

BOOK REVIEW

In the Service of Zeus: International Sport and
International Affairs*

Barbara J. Keys. *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. xiv + 274 pp. Bibliography, index, notes, photographs. \$49.95 (cloth).

One of the great strengths of diplomatic history is that it can and does incorporate many different topics and types of approaches. People who think that diplomatic history is what one diplomat says to one of his counterparts in another foreign ministry have not bothered to read the pages of this journal for at least the past twenty years.

Sport history is generally less diverse. Most historians in this field are actually students of recreational activities such as backpacking. Much of what they examine is not what one would tend to think of as sport history, and is better described as the study of leisure habits. As a result, topics that are important in social history dominate this field. Important exceptions to this trend come in both boxing and baseball history, where the focus has stayed on competitive athletic contests.¹

One thing that makes sport history different from other fields is that it attracts a number of guest stars—scholars trained in other fields and disciplines who use their intellectual skills to examine subjects of long-time personal interest.² These outsiders have often produced works of exceptional quality and

*The title comes from the fact that in the 1930s, Olympic medals had an image of Zeus on their forward side. The author would like to thank Michael Ezra, Mike Creswell, Mitch Lerner, and Sarandis “Randy” Papadopoulos for their assistance.

1. Social history issues such as race and class remain significant in boxing history. Some of the more significant works in this field are Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York, 1983); Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckled Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY, 1986); and Lewis Erenberg, *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* (New York, 2005). Business issues have dominated baseball historiography. A good introduction to this field is Jules Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History* (New York, 2000).

2. Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1997); Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York, 1983); Louis P. Masur, *Autumn Glory: Baseball's First World Series* (New York, 2003); Michael Mandelbaum, *The Meaning of Sport: Why Americans Watch Baseball, Football, Basketball and What They See When They Do* (New York, 1991).

importance. Several members of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations have been part of this trend.³

International sports—the Olympics, the World Cup, and their like—have fared fairly poorly at the hands of both sport and diplomatic historians. There are only passing references to the Olympics in diplomatic history textbooks and there is no mention of them in *Major Problems in American Sport History*.⁴ Most studies of international sport have focused on the politics of participation—which is to say, boycotts.⁵ Work on the Berlin Olympics of 1936, though, has been a cottage industry unto itself.⁶ Walter LaFeber with his book on Michael

3. Thomas W. Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Baseball Tour and the Birth of the American Empire* (Lanham, MD, 2006); James Edward Miller, *The Baseball Business: Pursuing Pennants and Profits in Baltimore* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990); Bruce Kuklick, *To Everything a Season: Shibe Park and Urban Philadelphia* (Princeton, NJ, 1991); Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "Nixon versus Paterno: College Football and Presidential Politics," *Pennsylvania History* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 236–60; and Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "Richard Nixon, Sportswriter: The President, His Historical All-Star Baseball Team, and the Election of 1972," *Journal of Sport History* 27, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 192–202.

4. Walter LaFeber, *The American Age: United States Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad since 1750*, 2d ed. (New York, 1994), 317, 402; Steven A. Riess, *Major Problems in American Sport History: Documents and Essays* (New York, 1997).

5. Derek L. J. Hulme, *The Political Olympics: Moscow, Afghanistan, and the 1980 U.S. Boycott* (New York, 1990); David B. Kanin, *A Political History of the Olympic Games* (Boulder, CO, 1981); Alfred E. Senn, *Power, Politics and the Olympic Games* (Champaign, IL, 1999); Christopher R. Hill, *Olympic Politics: Athens to Atlanta, 1896–1996*, 2d ed. (Manchester, England, 1996); Allen Guttman, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement* (New York, 1984); Stephen R. Wenn and Jeffrey P. 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: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 2 (1993): 45–66; Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis, 2002); Douglas Hartmann, *Race, Culture and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath* (Chicago, 2003). For studies that look at other issues, see Michael Llewellyn Smith, *Olympics in Athens, 1896: The Invention of the Modern Olympic Games* (London, 2004); George R. Matthews, *America's First Olympics: The St. Louis Games of 1904* (Columbia, MO, 2005); Benjamin Lowe, David B. Kanin, and Andrew Strenk, eds., *Sport and International Relations* (Champaign, IL, 1978); Andrei Markovits and Steven L. Hellerman, *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); and Peter Beck, *Scoring for Britain: International Football and International Politics, 1900–1939* (London, 1999).

6. Moshe Gottlieb, "The American Controversy over the Olympic Games," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (March 1972): 181–213; Carolyn Marvin, "Avery Brundage and American Participation in the 1936 Olympics," *Journal of American Studies* 16 (April 1982): 81–106; George Eisen, "The Voices of Sanity: American Diplomatic Reports from the 1936 Berlin Olympiad," *Journal of Sport History* 11, no. 3 (Winter 1984): 56–78; Stephen R. Wenn, "A Tale of Two Diplomats: George S. Messersmith and Charles H. Sherrill on Proposed American Participation in the Berlin Olympics," *Journal of Sport History* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 27–43; Stephen R. Wenn, "A Suitable Policy of Neutrality? FDR and the Question of American Participation in the 1936 Olympics," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 8 (December 1991): 319–35; Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York, 1971); William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (New York, 1986); Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games: The 1936 Olympics* (New York, 1986); Cooper C. Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (Metuchen, NJ, 1986); B. Hannah Schaub, *Riefenstahl's Olympia: Körperideale—Ethische Verantwortung oder Freiheit des Künstlers?* [Riefenstahl's *Olympia*: ideal bodies—ethical responsibility or artistic freedom?] (Munich, 2003); Arnd Krüger and William Murray, eds., *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s* (Urbana, IL and Chicago, 2003); Guy Walters, *Berlin*

Jordan—or what the basketball legend represents—is the only diplomatic historian who takes a prolonged look at sport and world affairs.⁷

As a result, Barbara Keys's study of international sport in the 1930s is an inventive and innovative study that has the potential to open up a whole new area of examination for historians interested in foreign policy. She argues: "In the years leading to the Berlin Games, a form of 'international sovereignty'—limited but real—had come to govern the playing fields where nations now pitted their representatives" (p. 1). With this thesis, it is little surprise that Keys provides an account that is more global than national in focus and concentrates far more on officials of various sports organizations rather than on the actions or policies of professional diplomats.

The 1930s were an eventful decade for sport. In 1930 the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) held the first World Cup. Keys is astute in recognizing the importance of this development. The creation of this contest is an event that an American scholar could have easily overlooked, given the weak following that football, or—if you prefer—soccer has in the United States. Later in the decade the United States (1932) and then Germany (1936) hosted both the winter and summer Olympics. Toward the end of the decade, the Soviet Union ended its isolation from international sport. These moves also set the stage for the Soviet Union becoming a major sports power in the postwar years.

The book begins with two introductory chapters about the development of international sport, in which FIFA plays a large role. These sections provide a useful introduction to readers unfamiliar with the origins or organization of international sport. The heart of the book comes with five chapters that examine the distinct cultural attitudes toward sport in Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States. These cultural attitudes reflected the dominant political philosophy of each country: fascism in Germany, communism in the Soviet Union, and democracy in the United States. This focus might seem narrow—three countries hardly seems like an adequate sample for an international history—but as Keys points out, "the world of sport was fundamentally a European creation" (p. 40). This description of international sport is on the mark. At the time, the United States was the only major Olympic power outside of Europe.

Despite this fact, assessing the role of the United States in global sport is also far more difficult than one might think. Americans have remained indifferent to the team sports that foreign publics enjoy (soccer, rugby, and cricket) and follow "Olympic sports" for two weeks once every four years. Although many elements

Games: How the Nazis Stole the Olympic Dream (New York, 2006); Christopher Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics: The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games* (Stroud, England, 2006); Anton Rippon, *Hitler's Olympics: The Story of the 1936 Nazi Games* (South Yorkshire, England, 2006); and Jeremy Schaap, *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics* (Boston, 2007).

7. Walter LaFeber, *Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York, 1999).

of American culture like movies and jazz found a huge foreign audience during the 1930s, sport was a major exception. Baseball and American football—the two most popular sports in the United States—enjoyed only limited popularity outside of North America. Officials of the U.S. government have, with a few notable exceptions, shown little interest in international athletic competitions. Keys notes that this insularity makes assessing the role of Americans in international athletic contests problematic. She explains, though, that a broad examination of management techniques, training methods, attitudes toward competition, and the celebrity treatment of athletes shows that “U.S. sport culture appears far more a part of, rather than an exception to, the broader currents of cultural influence exercised by the United States” (p. 65).

Keys also provides a chapter each on the efforts of Americans and Germans to mold the Olympics in their image when they hosted the games. The ambitions of the Nazis are well known, but Keys argues that Americans successfully introduced a commercial approach toward financing these gatherings that the international Olympic movement adopted in the years that followed. According to Keys, “the Los Angeles organizers put a distinctively American imprint on the international festival, greatly expanding international sport’s connections to the world of entertainment, consumerism and mass media” (p. 92).

This argument about a “form of ‘international sovereignty’” is new in a historiographical sense. There is a wealth of literature, much of it cited previously, that argues that officials of various nation-states have over the years attempted to manipulate international sport to their own ends. Few scholars have suggested the reverse: that the athletic world has pushed back. The sense of community that Keys describes is real, and explains, in part, why transnational entities such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and FIFA—armed only with “soft power”—have regularly withstood serious challenges to their authority from a variety of nation-states.

This book has a number of strengths. Keys’s research is especially impressive. She has drawn upon English-, French-, German-, and Russian-language documents housed in a variety of archives. These range from the depositories of national governments to the libraries of nonstate actors like the IOC, international sports federations, and national Olympic committees. She also uses personal papers housed on both sides of the Atlantic and in the holdings of municipal governments. Her notes and bibliography are also multilingual and she even draws upon some Japanese-language material. In addition, the quality of her prose is often reminiscent of Barbara Tuchman.

There are, unfortunately, a number of shortcomings to the book. There is a certain lack of precision to Keys’s language. Northern Ireland did not exist as a formal political entity when the home countries of the United Kingdom finally joined FIFA in 1910–1911; to this day, the official name of the federation for the six counties of Northern Ireland remains the Irish Football Association. She states that the cancelled 1940 Olympics would have been held in Tokyo. This statement is incorrect. The games were to have been held in Helsinki, Finland

when World War II forced a cancellation. In her footnote for this paragraph, she does explain that Japan surrendered hosting duties in 1938, which is correct. Keys also reduces the grandiose family name of Rear Admiral Sir Reginald Plunkett-Ernle-Erle-Drax to just Drax. Most of these comments, however, represent something only slightly more significant than quibbling.

There are, though, far more important problems. Keys claims more than her thesis will support. Her argument about Americans and commercialization seems anachronistic. Los Angeles made a world of difference to the financial structure of the IOC and commercialized the games—but in 1984, not 1932. Only one set of games between the two held in Los Angeles turned a profit, and it was television that helped finally make the Olympics profitable.⁸ In Berlin, the Nazis did make concessions to the IOC, but they were token, allowing a few athletes with Jewish heritage to compete and removing offensive signs prohibiting Jews from using public facilities for a few weeks. However, when the games ended, the Nazis returned to their evil ways.

Although Keys's prose skills are impressive, they fall flat at times. Her writing is strongest in the body of the text. In contrast, the introduction and conclusion of the book and of each individual chapter are less than engaging, which is probably the result of being written, rewritten, and rewritten again as she received input from peer reviewers, editors, and dissertation committee members.

The biggest problem with this book is the work of the publisher rather than the author. The hefty price tag is going to limit the sales of this title to academic libraries, which is unfortunate. This book is important and deserves a bigger audience than it will likely get.

As the previous paragraph indicates, this book is quite interesting and engaging. It is a title that professors should assign in their seminars and put on graduate student reading lists. It offers new views and perspectives on well-known topics. Even if one does not agree with all of its arguments, it is the type of study that will make people stop and think, and that is always a good thing.

8. Stephen R. Wenn, "A Turning Point for IOC Television Policy: U.S. Television Rights Negotiations and the 1980 Lake Placid and Moscow Olympic Festivals," *Journal of Sport History* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 87–117; and Allen Guttmann, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games*, 2d ed. (Urbana, IL and Chicago, 2002), 148–49, 163.