

# Olympus on fire

## Rome's 1960 summer spectacle reflected upheavals in politics and athletics

By Brion O'Connor | July 20, 2008

### Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World

By David Maraniss

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The world, and not just Rome, was a fascinating and frightening place in 1960, full of promise and peril, hope, unrest, and almost incomprehensible complexity. The Cold War, with the forces of communism and capitalism at loggerheads, appeared to be building inexorably toward a fearsome climax; racial tensions globally (notably the civil wars of an awakening Africa) were roiling; and revolutions both technological and sexual were picking up steam. Onto this simmering stage strode the Summer Games of the 1960 Olympics in Rome.

It must have been a daunting task for author David Maraniss to tackle the spectrum of worldwide events that swirled around the event, while providing the necessary context for the Games and requisite individual stories of the myriad athletes and officials who played significant roles, in a single volume. But the Washington Post associate editor succeeds dramatically, with an exquisite blend of exhaustive research and a crisp, well-paced narrative.

"Rome 1960" is a rich five-course banquet, teeming with calories, telling anecdotes, and captivating facts. Maraniss opens with a tasty appetizer, a historic dual meet between the USSR and the United States in Moscow in 1958. "The Olympic ideal was of pure athletic competition separated from the ideologies and international disputes of the modern world," writes Maraniss. "But that was an impossible notion, and there was no pretense of separating sports and politics in the first dual track-and-field meeting involving the two superpowers of the cold war era." That became even more clear on the eve of the Rome Olympics, as US officials recruited athletes to persuade Soviets to defect even as they promised their Italian counterparts that they would shun any political shenanigans.

Maraniss derides the archaic Olympic adherence to amateurism, which was under constant attack by athletes who were either beholden to the state (Communist countries) or could barely make ends meet while training (capitalist countries). He repeatedly skewers Avery Brundage, former Olympic strongman and Chicago millionaire, and his upper-crust Olympic committee cronies as unable or unwilling to recognize the draconian limits imposed on "amateur" athletes. "Their notion of the amateur ideal seemed naive if not miserly," writes Maraniss. "The whole notion of the gentleman amateur was nothing more than a late-nineteenth-century boarding school convention that somehow was imposed on the rest of the athletic world."

Many athletes were forced to consider the Olympics as a springboard to future opportunities (Hollywood being a big draw). The 1960 Games became a launchpad for one of the most influential athletes of the 20th century, Cassius Clay. Before converting to Islam and adopting the name Muhammad Ali, the boxer was a brash but wildly talented teenager from Kentucky who displayed the same bravado and penchant for self-promotion that would eventually transform him into one of the most recognized men on the planet. Yet Clay was far from the top dog on this US squad. That honor was bestowed, without dissent, on Rafer Johnson, the decathlon champion. Johnson, says Maraniss, "was universally regarded as the athletic royalty of the Games."

Maraniss does justice to the on-field competitions, and the athletes, effectively re-creating the drama and suspense of the more noteworthy events. This was no easy task, considering the Games were held nearly a half century ago. That time gap provides the benefit of hindsight, an intriguing perspective on the events of the day a scant 15 years after the end of World War II.

"Rome 1960" dispels the myth that athletes, as a whole, bought into the Cold War semantics, and reinforces the encouraging notion that most participants respected their opponents, sharing the bond of competition for the sake of sports, not ideology. In describing the defeat of Russian boxer Gennady Shatkov to Clay, Maraniss chides our national pastime of handicapping athletic events, thus putting undue pressure on our heroes with the weight of our expectations. "I shook Clay's hand," said Shatkov after being beaten in the gold-medal match. "It was no disgrace to lose to a boxer like that."

"Here was an athlete who seemed to have a wiser perspective on losing than most sportswriters," writes Maraniss. "It would be hard for outsiders to accept, but athletes understood. Usually you lose because someone else is better that day."

Maraniss relies heavily on such literary marksmen as Red Smith, Shirley Povich, A. J. Liebling, and the Englishman Neil Allen, among others, knowingly running the risk that some of the book's finest prose won't be his own. But "Rome 1960" is the better for their lyrical insights.

Sadly, the Olympics in Rome also gave rise to some of sport's more unseemly realities, including drug use (such as the alleged amphetamine-related death of Danish cyclist Knud Enemark Jensen, who collapsed in the searing heat of the first day of competition, and steroid abuse among weight lifters and swimmers), politically motivated judges, and endless propaganda. Maraniss reveals that both superpowers tried to exploit the Games, though the Soviets proved much more adept. One of the reasons was the race card, and the Soviets were quick to accurately criticize the double standard that most African-Americans, including the dazzling sprinter Wilma Rudolph, faced: Olympic heroes relegated to second-class citizens back home, unable to get a meal or a seat on the bus in certain states, or attend certain schools.

Ultimately, "Rome 1960" presents a classic chicken-egg question: Did these Olympics really change the world, or did the Games change as the world changed? Maraniss, frankly, doesn't answer the question, and doesn't need to. The 1960 Games were undoubtedly a watershed moment that came along at a time of great upheaval, and embodied those global changes. Maraniss depicts the milieu of those Games with clarity. Poignant and powerful, "Rome 1960" is a must-read for sports fans and history buffs.

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