

Nashville Scene

Games Nations Play

Historian finds seeds of politicized, commercialized Olympics in Cold War rivalries of 1960

by Michael Ray Taylor

ROME 1960

By David Maraniss (Simon & Schuster, 478 pp., \$27)

Fifty years ago, on the 1958 Fourth of July weekend, a Nashville coach named Edward Stanley Temple boarded a chartered bus with the women's track team from the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University—now Tennessee State—and set off for the national women's track and field championships in New Jersey. For most of the young women on the bus, it was their first trip out of Tennessee, let alone out of the segregated South. In just a few days' time, their stellar performance in Morristown would propel them across the Atlantic to Moscow, where they would represent the United States in the first athletic exchange between the Cold War superpowers.

The trek by the Tennessee State Tigerbelles to Nikita Khrushchev's Soviet Union serves as the opening scene of *Rome 1960*, a masterpiece of sports history by David Maraniss, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and associate editor at *The Washington Post*. The 1958 track meet, arranged at the highest diplomatic levels, set the stage for U.S.-Soviet matchups at the Rome Olympics two years later. There, for political reasons having nothing to do with sport, the world press first began to follow the achievements of women and African-American athletes. With the possible exception of the appearance of a young boxer named Cassius Clay, the 1960 Olympics have largely faded from popular memory, but hidden within its 18 days of competition, Maraniss finds a cast of memorable characters, a wealth of drama and intrigue, and a pattern of national and commercial bad behavior that foreshadows many of the controversies surrounding this summer's games in Beijing.

“In sports, culture and politics—interwoven in so many ways—one could see an old order dying and a new one being born,” Maraniss writes in his preface. “With all its promise and trouble, the world as we see it today was coming into view.” He delivers this transformation primarily through the lens of three young African Americans competing in the games: Clay, who was already developing the cocky swagger of Muhammad Ali; Rafer Johnson, the U.C.L.A. decathlete who would captain the U.S. team and carry the American flag at the opening ceremony; and Wilma Rudolph, an unmarried mother from Clarksville, Tenn., who became one of the greatest Olympic sprinters.

These three serve as touchstones throughout the book. As the games in Rome progress, Maraniss returns to them after forays into such subplots as a U.S. attempt to use an athlete to contact a Soviet defector, the first-ever attempt by a shoe manufacturer to pay an athlete to run in a particular brand of footwear, the death of a Danish cyclist in the

Italian heat (which leads directly to the practice of testing athletes for illegal drugs), and squabbles between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (which did not compete in 1960) over the name by which the International Olympic Committee would recognize the former. With the same thoroughness that categorized his biographies of Vince Lombardi, Bill Clinton and Roberto Clemente, Maraniss extracts physical details and dialogue from historical sources and contemporary interviews to make the scenes and characters come alive.

Consider this description of Rudolph's childhood in Clarksville, which was largely dominated by her near-fatal bout with polio: "By age eight, she would ditch her leg braces when her parents were not looking, but she was still the last kid chosen in outdoor games, which amounted to the Rudolph brood's version of the Olympics: who could run the fastest, throw the farthest. Then one day her father, who did the shopping in the family, came home with regular shoes for Wilma, marking a dramatic change in her life. As [her sister] Yvonne remembered the scene... 'My mother took her into a room all by herself; she didn't even let us know she had these shoes. And they put them on her, and she came out of the room, and she was beaming all over. It was like she was a whole new little girl.' " In a real-life version of the *Forrest Gump* scene where the Tom Hanks character runs out of his braces, readers cannot help but cheer as the "whole new little girl" outruns adversity, qualifies for the Olympics and leads her team to one gold medal after another.

"For every woman athlete who came after, she was the person who opened the door," her coach Ed Temple justifiably claimed many years later. "Wilma opened that door, and for all women, not just in track and field. She had that smile. She had that charisma."

While the political intrigues, media hype and doping scandals Maraniss explores in *Rome 1960* give the book contemporary relevance, it is his intimate portrayal of ground-breaking athletes like Rudolph that give the book heart—and that will stay with readers long after the medals, pomp and scandals of next month's games in Beijing fade from memory.