

## **THE OLYMPIC GAMES (9)**

### **The Olympic Games of 1948 in London, England**

The fourteenth Olympic Games of London were austere in much the same way as the 1920 Games in Antwerp were following the World War (I). London's second Olympic Games of 1948 were much better than the Games of 1908 except that the rainy conditions of 1908 repeated themselves again in 1948. Gymnastics competitions were brought indoors at Prince Albert Hall when it continued to rain at the retooled soccer stadium at Wembley for over a week. The former 1908 Olympic facility, the magnificent Shepherds-Bush stadium, had become a casualty of the German blitzkrieg bombing during World War II. There was no Olympic Village or newly built facilities; over 4,000 athletes from 59 nations were housed in old military camps, schools, prisons and private homes. Queen Elizabeth's Father, George VI declared the Games open. The 82,000 seat Wembley stadium was filled daily by enthusiastic spectators; however, not many British athletes were Olympic medal producers. This did not stop the British press from admonishing Fanny Blankers-Koen of Holland for being too old and leaving her two children at home with her parents while she competed and won four gold medals in track and field in London. The thirty year old Fanny had waited since the Berlin Games of 1936 to win a gold medal in the Olympics. In London she won four! Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia replaced Paavo Nurmi, "the Flying Finn" as the current greatest distance runner in the world. The British media called Zatopek "the terrible" because of his running style and facial contortions. Micheline Ostermeyer, a French concert pianist, won the shot put and the discus—an unlikely combination of talents. Bob Mathias, the seventeen year old US and Olympic decathlon champion, proclaimed after winning his medal that, "he would never do it again!"

### **The Olympic Games of 1952 in Helsinki, Finland**

The fifteenth Olympic Games in Helsinki saw the emergence of the Soviet Union in Olympic sport. Until Helsinki, the Russians had won only one gold medal in Olympic history. The US team members had been issue sleeping masks with their other gear for use in "the land of the midnight sun." Perhaps the US athletes were wearing their sleeping masks too often to see the Russian onslaught in athletic competition coming! Olympian Bill Roetzheim, a Plant City resident, remembers being shocked at the site of the giant medal count board at a department store in downtown Helsinki suddenly changing and recording a Russian lead in medal count over the USA. The USA-USSR rivalry in Olympic competition would continue for another forty years. On the surface the Finns were perfect hosts and sportsmanship prevailed at its highest level in Olympic history in Helsinki as nearly 5,000 athletes from 69 nations took part—the Germans and Japanese were back in! During the opening ceremonies, the spectators erupted in spontaneous applause when who but Paavo Nurmi, nine time Finnish gold medalist, carried the Olympic flame into the stadium and lighted the field torch. He then passed the torch to Hannes Kolehmainen, 1912 gold medalist, who in a still spry manner carried the torch up 272 feet to light the second Olympic flame. Behind the scenes, however, the International Olympic Committee was dealing with a record number of athletes, sports venues and countries entered in the sports competitions. Additional pressures for the admission of East Germany to the Games along with how to handle the "two Chinas" (*Formosa/Taiwan and Mainland Red China*), were politicizing the

Olympics. The Russians were very secretive and unapproachable about training in various sports. They stayed in their secluded compound outside Helsinki with IOC approval. Nina Romaschkova, an Amazon from the steppes, became the first USSR gold medalist ever in the discus event with a record throw. She was also arrested for shop lifting five hats from a Helsinki department store. Emil Zatopek won the 5,000 meters, the 10,000 meters and the marathon in record times while his wife Dana won the javelin throw. Zatopek had never run a marathon before Helsinki and couldn't walk for a week following the race! Sammie Lee retained his platform dive title of 1948. American Bob Richards of Wheaties box-top fame won the pole vault on a steel pole. Bob Mathias of the US, the man who said he would never do it again, won his second consecutive Olympic decathlon title. This time after five events following the first day of competition Mathias commented, "All this has made me very tired!"

### **The 1956 Olympic Games of Melbourne, Australia**

The sixteenth Olympic Games went "down under" to the Southern hemisphere for the first time in Olympic history featuring only 3,000 athletes from seventy-nine countries while the Northern hemisphere erupted in violence. Israel was ready to take the Suez Canal, the USSR invaded Hungary, and the Chinese objected to the admission of Taiwan to the Olympic Games. The first two boycotts in Olympic history occurred when Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon pulled out over the Suez crisis. The Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland withdrew because of the Soviet invasion. The Hungarians had it out with the Russians in water polo drawing blood! Pat McCormick completed her second double gold performance in diving while Floyd Patterson won the middleweight boxing title. Al Oerter of the US won his first of four consecutive gold medals in the discus throw in record distances each time. Hammer throwers Hal Connolly of the US and Olga Fikotova of Czechoslovakia won gold, fell in love, married and divorced. Bob Richards, now a reverend, won a second gold medal in the pole vault and decided to marry every Hungarian he could find to a US athlete. Tradition was broken when during the closing ceremonies the athletes of the world broke ranks and ran en masse to the infield in the belief that "the world was united not divided." The Olympians all sang goodbye to one another to the tune of "Waltzing Matilda."

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