

Rome 1960 was the Olympics that changed the world - in some ways, at least

STEPHANIE MYLES

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Rome 1960: The Olympics that changed the world, by David Maraniss, Simon & Schuster, 478 pages.

The Olympic Games kicked off in Beijing with a breathtaking opening ceremony yesterday, as the Chinese spent multi-billions to blow away the world.

That scene was in stark contrast to the 1960 Games in Rome, where the Chinese, who had withdrawn from the Olympic movement in 1958, were not even spoken of, but for the presence of Nationalist China, Taiwan.

Taiwan competed over the objections of the United States, and others, and were forced to march into the opening ceremony under the banner "Formosa" (the original name of the island), with a small sign directly behind that said "Under Protest."

The Rome Games were a no-turning-back moment for the modern Olympics.

And Pulitzer-prize winning author David Maraniss recreates that long-ago drama in his new book with such vivid and astonishing detail you almost feel as though you lived it.

That's no small feat, with so many athletes, so many great stories, and so many political and ethical issues surrounding that late summer in Rome.

The Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was at an apogee, and the Games became a flat-out propaganda war between the two superpowers.

Edicts from the U.S. to put African-American athletes front and centre, to counteract just charges of racism from the Soviets, were

unnecessary. The stars of the 1960 Games included dignified decathlete Rafer Johnson and sprinter Wilma Rudolph, who was the belle of Rome, inviting ardent attention from athletes the world over, not the least of whom was Cassius Clay, later Muhammad Ali.

The Rome Olympics were the first commercially broadcast summer Games, featured the first doping scandal and the first runner paid for wearing a specific brand of track shoes.

They also featured the first African-American flag-bearer in Johnson, a point brought home yesterday when Sudanese refugee Lopez Lomong did the honours for the U.S.

The Rome Games featured the first athlete from sub-Saharan Africa to win gold, when Adebek Bikila of Ethiopia (a country the host Italians had invaded, twice) ran barefoot through the pitch-black streets of Rome in record time.

That victory came as an all-white South African squad's executives somehow convinced then-IOC president Avery Brundage they had tried to include blacks but, sadly, they just weren't talented enough.

The East and West Germans competed as a unified team, in name only, even as the border between East and West Berlin was closing. When they won a medal, Beethoven's Ode to Joy was played, rather than an anthem.

All these stories, and so many more, are brought to life by Maraniss, whose previous works included biographies of Hall of Fame baseball hero Roberto Clemente and two on former U.S. President Bill Clinton.

The book is meticulously, exhaustively researched. But it never, ever drags; Maraniss's story-telling skills are that good.

And if you wonder why it's worth reading about an event that occurred before many of us were born, it's worth noting how much has changed in a relatively short period of history, and how much hasn't changed a bit.

In 1960, female athletes were not even recognized by the NCAA, the ruling body of U.S. college athletics. The 800-metre women's race was run for the first time since 1928 - over the strenuous objections of male reporters and especially those of Brundage, the philandering,

trough-sipping, upper-crust wannabe American who overlorded the Olympics.

There were athletes (Johnson among them) who were suspended or threatened with expulsion from the "amateur" Olympics for, among other things, working at a gymnastics camp for \$30 a week to help pay for training, or accepting a role in a movie. At the same time, the athletes from Russia were sitting pretty, their every need taken care of, with privileges accorded to no ordinary citizen.

The Russian weightlifters were jacked up with a new steroid called Dianabol in 1960. Nothing new there, either.

But the enduring image of all those so stunningly crafted by Maraniss is that of Johnson and Taiwanese decathlete C.K. Yang, former training mates at UCLA. Yang was the biggest reason Taiwan decided to send a team.

Yang finished an honourable second to Johnson; the Soviets would not even acknowledge his existence, chronicling the first, third and fourth-place finishers.

Johnson later said: "I never in my whole life but that once competed against someone where I had a little bit of ambivalence about beating him. ... I mean, I was exhilarated that I won and totally depressed that C.K. lost. I had both feelings."

As Yang stood, bent over, when it was done, it was Johnson who came and picked him up. And there they stood, arm in arm, before leaving late that night to walk back to the Olympic Village together, just the two of them.

Those are sights you won't ever see in our over-commercialized, over-hyped Olympics.

And as spectacular as the opening ceremony was yesterday, the man-made, costly blockbuster put on by the Chinese could never compare to the sights of Rome - of marathoners making their way by spotlight past the Coliseum, of rowers competing on Lake Albano, in a lake 600 feet deep, a five-mile oval bowl of a primordial crater, with a landscaped terrace leading up to Castel Gandolfo, the summer palace of the Pope.

There are some things money just can't buy.