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Interest in Olympics rekindled by adopted girls

By *CARL GOLDEN*

I am not a big fan of the Olympics. My interest waned back in the '80s, when it was decided Michael Jordan, holder of a multimillion-dollar contract with the Chicago Bulls, was an amateur and could join with other similarly situated players and be able to run up 62-point margins of victory over such hoops powerhouses as Yugoslavia.

This year, though, my interest has been renewed, not because the professional-amateur charade has been overcome, but because of where the games are being played.

My wife and I are the adoptive parents of three girls, all abandoned as infants in China, adopted by us in 1998, 2002 and 2006 and brought to live here in New Jersey.

They are 11, 7 and 4 now. When told the Olympics were being held in their native country, their interest perked up and we made it a point to stay awake to witness the opening ceremonies in Beijing.

Their interest levels vary with their ages, of course, but all of them understand something special is going on in China and a good number of people around the world are watching.

They understand they are Chinese and live here because we brought them to us. There are occasional inquiries about "my mom in China," or "what does adopted mean," or "why did you pick me."

They seem satisfied with the responses — at least for the time being. I suspect there will be more probing questions as they grow older.

For now, as we watch some of the Olympic competition on television or via the Internet, the questions go something like this:

"Did I live there?" Answer: No, each of you was born in the southern part of the country, a long way from where the games are being held.

"Is China going to win?" Answer: A lot of people will win medals, including the teams from China, but we have to wait until the end of the games to see who has won the most. "Who do you want to win, China or the United States?" Answer: The Olympics are about trying your best and, if you win, that's great, but if you don't, it's a thrill just to be there and take part.

"If I still lived in China, would I be in one of the games?" Answer: We don't know, but it would be nice.

"If I couldn't be in one of the games, would I have to work somewhere?" Answer: You'd all be in school, but as you grew up, maybe you could go to college, or have a job.

"Is it hard to be in one of the games?" Answer: It takes a lot of practice and hard work for anyone to be a good runner or swimmer or gymnast.

"Why is she crying?" pointing to a close-up of a spectator. Answer: She's happy and proud the Olympics are in her country.

"If I was still in China, would you find me and visit me?" Answer: If you were still in China, we wouldn't know who you were or where to find you, so that would be a little difficult.

"Could we go to China someday?" Answer: We'd love to take you, but it's far away.

"How far?" Answer: About 10,000 miles.

"How long does it take to get there?" Answer: About 15 hours by plane.

"How long is that?" Answer: Eight movies.

The 11-year-old is drawn to the competition; the 7-year-old a little less so, and the 4-year-old just wants to know when the fireworks are going to light up the sky again.

For them, the Olympics are what they once were, before they became political competition rather than athletic competition. They are innocent of the turmoil which has surrounded the selection of China as the site for the Olympics and the angry accusations of human rights violations by the government there aren't understood.

For them, the television coverage gives them a chance to glimpse the land where they were born and the people who live where they once did. Having left China at ages ranging from 10 months to 18 months, any memories are vague, so the television images of the country are all the more fascinating to them.

When the Olympic torch is extinguished in two weeks, they'll turn to whatever it is that interests an 11-year-old, a 7-year-old and a 4-year-old. The two oldest will be returning to school in a few weeks and the four-year-old will embark on that adventure for the first time as a preschooler.

They'll remember the Olympics for a time and, while they may not be able to articulate it, they'll feel pride that the games were held in the land where they were born.

Their experience probably won't reawaken my interest in the Olympics, however. But, there's still a possibility we can take them to visit China at some point, if only I can steel myself for eight feature length movies.
