WINTER GAMES 2010 VANCOUVER, CANADA

Things to watch for

The medals for the 2010 Winter Games will each feature a unique cropped section of a large master artwork.

Leading storylines heading into the Vancouver Games

By David Thomas
McClatchy Newspapers

More than 5,500 athletes from 80-plus countries are expected to take part in the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games. The third Winter Olympics to be held in Canada begins Feb. 12 and runs 17 days through Feb. 28. A look at 10 things to watch in these Games:

1. VANCOUVER

Vancouver is the largest metropolitan area to host a Winter Olympics. Selecting Vancouver as host city represents an interesting switch for these Games, moving the event away from the cozy, snowy village feel often associated with the Winter Olympics. Vancouver was selected in 2003, one year after the Salt Lake City metropolitan area hosted the Games. A successful Games in Vancouver could lead to a philosophical shift in selecting host cities.

2. INDOOR OPENING CEREMONY

The Opening Ceremony at BC Place Stadium will be the Olympics' first to be held indoors. BC Place, which opened in 1983 as Canada's first covered stadium, is the world's largest air-supported domed stadium and is pressurized by 16 jet engine fans. After the Olympics, the home of the BC Lions of the Canadian Football League will replace its inflatable roof with a retractable roof.

3. U.S. VS. CANADA

The United States edged Canada for second in the medal standings in 2006, with 25 medals to Canada's 24. (Germany was tops with 29.) As host country, Canada has embarked on an "Own the Podium" program designed to move Canada to the top of the medals count. U.S.-Canada hockey matchups — men and women — could be particularly intense.

4. UNIQUE MEDALS

In an Olympic first, each medal will be unique. Each will feature a different crop of artwork by Canadian designer Corrine Hunt. The medals, which are round and undulating, are the heaviest in Olympic history at 500 to 576 grams (just over 1 pound to 1.25 pounds) each.

5. CURLING

Each Winter Olympics, curling becomes even cooler. Curling is like chess on ice, except the competitors actually have to do something physical instead of sitting in a chair. USA Curling has 13,684 members. Membership increased 12 percent in the four years after the 2002 Winter Olympics and 14 percent since the Turin Games in 2006, and USA Curling officials say they expect another membership bump after these Games.

6. TV RATINGS

The Turin Games of 2006 were the least-watched Winter Olympics since at least 1988. Delayed coverage in the age of immediate results on the Internet was largely to blame. But with the 2010 Games in North America instead of Italy, NBC will be able to offer more live programming in its planned 835 hours of coverage. Fox has said it will send "American Idol" up against NBC's Olympics coverage.

Sumi, Quatchi and Miga are the mascots of the 2010 Winter Games.

7. QUATCHI, MIGA AND SUMI

Quatchi, Miga and Sumi are these Olympics' official mascots. Quatchi, the largest of the three, is a hockey-loving Sasquatch that wants to become a goalie. Snowboarding is the favorite sport of Miga, a young sea bear. Sumi (yes, pronounced "sue me") is an animal spirit from the British Columbia mountains that, not surprisingly, is a big fan of alpine skiing.

8. SKI CROSS

The only new sport at the 2010 Games is not really a new sport. Ski Cross, classified under freestyle skiing, included contact and crashes, which should lead to exciting finishes. Like Snowboard Cross but on skis, Ski Cross features four riders racing down a course filled with jumps and turns.

9. LINDSEY VONN

Americans will love Alpine skier Lindsey Vonn. Not only is she friendly with an engaging smile, but she also is the most successful U.S. female skier ever. She is the only two-time World Cup champion from the United States, and NBC cameras will be all over her quest for gold medals.

10. FIGURE SKATING

Women's figure skating is the glamour event of the Winter Olympics. American women have won the Ladies' Singles gold medal in three of the past five Games and have won at least silver in all five of those Olympics. But reigning world champion Kim Yu-na is from South Korea, and her top competition figures to come from Mao Asada and Miki Ando of Japan and Canada's Joannie Rochette. Not since 1964 has the United States not medaled in the event.

David Thomas writes for the Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram.

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Membership in USA Curling increased 14 percent after the 2006 Winter Games.

The best days to tune-in to Winter Games competition

By Craig Hill
McClatchy Newspapers

Even if you're a bona fide Olympiholic, plopping down on the couch 17 nights in a row to watch the Winter Olympics is probably unrealistic.

Like the athletes competing in the games, you're probably going to have to pick your moments. And like the athletes, you better pick the right ones.

Of course, even the casual Olympics fan will tune in for NBC coverage of the marquee events that bookend the games: Opening ceremonies on Feb. 12 and the closing ceremonies on Feb. 28.

But what about the 15 days in between?

Here are your 10 best bets:

Feb. 13

Medal events: Six

Highlights: Men's downhill, women's moguls and short track

Storylines: Bode Miller bombed in his unrealistic media-imposed goal to win five medals in '06. With much less pressure this time, he'll try to win his first gold on the first day of competition.

A strong Canadian women's moguls team led by top-ranked Kristi Richards will try to win their nation's first gold on home soil. However, U.S. star Hannah Kearny stands in their way.

Apolo Ohno could get his first chance of the games at winning a U.S. record sixth medal in short track.

Feb. 14

Medal events: Six

Highlights: Women's combined and men's moguls

Storylines: Lindsey Vonn enters these games as the face of Team USA and perhaps the best alpine skier in American history. A training run injury slowed her down in '06, but this time she'll be going for what she hopes is the first of several golds.

Defending moguls world champ Patrick Deneen of the United States will go for gold at Cypress Mountain, where he finished fourth in a World Cup race last year.

Feb. 16

Medal events: Six

Highlights: Men's super combined and women's snowboard cross

Storylines: Lindsey Jacobellis lost gold in the '06 snowboard cross when she fell while showboating on the race's second to last jump and lost a three-second lead. She's not likely to make the same mistake in Vancouver.

Ted Ligety will try to become the first Olympian to defend a combined title. This year the event includes one slalom run (the '06 games had two runs) and a downhill run. This change doesn't favor Ligety who excels at the technical events.

Feb. 17

Medal events: Seven

Highlights: Women's downhill and men's halfpipe

Storylines: Vonn is the undisputed queen of the downhill and has won three consecutive downhills in Canada. However, her last loss in Canada in this event came on the Olympic course in '08. She finished 0.01 seconds behind Nadia Styger of Switzerland.

Defending gold medalist Shaun White and Louie Vito of "Dancing with the Stars" fame lead a loaded U.S. team in the halfpipe. Americans have won six of the nine Olympic medals ever awarded in this event.

Feb. 18

Medal events: Five

Highlights: Men's figure skating and women's halfpipe

Storylines: It's been 22 years since an American man has won figure skating gold. Evan Lysacek, the reigning world champ, is the best hope for the U.S. since Brian Boitano's '88 win in Calgary.

U.S. women have won the last two halfpipe golds. Kelly Clark, Hannah Teter and Gretchen Bleiler, all Olympic medalists, will go for the sweep they just missed in '06.

Feb. 20

Medal events: Six

Highlights: Women's super G, Men's speed skating and short track

Storylines: Ohno has medaled in the short track 1,000 meters at the last two games. He has five medals and is trying to become the first U.S. man to win six. Speed skater Bonnie Blair holds the U.S. record of six.

Ohno

U.S. speed skating teammates and rivals Shani Davis and Chad Hedrick will likely race in the 1,500, an event they both medaled in in '06.

Vonn will once again be the favorite in Whistler during the women's super G, another event she dominates.

Feb. 21

Medal events: Six

Highlights: Men's hockey, bobsled and skier cross

Storylines: Watch the debut of a new Olympic sport — ski cross. Four skiers at a time race down a twisting, undulating course in the skiing version of snowboard cross. Former Olympic downhiller Daron Rahlves could challenge for gold.

Steven Holcomb will drive the two-man bobsled trying to win America's first men's gold in the sport since '48.

The U.S. Men's hockey team will try for an upset when it faces Canada, this games' version of the Dream Team.

Feb. 24

Medal events: Six

Highlights: Men's hockey and Women's bobsled and aerials

Storylines: Lacy Schnoor and Emily Cook lead a U.S. team trying to win its first gold in aerials since '98.

Barring an upset, the U.S. men should be playing in the hockey quarterfinals, while U.S. women race three bobsleds with medal aspirations.

Feb. 25

Medal events: Six

Highlights: Women's hockey and men's aerials

Storylines: If all goes as most think it will, Team USA and Canada will play for gold in women's hockey. Expect physical play from a pair of teams that don't like each other should that game happen.

In the men's aerials, Jeret "Speedy" Peterson promises to try to land the Hurricane, his trademark five-twist, two-flip jump. He failed to land the jump in '06 and it cost him a medal.

Peterson

This loaded day concludes with the women's figure skating finals where the U.S. will try to medal for the 12th consecutive games.

Feb. 26

Medal events: Seven

Highlights: Men's hockey and short track

Storylines: Team USA general manger David Poile says six men's hockey teams have a realistic shot at gold. That should make for dramatic semifinal games.

Three short track medal races ought to give the U.S. a chance to pad its medal total.

The U.S. women's curling team hopes to be playing for its first Olympics medal, which might be enough of an accomplishment for some rare prime-time TV coverage.

Craig Hill writes for The News Tribune (Tacoma, Wash.).