In one of the most dramatic upsets in Olympic history, the underdog U.S. hockey team, made up of college players, defeats the four-time defending gold-medal winning Soviet team at the XIII Olympic Winter Games in Lake Placid, New York. The Soviet squad, previously regarded as the finest in the world, fell to the youthful American team 4-3 before a frenzied crowd of 10,000 spectators. Two days later, the Americans defeated Finland 4-2 to clinch the hockey gold.

The Soviet team had captured the previous four Olympic hockey golds, going back to 1964, and had not lost an Olympic hockey game since 1968. Three days before the Lake Placid Games began, the Soviets routed the U.S. team 10-3 in an exhibition game at Madison Square Garden in New York City. The Americans looked scrappy, but few blamed them for it—their average age, after all, was only 22, and their team captain, Mike Eruzione, was recruited from the obscurity of the Toledo Blades of the International League.

Few had high hopes for the seventh-seeded U.S. team entering the Olympic tournament, but the team soon silenced its detractors, making it through the opening round of play undefeated, with four victories and one tie, thus advancing to the four-team medal round. The Soviets, however, were seeded No. 1 and as expected went undefeated, with five victories in the first round.

On Friday afternoon, February 22, the American amateurs and the Soviet dream team met before a sold-out crowd at Lake Placid. The Soviets broke through first, with their new young star, Valery Krotov, deflecting a slap shot beyond American goalie Jim Craig's reach in the first period. Midway through the period, Buzz Schneider, the only American who had previously been an Olympian, answered the Soviet goal with a high shot over the shoulder of Vladislav Tretiak, the Soviet goalie.

The relentless Soviet attack continued as the period progressed, with Sergei Makarov giving his team a 2-1 lead. With just a few seconds left in the first period, American Ken Morrow shot the puck down the ice in desperation. Mark Johnson picked it up and sent it into the Soviet goal with one second remaining. After a brief Soviet protest, the goal was deemed good, and the game was tied.

In the second period, the irritated Soviets came out with a new goalie, Vladimir Myshkin, and turned up the attack. The Soviets dominated play in the second period, outshooting the United States 12-2, and taking a 3-2 lead with a goal by Alesandr Maltsev just over two minutes into the period. If not for several remarkable saves by Jim Craig, the Soviet lead would surely have been higher than 3-2 as the third and final 20-minute period began.

Nearly nine minutes into the period, Johnson took advantage of a Soviet penalty and knocked home a wild shot by David Silk to tie the contest again at 3-3. About a minute and a half later, Mike Eruzione, whose last name means "eruption" in Italian, picked up a loose puck in the Soviet zone and slammed it past Myshkin with a 25-foot wrist shot. For the first time in the game, the Americans had the lead, and the crowd erupted in celebration.

There were still 10 minutes of play to go, but the Americans held on, with Craig making a few more fabulous saves. With five seconds remaining, the Americans finally managed to get the puck out of their zone, and the crowd began counting down the final seconds. When the final horn sounded, the players, coaches, and team officials poured onto the ice in raucous celebration. The Soviet players, as awestruck as everyone else, waited patiently to shake their opponents' hands.

The so-called Miracle on Ice was more than just an Olympic upset; to many Americans, it was an ideological victory in the Cold War as meaningful as the Berlin Airlift or the Apollo moon landing. The upset came at an auspicious time: President Jimmy Carter had just announced that the United States was going to boycott the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and Americans, faced with a major recession and the Iran hostage crisis, were in dire need of something to celebrate. After the game, President Carter called the players to congratulate them, and millions of Americans spent that Friday night in revelry over the triumph of "our boys" over the Russian pros.

As the U.S. team demonstrated in their victory over Finland two days later, it was disparaging to call the U.S. team amateurs. Three-quarters of the squad were top college players who were on their way to the National Hockey League (NHL), and coach Herb Brooks had trained the team long and hard in a manner that would have made the most authoritative Soviet coach proud. The 1980 U.S. hockey team was probably the best-conditioned American Olympic hockey team of all time—the result of countless hours running skating exercises in preparation for Lake Placid. In their play, the U.S. players adopted passing techniques developed by the Soviets for the larger international hockey rinks, while preserving the rough checking style that was known to throw the Soviets off-guard. It was these
factors, combined with an exceptional afternoon of play by Craig, Johnson, Eruzione, and others, that resulted in the miracle at Lake Placid.