supremacy and hatred of Jews spread alarm around the world, especially in the United States. Within months, American Jewish leaders began to openly discuss whether American athletes should go to Nazi Germany in 1936, in light of the discrimination, harassment, and violence. They wanted the United States and other countries to boycott the games unless the Olympics were moved to another location.

Brundage believed that politics and sports should not be mixed. He described the Olympic movement as "the greatest social force of our time." In response to concerns from his committee that the Olympic charter and spirit would be violated by the Germans, he agreed to go to Germany in 1934 to see the situation. He was assured by Nazi Olympic and German government hosts that Jews



Shea (left) first met Franklin Roosevelt (right) when the governor visited Lake Placid in September 1929.

would be able to participate. With that assurance, he came home convinced the United States should participate and, within days, the AOC agreed to accept Germany's invitation.

It is hard to believe now that Hitler had many admirers in the United States and particularly on the International Olympic Committee, but many members, like Brundage, viewed the boycott movement as a real threat to the Berlin Olympics and said the opposition was emanating from Jews and Communists. They also noted that the United States itself was hardly in a position to criticize the Germans for their treatment of the Jews in light of the segregation and discrimination against African Americans, particularly in southern states.

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LAKE PLACID OLYMPIC MUSEUM

Shea shook hands with Avery Brundage at the 1932 Olympics, but held him in contempt just a few short years later because of the official's views on Nazi Germany.

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Shea's opposition was heavily influenced by his Irish Catholic faith and his Dartmouth political science classes. The 1932 United States team he skated with included Irving Jaffee, a Jewish speed skater from New York City who had also won two gold medals. There were two other Jewish members on the Olympic team. He wrote to a leader of the boycott movement, "What the AOC has asked the Jews to do is this: To humiliate themselves by going to Germany, where they are considered as swine; to allow themselves to be embarrassed; to sacrifice the honor of their race."

Supporting Jews in Lake Placid

Shea thought about defending his Olympic titles and skating in Germany, but his discom-

fort with the discrimination against Jews in Nazi Germany gave him pause. He had some practical concerns as well, including travel costs during the Depression. He told the *Irish Times* newspaper, "I had a family and I had financial obligations and there really were no sponsors or anything at that time, so it would have been very difficult for me." But ultimately it was his conscience that prevented him from participating. Remembering his Jewish friends in Lake Placid, where there was a significant Jewish population, he noted that "It was very natural for me with the background knowledge I had and with the knowledge of these people living in Lake Placid who felt like they were being oppressed and discriminated against and it really was a crime against humanity what they were doing. ... I urged all the athletes publicly and privately that it wasn't the thing to do." He insisted, "If I were chosen and in the mind of entering the competition again, I would not do so as a friendly and sympathetic gesture toward the Jews of the United States."

The situation for Jews in Germany worsened in 1935 when the Nuremberg laws were enacted, which forbade Aryan marriage with Jews and deemed Jews to be "subjects" not citizens. Leading Catholics and Protestants came out against sending a team to Germany. *Commonweal*, a prominent Catholic magazine, issued a blistering editorial,

urging no Catholic young person to go to Germany and compete in the Olympics.

A Forceful Advocate

What was not widely reported at the time or after was that Shea had actually become a forceful advocate who wanted to use his influence to stop the United States from participating. At Albany Law School in the fall of 1935, he wrote a lawyerly and contemptuous letter to Brundage which his son, Jim, keeps in his father's scrapbooks from that era. His law school study and training certainly is evident in the style of the letter, which asked a series of pointed questions as well as statements.

"I have read in the press your attempt to justify American participation in the Olympic games in Nazi Germany in 1936. As an American athlete who represented the United States in the 1932 Olympic games and who won the world ice skating championship, I should like you to know that I regard your statement as un-American, untrue, unsportsmanlike and thoroughly vicious. How anyone who reads your views can believe that you are representative of the sporting spirit in America is more than I can understand."

He was especially outraged at Brundage's suggestion that America had discriminated against African-Americans. "It places the United States of America on a par with Nazi Germany. You make it appear that the barbarism of Nazidom,


 THE ARCHIVES
CONNECTION

The New York State Library holds a biography of Melvil Dewey, the founder of the Lake Placid Club, who started winter sports activities in Lake Placid. This biography provides useful context about the introduction of winter sports in Lake Placid that led to the bid and award of the 1932 Olympics. The New York State Archives additionally holds a letter Dewey sent to his board of directors related to the Club's policy of forbidding Jewish members. *The Games Must Go On* (Columbia University Press) by Allen Guttman describes Avery Brundage and his anti-Semitic and anti-Communist views, which influenced his outlook regarding the 1936 Olympics.

The Lake Placid Winter Olympics Museum maintains significant collections related to the beginnings of the winter Olympics and speed skating in the first three games in Chamonix, France, St. Moritz, Switzerland, and Lake Placid. Local newspapers including the *Lake Placid News*, which can be viewed on microfilm and in original copies at the New York State Library, also provided useful information. Jack Shea's scrapbooks are held by his son Jim and were consulted with permission.

years later, Hitler marched into Poland and World War II began. Many athletes from the 1936 Games died in the war and some of the Jews who participated ended up in Nazi concentration camps.

Shea stayed home and raised a family and was active in community and civic affairs. He was elected Town Justice and later Supervisor of the Town of North Elba, which includes Lake Placid. He was one of the community leaders who helped bring the Olympics back to Lake Placid in 1980. His son, Jim, was a Nordic skier in the 1964 Olympics. It was a great thrill for Jack when his grandson, Jimmy, was selected for the United States Olympic skeleton sled team for the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

The Sheas became the first three-generation Olympic family. As the patriarch, Shea was planning at age 91 to go to Salt Lake City and take part in the opening ceremonies. Three weeks before the events, Shea was killed in a car crash by a drunken driver near his home. In 2005, the 1932 Olympic Arena in Lake Placid was renamed the Jack Shea Arena.

The legacy of a young Olympic hero's commitment to the Olympic ideals of peace and humanity shine today brighter than Brundage's admiration of a dictatorship's ability to run an efficient Olympics while terrorizing Jews. As a Jewish writer noted, Shea deserved a "gold medal for conscience." ■



The Sheas became the first three-generation Olympic family. From left to right: Jim Shea, Jr., Jack Shea, and Jim Shea

festered and practiced by the Nazi government, finds a parallel in this country."

He rejected Brundage's assertion that all athletes were in favor of going to Germany for the Olympics. "How do you account for the fact that as early as May 1933, twenty-four former Olympic champions and close to fifty coaches of college athletics throughout the country joined in a plea to the International Olympic committee to move the games from Germany due to the Nazi persecution of Jews?"

Like Brundage, Jack Shea believed in the Olympic ideal of peace but he also drew a line with the Nazis. "In conclusion, permit me to inform you that were I [a] candidate for the Olympic team in 1936, I should refuse to play

in the Olympic Games if held in Nazi Germany. I regard such participation as an insult to the honor of every athlete and a violation of fair play and sportsmanship upon which the Olympic Games were founded."

American athletes did attend both the 1936 Winter Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and the famous Summer Games that same year in Berlin when African-American Jesse Owens defied Germany's theory of Aryan supremacy to win four gold medals. Shea was among a handful of other American athletes to refuse to participate, including the entire Long Island University Blackbirds basketball team.

Brundage would regard the Berlin Games as the finest Olympics ever held. Just three