

BOOK REVIEW

'Rome 1960' by David Maraniss

The Rome Olympics had it all -- Cold War maneuvers, individual triumphs, controversy -- and a transformative effect to boot.

By Mark Bowden

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Rome 1960

The Olympics That Changed the World

David Maraniss

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THE OLYMPIC GAMES are, quite literally, many things. Too many things, some might say. They are one of the great recurring television events in the world, the most significant global athletic competition, a premier international advertising venue, a biennial showdown between artificial performance enhancement and lab techniques to test for the same, a relic of the Cold War, a shameless exploitation of nationalism, a platform for prevailing ethnic, social and racial theories, a target for terrorists and (in light of most of the above) a naively idealistic exercise in the brotherhood of man.

But above and beyond the mindless flag-waving and tiresome product placement, the Games are thousands of compelling individual stories. No athlete makes it to the Olympics without lifelong effort. Few reach that platform without intense struggle. All of their stories converge in a whirl of competition crammed into about two weeks -- this year, in Beijing, the Games will run from Aug. 8 to 24 and will produce for NBC and its affiliated channels more than 1,000 hours of live programming.

The Games were not quite such a juggernaut 48 years ago, when the competition was held in Rome, but the challenge for anyone trying to tell the story is the same: How can you capture the breadth of an Olympics event while somehow doing justice to the thousands of smaller personal dramas? In his consistently engaging "Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World," David Maraniss succeeds by choosing judiciously from the narrative smorgasbord. He blends his own exhaustive reporting with cherry-picked passages from the colorful accounts filed by an Olympian team of American journalists on the scene, including Red Smith, A.J. Liebling, Tex Maule and Shirley Povich.

Maraniss' account works as both a history of the 1960 Games and a revealing time capsule of the Cold War. American and Soviet propagandists worked to exploit the Games for ideological ends. The communist press refused to even acknowledge the existence of some athletes, such as those competing from the Republic of China on

Taiwan or the West German portion of the supposedly "unified" German team. In what was a common Communist Party practice, winning athletes from the heretical regimes were simply airbrushed out of the record in Moscow and Beijing.

But there were also the seeds of change, from the emergence of charismatic black athletes like Wilma Rudolph and Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay), to the death of Danish cyclist Knud Enemark Jensen, who may or may not have been taking amphetamines (then, as now, the issue of enhancement is shrouded in mystery). Maraniss' portrait of Clay as a loudmouthed extrovert catches "The Greatest" before he exploded on the world stage, but with his outsized ego completely formed. Hindsight makes all the more poignant the irony of triumphant black American athletes carrying the torch of greatness for a country that still treated them as second-class citizens. They are the heroes of this book. Decathlete Rafer Johnson, who carried the American flag into the Stadio Olimpico in the opening ceremony, is clearly whom Maraniss regards as the greatest American athlete of those Games.

Some of the controversies in 1960 now seem quaint. Arguments raged over whether women's bodies and psyches could withstand the rigors of serious athletic competition. The issue of an athlete's amateur status was hotly challenged, with the International Olympic Committee not allowing Johnson to play a bit role in the movie "Spartacus" or suspending high hurdler Lou Calhoun for one year because he and his bride got married on the TV show "Bride and Groom." It was considered a breach of purity to profit in any way from one's athletic accomplishments.

Detail and character

MARANISS brings to this sprawling topic a newspaperman's eye for colorful, significant detail and a biographer's passion for character. "Rome 1960" is chock-full of deftly-drawn portraits, everyone from theatrical pole vaulter Donald Bragg -- whose goal in life beyond track and field (unfulfilled) was to play Tarzan in the movies -- to my favorite, Joe Faust, whose spiritual pursuit of excellence in high jumping entirely transcended competition, even Olympic competition. Maraniss finds this monk-like man still at it a half-century later, living alone with a makeshift high-jump bar and pit (a mattress) in his cluttered backyard, the discipline of the jump having become his personal form of prayer.

One of Maraniss' most fascinating portraits is of Avery Brundage, the outwardly bland Chicagoan president of the IOC, whose stubborn and naive idealism shaped the modern competition. Brundage saw the Olympics not just as games, but as a movement, a peaceful international phenomenon of greater import than the United Nations, and he was willing to overlook anything in pursuit of the dream, from Hitler's genocidal campaign against the Jews to South African apartheid, which excluded black athletes with the laughable explanation that they were not capable of competing at the same level as its whites. Brundage opposed women's competition and enforced "amateurism" in the West even as he turned a blind eye to the vast state-sponsored athletic mills of the Soviet Union

and Eastern Europe.

Maraniss sees Brundage's faults, but he also, I think, appreciates what he accomplished. Idealism is a thing often ridiculed, as it readily attracts the naif and hides the hypocrite, but it has also served a transcendent role in history. The history of the United States can be seen as one long struggle to live up to the lofty ideals enunciated at its founding. This struggle is ongoing, of course, and idealism continues to lead us toward a more hopeful future. Television and the Internet have amplified its effect by grabbing mankind's sordid failings by the scruff of the neck and dragging them into the bright light of our noblest goals.

As this book so vividly shows, the Olympic Games have never transcended politics, racism, sexism, professionalism or cheating, but one can argue that by stubbornly taking the high road, the Games have edged us upward. Hateful and foolish myths wither in the shadow of excellence, whether it is Jesse Owens obliterating Hitler's white supremacist theories or Rafer Johnson doggedly giving chase to his great friend and competitor C.K. Yang. How better to shatter ignorance and lies about race and gender than to witness the grace and power of Rudolph and the Tigerbelles tearing up the Rome track? At the same time that Cold War spies and propagandists formed a backdrop to the 1960 Games, that competition, with its nascent worldwide TV presence, introduced the West to sympathetic athletes from behind the Iron Curtain. The Olympics inched us all toward a more nuanced view across the ideological divide.

The Games that open this week are taking place against a backdrop of Chinese political oppression, but they are also presenting a more complex, intimate and respectful view of China to the world. Just as they introduce the rest of the world to China's most hopeful idea of itself, one suspects they will also pull that nation, a state founded on fear, closer to respect for universal human rights and liberties, to democracy and a state of consent. On the bigger issues, Maraniss shows us, maybe Brundage was right.

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