

The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games, by Allen Guttmann (Urbana-Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992). Reviewed by Robert K. Barney, University of Western Ontario, London, Canada.

As those of us who toil in serious study of the Olympic Movement can attest, our collective numbers are small and the material we produce is painfully miniscule when weighed against the entire corpus of material generated on the Olympic Games. This, of course, is odd given the global grandeur and significance of the now 100 years old phenomenon. Although we (Olympic scholars) may note some serious investigations that focus on particular individuals, events, issues, confrontations, etc. in Olympic history, we are faced with a much more difficult exercise in trying to identify even one comprehensive history of the Modern Olympic Movement. The single generic type of study produced over the years that comes closest to being a "history" is the group of statistical summaries that dutifully record an index of Olympic athlete achievement (who participated in or won what event, when, where, and in what fashion).¹ Such "historical" productions serve a purpose but are entirely without analysis or reflection, and thus provide little in helping to understand the phenomenon which exists as the ultimate goal of the world's best athletes in the global community's most widely played sports, and the manipulative object of political regimes, economic cartels, and interest groups of particular motivation.

In itself, the challenge of producing a serious history of any 100 year institution is formidable. In the case of the Modern Olympic Movement, the task has been quite enough to deter all but a few folks (some would call them foolhardy folks) from attempting such a mission. For those few that have produced a history of the Games, the result has not been particularly noteworthy. In most cases such histories are a direct reflection of the expertise of the author, who, to greater or lesser extent, exhibits one or all of the following characteristics: (1) the author is male, (2) the author has generally lacked the in-depth research scholarship experience necessary to execute the task, (3) the author's narratives have been based largely on journalistic reporting, (4) the author's description and analysis (where it exists) has reflected the Olympic experience of the country with which he plainly identifies, (5) the author's focus is all too often on the Games themselves, rather than the larger consideration of the Modern Olympic Movement as a whole, and (6) the author's impetus for production of such a history has been underscored by a profit motive, that is, publication of the work by a publishing firm more interested in marketability potential, i.e., reception by an audience less concerned with the veracity of information than with entertainment value (pictures, heroic tales, etc.).

Is Professor Guttmann's "Olympic history" any different? In most ways, yes! In a few, no! Let me address each characteristic in the order posed above.

Obviously, Allen Guttmann is male. He can't help that. But he has studied and written about women in sport,² indeed, women in the Olympic Games, which, to

some extent, softens what some might consider a gender bias. In his Olympic book, the problems of women in the Olympic Movement are given their due by Guttman. More obvious on the credit side of the ledger is the plain fact that Professor Guttman brings an extraordinary analytical and knowledge-competency base to this history. This has been demonstrated in a number of his prior works, each positively reviewed, and at least two of them considered as seminal works.³ Though not fundamentally an historian by trade, Guttman, nevertheless, has been a sharp student and interpreter of all that impacts on history, bringing together in his work, ideas and research material from a variety of disciplines allied to the social sciences. And, unlike many, he has “dirtied his hands” in the primary source archives embracing that material which is fundamental to advancing knowledge, and from which evolves the substance for establishing points of view or arguments. Guttman brings an almost religiously-held cross-cultural perspective to his work, usually voiding his ethnic and national bias to set events and interpretations in wide international context. And finally, Guttman’s has avoided the popular press market, consistently reserving his work for review and publication by academic presses, in this case, the University of Illinois Press. But, enough of Guttman’s credentials. What about the book itself?

Guttman’s avowed mission in embarking on “his” Olympic history was to produce a book that would appeal to an undergraduate university student reading audience. Inevitably, though, the book will be read by those more advanced in language and knowledge than undergraduate students. Guttman bridges this “audience chasm” effectively, writing in a style which should please all, that is, in a sometimes penetrating, sometimes humorous, but always entirely understandable manner. Effective, too, is the organizational model that Guttman has adopted for presentation of his material, a chronological approach which fits nicely with the traditional character of undergraduate Olympic history course syllabi and which most can grasp easily (who does not wish to have stories told to them in the sequence of events as they unfold?). Arranged in eleven chapters covering 174 pages is material tracing the evolution of the Modern Games from the inspired dream of Pierre de Coubertin to their present-day scale of problem-laden immensity. Between those “bookend” narratives, Guttman analyzes the Olympic Movement’s early “growing pains,” its recovery from the devastation and political ramifications of two World Wars, and most of the trials and tribulations faced by a succession of International Olympic Committee presidents, of which the domineering Baron de Coubertin and crusty Avery Brundage receive the most attention. And, for what many perceive as the single most fascinating Olympic Games ever celebrated, those in Berlin in 1936, Guttman awards an entire chapter. Of value to the reader, too, is the fact that the book sports (can I be permitted this metaphor?) a subject index, some twenty pictures (most of them familiar to Olympic literature consumers), a generally comprehensive bibliographical essay, and two standard indexes in the form of tables related to male and female participation and hosting site/dates for every Summer and Winter Olympic festival since 1896 and 1924.

Guttman addresses most of the controversial issues faced by the IOC during its first 100 years—nationalism, the amateur question, women’s participation, doping, gigantism of the Games, and global political intrusions in the form of war, fractured countries, and politically-inspired boycotts. Since various confrontations associated

with each of these problem areas occurred at one time or another during the IOC presidency of Avery Brundage, of whom the first scholarly biography was produced by Guttman himself, it is not surprising that the controversial American entrepreneur/sports czar captures an abundance of attention in the book. And why not? With the possible exceptions of Maynard Brichford, curator of the vast Avery Brundage Collection at the University of Illinois, and John Lucas, acknowledged dean of Olympic historians in North America, no one knows the flinty twenty year (1952-1972) Olympic leader more intimately.

Despite my general applause for Guttman's history and its material [that is well arranged and appropriate for modern-day students], there are some shortcomings -- out-and-out errors in some cases, highly debatable statements in others. Notable among the former are several notations that need correction if the book is to progress to a second edition. For instance, residents of Hamilton, Ontario, especially those who remember attending the first British Empire Games hosted by Canada's "Steel City" in 1930, will be nonplussed at Guttman's proclamation that Edmonton, Alberta was the site of the first edition of the sport spectacle that is now known as the Commonwealth Games (p. 9). Dutch folks, proud of their country's accomplishments in Olympic speed skating, will be aghast to read that national hero Ard Schenk was an Olympic champion in cross-country skiing (an Olympic sport never entered by a Netherlands' athlete) at the 1972 Winter Olympics (p. 135). Plainly, Allen Guttman was never a competitive swimmer. He has German swimming wonder Komelia Ender winning her fourth gold medal in the 1976 Games in Montreal in "the 4 X 100-meter backstroke relay" (p. 146). And, did not the "covered wagon/brave pioneer" reenactment pageants featured at the opening ceremonies of the 1984 Los Angeles Games symbolize settlers going west from New England to California, not the other way around (p. 161)? Finally, the most thrilling moment for all Canadians basking in the grandeur of "their" Winter Olympic Games in Calgary in 1988 occurred in the women's figure skating event. At that time, an unheralded, pretty blonde Canadian named Elizabeth Manley shocked judges and spectators alike by outperforming the favorites, Katarina Witt, Debbie Thomas and Midori Ito. In the glamorous world of "amateur" figure skating, however, prior reputation is often sponsored by pre-judged favoritism. Manley was a victim of this phenomenon, gaining the silver medal instead of the gold. Guttman makes no mention of Manley, recounting that Witt, Ito and Thomas, respectively, won the gold, silver and bronze medals (p. 168). These errors, among others, keep Guttman in the realm of the mortal. I forgive him anyways.

On the other end of the scale, there are statements by Guttman which deserve direct challenge. I note three instances. Guttman asserts (p. 54) that "believers in German gymnastics" (Turner) condemned competition. This provides an altogether false picture of Turner in Germany in the period before the Olympic Games evolved, and afterwards too. For decades before Coubertin was even born, Turner had organized huge turnfest competitions featuring hundreds of athletes, and, on occasion, thousands. Indeed, the character of these festivals assumed an "Olympic air" long before the first Modern Games were born at the end of the 19th century. While mass-gymnastic calisthenic displays were present on such occasions, so, too, were individual competitions in all kinds of apparatus gymnastics, wrestling, and track and

field activities. In the individual events, prizes were given to the winners. For Guttman to assert that Turner shunned the first Games in Athens in 1896 because they were appalled by the specialization, rationalization, and quantification that are characteristic of modern sports, is, in my view, a misrepresentation of matters. Indeed, by the time of the first Olympic Games in 1896, had sport, let alone Olympic sport, become specialized, rationalized and quantified? Was not a personal alienation between German sports authorities and French aristocrat Baron de Coubertin and his class-conscious Games not a deeper reason for general German "shunning" of the Athens' events of 1896?

In commenting on Jimmy Carter's attempt to persuade the rest of the world to unite with America in boycotting the Moscow Games of 1980, Professor Guttman states that the American State Department's dispatch of "Mohammad" Ali to sub-Saharan African countries in order to convince them to join the boycott "turned into a complete fiasco when Ali announced that the Africans had persuaded him that the boycott was a mistake." This reflection is obviously one derived from the media's reaction to the entire affair, a reaction based mainly on Ali's first African stop, Tanzania. Although the results of Ali's trip produced a mixture of both success and failure, the term "complete fiasco" is ill advised. Careful scholarship and analysis of Muhammad Ali's diplomatic venture paints a different picture than what Guttman (or the media) has reported here.⁴ Ali, without a doubt the most adored international athlete of the last half century from an African perspective, never, as far as I have been able to determine, announced that he was convinced by Africans, or any others for that matter, that the boycott was a mistake. This is a rare instance in Guttman's book where he turns to evidence somewhat less than objective.

Guttman's analysis is strongest when he examines politics and the Games. Conversely, he is at his weakest when he comments on the major force that drives the Modern Olympic Movement today--commercialism. With regard to Olympic political scenarios, few writers have captured with crystal-like clarity the problems produced and the solutions reached with regard to the post-World War II separations of Germany, China, and Korea. Guttman is one of those few. The same is true when Guttman examines the more than decade-long IOC confrontation with South Africa and its exclusionary national social policy of apartheid.

In my view, Guttman's book comes up short in examining the history of commercialism in the Modern Olympic Movement. For some reason, the subject, at least in this book,⁵ has not been one that has prompted Guttman's interest. Preliminary scenarios in "Olympic commercialism" that led to the enactment of "Rule 49" in the IOC's statutes near the end of the 1950s are ignored altogether. Proceeds from television rights in their now global context, will generate almost one billion dollars for Olympic coffers linked to Atlanta's centennial celebration of the 1996 Games. Income from television rights sold by Olympic authorities to other parts of the world (Western, Eastern and Southern Europe, Asia, Australia, Canada, etc.) is rapidly approaching a dollar figure equal to the income from U.S. rights by themselves. At the time that Guttman published his book these events were well on their way towards being realized. Such phenomena warrant much more attention in any book on the Olympics. But even though Guttman has given these events short

shrift, I have a more pronounced criticism on his treatment of the Olympics and commercialism. That criticism focusses on the rise of sponsorship and licensing.

A decade, before Mr. Ueberroth showed the Olympic world how to put on debt-free Games through sponsorship and licensing (television income had been in place since 1960 as a source of financing and had never paid the full cost for hosting), the IOC had been grappling with the disturbing but hard fact that by the early 1970s about 98% of its income (shared by National Olympic Committees, International Sports Federations, Organizing Committees for the Winter and Summer Games, and the IOC for administrative costs and special initiatives) was derived from the sale of television rights, largely, at that time, American rights. Thus, the IOC sought new initiatives for raising revenue. Out of this anxiety evolved the framework for a plan to market the aura of the Olympics and its symbols to international corporations involved in manufacturing and service. Hence, in 1984, TOP (The Olympic Program) was launched. In giving exclusive license for Olympic affiliation and use of the five ring symbol to a small selective body of the world's richest and most powerful business entities in exchange for millions of dollars, IOC moguls created a solution to the "all the eggs in one basket" problem (television income). Engaging the Swiss sports marketing firm SILA (International Sport and Leisure Agency) to negotiate the deals, TOP rapidly became a major contributor to Olympic coffers. In the first two quadrennials of its existence (1984-1992) TOP I and II produced some 240 million dollars. Further, the growth rate from TOP I to TOP II (90.2%) indicated that sponsorship income might well parallel the dizzying upward spiral of television rights fees, which from 1960 (television I) to 1964 (television II) increased by 104%. Guttman is silent on all this, and, in fact, boldly states that: "Rampant commercialization will continue unabated because the IOC has become utterly dependent on the sale of television rights" (p. 170). The IOC is certainly dependent on the commercialization and commodification of its product, but television is only half the story of that saga.

Still, despite all, I remain generally commendatory on the overall effect of this book. While I continue to feel that the definitive Olympic history never will be written, mainly because the Modern Olympic Movement and its main feature, the Olympic Games are simply too complex, too prone to internal and external forces, and too appealing in different ways to vested interest groups global-wide. Though few will probably ever make the attempt, and fewer still will have the tools to do the job, I am glad that Guttman took the challenge. The students in the Olympic History course that I teach have profited from his contribution. Together, we are grateful.

Notes

1. Two of the better examples published in English are: Erich Kamper and Bill Mallon, *The Golden Book of the Olympic Games*, Milan: Vallardi & Associati Editrice, 1992, 672 pp.; and David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Olympics*, New York: Viking Press, First Edition 1984, 685 pp.

2. Allen Guttman, *Women and Sport*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

3. Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978; and *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
4. See Stephen R. Wenn, "Muhammad Ali and the Convergence of Olympic Sport and U.S. Diplomacy in 1980: A Reassessment from Behind the Scenes at the U.S. State Department," *Olympika*, Volume II-1993, pp. 45-66.
5. Guttman does much better on this subject in Chapter 13 (Olympic Commerce) in his *The Games Must Go On*, op. cit.