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POLICY BRIEF

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Immigrants Proud To Represent U.S. In Winter Olympics

U.S. officials expect this year's Winter Games to promote greater international cooperation and peace. Immigrant athletes realize their Olympic dreams as members of the U.S. team.

The Olympic Challenge

With Olympics on the horizon, the world turns its attention to the U.S. as the 2002 Winter Games begin in Salt Lake City. For the following two weeks the world's greatest amateur athletes will compete for gold and the glory of their respective countries.

Though the competition is always fierce, this year's event is especially symbolic as the world recovers from the recent terrorist attacks. In the wake of such tragic events, the Olympic spirit of unity and goodwill is more evident than ever. As the host country, the U.S. expects this 'spirit' to transcend September 11 and promote a more profound commitment to cooperation and world peace.

Perhaps the best illustration of integration and unity can be found within the U.S. Olympic team itself. In several events some of America's brightest stars are immigrants who left their native countries behind to fulfill their Olympic dream in the U.S. As immigrants these athletes are proud to represent America, along with the opportunity to act as ambassadors of freedom and international cooperation. With national pride currently on the rise, these Olympic hopefuls offer Americans another reason to rally together.

Ice Dancing

One of America's top medal contenders is ice dancer Peter Tchernyshev. Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, he began skating at the age of six after his grandfather introduced him to the sport.

At first, he was a singles competitor until an ankle injury led him to pursue the discipline of ice dancing. Originally he represented the Soviet Union before moving to the U.S. to compete for three years. With great sacrifice he left behind his family, friends and homeland and came to the U.S. permanently in 1992 with his former wife, ice dancer Natalia Annenko.

In 1996, after separating from his previous skating partner, Tchernyshev met Naomi Lang and the two instantly clicked. Since that time, the pair has repeatedly won the U.S. Ice Dancing Championships and was ranked as high as 8th in the world.

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In order to compete for the U.S. in the upcoming Olympics, Tchernyshev made the decision to become a U.S. citizen on Jan. 29, 2001. He says he never intended or wished to become an American citizen when he was younger. But he says that after skating and living in the United States, he started feeling like an American. "I didn't become a citizen just to represent the country as a skater," he says. "I wanted to become a rightful member of the country."

Figure Skating

Another immigrant athlete eager to represent the U.S. this year is pairs figure skater Kyoko Ina. Born in Tokyo, Ina comes from a family with a proud tradition of Japanese Olympians.

Although she grew up in New York, she continued to compete for Japan. As a young teenager, Ina had won nearly every junior event possible and was ranked 8th in the world. She promised to be one of Japan's newest stars, and many hoped she would carry on the Olympic tradition in her family. She would carry on that tradition; only she would be an American. At age 16, tired of the constant travel, Ina made a crucial decision and change nationalities.

No longer caught in the middle of two identities, Ina is skating is better than ever. After four years of training, she and partner John Zimmerman, look to add their names to the list of Olympic champions, and to honor their country by bringing home the gold.

Downhill Skiing

A notable competitor in the downhill event is Jakub Fiala. He was born in Prague, and came to the U.S. when his family defected in 1978.

He grew up in New Mexico with his father, who worked as a part-time ski instructor. With little money, Fiala's father used black tennis balls as gates for training. By age 17, he was living alone in Breckenridge and skiing for the local team.

When denied a scholarship from a local university, he decided to train harder than ever. Three years later, in 1996, Fiala was offered a position on the U.S. Olympic squad. Since that time, he has competed in nearly two-dozen events, gradually improving his standings enough to qualify for this year's winter games.

One of Fiala's greatest idols has been American Bill Johnson, who won a gold medal in 1984. From his first Olympic memories of Sarajevo, to his chance to compete in Salt Lake, this young man from Prague has come a long way to realize his Olympic dreams.

Conclusion

The 2002 U.S. Olympic team is comprised of several immigrant athletes who have endured many hardships and difficulties to represent America. Despite various backgrounds and cultural differences, these competitors come together in a common goal - to bring glory to their country.