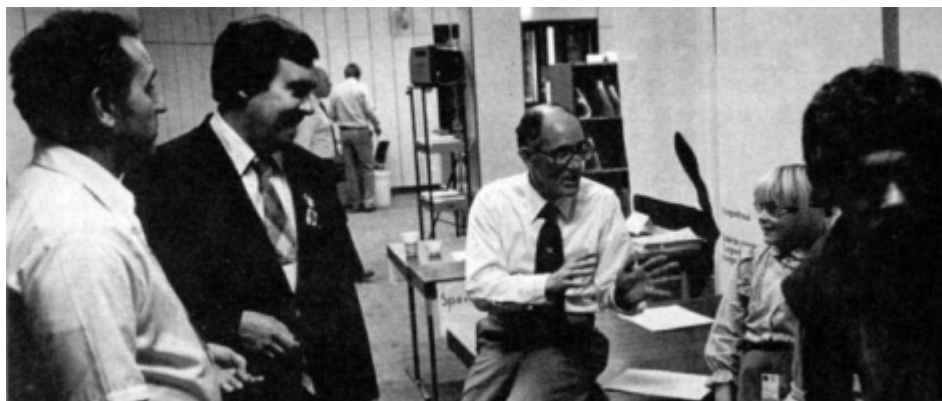


## America and the Olympic Press

by Herb Weinberg



*At the press centre at Baden-Baden, Herb Weinberg speaks with Georges Young (CAN), John Lucas (USA), Kathy, the daughter of Ken Reich (USA) and Michael Carlson from UPITN (from l. to r.).*

The Olympic Games in Moscow took place in 1980 and a quadrennium will have passed before they reappear in 1984 at Los Angeles. During that time the Games will be pretty much out of mind and out of sight as far as the American public is concerned ; and with the boycott having removed the United States' team from Moscow in 1980, Americans have had less interest in the Games than usual.

Unfortunately the American sporting press has also gone to sleep. Our sports columnists and editorialists will continue to hibernate for almost the next three years so far as the Olympic Games are concerned. In America, between each Olympics, there will be four World Series (professional baseball) ; four Super Bowls (American professional football) ; and four professional basketball championships, in addition to other professional affairs such as golf and tennis championships. Interest in amateur contests of importance is relatively small.

But for most of the rest of the world the Olympic Games go on continually. Athletes are already into some of their training programmes in the hope of making an Olympic team and their national reporters are reporting their progress.

So too do the affairs of the International Olympic Committee go on during the intervening four years between each Games. There are rules changes to be considered by the IOC in addition to the handling of attitudinal changes towards the rule on amateurism, politics, and the sometimes excessive costs of the Games.

To American writers, however, the Olympics are an event that occur only once every four years to punctuate the Super Bowls and World Series and to precede American presidential elections. In effect, America has no "Olympic" press, and our sporting public is the loser.

During February of 1981, as a freelancer, I covered the meeting of the IOC's Executive Board in Los Angeles, which had convened to inspect the city's progress towards the '84 Games. The city's Olympic organisers gave a small dinner for the foreign press. It took place within a Japanese restaurant and though I was not a foreigner in this distance, I attended the dinner, as did Kenneth Reich, the reporter for the Los Angeles Times.

Allowing us to attend the party was an act of charity because there was not an equivalent party for the American press. If there had been such a party Ken and I would probably have represented a majority. There were few American writers while the foreign press had writers from West Germany, France, Switzerland, Canada, Great Britain, Japan and Korea.

In 1974 the "Olympic Review" polled a dozen writers from around the world as to their reactions to recent changes within "Rule 26", dealing with eligibility for competing in the Olympic Games. Of those 12 writers selected to comment, 4 were British, 2 were French ; and the remainder represented 6 other nations. The editors of the "Review", however, seemed unable to find an American writer who covered international Olympic affairs or international sporting affairs on a regular basis who would be qualified to comment on the eligibility rule.

Similarly Americans are unaware of such rules changes because our sporting press is unaware of them. These issues, however, are covered as a matter of course within much of the rest of the world's print and broadcast media.

During 1973 I covered the Tenth Olympic Congress at Varna, Bulgaria as a stringer for the New York Times, to help me cover expenses. It was a convention of representatives from 82 of the Olympic nations meeting with IOC and sports federations leadership. Of course it was a major Olympic event ; but no American writer attended, except myself

and the assigned United Press International reporter. Of the more than 200 reporters in Varna no American writing on a regular basis was there to report or to editorialise or to criticise what went on. There was no established American writer to take an interest in United States' contributions or the lack of

It is an ironic situation when we realise and consider past American success at the Olympic Games-on the field.

American sports writers tend to be Olympic experts at a distance. The Olympic Congress at Varna was explained to Americans only according to the few bits of information our editors elected to print from wire service reports; or from the few words of mine the New York Times chose to publish ; or from the very few paragraphs American sporting magazines published. Print interest was miniscule and broadcast interest was practically non-existent.

One of the best-selling books about the Olympic Games, written in America - updated and re-issued before every Olympics-was written by Richard Schaap and was published in 1963. Yet Schaap never attended an Olympic Games until 1976, at Montreal. (The book is entitled *An Illustrated History of the Olympics*, published by Alfred A. Knopf Company.)

Therefore, American writers are ill-prepared to comment on Olympic affairs, having done little research or what we call "homework". But such lack of preparation has never found our writers hesitant to comment. Too many of our writers emerge every fourth year, at the Olympic Games, to carp, criticise and condemn without having done extensive preparation and homework about the Games. Very few American writers have ever met IOC delegates, much less interviewed them. In my experience most American writers covering an Olympic Games usually cover professional sports and are thrust into covering amateur

sports only occasionally, particularly at an Olympic Games.

At the Moscow Games in 1980 the IOC honoured eight journalists, presenting them with the Bronze Medal of the Olympic Order because of their body of work-dealing with the Olympic Games. Four were British (the same four who had been asked to comment on "Rule 26" and who are also members of the Press Commission) ; and there were two Frenchmen, a Russian and a Canadian. Historically England, France and Canada have never approached the medal production of American athletes, but their citizens are far more enlightened about Olympic matters-there was no American writer with an Olympic body of work to be considered for the Olympic Order.

In the United States the best writer on Olympic affairs over the years is Neil Amdur of the New York Times. Athletics is Amdur's primary interest among the Olympic sports and he has a thorough knowledge of the people and the affairs of the United States Olympic Committee. But his writing indicates little familiarity in depth with international Olympic matters or with the IOC. Unfortunately The Times does not send him abroad to IOC meetings (except for those that take place during an Olympic Games) to develop familiarity-or expertise. At IOC or Executive Board meetings in Europe, for example, The Times assigns Sam Abt, of the Paris-based Herald Tribune, to act as a capable stringer ; or they will assign someone from their European bureau such as John Vinocur, a political correspondent.

Of course there have been occasional well-written pieces about the Games by American writers-such as Barry Lorge's analysis of the American boycott published in the Washington Post. Lorge is a sports writer who researched his series at Lausanne (IOC headquarters), Lake Placid and Moscow; but he has dealt specifically with the Olympic Games only from a time just previous to the last Olympic Winter Games at Lake Placid;

and he may or may not deal in great detail with the Games in his new position with the San Diego Union.

"Sports Illustrated," the United States' most popular sporting magazine does an excellent job of covering an Olympic Games; but they have no writer regularly covering Olympism during the quadrennium between Games, though Robert Creamer, William O. Johnson Jr. and Ron Fimrite have occasionally done some interesting features dealing with the Games.

The acquisition of an Olympic Games by a city quite naturally involves an element of politics. It is a democratic process wherein each bidding city makes its presentation to the IOC as to its capabilities in holding an event involving 21 sports. There are matters of finding adequate administrative personnel, and the practical problems involving financial resources, the stadia available and the availability of television facilities and expertise.

In 1978, at Athens, circumstances found Los Angeles as the sole bidder for the Games.

But that status did not guarantee the Olympic Games to the city. There was disagreement between the Los Angeles' organisers and the IOC as to contractual terms, and the IOC was considering asking other recent host cities (Munich, '72 ; Montreal, '76 and possibly Moscow, '80 or even Mexico City, '68) to consider refurbishing their existing Olympic facilities for a possible return of the Games.

After a series of delays, however, they resolved their differences and the contract was signed for the '84 Olympic Games to be held in Los Angeles.

The best American coverage of these events was by The Los Angeles Times. Their reporter, assigned to this story, was Ken Reich who described every meeting and nuance in

those protracted and sometimes difficult negotiations. Reich, therefore, is about the best-informed American reporter dealing with the forthcoming '84 Games.

Therein lies the irony: Ken Reich, though a capable writer, is a "political" reporter. He deals primarily with Los Angeles city politics and he has NO sports background-and he did not start covering this particular assignment until 1977 when it became apparent that Los Angeles was a prime candidate for the '84 Olympics.

Our best Olympic writer, therefore, has no real knowledge of amateur sport, and his exposure to Olympism is relatively recent. Yet he stands alone ; even the remaining Los Angeles print and broadcast media cover Olympic affairs only sporadically.

Where is there one American "sports" writer who has been there, so to speak, much less a corps of writers such as the British have?

Where are our sports writers who go from the Games themselves into the interstices of Olympism : those IOC meetings and affairs that need coverage, explanation, criticism and editorialisation ? There is little wonder that the American public is among the least informed as to Olympic policy and issues-again in stark contrast to our success on Olympic fields.

No American writer has the effect that the late Doug Gilbert had in Canada or as John Rodda (The Guardian) or as John Hennessy (The Times of London) have in Great Britain.

Though masses of American writers strive to be assigned to an Olympic Games I found most of them unaware there are TWO sets of Olympic press credentials: 1. those necessary for coverage of sporting events at venues ; and 2. credentials needed for admission to IOC press conferences held at the Games.

Though we are supposedly an Olympic "power" it is painfully significant that only 15 press accreditations had been allotted to the United States for the Eleventh Olympic Congress at Baden-Baden, West Germany. Though up to 500 reporters covered this meeting involving all the world's Olympic nations, federation officials and athletes, that small American allotment reflects the historic disdain our media attaches to the coverage of Olympic or IOC affairs. As stated : 8 years ago I was the only American writer to cover the Tenth Olympic Congress at Varna.

Without a truly qualified corps of writers to cover important Olympic or amateur sporting events, we find in its place the fiasco of hit-and-run American writers who cover an Olympic Games without benefit of research, or experience, or homework dealing with the Games. Few, if any, have ever talked with an IOC delegate at length nor do they tend to converse at length with anyone knowledgeable about Olympism...

American sports writers overwhelmingly cover the professional sports. Pure amateur sport gets relatively little coverage.

And it is only in America that these kind of writers are suddenly and magically converted to experts on amateur and Olympic sports-at about the month of February-every fourth year!

*H. W.*

