The Olympic Spirit

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By JOE BIDDLE

To this point, I must admit the London Olympic Games have been most enjoyable to watch.

I can’t remember a recent Olympics that had as many unusual human-interest stories as this one.

Seriously, does it get any better than having a legally blind archer set a world record in the men’s individual archery ranking round?

That’s exactly what Im Dong-Hyun did, despite the fact he can’t read a newspaper at arms length and he can only see blurred colors and lines at the target 76 yards away. He cannot see anything out of his right eye.

Then there is the Blade Runner, 25-year-old South African double amputee Oscar Pistorius, who runs on a set of carbon blades.

Pistorius had both legs below his knees amputated, but he qualified for the 400-meter semifinals, an incredible accomplishment by any measure. He will compete in South Africa’s 4x400-meter relay team Thursday.

We saw former University of Tennessee sprinter Justin Gatlin take the medal podium for the first time in 10 years after being hit with a four-year ban for doping.

Gatlin took bronze behind two Jamaicans, including gold medalist and World and Olympic record holder, Usain Bolt, who ran a blistering 100 meters in 9.63 seconds. Gatlin ran a 9.79 second time for the bronze.

The Olympic Games had no shortage when it came to triumph and tragedy.

American McKayla Maroney was crushed after the final contestant edged her out in the women's vault, an event where Maroney was the reigning world champion.

But a dismount on her second and final vault went awry and dumped her on her rump, taking off enough points to give the gold to Romania's Sandra Izbasa.

"I didn't deserve to win gold if I landed on my butt,'' the stoic McKayla admitted. "I'm not disappointed about the silver. I'm disappointed about my performance.''

She was so heavily favored going in, everyone else was playing for silver.

Imagine how difficult it had to be for McKayla to give the gold away. Gymnastics is a most difficult sport to master at the Olympic level and mostly these are teen-agers who have been trained for years to perform like robots.

Then there was Canadian Rosie MacLennan, who took gold in trampoline. Make fun of the event if you wish, but these are not the flimsy trampolines you perhaps had in your back yard when growing up.

In the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver, MacLennan flew to Toronto on accrued flight points. She slept on an air mattress at her brother's home.

She was a volunteer at Canada House, which served as a gathering place for Canadian Olympians.

She ran errands, waited on athletes, took pictures of the medal winners off a printer and had them framed and hung in Canada House.

Now they were waiting on her, quite a turnaround at Canada House. Now the Prime Minister wanted to talk to her on the telephone. Her Twitter account went ballistic. Yes, Justin Bieber, tweeted her. All is well in her world.

It's where countries whose leaders are often at odds, can compete and get to know one another.

When 400-meter semifinalist winner Kirani James of Grenada took off his name/number bib and exchanged it with the South African, Pistorius, color was no barrier.

"My hat's off to him,'' James told reporters in London. "Just coming out here and competing.''

That, my friends, is the Olympic spirit.

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