

The Olympic Games (10)

The 1960 Olympic Games of Rome, Italy

The seventeenth Olympic Games in Rome reminded the world that more than fifteen hundred years ago, Theodosius, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, outlawed all non-Christian celebrations in 393AD—this included the ancient Olympic Games. Rome was able to blend the old and the new in its presentations of the Olympic venues. Abebe Bikila of Ethiopia won the marathon event running in bare feet becoming the first gold medalist from the African continent. Gymnast Larisa Latynina of the USSR completed her Olympic “most ever” medal count record of eighteen. Wilma Rudolph of the US, dubbed the “La Gazelle Noire” (the black gazelle) by the Italian press, overcame polio, scarlet fever and won three gold medals in the sprint events. Cassius Clay (*Muhammad Ali*) won the gold medal in the light heavyweight division only to throw the medal into the Ohio River years later. Rafer Johnson of the US won a gold medal to go with his 1956 silver medal in the decathlon competition. The US basketball team with Oscar Robertson and Jerry West posted the largest average score margin over all the competition. Italy was third in medal count after the US and the USSR. Eighty thousand Italians lit newspaper torches as the Olympic flame was being extinguished in a tribute to Olympic fever!

The 1964 Olympic Games of Tokyo, Japan

The eighteenth Olympic Games in Tokyo began when Yoshinori Sakai, a Hiroshima resident born during the dropping of the atomic bomb, lit the Olympic torch. The first Olympic Games in Asia had been put off twice before due to World Wars. The facilities were the most modern to date. The sports of judo and volleyball made their Olympic debuts. Vera Caslavka of Czechoslovakia won three gold and two silver medals in gymnastics. For the US, Bob “the bullet” Hayes became the world’s fastest human. Billy Mills, a half Sioux Indian, won the 5,000 meter race and Wyomia Tyus wins the first of her two consecutive gold medal wins in the 100 meters. Japan didn’t win many medals but convinced the world that they were part of the world community at last!

The 1968 Olympic Games of Mexico City, Mexico

The ten day prelude to the opening of the nineteenth Olympic Games of 1968 was a series of ugly riots that led to the killing of 250 unarmed demonstrators by government troops. Many Mexicans wanted the funding to be spent to erase poverty rather than to finance the Olympic Games. Never before had an Olympic Games been conducted in an altitude of greater than seven thousand feet. The thin air with thirty per cent less oxygen led to physical difficulties in the endurance events and world records in the short sprint and long jump events. Lee Evans of the US set a record in the 400 meters that stood for almost twenty years and Bob Beamon of the US set a long jump record of 29 feet 2 one half inches lasted twenty-two years. Dick Fosbury introduced “the flop” technique that revolutionized high jumping. Al Oerter won his fourth gold medal in the discus throw. Wyomia Tyus gets her second gold medal. Vera Caslavka wins four gold and two silver medals in gymnastics a few months after signing the “Manifesto of 2000 Words” rejecting Soviet involvement in Czechoslovakia. She performed her floor exercise to “The Mexican Hat Dance” and then married her track star husband in a Catholic Cathedral. Sex testing of female athletes took place for the first time and Enriqueta Basilio, the Mexican hurdler,

became the first woman in Olympic history to light the Olympic flame cauldron. The IOC had not taken an official stand on the 250 killings in the riots; however, they pressured the US Olympic Committee to send home Lee Evans and John Carlos for staging a non-violent protest in the form of a black power salute on the awards stand!

The 1972 Olympic Games of Munich, Germany

The twentieth Olympic Games of Munich featured over seven thousand athletes from 121 nations in 195 events. The budget was ten times greater than Tokyo in 1964. The Games were dedicated to peace and brotherhood. On September fifth, nine Palestinian terrorists invaded the Israeli Olympic Village compound killing two Israeli athletes and taking nine more hostages. The Olympic Games were suspended for a mere thirty-four hours by IOC President Avery Brundage who announced that the Games would continue. The terrorists demanded the release of two hundred prisoners held in Israeli jails and their safe passage out of Germany. The German police took out five terrorists in a planned attack at the military airport but missed one terrorist who killed the nine Israeli hostages by detonating a hand grenade in the helicopter where the hostages were handcuffed together in a chain.

Archery and team handball were reintroduced as Olympic sports while whitewater canoeing was introduced for the first time. Olga Korbut, “the Russian pixie who cried and then smiled,” became the media favorite. Lasse Viren of Finland won the 10,000 meters in record time after briefly falling. He also won the 5,000 and four gold medals in two Games overall. For the US, Mark Spitz won seven gold medals in swimming to go with his two in 1968 for a total of nine. Chris Taylor, the four hundred pound plus freestyle wrestler, won a bronze medal and is the all time heaviest Olympic athlete. The US basketball team lost for the first time in Olympic history after sixty-two consecutive victories and seven gold medals. The game ended three times with the US leading in the first two finishes and the USSR leading the last finish. Kenny Davis of the US basketball team commented, “Every time I feel a little sorry for myself and the team, I think of the hand grenade rolling toward the nine handcuffed Israeli athletes in the helicopter!”

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