

Interview with Tom Peters  
5 April 1995

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Jennifer Symola [Spelled phonetically] (JS): Who started the origins of the sports training center in 1977?

Tom Peters (TP): The sports training center concept really was an outgrowth of the president's Commission on Olympic Sports. That commission worked from 1975 to 1977 when they issued a report talking about the future of Olympic sports in the United States. Locally, Dr. Roy Heath, he was really the father of the Olympic movement in terms of Northern Michigan University. It was his idea that we should form a winter sports training center here similar to what they had in Squaw Valley, Idaho but we would deal with the Olympic sports for winter training.

JS: Okay. How important was the establishment of the Great Lakes Sports Academy?

TP: As the concept of a sports training center grew here, it was apparent that the best that we could offer would be to establish an academic program that would go along with the training for the Olympic athletes.

JS: What was the effect of Blanchard's help?

TP: As the concept of an Olympic Training Center developed here for Northern Michigan University, James Blanchard was the governor of the state of Michigan. He was very instrumental in us getting the final push across. He headed the delegation to Colorado Springs to make a pitch to the site selection committee who ultimately recommended the designation of Northern Michigan University as an Olympic Training Center, to be the third in the country. The other two being Lake Placid in New York State and Colorado Springs. Governor Blanchard and along with our president at that time Jim Appleberry visited Colorado Springs. They hosted a reception for the delegates to the convention and in fact the governor was a part of the formal presentation to the site selection committee requesting this designation. So he was very instrumental in getting us going. Furthermore the governor approved an appropriation of \$600,000 to help with the funding of the United States Olympic Training Center then, at Northern Michigan University, later to be called the United States Olympic Education Center.

JS: Who decided on the sports to be offered?

TP: Once we got beyond the concept of a winter training center only, it was pretty well on the recommendation of the staff here at Northern Michigan University in concert with the national governing bodies of certain sports and the United States Olympic Committee themselves as to which sports would be offered here.

JS: What summer sports are offered and what winter sports are offered?

TS: Currently if you want to call boxing a summer sport, boxing would be the only summer sport offered, although they train year round. The winter sports that we deal with are biathlon cross country skiing, luge, ski jumping, and short track speed skating. I would add however that most of these sports are in training year round so even though they perform in the winter time they're in training most of the year.

JS: Northern promoted that all future Olympians could train and take classes. This is a unique offer because the other two training centers in the United States don't offer this. How effective is this approach in attracting Olympic trainees?

TP: It has been very effective in getting the, the agreement we have is that no athlete can be in training here without being a student and that student also has to come here with the recommendation of the national governing body in that sport. We have student athletes here training in all ages. Actually if they are not enrolled in a class at Northern Michigan University or in the local public school system they are not allowed to train here.

JS: Has receiving national media attention as an Olympic Training Center made Northern a more prestigious university?

TP: I think basically it has. It's called attention to this university and this particular program worldwide obviously by the success our athletes have had in both the winter and summer games. Also in Washington D.C. among the congressional representatives and many of the major corporations in the country as well.

JS: The Olympic Education Center has established new programs for students, such as the bio-chemics lab and the sports medicine program. Have students taken advantage of these programs?

TP: Yes they have, and in fact these programs have been available not only to our Olympic athletes but to other students at the university as well. Dr. Phil Watts in the Physical Education Department has done quite a bit of work in this area. In fact some of our findings and testings have been shared by a computer with Colorado Springs to help better identify the physical profiles of our student athletes.

JS: How do the athletes interact with other students at the university?

TP: I think reasonably well. They are housed in their own dormitory situation. However they do attend the classes and participate in other activities on campus as their training allows them to do. The same would be true for those student athletes who are in the Marquette Public School system.

JS: Has the Dome been a success?

TP: The Dome has been a success. It's not only been good for the athletes in training here at the Olympic Education Center, it also has been a great thing to our own students, to Northern intercollegiate athletics, and the community at large.

JS: It is able to accommodate all the different sports trained for by the future Olympians?

TP: The answer to that question is yes. There are special venues that are needed for many of the sports, however they do do a lot of cross training in the facilities that the Superior Dome has to offer. Obviously it enhances their ability to train.

JS: Has there been enough community involvement with the sports training center?

TP: The answer to that question is yes as well. In the early days when the original concept was brought forth by Dr. Roy Heath there was a local organization formed by the name of GLSTSA which was the Great Lakes Sport Training Site Association. And it was their group of local citizens who got together to try and develop plans and an approach to the United States Olympic Committee to seek designation of our training center here. Once that designation was received then GLSTSA became GLTCA, the Great Lakes Training Center Association, since we were already an Olympic Training Center. And they continue to be very active, they support the student athletes that are involved in our programs here at the USOEC. They also provide kind of like a welcoming committee when the international teams come here to compete.

JS: Was spending a lot of money on the sports training center a good or bad thing?

TP: Well I think it's been a very good thing. As I mentioned earlier the budget for the United States Olympic Training Center was originally \$600,000 and that was supported and promoted through the auspices of Governor Blanchard. That budget has been cut in recent years and now we are involved in full blown fundraising from private sources to continue the operation of the United States Olympic Education Center. In addition, a bill that the governor signed last fall will allow us to present a USOEC license plate for sale in Michigan, the proceeds of which will go to support our center here in Marquette.

JS: How much national exposure do you think the USOEC has received?

TP: Well I think we've received a considerable amount of national exposure and some international exposure through the success of our athletes in the games, particularly the Winter Olympic Games. We won a good share of medals in the last two Winter Olympic Games and of course Cathy Turner is a two time gold medal winner in the short track speed skating. Our relay team, our women's relay team has won medals in both games and our men's relay team has also won a medal. So we've received considerable visibility on the national scale and internationally through the success of the program here. As they are interviewed our student athletes are very quick to tell about the uniqueness of this center and the support they get as students at this university as well as being in training for the Olympic teams.

JS: From my research I have learned that an all year long training faculty was suggested back in 1972. How much do you know about this?

TP: The original idea did encompass a yearlong training faculty however presently we are using all of the academic programs at the university. By that I mean they are available to the students at the USOEC as they are to any other students at the university. So our academic programs

pretty well follow the academic year of the university. For those who were in the public school, then they would follow the academic year of the public school program.

JS: What are the biggest problems facing you Olympic Education Center?

TP: The biggest problem honestly is continuing the funding. The funding really predicated the number of athletes that can train here for any period of time. We budget according to a per athlete bill, so the number of bills time whatever it costs per day to have athlete here is what we need to generate each year for the operation of the center. We do not charge USOEC for use of facilities because these athletes are also students at the university and we figured the facilities should be available to them as they are to the other students.

JS: Does the USOEC have a bright future?

TP: The answer to that question is definitely yes. The concept of the Olympic Education Center will continue to grow in the United States, it's become very popular. There has been success here, in fact it may very well be that Northern Michigan University will be the fore runner of other centers of like kind in the United States. You must remember that many of the sports that are in the Olympics, athletes can get training from being in college or in high school, or in private clubs. However there are a number of sports where this is not possible. So the Olympic Education Center idea is a very unique one and I think we'll continue to be in the forefront of things to come.

JS: People get confused about the difference between the Dome and the Olympic Education Center. Can you please explain the difference between the two?

TP: It may take a while. Actually, they are two very different things. The STC, Sports Training Center, is the sports training center which is now known as United States Olympic Education Center. The sports training center idea was to provide training and education for potential Olympic athletes. The "sports training complex" as it was called, now better known as the Superior Dome is a facility that is used, or was planned for use, initially by the university well before the time we became an Olympic center. The building, the Superior Dome, is used by Northern Michigan University students, by our intercollegiate athletic teams, by the public, by high schools, by any number of different kinds of groups and activities throughout the year. So even though the athletes in the United States Olympic Education Center have access to the Dome and do use it for some cross training, it is really a separate entity and it is a university facility and it's basically for university activities.

END OF INTERVIEW