

# 1960 Rome Games were a turning point for Olympics

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"Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World"

by David Maraniss

Simon & Schuster, 478 pp., \$26.95

If there ever was a time to ponder the meaning and magnificence of the Olympics, this is it: On the eve of the 2008 Summer Olympics in China, the world is poised to judge this historic twinning of politics and sports pageantry.

Sensing the significance of this year's Games, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author David Maraniss delivers a remarkable account of another momentous Summer Olympiad in his "Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World." Forty-eight years doesn't seem that long ago, and in the context of Olympics history, it's a mere 200-meter dash back in time. And what an awesome dash it is.

"In so many realms, these Rome Olympics represented either the end of something or the start, and here was another small example in track and field," Maraniss writes, deep in his fascinating book, about the introduction of fiberglass poles in the pole-vaulting competition and the effect it would have on athletes (from this point forward, agility rather than power would now be key).

There were many other benchmarks in the 1960 Olympics: the first commercially televised Games, which introduced viewers to courthouse reporter-turned-host Jim McKay; the restoration of the women's 800-meter race; the first event in which an athlete was paid to race in a certain brand of track shoes (the athlete, cocky German runner Armin Hary); and the birth of a system for testing Olympic athletes for banned substances in the wake of a cyclist's death that may or may not have been linked to drugs.

The larger narrative: Italy, a country cursed by much of the world a few years earlier (World War II had ended just 15 years prior), craved universal admiration. And in this new world order, a record number of athletes (5,338) were dispatched to the Games — except from the People's Republic of China, which chose to boycott the 1960 Olympics. The reason? Inclusion of Taiwan in the Games.

But Germany, forced by the International Olympic Committee to at least try to put politics aside temporarily, was for the moment no longer East and West, as far as these Games were concerned. The country participated as a unified entity or else risked not competing at all. And requests to right racial injustices — by banishing South Africa from participating because of its practice of apartheid — went unheeded.

Maraniss is an exceptional chronicler of history, sports and personalities, and while some chapters feel too dense, there are plenty of passages that move swiftly. The story of U.S. sprinter

David Sime's attempts to help coax Russian athletes to defect, for example, is as intriguing as any spy narrative.

Other pages that soar are those chronicling the competitors and the glory or anguish they encountered in Rome. Maraniss shows us the full spectrum of the Olympic extravaganza and spotlights both familiar and long-forgotten (or never known) athletes from all corners of the world.

There's Wilma Rudolph, the sweet U.S. sprinter who had overcome childhood polio, then teen motherhood, to become the undisputed doyenne of the 1960 Summer Games. And a barefoot palace guard from Ethiopia, Abebe Bikila, who triumphed in the country that once invaded his homeland.

Rafer Johnson, the U.S. decathlete appointed by his homeland as a symbol of racial equality (though that yet wasn't reality at home in the States), was appointed as the country's flag carrier in the opening ceremonies, the first African-American athlete to do so.

But here is also the tale of another American athlete, high jumper Joe Faust, 17, who may or may not have failed at the Olympics. Maraniss reports the facts of his anti-climactic final jump at the Games, but then poignantly catches up with the athlete-turned-Trappist monk, now in his 60s — and lets the reader decide.

Here too is American weightlifter James Bradford, who nabbed a silver medal at the 1952 Olympics and came out of retirement to try and capture gold in 1960. In Rome, however, Russian officials appealed a ruling that aspects of the performance of his main competitor, Yuri Vlasov, were illegal. The Russians prevailed, giving Vlasov the lead and thwarting Bradford's imminent victory.

Bradford returned to the United States to his low-paying job at the Library of Congress, where no one congratulated him. And then his Olympic rival invited him for a series of weightlifting events in the Soviet Union where Bradford, wined and dined, recognized how differently world-class athletes are treated there than here.

As the Cold War raged, Americans sought to convince Russians to defect — and Bradford toyed with the notion of defecting himself. Reading about this flirtation is nothing short of riveting, as is this engaging book that will appeal to the sports enthusiast, armchair traveler or anyone in countdown mode for Beijing 2008.