

SETTING THE 1968 RECORD STRAIGHT

REMINISCENCES FROM C. ROBERT PAUL, JR.

Many versions have been written about the ‘cause celebre’ of the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, the banishment of Tommy Smith and John Carlos by the IOC and the USOC for conduct unbecoming of an Olympic athlete on the victory stand.

The complete story has never been written heretofore. Perhaps I was an eyewitness to the entire proceedings as dusk was falling in the early evening of October 20th, 1968.

Historical fact-Tommy Smith was the victor in the 200 m. sprint and teammate John Carlos finished third behind Australia’s Peter Norman.

Head coach Payton Jordan and sprint coach Stan Wright approached me in the working press section several minutes before the medals’ presentation. They came with a quizzical look.

Jordan led off, “We gave Smith and Carlos permission to wear black handkerchiefs and black socks underneath their sweatsuits.”

As press chief for the United States press, I was interested in having the facts before the happening.

Only moments later, Smith, Carlos, Mrs. Smith, and Peter Axthelm, newly minted sports editor of a leading US magazine walked down the pressbox aisle. I remarked to Jordan and Wright, “Why is Mrs. Smith flouting a black glove in either hand? Let’s see what happens.” The die had been cast.

At the proper moment Smith and Carlos walked to the victory stand, along with Norman. The deadpan expressions of Smith and Carlos didn’t reflect what was going through their minds.

Then it happened. As our national anthem was started, it was startling to see our two medalists raised two “gloved” fists in a salute of defiance. Score one for Smith and Carlos. Howls of derision from 100,000 track fans filled the air.

As I recall only a single photographer captured the event.

The next morning IOC President Avery Brundage called a special meeting of his body. Among those present were

Douglas F. Roby, USOC President. The “body” adopted a resolution decrying the conduct of Smith and Carlos, expelling the duo from all further Olympic competition, and advised the USOC to send the two sprinters homeward bound.

Thus, after lunch, President Roby called together his Board of Directors to discuss the action of the IOC. The USOC Board declined to support the IOC dictum.

The following morning the IOC again met in full session. Action: the USOC would eliminate Smith and Carlos or the USA track and field team would be barred from the final days of competition.

President Roby reconvened his Board and in plain English relayed the edict-vote to send Smith and Carlos packing or the USA would be eliminated. It was the only time I had ever heard President Roby raise his voice.

The President carried the day. The Board supported almost unanimously the IOC edict.

At the conclusion of the meeting, President Roby asked me to sit with him when he informed Smith and Carlos of the action of the IOC and the USOC barring them for life.

What a difference 48 hours made.

Roby didn’t mince words. He told Smith and Carlos they were barred for life. The USOC would provide them with transportation home as soon as they wished to return to the United States. They could keep their medals and special clothing, but they must check out of the Olympic Village that afternoon.

Other than assert nods of their heads, I don’t recall Smith and Carlos saying a single word.

The track and field meet continued without untoward happenings, and Smith and Carlos found ancillary-housing in downtown Mexico City.

The IOC had exerted its authority. The USOC, further, accepted the IOC authority.
