Sport, Diplomacy, and Contentious Politics: The 1968 Mexico City Olympics

As Brazil prepares to host the FIFA World Cup (2014) and the Summer Olympics (2016), it makes sense to reflect on the last time a Latin American nation hosted both events in a two-year span. Much like Brazil now, Mexico used the Summer Olympics (1968) and the World Cup (1970) to broadcast to the world the economic progress and political stability it had achieved. In the case of the Olympics, the results were mixed. The massacre at Tlatelolco one month before the games tarnished Mexico’s peaceful image, although the actual sporting events carried on smoothly. In Before the Eyes of the World, U.S. diplomatic historian Kevin B. Witherspoon draws on the 1968 Summer Olympics to examine Mexican society and politics, Cold War international politics, and the U.S.-based Black Power movement. His analysis illustrates that hosting an international sporting event can have consequences far beyond the organizers’ intentions.

Witherspoon contends that the 1968 Summer Olympics "united politics, culture, diplomacy, and athletics as no Olympics before or since" (p. 5). Conscious of their nation’s status as the first third world host of the Olympics, Mexican elites sought to project an international image of Mexico that balanced its modern and industrial characteristics with more traditional, and distinctly Mexican, traits. In contrast, the Mexican student movement viewed the Olympics as an example of the misguided policies of an authoritarian Mexican government that refused to democratize. The Mexico City Olympics also became the site of debate over the contentious racial politics of the United States (specifically the Black Power movement and its effect on athletics) and South Africa (which continued to be banned from international sporting competition for its apartheid policies). Finally, from the bidding process to the actual sporting events, these Olympic Games served as a platform for the United States and the Soviet Union to outwit and outperform each other in order to gain an advantage in the game of Cold War cultural supremacy.

Before the Eyes of the World consists of six chapters, with each examining a specific aspect of the 1968 Summer Olympics. Chapter 1 describes how Mexico City won the bid for the Olympics, and includes a history of Mexican participation in and hosting of international amateur sporting events. In bidding for the Olympics, Mexico City defeated its chief rival, Detroit, by securing the support of the Soviet Union and by contrasting U.S. arrogance and racial exclusion with Mexican humility and racial inclusion. Chapter 2 discusses the central controversies of this Olympiad, including South Africa’s eligibility, the nature of amateurism, and Mexico City’s altitude. It also analyzes the Cultural Olympics, which took place a year before the sporting events and focused on the cultural contributions of participating nations. Although a success, Witherspoon contends that
the Cultural Olympic activities “celebrated European and
American culture, relegating Mexican culture to a lesser
stature” (p. 77).

The following two chapters analyze the contentious
politics that surrounded the games. Chapter 3 examines
the impact of the Black Power movement on African
American amateur athletes, many of whom considered
boycotting the Olympics because of inequalities in how
they were treated. Although fascinating, this chapter
makes very little reference to Mexico. Chapter 4 narrates
the events of the Mexican student movement and
the massacre at Tlatelolco, which shattered the image
of Mexico as a peaceful and stable nation—an image the
Olympics were intended to project.

The final two chapters focus on the results of the
Olympics, on the field and off. Chapter 5 looks at the
sporting events of the Olympics, with a particular fo-
cus on African Americans Tommie Smith and John Car-
los’s controversial fist raise during their medal ceremony,
a salute to Black Power. The chapter, however, makes
very few references to Mexico and Mexican perceptions
of the results of the Olympics. Chapter 6 serves as a
conclusion and an epilogue. Regarding the impact
of the Olympics on Mexico, Witherspoon argues, “it seems
clear that spending on projects such as the Olympics con-
tributed to the economic woes of the 1970s and 1980s” (p.
146). In terms of Mexico’s impact on the Olympics, he
notes that the 1968 Summer Olympics set a precedent for
the amount of time and money spent on security, both of
which would continue to increase for future Olympics.

In narrating the story of the Mexico City Olympics,
Before the Eyes of the World makes a significant con-
tribution to the existing academic literature on Mex-
ico and on sport. It is the first critical history to ana-
lyze both the actual sporting events of the Mexico City
Olympics and the political and social contexts surround-
ing them. Witherspoon attempts to address issues in
Mexican, African American, U.S. diplomatic, and sport
historiography, which works best when he analyzes
the bidding process for hosting the Olympics in chapter 1.
Furthermore, Witherspoon demonstrates that the Mex-
ico City Olympics were a turning point in Olympic his-
tory, as the Mexico City Olympics were a harbinger for
the increased politicization of the games that led to the
Olympic boycotts of the 1980s.

Witherspoon’s narrative relies on a variety of
sources: private collections, personal interviews, pub-
lic archives, and periodicals. Of these sources, the lat-
ter two provide the bulk of the evidence. The archival
evidence includes documents from the Mexican Olympic
Committee, the United States Olympic Committee, the
National Security Archive, and the Avery Brundage Col-
lection, although the vast majority of the archival evi-
dence is from the National Archive and Records Admin-
istration (NARA). Of the forty periodicals cited, three were
published in Mexico, while the rest were published in the
United States or Europe.

To his credit, Witherspoon examines the Mexico City
Olympics from multiple perspectives. Yet, at times, Mex-
ico and Mexicans are depicted flatly as passive spectators,
especially in chapters 3 and 5, where they receive little
mention. One wonders if these depictions would have
differed had Witherspoon consulted the Archivo Ge-
neral de la Nación’s archive on the Organizing Com-
mittee of the Olympic Games, as Ariel Rodríguez Kuri
and Claire and Keith Brewster have done.[1] Cultural maga-
nines, such as Siempre! And Mañana, and sports dailies,
such as ESTO and La Afiación, likewise would have helped
flesh out Mexican perspectives on African American ath-
letes and the athletic results of the games. Furthermore,
Before the Eyes of the World does not examine the links
between the 1968 Olympics and Mexico’s hosting of the
1970 World Cup, which both Joseph L. Arbena and Eric
Zolov contend were also intended to project a modern,
Mexican image of the nation abroad and legitimize the
regime back home.[2]

In the end, Before the Eyes of the World provides a
well-written account of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics
that functions better as Olympic and sport history than
it does as Mexican history. The second half of the title,
Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games, is a bit misleading,
though Mexicanists should find much of the book engag-
ing.

Notes

[1]. Ariel Rodríguez Kuri, “El otro ‘68: Política y es-
tilo en la organización de los Juegos Olímpicos de la Ciud-
dad de México,” Relaciones 19, no. 76 (1998): 108-129; and
Claire and Keith Brewster, Representing the Nation: Sport,
Control, Contestation, and the Mexican Olympics, in spe-
cial issue, The International Journal of the History of Sport
26, no. 6 (2009): 711-880.

Games: Mexico City, 1968,” in Sport in Latin America
and the Caribbean, ed. Joseph L. Arbena and David G.
LaFrance (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2003), 133-
143; and Eric Zolov, “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomor-
row’: Mexico and the 1968 Olympics,” The Americas 61
no. 2 (2004): 159-188.