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Rome Olympics resonate 48 years later

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The U.S. elections will take a small respite during the next two weeks for the Beijing Olympics. Politics won't.

President George W. Bush said he was going to Beijing because he "made a decision not to politicize" the games. Sure. Former Senator Bill Bradley, himself a member of the U.S. basketball team that won the gold medal in 1964, once said that imagining the Olympics without politics was like "trying to keep oxygen out of the air we breathe."

The biggest story, more than any times or scores or controversies, will be China. On the playing fields, the Chinese sports machine aims to win more medals at the 29th Olympiad than the Americans after the spectacularly successful opening ceremonies Friday.

More important is the dominant portrait emerging of China: the dynamic economic powerhouse, the only country in the world that might rival the United States as a superpower in the next generation, or the politically repressive regime that cracks down on dissidents, curtails freedom and acts like thugs on Tibet.

There will be stirring competition: the Americans against the Jamaicans in the sprints; the swimmer Michael Phelps's quest to equal or beat Mark Spitz's record of seven gold medals; the U.S. basketball team trying to come back from its devastating losses in Athens four years ago.

If you love sports or politics, then pick up "Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World." The remarkable personalities and politics of those Games almost half a century ago and what they presaged are depicted brilliantly in David Maraniss's book.

No Olympics has assembled such a cast of characters, including the American light-heavyweight boxer, Cassius Clay, who went on to become Muhammad Ali, arguably the most renowned athlete in the world. Rome 1960 was steeped in the politics of the Cold War, the issue of race, and the cheating and commercialism that came to dominate much of sports.

Maraniss, author of books on Bill Clinton, the sports legends Vince Lombardi and Roberto Clemente, and the Vietnam War, brings to mind the versatility and depth of David Halberstam.

In Rome, the young Clay burst onto the international scene, showing his boxing genius in defeating experienced Russian and Polish fighters to win the gold. He was boisterously omnipresent in the Olympic Village, regaling people with stories about himself, some true, some not.

"All," Maraniss writes, "were in the service of the mythology of a self-invented character, who became everything his vivid imagination could dream of and more."

The only more charismatic figure was Wilma Rudolph, who was stricken at age 4 with polio, scarlet fever and double pneumonia and wore leg braces for years. By 1960, she was the sprint star of the Tennessee State running Tigerbelles, capturing three gold medals, forever changing the sport for women and black Americans. She captivated Rome and her own then-segregated America, including John F. Kennedy.

The flag-bearer for the U.S. team was Rafer Johnson, still the most memorable decathlon champion in Olympic history. His epic battle with his college teammate, C.K. Yang of Taiwan, right up until the last event, seems as intense and heroic in the book as it must have been in Rome.

The Americans aren't the exclusive focus. There are delicious profiles of Milkha Singh, India's "Flying Sikh," who won a bronze in the 400-meter dash; Armin Hary, the upset victor in the 100-meter dash, and Igor Ter-Ovanesyan, the Soviet broad jumper who socialized with the American runner Dave Sime, pondering defection.

The most compelling story, however, was the obscure Ethiopian, Abebe Bikila, who won the marathon after discarding his ill-fitting shoes.

Bikila running "through the silent night, alone and barefoot down the torch-lit path of the Appia Antica on his way to marathon history" gives you goose bumps.

Two decades earlier, Benito Mussolini's troops had invaded his country, prompting the retort: "It had taken Italy a million-man army to defeat Ethiopia, but only one Ethiopian soldier to conquer Rome."

He was the first of the great African distance runners. In Beijing, the Ethiopians remain strong at the distance events, as Haile Gebrselassie goes for his third 10,000-meter title.

"Rome 1960" also chronicles the agony of defeat through the prism of the American high jumper John Thomas and the sprinter Ray Norton, whose failures marked them for life. That Olympics was the start of the doping scandals - a Danish cyclist, using an illicit drug, died - that have sadly become commonplace.

And there were the great sportswriters, Red Smith, A.J. Liebling, Shirley Povich from Maraniss's Washington Post. It was a different age: "One well-known Norwegian journalist got so drunk," the author recalls, "that he cabled his article to the wrong newspaper, which recognized his famous byline and puckishly published his dispatch on the front page."

This year NBC, with its billion-dollar investment, will televise or Webcast 3,600 hours of coverage; in Rome, CBS paid half a million dollars and film was flown to New York, where the sportscaster Jim McKay reported the results.

The head of the Olympics then was Avery Brundage, a bigoted hypocrite who perpetuated the myth that amateur sports were pure. Rafer Johnson was told if he appeared in a movie he would be disqualified. Yet Hary, the sprinter, won the 100-meter dash wearing his favorite shoes and then changed brands for the medal ceremonies; both manufacturers were paying him under the table.

It was also the most political Olympics since the 1936 Berlin Games. The Soviet Union won the most medals - and the propaganda war in the short term - with its state-run athletic machine. Johnson and Rudolph left a more enduring mark.

That may be a lesson for the Chinese as they seek a similar propaganda victory in Beijing.

The next two weeks will produce stirring performances, perhaps even a Clay or Bikila. If so, let's hope a half-century from now there's a Maraniss to write about it.
