

Marketing National Identity -- The Olympic Games of 1932 and American Culture

Mark Dryerson
Weber State University, Utah

In the summer of 1932, in the midst of the Great Depression, Los Angeles staged an Olympic Games. In that Olympics the United States sought to manufacture an image of itself as a healthy, robust nation which had met the challenges of economic chaos and risen from the ashes -- in much the same way as the National Socialists sought to use the Games in Berlin four years later to celebrate the "New Germany." Far from the realities of the Great Depression lay a magical landscape where Olympic organizers constructed a special village -- an Olympic village. At that village and in other sites around Los Angeles the United States staged an Olympic production to prove that in spite of the ravages of the Great Depression they were still the globe's fastest and strongest athletes.

The Olympic village and its environs were no squatters' camp for "Okies." Neither the Joads nor any of their real-life compatriots found respite in this promised land. For this was not the California of the Great Depression which John Steinbeck chronicled. Rather it was a place in which reality seemed conveniently suspended. After all, suspended reality was Hollywood's specialty. The Games of the Tenth Olympiad found a home near Hollywood. Influenced by the motion picture industry and sponsored in part by corporate interests, the Los Angeles Olympics were engulfed by consumer culture. In that fantasyland atmosphere the Los Angeles organizing committee planned to insure that the Games would be an American extravaganza.

At Los Angeles the American public found itself confronted by a deluge of symbols and images manufactured to promote the vitality of American culture. The public also discovered media representations of other "national identities." For a consumer culture which adored sport, the Olympics represented a spectacle embedded with political language and laced with social interpretations. In the first "pop culture" modern Olympics Americans consumed images of race, gender and class, national identity and national mythology.

The Olympics highlighted important features of 1930s American culture and the areas in which Olympic sport worked as a culture-producing force. Media accounts of the Games reveal American attitudes about social conditions and policies, national identity, race and gender. The Los Angeles played a significant role in shaping American perceptions of the world and that sport provided a pseudo-political philosophy for uniting American culture. At the same time, some groups also used the

language and imagery of sport to offer critical assessments of American society. Thus the Olympic Games served as an important political language for 1930s American culture.