

David Welky
Purdue University

“Everything That Americanism Stands For”: U.S. Newspapers and the 1936 Olympics

The controversies surrounding the 1936 “Nazi” Olympics in Berlin have been well detailed, but what is less clear is how American audiences understood the events in the German capital as they occurred. As newspapers served as the primary conduit of sports information, they played critical roles in imparting themes and ideologies to American readers. Newspaper coverage of the 1936 Olympics went beyond reporting on events and athletes. Instead, the press used the Games as an opportunity to demonstrate that America was still a strong and unique nation even in the midst of the Great Depression and rising totalitarianism. Despite Hitler’s efforts to curry favor with the American press, reporters exposed the dangers of fascism by depicting the militarism and groupthink mentality of the German people even as they minimized the fascist threat by lampooning prominent Nazis. Newspapers also criticized Old World nations for violating the spirit of the Games. Instead of celebrating the individualistic spirit of the athletic contest, European dictatorships viewed the Olympics as an opportunity to glorify the state. It remained for America to show the world the benefits of individualism and democracy, and the press accordingly exalted competitors who lived out the classic rags-to-riches dream, validating American exceptionalism and opportunity by swiftly rising from obscurity to Olympic champion. By focusing on such themes, the American press made the Olympics into more than a competition between athletes. They became a competition between ways of life, a contest between democracy and totalitarianism that foreshadowed the conflict that followed soon after.
