

NEW YORK POST

"ROME 1960"

By ROBERT A. GEORGE



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"The world is stirring not only politically," Arthur Daley of the Times noted. "It is stirring athletically, too. Nations that weren't in existence at the time of the Melbourne Games four years ago competed here with distinction. The US scares not a soul anymore. Once the Americans dominated the show. They don't any more nor are they likely to do so again."

Daley wasn't the only one who thought so. Facing an energized Soviet Union and Eastern bloc who saw sports as their primary propaganda tool with which to battle the cultural strengths of America and the West, the sentiment going into the 1960 Olympics was that America had "gone soft."

Those words could also be spoken about America in 2008 - facing a world "stirring" politically and economically. Currently, one of the most feared US competitors is hosting the Games this year - China. One wonders if the concerns of 48 years ago may hold some lessons for today; and show that America's weaknesses both then and now have been greatly exaggerated.

In "Rome 1960," David Maraniss makes a strong case that the year's summer games had as profound an impact on international politics, as well as American sports and culture, as any one event of the latter part of the 20th century.

These were the Games that a young Cassius Clay first introduced himself to the world and accurately predicted he'd win a medal. The future Muhammad Ali is shown as a cocky, yet starkly mortal man afraid of flying. Nikos Spanakos, a featherweight from Brooklyn recalls that Clay screamed the entire flight. "So the coach gave us a sleeping pill to knock us all out, and Cassius was able to overcome the sleeping pill and was still screaming," Maraniss recounts.

These were also the Games where Wilma Rudolph and her superb fellow black "Tigerbelle" of little-known Tennessee State first made the world notice women's track and field. And when gymnastics began to take a prominent role.

But, most significantly, these were the Games when the intrigues of the Cold War forcefully inserted themselves into the sports world. In the background,

Maraniss' intricate detailing of the various machinations going on between the US and Eastern Bloc powers gives parts of the book the feel of a suspense novel.

American sprinter Dave Sime was recruited by the US to aid with the possible defection of Russian Igor Ter-Ovanesyan, who was truly beguiled by American culture (particularly Louis Armstrong). Sime, sick from flu and alone in his hotel room in New York got a visitor. "The federal agent told Sime that the United States of America could use his help . . . They had targeted an athlete who might be approachable in Rome," Maraniss describes.

In need of a Bond-style uber-villain, Maraniss finds a good one in International Olympic Committee Chairman Avery Brundage. Brundage's lengthy career in the Olympic bureaucracy (running both the US and global organizations) lent him a superb arrogance - and afforded him the unique opportunity to be a de facto apologist for the Nazis in 1936, as well as both the apartheid regime of South Africa and Red China in 1960.

"Brundage believed that members of the committee had to remain autonomous and nonideological, devoted not to their countries but to the Olympic cause - even if that meant running the IOC like a secret society." Maraniss says. But according to the author Brundage's greatest sin was his "amateurism uber alles!" mentality which effectively handicapped US athletes in comparison to their Eastern Bloc counterparts, who were state-supported and lived like royalty compared to their countrymen.

Brundage and his lackeys on the American Olympics organization blocked US athletes from taking any secondary jobs that even hinted that they might make a buck from their athletic prowess. "This touched on the huge political side to the amateur issue that divided East from West. How could state-subsidized athletes from the socialist nations be called amateurs? Brundage had been facing that question since his visit to the Soviet Union in 1954, but to some in the West he seemed less vigilant in enforcing the amateur code on Eastern bloc delegations."

One of the most poignant examples involves decathlete Rafer Johnson - selected as the first black

captain of the US Olympic squad. He shared a running track with actor Kirk Douglas. Nearing the end of his competitive career, Johnson was intrigued when Douglas suggested he try out for a supporting role in the upcoming "Spartacus" film. Johnson read for the part - ironically, of Draba, a "rebellious Roman slave from Africa" and was selected. Only then was he told, "Acting in Spartacus would make him a pro . . . If [you] take the part, forget about getting on the plane with your teammates and competing in Rome . . . Johnson was being hired, not because he knew how to act, they said, but because he was a famous athlete. From their perspective, that was no different than if he were paid for a track meet. For the moment, Johnson could empathize with Draba; overlords were threatening to hang him upside down in chains as a warning to others."

Robert A. George is a Post editorial writer.

Rome 1960

The Olympics That Changed the World

by David Maraniss

Simon & Schuster

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