

Birth of the modern Olympics

1960 Summer Games reflected a changing world

By **JACK LESSENBERRY**

**BLADE OMBUDSMAN**

**ROME 1960: THE OLYMPICS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD. By David Maraniss. Simon and Schuster, 435 pages. \$35.**

For the next two weeks or more, it will be virtually impossible for anyone to escape the media extravaganza of the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing.

The entire spectacle will be broadcast in high-definition TV. There will be enough media there to start a small country of their own (though one with very few athletes) and we will be treated to more computer-generated charts, diagrams, and simulated graphics than anyone will be able to absorb.

Given all this, why in the world would we want to sit down and read a fairly long book about a long-ago set of games held in Rome, in an era when everyone had to worry that two elderly bald men might blow the world up, when TV was black, white, and sporadic, and when perhaps the major issue in this nation was whether white Americans would ever treat black people as human beings?

This book supplies the excellent and gripping answers within its first few pages. For savvy readers, one of the best reasons to pick it up is that the author is Washington Post associate editor David Maraniss, who may be the best living serious writer about sports, especially since the tragic death of David Halberstam.

Maraniss, whose best-known book is probably *First In His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton*, has written compelling studies of star-crossed baseball hero Roberto Clemente and Green Bay Packers Coach Vince Lombardi.

This is a book to at least match those efforts. The 1960 Summer Olympics (officially and pompously, the Games of the XVII Olympiad) were held just as a new world was struggling to be born. They had been endangered by one of the most sensational events in the history of the high Cold War, the shooting down of Francis Gary Powers' secret U-2 spy plane over the USSR.

Finally held just weeks after a young John F. Kennedy had won the Democratic Presidential nomination, they were the first games in which television really played a major role - though it wasn't the television coverage we know today. Events were filmed, and then the canisters were flown to New York in unheated airliner baggage compartments.

"I can remember sometimes holding the (frozen) tapes against my body to get body heat to loosen it up," said Jim McKay, who would later become the anchorman most identified with the Olympic games. When the 1960 games started, however, he was editing the coverage with razor blades and glue.

Incidentally, complete television rights for the games went to CBS for what was then seen as the considerable sum of ... \$600,000. (This year's Olympic television rights cost in the neighborhood of \$2.5 billion.)

But the real stars of that Olympics, and this book, were an array of some of the most famous athletes ever to take part in any Olympic games. Rafer Johnson. Oscar Robertson. Walt Bellamy. Sprinter Abele Bikila was the first man from black Africa ever to win a gold medal in the modern Olympics.

And there was an 18-year-old amateur boxer who would later rock his nation and the world, then named Cassius Marcellus Clay.

This is a book, indeed, about a two-toned world (on screen and off) in which skin color played a major part. For the first time, a host of new sub-Saharan African nations were fully independent. Only three of them competed at Rome, but it was clear many more would be ready the next time.

It was the first year when an African-American (Rafer Johnson) would captain a U.S. Olympic team, even though he could not have voted in Mississippi or eaten at a drugstore lunch counter in the Carolinas. And it was the year of the Tigerbelles, a group of amateur women athletes welded together by their legendary coach, Ed Temple, in an era when they could win major meets but were all too often denied the ability to use public bathrooms.

If there is one central hero of this story it is the best-known Tigerbelle, Wilma Rudolph, who won three gold medals despite being a premature baby who survived scarlet fever, pneumonia, and polio - and who, though few spectators knew it, was an unwed mother when she competed in the games.

These athletes accomplished what they did despite the politicians and the head of the U.S. Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, a pompous fool and buffoon.

Maraniss has given us a vivid picture of a time in which the modern world of sport was beginning to be born. Rome 1960 is a fascinating read for anyone who cares about sport and society. In fact, it may be hard to put it down during some of the broadcast of this Olympiad's overhyped games.