

KIRKUS REVIEWS

“Starred” Review

Timely, illuminating account of the 17th Olympiad, with its many firsts, including the first doping scandal in Olympic history.

Washington Post editor and Pulitzer-winner Maraniss (*Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball’s Last Hero*, 2006, etc.) has a talent for condensing sprawling events into comprehensible episodes. In this instance, those episodes take place on and off the field. Many, indeed, take place in secret government facilities and back alleys. The 1960 Rome games, for instance, took place at the height of the Cold War, when the United States and Soviet Union both took considerable pains to convert a theoretically apolitical contest of amateurs into a thoroughly politicized, near-professional endeavor.

As Maraniss’s account opens, for instance, track star Dave Sime is receiving an assignment from Washington to “run for your country, and bag a defector for your country as well.” While other American athletes distributed Russian-language pamphlets extolling the virtues of life in the West, Russian women athletes stepped onto the Rome tarmac wearing “sharp beige suits, hosiery, high-heeled brown pumps—and lipstick,” having been instructed to show the sexist sportswriters of the world that beauty salons were not unknown behind the Iron Curtain. Meanwhile, African-American athletes such as Rafer Johnson—the first to carry the flag in the parade of nations—and Wilma Rudolph struggled to keep their discontents about Jim Crow America to themselves, a matter that seemed not to trouble a young boxer named Cassius Clay, whose consciousness would not be heightened for another few years with the adoption of a new name, Muhammad Ali.

As to the firsts: Maraniss carefully relates stories of the first doping scandal in Olympic history, the advent of anabolic steroid use, the inauguration of the Olympics as a television event—and the first recognition on the part of the U.S. government, it seems, that the Soviets had a point in thinking that “some . . . sporting victories have had certain propaganda benefits.”

Evocative, entertaining and often suspenseful—sports history at a very high standard.

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