

OLYMPIC STUDIES

Robert K. Barney and David E. Barney
University of Western Ontario and Albuquerque Academy, NM

War, Incarceration, Reminiscence: Sport and the Olympic Games in Prisoner of War Camps, 1940-1945

Following the successful celebration of the 4th Winter Olympic Games in Garmisch-Partenkirchen and the Summer Games of the 11th Olympiad in Berlin in 1936, many of the world's best athletes looked forward to the winter and summer Games of 1940 scheduled to be celebrated in Sapporo and Tokyo, respectively. Events in the far Pacific and Eastern Europe in 1938 and 1939 dashed those expectations. Wartime conditions dictated a cancellation of the 1940 Olympic festivals, indeed, those planned for 1944 as well.

In September 1939, a German *blitzkrieg* swept across Poland, ushering in the devastating wartime conditions of World War II. Over the next five years, combatants of both Allied and Axis powers struggled over land, in the air, and on and beneath seas in an attempt to gain victory. Thousands of soldiers, airmen and seamen died or were wounded in the struggle; thousands more were captured and incarcerated in prisoner of war camps. For interned Allied enlisted men and non-commissioned officers, there was little question as to how each day in captivity would be spent. Under the rules of the Geneva Convention of 1928, all were put to work, sometimes under tolerable conditions, sometimes not. There was neither time nor incentive to pursue recreation and diversion in the form of sport. For officers, however, matters were vastly different. Not required to work, and left largely to a form of self-administered internal custodianship during internment, officers sought to survive boredom through participation in a variety of activities, one of the more prominent of which was sport. For Axis prisoners of war interned in Canada and the United States, living and work-related conditions were generally superior to those experienced by their Allied counterparts interned in Europe. Thus, recreational and competitive sport participation for German and Italian detainees, enlisted men and officers alike, was apparent.

Inevitably, Olympic themes rose in prisoner of war sport activities. Particularly was this so with respect to prisoners of war interned in various European camps in the Olympic years of 1940 and 1944. Using Polish archival sources, together with material from the National Archives in Washington, this paper relates the powerful story of thus far unknown attempts to recreate the 1940 and 1944 Olympic Games in prisoner of war environments. The research and narrative sets the prisoner of war Olympic Games agenda

against the greater backdrop of prisoner of war sport in general. It also tells a very intimate story, one based on personal reminiscence. As twelve-year-old youths, living on an airbase in the southern United States in 1944, a military post which interned thousands of German and Italian prisoners of war, the authors draw upon their own first hand experience of “observing, working and playing” with POWs from lands far away. This paper, then, employs cross-cultural sources and experiences to portray sport events in a history neither readily known, nor understood.