



Gold medalist Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo of Norway celebrates on the podium after winning the Men's 10km + 10km Skiathlon during the 2026 Olympic Winter Games at Tesero Cross-Country Skiing Stadium. He won six gold medals in this year's competition. KAI PFAFFENBACH/REUTERS VIA IMAGN IMAGES

What is Norway's secret sauce at Olympics?

Your Turn
 Mark A. Zupan
 Guest columnist

I love the Olympics, and the recently concluded Winter Olympics is no exception. Athletes at the top of their game represent countries in several days of intense competition balanced by heartfelt camaraderie. All of this is done in service to the Olympic ideals "Faster, Stronger, Higher - Together."

National success is typically measured by the total number of medals, and we enjoy seeing nations' flags hoisted above the winners' podium. Such overall medal tallies, of course, do not account for countries' population size, income, climate and its conduciveness to winter sports, any home-field advantage and investment and citizen participation in athletics.

By all measures, it is striking the extent to which Norway has dominated the medal count since the inception of the Winter Olympics in 1924. With 446 medals, Norway tops the cumulative medal count leaderboard. The United States ranks second with 363 medals.

What is Norway doing right? Of course, it is blessed with a climate conducive to winter sports. It also has one of the world's highest per capita income levels thanks to an industrious population and significant oil reserves. In addition, over the last four decades, Norway has been promoting athletics in a particular manner among its citizens.

In 1984 and 1988, Norway won three and zero gold medals, respectively. Since that dismal showing, the country has invested heavily in Olympiatoppen, an organization devoted to recruiting and training Olympic athletes, arguably Norway's second-most-valuable natural resource.



Alina Muller of Switzerland celebrates after scoring the game-winning goal against Sweden during the women's ice hockey bronze medal game during the 2026 Olympic Winter Games at Milano Santagiulia Ice Hockey Arena. GEOFF BURKE/IMAGN IMAGES

As noted by Ben Cohen and Joshua Robinson in a recent Wall Street Journal article ("One Tiny Country Dominates the Olympics - and Everyone Wants the Secret, Feb. 17, 2026), Norway's Olympiatoppen strategy runs counter to that of most other nations. Olympiatoppen facilities are modest. Youth sports are organized to be affordable for everyone, with a priority on fun over winning, and kids are discouraged from specializing too early. Indeed, they are instead encouraged to try out as many sports as possible.

The results of Norway's novel approach have been remarkable. At the

1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway went from getting blanked in 1988 to winning the overall medal count - including 10 golds. This year, at Milan-Cortina, Norway earned an all-time record (for any nation) 18 gold medals. Its athletes also won 12 silver and 11 bronze medals. Norway's total haul of 41 medals was well ahead of the 33 garnered by the second-place United States and the 30 by third-place Italy, the host country.

What is even more remarkable about Norway is its per capita Winter Olympic medal productivity, as shown on the following list. Of the 29 countries that won at least one medal at the Milan-Cortina

Olympics, Norway stood head and shoulders above the rest. Specifically, Norway won one medal for every 135,122 citizens - nearly three times better than second place Switzerland.

Winter Olympic Medal Productivity, 2026 Population Relative to Total Medals:

1. Norway 135,122
2. Switzerland 388,261
3. Austria 509,544
4. Slovenia 540,000
5. Sweden 591,111
6. Netherlands 902,000
7. Finland 925,000
8. Latvia 945,000
9. Estonia 1,340,000
10. New Zealand 1,600,000

The United States didn't make the top 10 and in fact ranked near the bottom of the list - 23rd out of the 29 participating countries that won at least one medal. Our nation won one medal for every 10,243,000 American citizens. China did even worse at 28th - with only one medal per every 94,000,000 citizens. While these results focus on the Winter Olympics, Norway's Olympiatoppen approach offers some potentially valuable insights for other nations regarding how to succeed with respect to educational and economic outcomes.

Namely, are cultures more likely to be winning ones when they promote broad-based participation and agency over expensive facilities? When they discourage specialization while encouraging broader-based interests across their members? And when they focus on fun versus winning?

Mark A. Zupan is president of Alfred University. Reach him at zupan@alfred.edu