

A triumph in Rome

Work details beauty, intrigue of 1960 Summer Games

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For the Journal-Constitution

Published on: 07/06/2008
NONFICTION

"Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World" by David Maraniss. Simon & Schuster. 478 pages. \$26.95.

Bottom line: Even an old East German gymnastics judge would give it a 10.0.

You couldn't make this stuff up, and fortunately for David Maraniss, he didn't have to. His latest nonfiction masterpiece, "Rome 1960," captures all the complexity, beauty and, at times, incredulity of those Summer Games with a gold-medal narrative.

"The Olympics That Changed the World" is the book's subtitle, and no mere hyperbole. Those games, the first truly modern Olympics, staged in the Eternal City's splendor, were rife with:

Escalating Cold War tensions (think: convicted U.S. spy pilot Francis Gary Powers and Nikita Khrushchev). Olympic medal counts as propaganda in the East-West political tug-of-war. Spy vs. spy, including the CIA recruitment of American sprinter Dave Sime to entice Soviet long jumper Igor Ter-Ovanesyan to defect.

The early effects of the civil rights and women's movements. The first Olympic doping scandal (and death, of a Danish cyclist). The first athletic shoe payoff -- and switcheroo -- by German Armin Hary, who won the 100 meters in Puma running shoes, then wore Adidas for the medal ceremony.

The "shamateurism" of state-supported Communist athletes, and the increasing financial frustrations of Americans and other amateurs. Avery Brundage, the autocratic, despicably hypocritical International Olympic Committee president, and his fellow out-of-touch IOC patrician poobahs.

And, of course, television. These were the first Games commercially broadcast worldwide, the rights commanding a mindboggling \$1.2 million (a pittance compared with the Athens 2004 price tag of \$1.2

billion). The '60 Olympics were the first exposure many U.S. viewers had to a broadcaster named Jim McKay.

And then there were the athletes themselves. Has any Olympics ever offered such an array of towering figures, Olympians who were actually Olympian?

An unabashed, 18-year-old light-heavyweight boxer from Kentucky, a slugger-dancer named Cassius Marcellus Clay, won a gold medal, later captured the heavyweight championship of the world and captivated the planet as Muhammad Ali.

Rafer Johnson, the U.S. decathlete and arguably the most regal Olympian ever, was the first African-American to carry the American flag in the opening ceremonies. While Johnson and young Clay were polar-opposite personalities, "I loved the way he talked," Johnson told Maraniss. "He was just brash and challenged people, and he said it the way he felt it, and he talked about it. . . . I just couldn't do that. That just wasn't my makeup. But I loved him for being that kind of person."

Oscar Robertson, Jerry West and the rest of the U.S. basketball team were the original Olympic "Dream Team." Abebe Bikila? Just an unknown Ethiopian distance runner. "A skinny little African guy in bare feet," said American Gordon McKenzie, who first saw Bikila just before the marathon began and thought, "There's one guy we don't have to worry about."

A quarter-century after Mussolini's fascist forces conquered his country, Bikila won the Rome marathon in Olympic-record time. The first of the great African distance champions, he repeated in '64 in Tokyo _- in shoes this time.

The star of the Games was a most unlikely Roman goddess: Wilma Rudolph, the little Tennessee girl who wore braces for childhood polio before blossoming into a Tigerbelle, the coterie of swift female sprinters Ed Temple coached at Tennessee State in Nashville and then in Rome. Rudolph won three golds, in the 100, 200 and the 4x100 relay.

As usual, Maraniss _- author of "Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero" and "When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi," among others _- superbly chronicles all of this. His timing is perfect. Nearly a half-century ago, C.K. Yang and his Republic of China teammates were forced by IOC officials to compete as Taiwan, a concession to Mao's Communist People's Republic of China. Red China didn't compete in Italy. Next month, the athletes of the world come to

Beijing for an Olympics that in Rome, 1960, was inconceivable.

MEET THE AUTHOR

David Maraniss lectures on "Rome 1960" at 8 p.m. July 16. Atlanta History Center. \$10, reservations required. 130 W. Paces Ferry Road N.W. Atlanta. 404-814-4000.