

Great athletes, tense times color story of '60 Olympics

By Jules Wagman

SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

Sunday, Jul. 06 2008

For those of a certain age, just naming some of the star American athletes of the 1960 Summer Olympics creates a flood of memories: decathlon winner Rafer Johnson, sprinter Wilma Rudolph, hurdler Glenn Davis, long jumper Ralph Boston, light-heavyweight boxer Cassius Clay.

Ethiopian marathoner Abebe Bikila ran barefoot to his gold medal; Australian metric miler Herb Elliott beat the old mark by 6 seconds; and the American basketball team defeated Brazil, 90-63, for the gold medal.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Maraniss brings back those memories and many more in a riveting account of the games held in Rome. He also places the games in the larger context of the Cold War and the East-West struggle to achieve supremacy without setting off a nuclear war.

The Cold War intruded even before the games began, when the International Olympic Committee decreed that the East and West German teams would compete as one and that Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" would be played to honor gold-medal winners instead of a national anthem.

Communist China was returning to the games — only if Nationalist China (Taiwan) did not compete as the Republic of China. The U.S. State Department tried but failed to get Taiwan to pull out, and the team entered the stadium as Taiwan and with a short-lived banner that read: "Under Protest."

The CIA recruited U.S. sprinter David Sime to persuade West-leaning Soviet long-jumper Igor Ter-Ovanesyan to defect. The attempt moved along precariously until the CIA's "Mr. Wolf" entered the picture at a restaurant rendezvous and frightened off Ter-Ovanesyan.

Doping became an issue for the first time during the games when a Danish cyclist died hours after he collapsed in the oppressive heat of the first day of competition. The next day, a trainer said a drug "designed to intensify blood circulation might have led to his death."

"The tragedy was a turning point in modern athletic history, ushering in the age of drug testing," Maraniss writes.

Clay, who later changed his name to Muhammad Ali, was introduced to the world at the 1960 games. Maraniss writes that Clay's bravado, obvious before he left New York, was intensified by his fear of flying. In Rome, Clay, then 18, dominated the light-heavyweight class, winning the gold with a strong finish, though "in his greenness he could not put his opponent away."

Maraniss quotes Nat Fleischer, Ring magazine's veteran editor, as saying it was "an exhibition of perfect hitting by the Kentucky schoolboy."

Maraniss repeatedly displays his reporting skills, immersing the reader in the action, from Rudolph being awakened from a nap to run her winning 100-meter sprint to Johnson slogging through the two-day decathlon competition to his Olympic record 8,392 points.

The Soviet Union won the medal race with 43 gold, 29 silver and 31 bronze. The U.S. took 34 gold, 21 silver and 16 bronze. Soviet gymnastics won 26 medals, including 10 gold, compared with none for the United States, which spurned gymnastics. That would change by 1984 and Mary Lou Retton.

In the propaganda games, both sides claimed victory.

In "Rome 1960," Maraniss takes home the gold.

Jules Wagman took part in coverage of the 1952 summer and winter Olympic Games for Stars and Stripes, the Army daily newspaper in Germany.