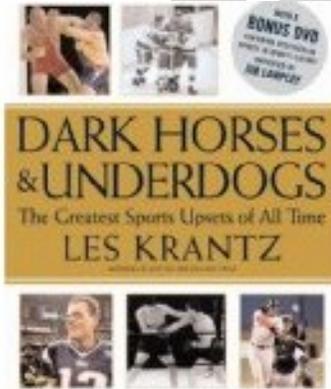


1994 Winter Olympics

Dan Jansen, Speedskater



Lillehammer, Norway was more than a beautiful setting for the 1994 Olympic Games. For speedskater Dan Jansen, often called the “heartbreak kid” of the Winter Olympics, it was his last chance to shake the jinx that had followed him since the 1988 Games. It was his final shot at Olympic gold.

The Norwegian people outdid themselves in preparation for these Games and the result was spectacular. One of the most striking venues was the speed skating facility in Hamar. It was a huge shell that looked remarkably like the upturned hull of a Viking ship. What better setting for the most emotional moment of the games – Dan

Jansen’s bid for the medal that had eluded him for so long.

Jansen, the youngest of nine children, practically grew up on the ice. His family home was a block away from the outdoor speed skating rink in West Allis, Wisconsin. He donned his first pair of skates at four and success came swiftly. Jansen won his first regional meets at the tender age of eight. By 12 he was winning national meets and in 1984 he made the Olympic speed skating team headed for Sarajevo, Yugoslavia.

Jansen placed fourth in the 500-meter race at those Winter Games, missing the bronze medal by just sixteen hundredths of a second. While friends and fans mourned his near-miss of a medal, Jansen took pride in his accomplishment. “My thinking was: You’re 18 years old and you’re fourth best in the world. Wow!” he said.

Jansen quickly made his mark in the speed skating world, winning the 500 and 1,000-meter races at the 1986 World Cup Championships and taking top honors at the World Sprint Championships in 1988. Olympic gold appeared to be in sight.

But it was not to be as easy as that. Jansen’s sister, Jane, had leukemia and the morning of his first event, Dan’s brother called him in Calgary to say that Jane was dying and wanted to say goodbye. A few hours later she passed away. “I want[ed] to go out there and do well for her because she’s fought so hard,” Jansen said. But that proved to be easier said than done.

“The eyes of the world are focused on Dan Jansen,” intoned the ABC commentator. And they were. Jansen took his place at the line and jumped to a false start. On the next start, he got off slow. Ten seconds into the race, his left foot went out from under him, sending him careening across the ice, into another skater and into the pads surrounding the rink.

Four days later Jansen lined up for the 1,000, dedicating the race to his sister Jane. He started well, making it through 800 meters before the unthinkable happened. He caught an outer edge and fell once again, ending his 2nd Olympics without a medal. “From that moment on,” said Jansen, “I was unofficially ordained *Dan Jansen the Guy Who Fell on the Day His Sister Died.*”

Proving that he is more than just a tragic hero, the 26-year-old Jansen trained hard and won first place at the 1992 World Cups. He was projected to medal at the 1992 Olympics in Albertville, France, but once again, it was not to be. He lost his balance in a turn and narrowly missed a bronze medal in the 500. He finished a disappointing 26th in the 1,000.

Not ready to give up, Jansen began to prepare in earnest for the 1994 Olympics – just two years away. He sought advice from sports psychologist Jim Loehr, whose clientele included many other “jinxed” athletes. Loehr convinced Jansen to embrace both the 500 and 1,000-meter races equally, rather than pinning his hopes primarily on the shorter race. He helped him approach the longer sprint with a new strategy – and a new attitude.

As the Lillehammer Games approached, Jansen was once again in top form. *Time* magazine dubbed him “the greatest sprinter on long blades in the last decade.” The May 27 arrival of a baby daughter, named Jane after his sister, helped him relax and focus on what was important to him. “It changed my outlook on everything,” he said.

Heavily favored to win the 500, Jansen started fast, going strong into the backstretch. On the final turn, he lost control of his left skate, touching his hand to the ice to steady himself. On a longer race, the misstep might not have mattered, but in such a short race, it made a world of difference. Jansen came in a disappointing eighth.

So this was it. His career came down to one final race – and it wasn’t his best event. “You want people to pull for you. And it was good because you like to have the support,” Jansen said. “But it was bad because I didn’t want to disappoint people anymore.”

On the day of the big event, Jansen prepared for the race while trying to shake a feeling that something was not quite right. During World Cup events, athletes skate a 500 before their 1,000, so Jansen decided it might help if he felt more fatigued. He hit the stationary bike for 15 minutes and followed that with a short jog.

As the crowd waited in anticipation, commentator Eric Heiden noted that as many as ten skaters had a chance to win this one. Jansen himself felt that the skaters to beat were Igor Zhelezovsky of Belarus and Sergei Klevchenya of Russia, who were skating in the first pair. Both posted times under 1:12.86.

Going in the fourth pair, Jansen felt a sudden jolt of energy right before the gun signified the start of the race. “I knew I was ready,” he said. And he was. Jansen was paired with Junichi Inoue of Japan and both skaters

came out fast. Jansen reached the 200-meter mark with a competitive time of 16.71. When the skaters changed lanes at the 400-meter point, he crossed over and got a brief boost by riding Inoue's slipstream going into the turn.

Jansen was skating smoothly, maintaining an even rhythm as he went into his second-to-last turn, only 300 meters from the finish. This is where Klevchenya almost went down earlier. Hugging the inner lane, the turns are tighter and the force seems greater – both of which increase the risk of falling. And Jansen did slip -- but briefly. The crowd gasped as his hand grazed the ice. He lost two or three hundredths of a second, but he stayed calm. When his coach held up a card which read 26.5 – his time for the first 400 meters – Jansen knew he was on pace for a medal, and after the final turn, he let loose on the last fifty meters. As he crossed the finish line, the noise in the arena was deafening. The crowd saw the time before he did ... 1:12.43 – good enough for a gold medal *and* a new world record.

Jansen skated a much photographed victory lap with his 7-month old daughter in front of an emotional crowd. A lot of hard work and a few highly publicized failures were finally behind him. "I never knew it would feel this good," he said.