

The Use of Sport in the German Democratic Republic for the Promotion of National Consciousness and International Prestige

by
G. A. CARR
University of Victoria

One of the outcomes of the growth of East German sporting power has been the stimulus it has given to the Federal Republic of Germany. Even the West Germans admit that no other factor has influenced their sport programme with the same effectiveness, the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. included. Both the GDR and the Federal Republic have pushed each other forward. In the GDR there has been an open union of sport and politics, particularly as sport has had a large part to play in this country's drive for sovereignty and recognition. In the Federal Republic, there has been a more reluctant association of sport with politics. This association seemed inevitable since the challenge from the East has been such that the West German government was forced as a matter of national interest and national security to become deeply involved in sport.

The history of East and West German sporting relationships since the end of the 2nd World War has been one of continuous confrontation. This situation continues, particularly with reference to the status of West Berlin, but much of the bitterness which characterized the first two decades of East German existence has subsided.

Looking back over the years from 1949 when the German Democratic Republic was founded, one notices a West German retreat both in the arena and in sport diplomacy. At the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki, West German athletes alone represented all of Germany. In 1955, at the 50th IOC Congress, the National Olympic Committee of the GDR was given provisional recognition on the basis that the GDR and the Federal Republic form a combined team for the 1956 Olympic Games.

Subsequent to the 1956 Games, the GDR pushed very hard for sovereignty in sport with complete separation and independence from the Federal Republic. In the Federal Republic the desire to avoid recognition of the GDR produced a flood of decrees by which the West Germans hoped: 1) To deny any recognition of the GDR and claim for themselves sporting representation for all Germany, 2) To avoid embarrassing problems of protocol with their NATO allies and 3) to allow sport relationships to continue between themselves and the GDR. With these difficulties as a background, the IOC repeated its former policy and demanded again that a combined German team be formed for the 1960 Olympic Games.

A year following these Games, East-West sporting relationships were totally broken off as a result of the Berlin wall which was built in August of 1961. However, in spite of the fact that East-West relationships had reached an all time low, the IOC pressed yet again for a combined team for the 1964 Olympic Games which was achieved only with great difficulty.

In 1965, separate teams were decreed to represent the Federal Republic and the GDR for the 1968 Olympic Games. However, the IOC clung to the stipulation that both teams again compete under a neutral flag of German colours and Olympic rings.

Finally in 1968 it was decreed that the GDR be represented in future Olympic Games with a fully independent team, and with their own flag, emblems and anthem.

The Federal Republic has acted as a spur to East German progress. This coupled with the GDR's need to be recognized and accepted both internationally and internally by its own citizenry has provided its leadership with considerable stimulus. Furthermore the efforts made in sport by the GDR have helped to emphasize its existence as an independent State. Successes at the Olympic Games and other competitions around the world not only bring prestige and recognition to the GDR, but they are part of the overall use of sport by the controlling Socialist Unity Party in developing an internal spirit of support and pride for the GDR and by association for its leadership.

Using sport as a medium for indoctrination, the Socialist Unity Party has pushed hard for the consolidation of socialism in the GDR. This has meant that: 1) Any feeling of the people that they are citizens of a divided Germany rather than a single State, had to be vigorously counteracted. 2) That loyalty and support of the country's leadership had to be developed, and 3) Whatever attractiveness the Federal Republic had or has in the eyes of the East German people must be continuously opposed. Evidence of the drive to develop patriotic support for the GDR is found throughout the East German sport programme. Examples are: The re-institution of the old traditional and nationalistic gymnastic festival in Leipzig, flag ceremonies and oaths of allegiance at Spartakiads, and changes in the East German sport badge from its old title of "Ready to work and defend the Peace" to "Ready to work and defend the Homeland".

In the development of patriotic fervour, the star athlete plays an important role. Idolized by the youth of the country, he is used as a mouthpiece of the Party providing an important link between the leadership and the youth of the country. This link between Party and people is continuously cultivated. With the leaders and star athletes present, the larger sporting displays such as the Spartakiads become manifestations of solidarity and harmony of purpose. Mass exercises are symbolic of unity and a common bond. Since sport is openly involved with politics in the GDR, constant associations are made between sport and political situations as they occur from day to day, both internally and externally. These associations take many forms but they are most commonly demonstrated in the political statements made by national leaders and athletes at sporting occasions.

The growth in power of the GDR has left not only capitalist nations behind but many of the socialist nations also. The establishment of the GDR as a great sporting power in Europe has been made both at the expense of the Soviet Union as well as other nations.

Since the Munich Games and with the increase of recognition and self assurance of the GDR, the stagnation in sporting relations between the Federal Republic and the GDR which occurred since 1961 has ceased. East German leadership is determined, however, that increased contact will not bring about ideological weakening.

NOTE

Four speakers at the First Annual Convention of NASSH did not submit their abstracts to the publisher in time. They and their topics are:

Nicholaas Moolenijzer, University of New Mexico on "The True Origin and Development of the Austrian School of Physical Education."

George Coroneos, University of Massachusetts on "The Turner Thesis, The Revisionists and Sport Historiography."

Bruce Campbell, Central Michigan University on "The Pan-Am Games, Alma, Michigan — Ingersoll, Ontario."

Seward Staley, University of Illinois on "Some Aspects of Sport Literature."