

# - THE OLYMPIC GAME - AND - ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES -

Reviewed by JOHN GOLDLUST

In the year of the Munich Olympic Games, it is inevitable that this quadriennial orgy of sport will inspire a number of books dealing with these, the XXth Olympiad of the modern era, and with the Olympicism general. After all, an obscure obsession of a rather romantically eccentric French baron has exploded in the space of seventy-five years into a gigantic sporting extravaganza involving thousands of participants from almost every country in the world and watched by hundreds of millions of television spectators in a world-wide hook-up.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics had the quaint idea that a regular festival of sport of the type held by the ancient Greeks was an ideal means of promoting international friendship and understanding, as well as allowing the best sportsmen in the world to achieve their greatest heights through spirited competition. It does not require a great deal of insight to discover that by 1972 what was originally conceived as a noble contest of skill and endurance in quest of international harmony has become an enormously expensive business enterprise that frequently acts as the vehicle for personal and national aggrandisement.

The Baron's idea of participation for its own sake has been perverted to win at any cost for oneself or for one's country's sake. Each country deifies its winners and ignores its losers. Journalists and television commentators lionize the narrow-minded concern of the champion who has dedicated himself from childhood to win, win, win. Parents are praised for "creating" Olympic champions by inspiring and supporting this approach and shielding the prospective champions from "outside distractions" such as living, learning, relating to people. Instead of "the main spirit of the olympics is to participate" the prevailing motto is more likely to be that of U.S. pole vaulter Bob Seagren, who pointed out in an interview in Munich, after coming second to an East German, that the silver medal was the same as nothing at all.

Johnson critically evaluates the games, carefully pointing to the numerous examples of self-seeking, corruption, bad sportsmanship, and nationalistic rivalry that tend to predominate. He notes that despite the "official" line which holds that the athletes are participating as individuals, there are always "unofficial" points-tables published ranking each country's performances and interpreted by each nation's journalists in a way that will best promote national glorification of that country's results. Since the U.S.S.R. entered the Olympics after World War II, its competition with the U.S. to win the Olympics by massing the largest number of medals and placings has been closely observed, commented on and evaluated by the press and sporting bodies in both countries.

Johnson also justifiably mocks the idea that the Olympics are for amateur participants only. Except in a few of the more obscure sports, in order to win a gold medal an individual must dedicate himself obsessively to training for many years, spending many hours of every day in a rigid, premeditated programme devoted solely to eventually producing a winning performance at the games. These people are professional in the sense that the sport plays the major role in their lives and their job or "study" is merely incidental, allowing them to qualify as true-blue

"amateurs." Also, because of the national pride and honour involved, most governments are eager to promote and subsidize athletes through scholarships, training programmes and trips abroad.

Many of the Olympic champions are aware that their feats and the subsequent idolization and publicity can be skillfully translated into financial or even political gains. The latter two-thirds of Johnson's book consists of a series of short portraits of outstanding Olympic champions of the modern era, tracing their lives subsequent to their Olympic victories. Many are faced with psychological problems as a result of achieving their greatest moments so early in life, and thus their subsequent existence appears to them to be all downhill. Others use their victories cynically to make business contacts, obtain preferred jobs, meet important people, or to receive support for public office.

One of the best chapters of the book is devoted to the career of the great American sprinter Jesse Owens, who discovered that despite his being the toast of the world after the 1936 Berlin Olympics, he was unable to eat his three gold medals. He found, however, that people were prepared to pay him for speaking to sporting clubs, youth organizations, fraternal orders, and the like, casting him in the role of a "professional good example." Thus he has made a career of mouthing, to all who pay to listen, the idealistic phrases of the Olympic movement, praising the ideals of sportsmanship, brotherhood, dedication, and hard work, while his own experience and observations on the direction of competitive sport in the U.S. would inevitably lead him to conclude that sport is being used to socialize young people with such traits as obsessive ruthlessness, aggression, chauvinism, and success as the only measure of one's worth.

Another chapter examines the membership of the International Olympic Committee, which is probably correctly characterized as the "Bluest-Blooded Club" in the world. Almost all the members are independently wealthy, socially prominent (frequently of royal blood), citizens whose perceptions of life are inevitably affected by their own distinctively luxurious backgrounds so that their understanding of the motivations of the average athlete from a working-class background or the political use of sport in both internal and international affairs of some governments are generally totally naive and unrealistic. There has been a history of the I.O.C. tacitly using the principle of sport being above politics to support abhorrent political regimes. The case of the two American Jewish sprinters being left off the U.S. relay team in Berlin is a case in point.

Johnson's biting critique is a refreshing alternative to the usually trite, mealy-mouthed glorifications of everything sporting that are perpetuated by the sycophantic sporting journalists of the media. Certainly the Olympic Games are still a dazzling spectacle with fine performances by excellent athletes who are frequently also excellent sportsmen in the best sense of the word. However, a great amount of demythologizing of sport and sporting heroes is necessary, particularly as there are strong forces such as sports

commentators, politicians, and many others able to profit personally from the "sports industry" who seek to use the mythology of sport to encourage individual and national aggrandisement, and also to somehow use sporting success as an analogy for success in life. This latter use has a tendency to perpetuate other more dangerous and often socially regressive myths.

On the contrary, the book by Kamper does not concern itself with either a glorification or criticism of the Olympic ideal. It is a book of facts of the purest kind, written with the type of academic objectivity of which a dedicated physicist would be proud. Kamper presents a faithful record of every Olympic event held at the modern Olympic Games between 1896 and 1968, listing the first six place-getters, the time or distance, country, and in addition, the number of competitors in the event, number of countries and the date on which the competition was held. In team events every team members' name is listed.

This gargantuan feat of dedicated scholarship took Mr. Kamper nearly forty years and so emerges as almost a life's work. The extent of his labours is demonstrated in the bibliography which lists hundreds of official reports and publications from twenty-six countries. The text is studded with 678 (count them!) footnotes which comment on any kind of irregularity, to the length of informing the reader when some contestant's name has been spelt wrongly in the official programme. The entire book is printed side-by-side in three languages—German, French and English. This can be a little confusing to the English reader as the alphabetical order is taken from the German as are many of the abbreviations. In addition to lists of the results, event by event (including sports and events no longer in the Olympics), there are at the back tabulations of such variables as which nations participated in each event at each Games, a list of the greatest medal winners—individually and by country—and many other incredible statistics painstakingly compiled by Kamper.

Why anyone would write such a book may be a legitimate question but appears rather impudent in the fact of the enormity of the task, the duration of the research and the dogged determination of the author to leave no stone unturned. One must remain humble before the deed and point out that it is undeniably the most complete work written on the outcome of events at the modern Olympics. For anyone to whom having such facts at their fingertips is vital, this book is the definitive work. However, one must feel sorry for Mr. Kamper because by the end of the Munich Olympics his work will already be out of date. Oh well, back to the library.

William O. Johnson, Jr., *All that Glitters Is not Gold: THE OLYMPIC GAME*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$7.95  
Erich Kamper, *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES*, McGraw-Hill, \$25.00

John Goldlust, a doctoral candidate in sociology, has memorized the Guinness Book of Records.