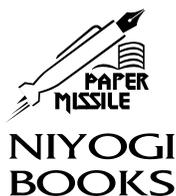


THE MOST INCREDIBLE
OLYMPIC
STORIES

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LUCIANO WERNICKE



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To my children, Facu and Nico

‘And although the oblivion, which destroys everything, has
killed my old illusion, I keep hidden a humble hope that is
the whole fortune of my heart.’

—Alfredo Le Pera, *Volver*

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INTRODUCTION

An Olympic game is the sporting event par excellence. Although in many countries football is the discipline of choice and its World Cup is the summit of passion, it is also true that the Games arouse enormous fervour for its quantity and variety of competitions, because women take part and because in the two-week duration of the tournament, all countries participate and not only thirty-two, as is currently the case with the top FIFA event.

Oxford Dictionary indicates that an Olympiad is 'a major international contest in a particular game, sport, or scientific subject,' despite its original definition indicates something else: 'a period of four years between Olympic Games, used by the ancient Greeks in dating events.'

It is true, but as a counterpart it can be specified that in that same menu there are 33 competitions divided into 339 events, including football, basketball, tennis, volleyball, athletics and swimming, to name only the popular ones. However, each one has its own World Cup, yet for most, the zenith is the Olympic gold medal. In any case, it is not necessary to choose between the Olympic Games or the FIFA Cup: the two competitions coexist perfectly in the world sports calendar, both in every four years and interspersed 'two by two' so that everyone can enjoy an event considered as the 'modern war' for being a healthy, positive fight, and as a song affirms, 'the only fair of battles'.

In ancient Greece, the Games were sacred and all types of war action were banned throughout the week of the competitions. Upon resurgence in 1896 and reaching a formidable popularity throughout the planet in the 20th century, the Olympics became the scene of contests that extended beyond the boundaries of a court or stadium. Political propaganda actions, serious diplomatic friction and even a massacre—product of an ancient conflict—contaminated the purity of the sport, which was stopped only by the effect of the two world wars. Between 1948 and 1992, the United States and the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) discovered that the Games represented a perfect terrain to extend the ‘Cold War’ that, in parallel, was raging on other fronts.

In Munich 1972, the Olympiad developed ‘normally’, until in the middle of the competition, a Palestinian terrorist group executed eleven Israeli athletes. In that same country, but thirty-six years earlier, the Games allowed Adolf Hitler to extend his effective ‘propaganda’ beyond its borders. In Mexico 1968, a group of African-American athletes denounced the social abuse suffered by the black population in the United States.

It is important to clarify that this work reviews only the editions of the Summer Games, considering that the Winter Olympics are not ‘universal’ for two circumstances: one, because to do winter sports you need ‘yes or yes’ snow or ice, and this climatical phenomenon only happens naturally in the half (or less than the half) of the countries, only for a few months a year and in localities with certain geographical characteristics, usually mountain. In most of South America, Africa, the Caribbean, Central America, Southeast Asia and Oceania the snowfall is extraordinary or nil, so it is impossible for their populations to have universal access to this kind of recreations in which the people have to slide and not to run or jump. There have been cases of participants

from tropical countries in the Winter Games, but these were atypical situations, closer to curiosity than to high competition. In Pionchang 2018, the latest edition, ninety-two countries participated, a record for this version. In the last three Summer Games, more than 200 states competed. Rio de Janeiro 2016 reached all the nations of the globe affiliated to the IOC: 206.

Secondly, the practice of these winter disciplines necessarily requires the use of high-cost equipment, consisting of thermal suits, gloves, glasses and skis, as well as boards, skates and sleds. Later in this book we will see that the runner Abebe Bikila, from poor Ethiopia, won the 1960 Rome marathon dressed just in a shirt, shorts and bare feet. In ancient times, athletes used to compete naked, which matched the chances of each contestant. Currently, the possibilities of a good bobsleigh team necessarily depend on the quality of its very expensive sled.

Another key point in the Olympic history is ‘amateurism’. Since the resurrection of the Games in 1896, the French baron Pierre de Coubertin imposed the exclusive participation of athletes who did not act in any sport as professionals, including non-Olympic disciplines. The American James Thorpe, an aboriginal ‘all terrain’ sportsman model, won by a very wide margin the pentathlon and decathlon of the Stockholm 1912 edition, but he was later disqualified when it was revealed that he had played baseball for money in a league in his country. The brilliant athlete, who also stood out in American football, claimed until the last of his days the return of his gold medals.

Coubertin’s unfair stance—which the International Olympic Committee held firmly until the 1980s and finally abolished in 1992—was classist and contradictory. Classist, because it reserved the Olympic glory for children of wealthy families who could prepare for high competition without taking up their time working to maintain and afford trips and stays to the Games. Many participants had professions

not related to sports and have won medals, but they were almost exceptions. The fact that some athletes had to occupy most of the day in trades, far from physical development, to obtain their livelihood, and others could train at pleasure every day because they were born with the golden spoon, implies that the concept of 'Amateurism' was synonymous to monstrous inequalities. The olive tree of the first Games was reserved almost exclusively for nobles and millionaires. At the 1968 Grenoble Winter Games, the president of the IOC, the American Avery Brundage, refused to hand over the medals to the Frenchman Jean-Claude Killy (winner of three golds in slalom, giant slalom and descent) and to the Canadian Nancy Greene (gold in giant slalom), because both had posed for graphic reporters with their skis in hand to display the brand of products. But he did award Peggy Fleming, gold in figure skating. Fleming didn't need sponsors: his father, a billionaire, had built an ice rink for his exclusive use in his own home.

Amateurism was jointly unworthy because it allowed undercover professionalism. During the second half of the 20th century, athletes from the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries (East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Poland, etc.) were mostly registered in the official forms of the Games as policemen or army personnel of their country. However, this was a gross masquerade, since they were completely dedicated to training and rarely accomplished the tasks they claimed to perform. It was never clear why State support was allowed but not the private one.

Conscious of the prolific and diverse European and North American bibliography, the statistics recorded on the official website of the IOC and the infinite world of the Internet, I preferred to address the chronicle from another angle. Without abandoning the remarkable sporting feats, heroes and outstanding records, *The Most Incredible Olympic Stories* emphasises the most surprising curiosities

and anecdotes that, at the same time, amuse and present a more human profile of the protagonists. Many of the stories are based on situations generated by politics, economics or complex sports regulations. Others, of countless eventualities. Like any other person, elite athletes, modern 'gods of the Olympus', suffer injuries and illnesses, robberies, theft, get drunk, hit rivals or referees, fall in love, get married or divorced, have children, fall asleep or lose some essential component of their competition equipment. Some succumb to the power of money, others prefer not to sell their honour.

They also live adventures that seem designed by Hollywood scriptwriters: a target-shooting champion who lost his right hand in the war and educated his left one to win the gold medal; an exhausted marathoner who had to run quickly in the opposite direction for more than a kilometer chased by a fierce dog; a Portuguese runner who was hit by a car, and ten days later won the Los Angeles marathon, with a record included; a sailor who left his career to rescue two drowning rivals; an athlete with two penises; a shooter ejected from the Olympic team for his noisy farts and a twin who replaced her sister star. These are just some of the more than 400 stories that feed this powerful cocktail of Olympic adventures.

Luciano Wernicke
Buenos Aires, September 2020

ANTIQUITY AND RENAISSANCE

A race of only 192.28 meters in length. That humble, that simple, that brief was the beginning of the Olympic Games. A modest test with a humble winner: a chef from the Elis region called Coroebo (or Koroibos or Choroebus, according to different translations). In the year 776 BC, he ran faster than any other competitor the distance of 'one stadium' and returned to his city crowned with olive twigs. Was the chef the first champion of the first Olympiad? Many historians asseverated that Coroebo was not the inaugural winner, but his name was the first to be engraved in stone at the head of a long series of heroes, also mentioned in poems of Homer or Pindar.

The foot race was part of a variety of religious and cultural rites that took place every four years, over six days, in a plain located next to the sanctuary of the city of Olympia, famous for its temple dedicated to Zeus, one of the seven wonders of the antiquity. It is estimated that the pedestrian test would have begun to be disputed at least 150 years before Coroebo, although this is only a conjecture.

Beyond its origin, after the victory of the chef, the games were consolidated and, through their successive editions, they grew in number of participants, who came first from all corners of the Hellenic world and later, from the different provinces of the Roman Empire. Likewise, other tests were added to the simple 192.28-meter contest:

a two-stadium race (called *diaulium*, 385 meters), four stadiums (769 meters), eight stadiums (1.538 meters) and up to twenty-four stadiums (known as *Doric*, 4.614 meters). Then, the pentathlon appeared (a competition that combined five disciplines: race, discus throwing, javelin throwing, long jump and fight), *hoplitodromia* (race wearing armor and carrying spear and shield), pugilism and horse-quadrigas. Boxing began with no difference of categories by weight or protection of any kind. The duels had no assault limit and ended by knockout or abandonment of one of the fighters. Over the years, leather strips were incorporated to protect the hands and make the blows stronger. Some boxers added small stones, lead fragments or wood chips to the straps to cause more damage to their rivals. The fights generated so much passion among the public that a new type of contest was added, designed especially for those who enjoyed the blood: the *pancracy*, an ‘everything’s fair’ kind of *carnival*, that included bites, asphyxiation, kicks in the testicles and even sinking the fingers in the eyes of the rival. This new addition extended the Olympic calendar to seven days.

Since its inception, the games were conceived as a period of spiritual and religious recollection. Shortly after, they were dressed with a nationalist halo. In the 9th century BC, the kings Ifitos of Élide, Cleóstenes of Pisa and Licurgo of Esparta instituted what is known as the ‘Olympic truce’, an initiative that suspended all kinds of war actions between the Greek city states during the week of the games. They also established a ban on entering Olimpia, ‘a sacred place’, armed,—‘Who dares to penetrate it with weapons will be considered sacrilegious’.

But not everyone could participate in the competition. In the early days, only the Greek males were considered as ‘free men’—legitimate sons with full possession of all civil rights, who had not committed anything sacrilegious ever. Then, for political reasons, contestants from other nations were accepted, in some cases by imposition, as happened