

Carlson, Lewis H. and Fogarty, John J. *Tales of Gold. An Oral History of the Summer Olympic Games Told By America's Gold Medal Winners*. Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1987. Pp. xiii, 514.

Including the prefatory pages, this difficult-to-categorize book is over 520 pages in length. The authors are professors of humanities and English at Western Michigan University and Ferris State College, respectively. Fifty-eight (not "fifty-five," as it says on the dust jacket) American Olympic Games champions (47 men, 11 women) were interviewed and their voices transcribed into *Tales of Gold*. Olympic Games 1912 through 1984 were covered, with 96-year-old Abel Kiviat at one end and the youthful 27-year-old quadruple gold medalist, Carl Lewis, at the other end. The fifteen chapters are titled simply by the city and year of each Summer Olympic Games, with three to five athletes' names and events listed beneath—all in unpretentious but effective manner.

The format is always the same. Chapter 3, "Paris, 1924," for example, begins with a Carlson-Fogarty thousand-word history of these seventh Olympic Games; a small four hundred-word summation and evaluation by the two authors of the athlete's life comes next and is followed by a colossal five thousand-word autobiographical sketch from birth to old age. This approach is repeated three to four or five times for each chapter. Dr. Benjamin Spock, eight-oared shell; Russell Vis, wrestler; and "Bud" Houser, shot and discus champion are treated in this third chapter.

The authors traveled the nation in search of gold medalists and were met everywhere with "warm, generous, and gracious hospitality," allowing all to speak in something like a Joycean athletic stream of consciousness. With some pride the research team wrote that "In the main, the editing has been minimal." The former "greats" seem to have taken advantage of this license and run on for pages—notably Aileen Riggan, Dr. Spock, Helen Stephens, Archie Williams, and "Spec" Towns. It seemed that the older the interviewee, the more they rambled, and maybe this is quite understandable.

With only a few exceptions the men and women made no conscious efforts at being profound or pedantic, at drawing universal truths from their Olympian experiences. Remarkably, and one cannot glean if the authors meant it so, almost everyone in this book grew up poor and often in abject poverty. Double gold medal winner in 1928, Ray Barbuti, was born dirt-poor in Brooklyn; George Gulack won a 1932 gold medal in flying rings, but only after years of suffering as a penniless immigrant Latvian boy. George Roth married young during the Depression and, despite “15 days without food,” he made the ‘32 team and won gold in Indian clubs. Francis Johnson won a basketball gold medal in Berlin but only after years as a very poor Kansas farm boy. This thread of hard times forms a consistent theme.

Not unexpectedly, the range of human emotions emerge from these fifty-eight interesting people. Pathos and humor mix with anger, indignation and overarching gratitude to parents, teachers, coaches, teammates and, quite frequently, to their Olympic opponents. Greco-Roman champion Jeff Blatnick revealed that as an athlete and even more so as a person “I learned to win by learning to lose—that means not being afraid of losing.” A true amateur athlete, the double Olympic champion in archery announced his retirement after the 1988 Games in Seoul. “I can’t afford to live the rest of my life in poverty,” confessed Darrell Pace.

Over and over again, rifle medalist Lanny Bassham declared that the secret of winning the gold is “mental management.” The serene William Steinkraus, America’s greatest equestrian star, dispelled the argument that there’s little difference between an Olympic champion and an under-contract professional gladiator athlete:

And the concept of amateur sport—the reason it is antiprofessional sport—is not because money is a bad thing, but because if you are doing it for money, you are not doing it for the intrinsics.

Basketball superstar, thoughtful Rhodes Scholar, and now U.S. Senator, Bill Bradley was serious when proposing that “a film festival, poetry readings, concerts, cultural shows . . . might run simultaneously as an expanded Olympic Games.” And lastly, just to underscore the flavor of the book, 1960 winner at 200-meter breaststroke, Bill Mulliken, confessed when he was most vibrantly alive. “My idea of Heaven,” he said, “is at the three-quarter mark to see somebody there because I know that’s going to bring out the best last quarter in me.” (p. 333).

This is a delightful as well as instructive book, but it is much too long. It is not so much about the Olympic Games as it is about selected Olympic champions, which is not exactly the same thing. Thus the sub-title of the book, “an oral history of the Summer Olympic Games,” is misleading. It is not because ninety percent of the text deals with interesting lives before and after their Olympic Games experience. The author’s mini-histories of each Olympic Games, mundane as they be, are more historically instructive than are the athletes’ revelations.

Maddeningly (to me), the authors used the word "Olympiad" incorrectly several times (see pages xii, 193, etc.), never once using it to refer to a chronological period of time. Alex Groza is an interesting guy; all in his large family were over six feet tall and weighed 300 pounds, but nowhere in his dialogue did he talk about his Olympic Games experience in London-an indefensible oversight by the two authors rather than a criticism of Alex. Nearly the same mistake occurs in many more chapters.

The book is, as I said, too long. There's insufficient editing, almost no visible effort to delete minutia that might result in a more manageable 350-page book. After 150,000 words, there's no attempt to "sum up"-to share with the reader what Messrs. Carlson and Fogarty gained and learned from their experience. Even a brief concluding chapter would have been instructive to whatever audience the book aimed at (there's no hint to whom it is directed).

Despite the niagara of words, several pesky small mistakes and, possibly, a lost opportunity, the book is a very good one and I recommend it highly. Who could not be charmed by Dr. Bud Houser's comment, "I had a good sense of touch and more brains in my hands than in my head" (p. 48) and this from a dental surgeon and shot-discus Olympic winner. Eleanor Holm, fifty years after her humiliation, stridently noted that "I was everything that Avery Brundage hated." Dorothy Poynton Hill heaved a great sigh of relief, admitting that being the world's best at something (diving) is better than "being Suzy Klutz trying to learn how to bake a cake." Helen Stephens, after her 100-meter victory in Berlin, was invited to the press box where "Herman Goering, of course, tried to play footsie under the table." Olga Fikotova Connolly, still angry after fifteen years, denied that her powerful peace letter following the slaughter of the Israeli athletes was political in nature (p. 283). I quit while still ahead, said 1956 heavyweight boxing champion, Pete Rademacher. I was not rich, "but I had all my faculties, and I still had a lot of zip and desire to do something." Wildly funny-serious Donald George "Tarzan" Bragg, pole-vault winner in Rome, admitted that after thirty years of wanderings, "I still don't know what I want to do with my life" (p. 308). Billy Mills grew up in poverty on the Oglala Sioux Indian Reservation, never having known his parents. While a U.S. Marine in 1964, he won the 10,000 meter run in one of the most exciting finishes in Olympic history. "After I caught my breath and calmed down, I had this very powerful feeling come over me that my dad knows-he knows I'm an athlete" (p. 352).

This book deserves a wide reading. It is interesting, entertaining, instructive, skillfully written by two English professors, and valuable-not as Olympic Games history, but as unique biographies of great athletes, men and women (to name a few not previously mentioned): Pete Desjardins, Helen Meany, Betty Robinson, Jean Shiley, Bob Mathias, Parry O'Brien, Sammy Lee, Harrison Dillard, "Sugar Ray" Seales, Wyomia Tyus and a dozen more Olympic Games "Hall of Fame" gold medalists.