

The Road From Rome

Politics, commercialism, doping, nonstop TV coverage—it all started in 1960.

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Avery Brundage, the Crusty Chicago businessman who ran the International Olympic Committee as his vast personal fiefdom during the middle decades of the 20th century, clung obsessively, if at times naively or hypocritically, to the notion that his movement could be free from professionalism, commercialism and politics. Any semblance of that idea is long gone now as the Beijing Olympics approach. While evocative sports stories will certainly emerge from the 2008 Summer Games, these Olympics seem destined to be remembered less for what happens in the competitions than for the surrounding atmospherics and, above all, for the simple fact that they are being staged in China. Whether Dara Torres can turn back the clock and win swimming gold at the age of 41 is a stirring question, but it's been overshadowed by political issues. How the Chinese handle their human-rights failings, the ghastly pollution in their capital city and the thousands of Western journalists clanging around looking for stories in a state known for rigid control will more likely define the Olympic days in Beijing.

Running close behind politics will be laments about the various ways the Olympics have been tainted. *Citius, altius, fortius* is the Olympic motto—faster, higher, stronger—and the athletes every four years do indeed seem to go faster, rise higher and exhibit more strength. Yet along with new records come ever more suspicions that illegal substances have something to do with those achievements. And today, when it comes to the Olympics, there is exponentially more of everything, not just more steroids and doping but more money, more commercial sponsors, more television, more athletes, more events—an overwhelming sense of excess that can make it harder to appreciate authentic moments of athletic brilliance and sportsmanship.

How did things get to this point? One way to find an answer is by looking back a half century to the days leading up to and including the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. The contests in Rome shimmered with performances that remain among the most golden in athletic history—from the barefoot Ethiopian Abebe Bikila in the marathon to the graceful Wilma Rudolph in the sprints; from audacious Cassius Clay in the boxing ring to dignified Rafer Johnson in the decathlon. But more than that, the forces of change were everywhere. In sports, culture and politics—interwoven in so many ways—one could sense an old order dying and a new one being born. With all its promise and trouble, the modern world as we see it today was coming into view. Television, money and drugs were bursting onto the scene, altering everything they touched. Old-boy notions of pristine amateurism, created by and for upper-class sportsmen, were crumbling. Rome brought the first doping scandal, the first commercially broadcast Summer Games and the first runner paid for wearing a certain brand of shoes. It also, fittingly, brought the first round of controversy over China.

Today we see China promoting the Olympics for grand propaganda purposes, reintroducing itself to the world for what it expects to be its dominant century. But in 1958 China wanted nothing to do with the rest of the world. Mao Zedong's People's Republic withdrew from the Olympics altogether that year in an ideological snit over the refusal of Brundage and his IOC cohorts to ban Taiwan, which called itself the Republic of China and was run by Chiang Kai-shek, Mao's old antagonist. In retreating from the Olympics, China denounced Brundage as "a tool of the imperialistic State Department of the United States."

The context was different, but the central political question as the Rome Olympics neared was the same as it is now: how should the world deal with China? The issue was debated that year by Vice President Richard Nixon and Sen. John F. Kennedy during the presidential campaign, and Brundage and the IOC became embroiled in it as well. The United States did not recognize Mao's mainland government, Mao did not recognize Chiang's island government and the IOC had nothing but trouble with both. Not long after the People's Republic withdrew from the Olympics, the IOC ruled that Taiwan could no longer call itself the

Republic of China at the Olympics because it did not represent the geographical entity of China. It could march in the opening ceremony only as Taiwan or the other name for the island, Formosa.

Suddenly Brundage went from being called a tool of American foreign policy to being labeled a communist sympathizer. Right-wing groups in the United States mounted an intense letter-writing campaign denouncing him. The State Department, while claiming to be free from political involvement in the Olympics, began a lobbying effort to persuade the IOC to overturn the decision. The Taiwanese, in diplomatic cables with Washington, went so far as to suggest that perhaps they should introduce Brundage, a known philanderer, to some of the "fleshpots of Rome" to help the cause. When all else failed, the United States urged Taiwan to boycott the Olympics rather than accede to the change in nomenclature, which was taken as a symbolic victory for the Reds in the cold war.

That almost happened, but for one simple and overriding fact: Taiwan had a superb decathlete, C. K. Yang, who seemed destined to bring honor to the island by winning its first Olympic medal. The Taiwanese delegation chose to stay in Rome, but revealed its dismay during the opening ceremony when a lead official took out a handmade banner as the team marched past Brundage on the reviewing stand. UNDER PROTEST, it read. Yang went on to win a silver medal in one of the most memorable contests of the 1960 Games, barely losing the decathlon gold to his close friend and UCLA teammate Rafer Johnson, the captain of the U.S. team. (Johnson also made history at the opening ceremony as the first black athlete to carry the Stars and Stripes at the head of the American delegation.)

In the cold-war mentality of the Rome Games, the propaganda value of winning medals had become absolutely critical. The Soviets and their Eastern-bloc allies claimed that every medal they accumulated was further proof of the superiority of their political systems. Reading the accounts from East Berlin, one would think that Ingrid Krämer, the brilliant diver from Dresden, won two gold medals in Rome not because of the extraordinary way she pierced the water with barely a splash but because of "her joyful life in the socialism of the German Democratic Republic." Now the Chinese seem to be assuming the old Soviet role as the nation placing the most emphasis on state-supported Olympic success. There have been reports from China already about athletes who wanted to retire but were forced to keep training, against their will, because their government wanted them to win medals in Beijing.

During the Rome Olympics, the Americans complained that Soviet athletes were essentially professionals supported by the state, while American athletes received no state support and were held to the amateur rules of that era, which sometimes veered toward the preposterous. Lee Calhoun, the best 110-meter hurdler of that era, won a gold medal in Melbourne in 1956 and repeated his gold-medal performance in Rome, but between those two Olympics he had been suspended for a year because he and his college sweetheart, Gwen, had the temerity to get married on the television program "Bride and Groom." Track officials ruled that by taking wedding presents from that show, Calhoun violated the amateur code and had become a professional. Johnson, the great decathlete, had acting aspirations, and befriended the actor Kirk Douglas, who often ran on the UCLA track. But when Douglas invited Johnson to try out for a role in the movie "Spartacus," officials warned Johnson that he would be ruled ineligible in Rome if he accepted the part. They said he would be taking advantage of his athletic prowess for financial gain.

There was a ruling-class aspect to the amateur rules that appeared obvious to most athletes. Slavery Avery, they called Brundage, who along with his associates on the IOC executive committee was thought to have a holier-than-thou attitude about amateurism. It came across as too easy for the Chicago millionaire and his upper-crust associates to talk about the virtues of sports for sports' sake. What, for example, could the vice president of the IOC, David Burghley, the Marquess of Exeter, know about the daily financial struggles of poor and middle-income athletes who had to train constantly to retain their world-class edge?

The most glaring example of incipient commercialism in 1960 involved not an American but the German sprinter Armin Hary, a rascal individualist who angered the Americans soon after arriving in Rome by refusing to meet with Jesse Owens, the immortal sprinter who had won four gold medals at the 1936 Games in Nazi Berlin and who had come to Rome to write a syndicated column for a Chicago newspaper. (Owens handled Hary's rudeness with grace, retorting that he had been snubbed by bigger jerks before, but never faster ones.) Hary ended up winning the 100-meter sprint, defeating the American Dave Sime in a photo finish. In so doing, he became the first Olympic sprinter to take payments under the table for wearing a certain brand of shoes. Or two brands, in this case. There were two major German shoe companies then, Adidas and Puma, and Hary wore Adidas in the race, then ditched those and put on Puma shoes to accept the gold medal.

Today that sort of action seems almost quaint. Most of the athletes have shoe contracts of one sort or another, and the U.S. basketball squad—another so-called Dream Team, led by the NBA stars LeBron James and Kobe Bryant—might as well be called the Nike team, since everything about the squad seems bought and paid for by Nike. In that sense, there is no longer an imbalance between athletes from the West and those from state-supported programs like the one the Chinese use. The Olympics have become a free-for-all fair fight, for better and worse.

Fair, that is, except when it comes to doping. If—or more likely when—an athlete at the Beijing Games is disqualified because of a drug test, or loses his or her medals later because of revelations about the use of illegal substances, the context for that again will go back to the 1960 Olympics. Soviet and American weightlifters were experimenting with anabolic steroids during the competition in Rome, though the effects were not yet clearly established, either in terms of how the steroids might boost performance or how they might hurt the body. Steroids were not yet a banned substance, and Olympic officials were unaware that they were being used.

The drug story that broke in Rome and changed everything came on the first day of competition. A Danish cyclist named Knud Enemark Jensen went off with his three teammates that morning in the 100-kilometer time-trial road-cycling event, but he never reached the finish line. He grew dizzy in the Roman heat halfway through, collapsed to the pavement and died an hour later. At first it was assumed he had died of heatstroke, but the next day a Danish trainer acknowledged that he had administered a doping agent to Jensen and other members of the team.

Olympic officials had long suspected that some athletes were using various drugs—blood thinners, steroids, amphetamines—but Jensen's death finally forced a response. A medical committee was formed by the IOC in 1961, the first list of banned substances was issued in 1967, drug testing of some athletes began at the Mexico City Games in 1968 and steroids were added to the list of banned substances in 1976.

The moment that Jensen collapsed on the pavement was captured in photographs, but not on television. It is hard to imagine any event of that sort not being captured by the TV cameras in Beijing, where NBC, in a billion-dollar effort, will employ an army of 2,900 people to produce 1,400 hours of television coverage and 2,200 hours of coverage on the Internet. Here again, Rome provides context. Those were the first commercially televised Summer Olympics. CBS paid less than a half-million dollars for the rights and sent a crew of fewer than 50 people, only three of whom were announcers, to Rome. It was just before the era of transatlantic satellite broadcasts, so nothing seen in the United States was live. Every day, canisters of videotape and film were sent by commercial jet from Rome to New York.

Jim McKay, hosting his first Olympics, was not even in Rome, but sat in a studio at Grand Central Terminal tapping out his nightly scripts on a portable typewriter as editors spliced together the half-hour shows. Sometimes the tapes were still cold from the belly of the jet, and McKay and the editors would stick them under their armpits to warm them up.

McKay died only months before he could watch the opening ceremony in Beijing. But in television, as in so many other realms, the first glimpses of what the world will see on the stage in China this August came nearly a half century ago at the 1960 Olympics in Rome.

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