

This weekend, the Torino Olympics came to an end. I have always enjoyed watching the Olympics, so I was happy to remember that it would be broadcast this February. But with the time difference, and my busy schedule, I didn't get to watch as much of it as I had hoped. At home, my parents taped a few events and some news about the Olympics and send it to me too, so I was lucky enough to see some Japanese coverage as well as a few hours of American coverage to boot. I'd like to share with you some of the big differences.

One thing that jumped out at me is that American TV seems like so much more of a money-making enterprise than Japanese TV. Even simple commercials for TV shows at home are meant to make them look bigger and better than the competition. Product advertisements as well as TV shows have the look of expensive Hollywood productions. The news almost seems more like entertainment, with special graphics and music to introduce news stories, and the general spectacle that is made of any news event. In Japan, even the popular NHK national news is just a newscaster at a desk, telling about the happenings of the day, instead of a big performance to attract more viewers. It's refreshing. When I first came to Japan I was impressed that television programs hadn't gotten quite so out of control. But as time went on, I started to miss TV from home. Aside from the fact that I don't have to concentrate to understand what's going on, I missed the commercials that can be as entertaining as a television program itself. I missed the TV shows with big stars that I knew. And when it came time for the Olympics, I missed the American-style coverage for that, too.

Since American TV really is about making money, Olympics coverage is stretched out for hours each night, and most regularly scheduled programs aren't shown, at least on the main TV channel. Every night, and probably every afternoon as well, is dedicated to hours of programming—showing warm-ups, background stories about the athletes, and the events themselves, in long, almost painful, detail. I longed to see all the stories, to learn about the history of different athletes, and to hear the sportscasters' predictions and analysis of the medals in all the different events. But when I started to think about it, this was precisely the kind of thing that I was happy to get away from when I first got to Japan! The only reason that American TV shows so much of this is because the advertisers are paying TV stations millions of dollars for time during the commercial breaks. It seems so cheap and meaningless when I really think about it.

On the other hand, the Olympics coverage in Japan is much more about the sports. When I watched the women's figure skating short programs, I realized that there were no commercials, but simply nonstop coverage of all the women that skated. That alone was worth it. I also didn't really miss the nonstop commentary that plagues the media at home. When Sasha Cohen, an American figure skater, was in the

lead last week, the American news programs talked nonstop about how she probably wouldn't win because she skates so poorly under pressure. (I only know because I do listen to American radio online for some news). "Is this really what the Olympics is about?", I wondered. As it turns out, they were right, and Shizuka Arakawa skated her way to the gold medal. I wonder how she would have felt if the Japanese media was full of mean stories about her!

When it comes right down to it, no system is perfect. But while I know that the American way of doing things (TV and beyond) can sometimes be excessive, it's the standard that I will always use to measure other things against. And while luckily I can see the good points to the way of life in other countries, deep down, I'll always be American. I'm just glad that at least I've had this chance to take a look at my own country from the outside, and will hopefully be able to incorporate some of the values that I've learned in Japan in my life when I eventually do go home.