

Olympic feats

The Cold War competition of 'Rome 1960'

INTERVIEW BY ALDEN MUDGE

When David Maraniss finished his much-praised biography of baseball superstar Roberto Clemente (*Clemente: The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero*), he was "determined not to write another sports book anytime soon." He had previously written a highly regarded biography of perhaps the greatest football coach of all time, Vince Lombardi (*When Pride Still Mattered*), so his feeling was: been there, done that.

Besides, during a 30-year career at the *Washington Post*, Maraniss had developed a reputation as a great observer of the American political scene. In 1993, he won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for his series on the early days of Bill Clinton's presidency. (He also shared in the 2008 Pulitzer given to the *Washington Post* team that covered the Virginia Tech shooting.) He published an astonishing account of the 1960s (*They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967*). He wrote a seminal biography of Bill Clinton (*First in His Class*). And, as Maraniss finished his work on the Clemente biography, the preliminary jockeying for position in that other great American contact sport—the run for the presidency—was already beginning.

Unfortunately for Maraniss—but not, it turns out, for readers—Roberto Clemente and the Pittsburgh Pirates were on their way to the World Series at the same time that the world was traveling to Rome for the 1960 Olympics.

"I was doing research on August and September 1960 and I kept seeing these names in the sports section—Rafer Johnson, Wilma Rudolph, Abebe Bikila, Cassius Clay," Maraniss says during a call

to his home in the Cleveland Park section of Washington, D.C., where from his third-floor office he can see the spires of the National Cathedral. Maraniss and his wife, Linda, the "quirky saint" to whom he dedicates **Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World**, now divide their time between Washington and Madison, Wisconsin, where they grew up. "Those are pretty intriguing names. That's what first struck me. But I kept saying I really don't want to do a sports book."

As he read on, however, Maraniss noticed that this was the time when Nikita Khrushchev was about to make his first visit to the United Nations in New York as the Cold War turned serious. "Black Africa was gaining its independence that summer, so that was another layer. Then I read that a doping death had taken place that year and that it was the first televised summer Olympics. And that was enough."

From these strands and additional stories turned up through the prodigious research and reporting that is typical of his books, Maraniss fashions a completely captivating and frequently surprising narrative of the 17 days of athletic competition and political intrigue in Rome during August and September 1960.

First of course, there are the athletes. This was the Olympics when a brash, unknown 18-year-old boxer from Louisville named Cassius Clay burst on the scene. But in that moment, the future Muhammad Ali could not hold a candle to the immensely respected decathlon winner Rafer Johnson, who was the first black athlete to lead the American team and carry the United States flag during the opening ceremonies. It is one of the wonders of Maraniss' storytelling that he can present a charmingly callow Cassius Clay, bragging his way through his fear of flying, without succumbing to the huge temptation to make Clay's the dominant

story of these Olympics.

"The one thing people know about the 1960 Olympics is Cassius Clay," Maraniss says. "But that's not where **Rome 1960** focuses. The other story that I downplayed, but for different reasons, was the basketball team. I love Oscar Robinson and Jerry West. I think that backcourt is for the ages. But I have never thought that basketball represents the Olympics, so I didn't want to get sidetracked on that."

Instead Maraniss writes marvelous, suspenseful accounts of competitors from around the world. Among the most fascinating of these is the story of the eccentric Joe Faust, an American high jumper who didn't come close to winning and yet remained so obsessed with the sport that he continued to jump with almost religious fervor into his 70s. "What an interesting life and mind," Maraniss says of the hours he spent interviewing Faust. "He's the kind of character that as a reporter you're always looking for."

Just as important to **Rome 1960** are the intense political battles that were being waged behind the scenes. This was a time when Cold War antagonisms were nearing their height, and the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. vied mightily to win the Olympic propaganda war. Among his many discoveries, Maraniss uncovers the story of the American's ham-fisted attempt to get Soviet athlete Igor Ter-Ovanesyan to defect. Maraniss also offers a ground-breaking account of the fierce political competition between China and Taiwan that played out during the summer of 1960.

"In **Rome 1960** you see the roots of what exists today," Maraniss says. "The Chinese are using the Olympics for political purposes just as the U.S. and the Soviets did during the Cold War. You can't take politics out of the Olympics no matter how hard you try. So you probably shouldn't try. I don't think anybody should boycott the Olympics, but the athletes and countries that go should say

whatever the hell they want to say about China."

Then, ever the consummate journalist, Maraniss adds, "The Chinese have never experienced the world press the way they will during the Olympics. I don't know what will happen but it will be fascinating. But I'm not going. I have asthma and I don't want to be in all that air pollution."

That's too bad. Imagine the stories he would tell.

Alden Mudge writes from Oakland, California.