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OLYMPICS

In the twenty-first century the Olympics rank as the most common shared experience on Earth. More people tune in to televised Olympics coverage than to any other global television program. More than 70 percent of the world's population—or about 5 billion people—watched the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2012 London Olympics. In the United States the Olympics rank as the most-watched global event, far outpacing World Cup soccer—a spectacle virtually tied with the Olympics in broadcast ratings around the rest of the globe. The contemporary popularity of the Olympics in the United States has older roots, dating to the origins of the

modern games in the 1890s. From the beginning the United States became enmeshed in the Olympics to a greater degree than it did in any international movement. The United States has sometimes resisted cooperative international endeavors and routinely retreated to ideological if not actual isolationism, from refusing to join the League of Nations that US President Woodrow Wilson helped to create after World War I (1914–1918) to a more recent repudiation of the International Criminal Court, but Americans have missed only one Olympics, when the United States boycotted the 1980 Moscow games.

As of 2015 the United States held a commanding lead in the overall medal count, tabulating performances from Athens, Greece, in 1896 to Sochi, Russia, in 2014, with 2,684 gold, silver, and bronze medals, more than double the total won by the Soviet Union (1,204). That lead seems secure given that the now extinct Soviet state will presumably garner no more Olympic medals. The United States has hosted more Olympics than any other nation as well, a total of eight (four summer and four winter games). The next closest rival is France with five (two summer and three winter).

Since the 1890s the Olympics have provided a crucial location for the United States to engage the world. Like the earlier world's fair movement on which much of the Olympic scaffolding is built, these sporting contests create an international space where nations measure themselves against rivals, craft narratives that express national identities, and develop relationships with other nations. At the Olympics the United States has articulated and argued about competing visions of national identity, designed and implemented programs for “Americanizing” the Olympic movement, and collaborated with and confronted other nations as well as the transnational agency that has long governed the movement—the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND OLYMPIC EXPERIENCES

The modern Olympics emerged at the end of the nineteenth century from a trove of competing schemes for international athletic contests circulating regularly in the world press. The Baron Pierre de Coubertin, a French aristocrat (1863–1937), brought the Olympic movement to life. Inspired in part by the Greek Olympics of antiquity, Coubertin constructed a modern spectacle that embraced international and national dimensions. Like the world's fairs, the Olympics sought to include participants from every corner of the globe and made the nation the fundamental unit of organization, ensuring that the games would serve as measuring sticks of national prowess. Nationalism suffused Coubertin's internationalist venture in another way. Like many of his generation he feared that France was slipping into global insignificance.

In Anglo-American sporting traditions, Coubertin identified an antidote to French decline, seeking to inoculate his own nation against cultural torpor by having it fall in love with competitive sports.

The British routinely ignored Coubertin's Olympics for decades, although imperial dominions, especially Australia and Canada, regularly sent teams. In contrast, the United States played a major role from the beginning.



Flag bearer Lopez Lomong (a Sudanese immigrant distance runner) and other members of Team USA in the Summer Olympics opening ceremony, Beijing, August 2008. Since 1896 the strains of American exceptionalism have dominated narratives of nationhood in Olympic arenas. American teams have embodied an idealized “melting pot” that mixes blacks and whites, immigrants and the native-born, and rich and poor into a world-beating coalition. BOB ROSATO/GETTY IMAGES

William Milligan Sloane (1850–1928), who taught French history at Princeton University, served as a founding member of the IOC and organized an American contingent headlined by Princeton athletes to compete in the inaugural 1896 Olympics in Athens. When the Americans dominated the track and field contests, the US media hailed their victories as symbolic of the youthful vitality, democratic institutions, and egalitarian character of the Republic, inaugurating a tradition of defining Olympic triumphs as an element in the folklore of American exceptionalism. As James Connolly (1868–1957), the first US Olympic champion, who later became an international correspondent covering the games, proclaimed, Americans won Olympic victories not because they possessed superior athletes but because they had built a superior society.

Since 1896 the strains of American exceptionalism have dominated narratives of nationhood in Olympic arenas. Early interpreters dubbed US teams “America’s athletic missionaries,” icons of the Republic who personified the virtues of good citizenship. American teams became avatars of social promise, compromising in popular depictions every social class, ethnic group, and religious affiliation—and, beginning in the 1920s when women gained official entry into Olympic sport, female as well as male “athletic missionaries.” In these portraits American teams embodied an idealized “melting pot” that mixed blacks and whites, immigrants and the native-born, and rich and poor into a world-beating coalition. American interpreters have insisted that the nation’s Olympic triumphs signify not merely athletic superiority but the preeminence of American culture above the rest of the globe’s social constellations.

When, before World War I, the European press condemned American teams as collections of “immigrant mercenaries,” its American counterpart replied that US teams were an unbeatable “union of all races.” During the 1920s Americans celebrated the ethnic roots of Olympic swimming stars Gertrude Ederle (1905–2003; the daughter of German immigrants) and Johnny Weissmuller (1904–1984; an immigrant from the Austro-Hungarian Empire). At the 2002 Salt Lake City games, melting-pot paeans reappeared in the American media, as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans earned medals for Team USA in sports previously considered the bastions of mainstream whites. At Beijing in 2008 the American media gushed when Sudanese immigrant distance runner Lopez Lomong (b. 1985) earned the honor of carrying the Stars and Stripes in the opening parade.

The faith in American exceptionalism expressed in these melting-pot narratives emerges in other Olympic tales as well. In the Olympics the United States can

magically transform itself from the wealthiest and most powerful nation on Earth into an underdog that overcomes insurmountable odds to conquer rivals. That script resides behind the 1980 “Miracle on Ice” at Lake Placid, when a supposedly ragtag collection of Americans defeated the mighty Soviet ice hockey machine on the way to winning an unexpected gold medal. For more than three decades this Cold War “miracle” has generated an endless supply of “Star-Spangled” books, movies, and other popular culture artifacts that generate powerful visions of American nationhood, although in 1980 the matchup with the Soviets was not even broadcast on live television.

Homages to American exceptionalism also spark alternative Olympic narratives. Other nations point to American affluence as an explanation for US dominance rather than acceding to claims that United States possesses a superior society. Jamaica, Norway, and many other countries have turned to medal counts based on per-capita Olympic victories or triumphs prorated by gross domestic product to celebrate alternative claims of national superiority. The Olympics also provides opportunities for communities within the United States to challenge claims about inclusion and equity. In the early twentieth century Irish American athletes won a host of Olympic medals for the United States, spurring Irish American commentators to challenge stereotypes of Anglo-Saxon superiority. At the 1936 Berlin Olympics, in the face of tremendous racial hostility from the Nazi regime, Jesse Owens (1913–1980) won an unprecedented four gold medals in track and field. His fellow “black auxiliaries,” as the German press labeled his African American teammates, added another four gold, three silver, and two bronze medals. Their performances unleashed a torrent of self-congratulatory devotionals proclaiming that black Americans could flourish in the United States. A determined cohort of dissenters in both the black and white press replied that while Owens and the black auxiliaries had delivered a blow to Nazi racism in Berlin’s Olympic Stadium, in many places in the United States they were not allowed to run, jump, go to school with, or engage in a host of other daily activities with their fellow white citizens.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

Thirty-two years later, two African American sprinters, Tommie Smith (b. 1944) and John Carlos (b. 1945), dramatically repackaged this racial counternarrative to American exceptionalism when they donned black gloves and gave a Black Power salute on the medal podium after winning gold and bronze medals, respectively, at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Their powerful dissent from the traditional Olympic tributes to American exceptionalism represented the culmination of decades of challenges to

racial barriers and sparked controversy not only in the United States but around the world. As members of the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR), Smith and Carlos not only campaigned against racism in their own country but also condemned South African apartheid. Australian Peter Norman (1942–2006), who earned a silver medal by finishing between Smith and Carlos, joined in the protest by sporting an OPHR patch on his track suit as well as denouncing his homeland's "White Australia Policy."

National and international issues intersected in many other Olympic incidents. In the early 1900s Irish American Olympians supported the inclusion of their kinsmen on separate Irish teams rather than on Great Britain's squads. In later decades the US government lobbied the IOC to recognize American allies as Olympic "nations," including the US protectorate in the Philippines. In 1972 after Palestinian terrorists attacked Israeli athletes in Munich, West Germany, ultimately killing eleven of them, President Richard Nixon and his advisers pondered declaring a national day of mourning but decided instead to use the murders to press the United Nations to take a more serious stance against global terrorism. During the Cold War, when questions of which of the "two" Germanys, "two" Koreas, and "two" Chinas the IOC should recognize precipitated international diplomatic crises, the United States consistently supported the inclusion of its protectorates—West Germany, South Korea, and the Republic of China (Taiwan)—in the Olympic "family."

The United States also has a long tradition of confronting its rivals and enemies at the Olympics. Great Britain served as the original American Olympic foil. Americans routinely charged the British with anti-American bias, leading even the ardent Anglophile and US president Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919) to scold Britain from his "bully pulpit" for poor sportsmanship at the 1908 London games. After World War I, as the United States began to surpass Great Britain not only in Olympic medals but in many other measures of national vitality, new enemies appeared. During the 1930s, the American press portrayed the Olympics as surrogate wars against totalitarian powers: Italy, Japan, and Germany. The United States very nearly boycotted the 1936 Olympics in Germany. To register American opposition to the Nazi regime, the American team refused to dip the flag to Adolf Hitler. This 1936 refusal rather than an earlier Irish American challenge to an English king in 1908 in London marked the starting point for the consistent American refusal to lower its national flag at the Olympics.

In spite of the heroics of Owens and his African American teammates, Germany easily bested the United States in the 1936 medal count. Combined with the

results that Italy bettered France's total and Japan surpassed Great Britain's mark, the 1936 Olympics was interpreted by many as evidence that the Axis had surpassed the republics of the West. Some American observers offered an alternative explanation. Rather than acquiesce to the arguments that German, Japanese, and Italian victories heralded the superiority of totalitarian societies, they accused their enemies of cheating in various ways and of fielding teams of robotic automatons who subverted the spirit of "true" sport. Such arguments would become stock explanations in the future as new Olympic enemies emerged to challenge American superiority in the games.

THE OLYMPICS AND THE COLD WAR

In the Cold War that followed World War II (1939–1945), the Soviet Union emerged to challenge the United States in Olympic arenas. In the Cold War superpower clashes at summer games, beginning with the Soviet debut in 1952 at Helsinki, the Soviets outpaced the United States in total medals and gold medals at Melbourne in 1956, Rome in 1960, Munich in 1972, and Seoul in 1988. The United States triumphed only at Helsinki in 1952 and Mexico City in 1968. At Tokyo in 1964 the United States won more gold medals but the Soviets won the most total medals. In Montreal in 1976 the United States finished second overall but third behind the Soviets and East Germany in gold medals. In Cold War winter Olympics the Soviets claimed medal count victories in every game from their debut at Cortina d'Ampezzo in 1956 through the 1988 Calgary installment. The United States finished no higher than third and as low as ninth in that era.

When the United States beat the Soviets in Olympic contests, Americans interpreted victory as a signal of social superiority. When the United States lost to the Soviets—a more frequent occurrence—it raised fears of national decline. "Soft Americans" in the parlance of ardent cold warrior president John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) could not compete with their Soviet counterparts. Equally common were explanations that labeled the Soviets as robotic automatons programmed to cheat whenever possible, thus subverting the spirit of "true sport"—a resurrection of the old charges leveled at German, Italian, and Japanese rivals. Routine claims that Olympians from the Soviet bloc won medals with state-sponsored doping programs added a new wrinkle to the charges. In fact, the ingestion of such substances represented a common practice in both the East and the West—with the United States and its allies generally at the cutting edge of the pharmaceutical arms race.

The enmity between the Cold War rivals reached its apogee in the 1980s when the United States boycotted the

1980 Moscow Olympics to protest the Soviet incursion into Afghanistan. The Soviets refused to compete at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. A decade later, as the Soviet Empire unraveled and the Cold War evaporated, the Soviet versus US Olympic rivalry dissolved. In the twenty-first century a new superpower emerged to challenge the United States as the People's Republic of China launched an ambitious athletic program to garner Olympic supremacy. At the 2008 Olympics, hosted by Beijing, China won the gold medal race while the United States prevailed in the overall medal count. At the 2012 London Olympics, the United States surged back into the lead in both categories.

DISPUTES WITH THE IOC

Beyond crowing about medal counts and threatening boycotts, the United States has long struggled with the IOC to shape the Olympics. In the early 1900s the head of the American Olympic Committee, James Sullivan (1862–1914), and the head of the IOC, Coubertin, engaged in a protracted struggle for control of the games. In the current era the US Olympic Committee and the IOC quarrel over revenue-sharing agreements. Americans sought to include their national pastimes on the Olympic program, including American football, which was a demonstration sport at Los Angeles in 1932 but has never again been seen at an Olympic venue. Baseball had more success, appearing several times as a demonstration sport before enjoying a short reign as a medal sport from 1992 to 2008 before the IOC dropped it. Basketball has been the most successful at cracking the Olympic lineup, debuting as a medal sport in 1936 at Berlin and remaining on the program ever since.

More recently, American interest groups included US-invented “action sports,” including beach volleyball, triathlon, mountain and BMX cycling, snowboarding, and freestyle skiing, on Olympic programs. The inclusion of such sports has not only increased the medal haul for the United States but created new global markets for US corporations to sell products and promote American lifestyles. Entrepreneurs have used the Olympics to market products and ways of life since the 1900s, when America's athletic missionaries won glory and A. G. Spalding and Brothers, an early sporting goods manufacturer, outfitted the team and advertised its wares in Olympic stadiums. A century later Nike and other companies have eclipsed Spalding as Olympian advertisers, but in American corporate and public imaginations the Olympic movement remains the most important international venue for projecting American cultural power around the world.

SEE ALSO *Baseball*; *National Basketball Association (NBA)*

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