

Another sports tome from Maraniss Cold War tension, marvelous personalities formed backdrop for 1960 Olympics in Rome

Rob Schultz
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It seems that David Maraniss has been attracting readers and winning awards ever since he started his writing career at The Capital Times as a high school student covering prep sports and student anti-war protests.

Many years later, as a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for The Washington Post and an author of four acclaimed books, Maraniss, 59, continues to dazzle with his exhaustive research and writing style that makes his work easy to absorb and hard to stop reading.

The son of former longtime Capital Times Editor Elliott Maraniss joined the Post in 1977, and rose through the ranks to become Maryland editor, deputy Metro editor and Metro editor. He went back to reporting in 1983 and earned a Newspaper Guild Front Page Award for his yearlong series on the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Maraniss moved to Austin, Texas, in 1985 and spent seven years as the Post's southwest bureau chief. There, he did award-winning work on a series about integration in American institutions as well as a series he completed with Rick Atkinson on the savings and loan scandal. He also started covering Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign, an effort that earned him the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting.

He moved back to Washington in 1993, and that's when he started writing books. He has authored "When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi," "First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton," "They Marched Into Sunlight -- War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967," and "Clemente -- The Passion and Grace of Baseball's Last Hero."

He is also the author of "The Clinton Enigma," and co-author of "The Prince of Tennessee: Al Gore Meets His Fate" and "Tell Newt to Shut Up!"

The latest book from Maraniss is "Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World." It is a story of great athletes like Wilma Rudolph, Rafer Johnson and Cassius Clay who won gold medals as the world around them was dramatically changing politically, socially and environmentally.

Maraniss and his wife, Linda, have two grown children and have homes in Washington and Madison. He talked The Capital Times about his new book last week from his cell phone while driving from Washington to Madison.

"When I told people I was doing a book on the Olympics, the natural assumptions were that it had to be about 1936 and Berlin, 1968 with the Black Power and 1972 and Munich," Maraniss said. "In my mind they were fascinating but one-dimensional. They were dominated by one scene. What drew to me Rome was that it sort of had everything. There was an incredible palette of scenes and issues running through it that I thought told more about the modern world than those others."

His research for the book took him to Rome and Lausanne, Switzerland, which is the home of the International Olympic Committee and its excellent archives. It also took him to Champaign, Ill., which has the archives for Avery Brundage, who was the IOC president in 1960; and Nashville, the home of Tennessee State. That is where Rudolph and her Tigerbelles teammates dominated the women's collegiate track scene before starring at the Olympics.

"Going to Rome and to Switzerland, it was easier to get my wife to do that than to move to Green Bay for the winter, which is what we did for Lombardi," Maraniss said with a laugh. "So it was kind of a payoff in that sense."

Maraniss still works for the Post as an at-large reporter. He was part of the Post team that won a 2008 Pulitzer for the newspaper's coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting last year.

In addition to the pulitzers, Maraniss has earned a slew of awards that are referenced on his web site, davidmaraniss.com.

At the moment, Maraniss is doing research on Barack Obama. If Obama is elected president, Maraniss may write a biography on him. "I'll definitely do some stuff for The Washington Post, no matter what. We'll wait and see if I do a book," he said.

What follows is the edited transcript of the conversation with Maraniss about his new book, "Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World."

CT: Was the tumultuous political climate surrounding the Olympics in '60 what motivated you to write this book?

Maraniss: It was a combination of the sports, the politics and the sociology. I first started taking notice of the '60 Olympics when I was researching the Clemente book because the 1960 pennant race was a key part of his baseball career. I went through these old sports sections and saw names I couldn't get out of my head like Cassius Clay, Rafer Johnson and Wilma Rudolph. But I really didn't want to do another sports book.

It was when I saw everything that surrounded these Olympics and rose through the Olympics; all the politics of that moment really brought me to the book. It was the Cold War, it was the first televised Olympics, it was the first doping scandal, there was tension between East and West Germany as they competed as one team even though they hated each other, the propaganda war between the United States and the Soviet Union, the civil rights movement at that moment boiling over. All of that together drew me to the story.

CT: There were so many great athletes who came out of that Olympics: Rafer Johnson, Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay), Wilma Rudolph, Oscar Robertson and Jerry West. Who was your favorite?

Maraniss: It's a tie. I really can't choose between Rafer Johnson, Wilma Rudolph and (Ethiopian marathoner) Abebe Bikila. But Rafer is the only one who is still alive. I loved West, Robertson and Muhammad Ali, too.

But I think, as a human being, probably Rafer. For what they meant to the world, probably Wilma Rudolph and Abebe Bikila.

CT: What can we learn from the 1960 Rome Olympics that can be put to good use later this summer in Beijing? You pointed out in your book that the world as we know it today, with all its promise and trouble, was coming into view in 1960. Can you see another world coming into view as we head to China?

Maraniss: Yes, I do, but I'm not sure whether it's a better world. I honestly think that China is going to be an absolutely huge factor for

this entire century to come. I think these Olympics is sort of the introduction of China to the world in a way. So for better or worse, what happens at these Olympics will be symbolic for what is to follow for the rest of this century as far as China's interaction with the rest of the world.

I think it will be a fascinating Olympics and it will be one that will be remembered -- maybe not for the athletes themselves, but for the atmosphere and the meaning of it being in Beijing.

CT: The Rome Olympics was among the first-ever televised Olympics. How much of it did you see on tape?

Maraniss: Very little was saved. I saw more sort of raw footage from the Italians and from other places than I saw of the actual television coverage. CBS that did the televising doesn't have the tapes anymore. Isn't that amazing? I got to see a lot of footage of the athletes, but I didn't see the actual coverage of it.

CT: You've written about Clemente and Lombardi, and now the 1960 Olympics. Many of the events you drew from occurred in the same era. Was there anything unique about the Olympic athletes, something that set them apart from others you have covered in your books?

Maraniss: Wilma Rudolph was the first woman athlete I've been able to write about. That was a pleasure for me, to sort of delve into the early struggles of Wilma Rudolph and the Tigerbelles, who were not only female but African-American. What they had to overcome in Rome was just incredible. So that really sticks out for me.

Another interesting moment was that Cassius Clay was only 18 years old and had the exact same personality then that he would have later as the world-famous Muhammad Ali. But he didn't have the same meaning behind him. It was sort of like he was a clown prince without a larger meaning.

He and another athlete at those games named Armin Hary, a German sprinter, were kind of real individualists with an assertion of ego. That was representative of what was to come with athletes thereafter.

Rafer Johnson, Abebe Bikila and Wilma Rudolph had an incredible integrity and beauty to them but didn't have that assertion of ego that became a sort of signature of the modern athlete.
