

Sport as a battlefield

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After 1945, the geopolitical use of sport found a place in the alliances of the Cold War. Ideology and diplomacy slipped into every aspect of the practice of sports.

Reviewed: Sylvain Dufraisse, *Une histoire sportive de la guerre froide (A Sports History of the Cold War)*, Paris, Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2023, 396 p., 23, 90 €.

After the Second World War, civilians and military officials alike used sports to forge bonds between peoples and playing fields to acquire influence. In his magisterial synthesis, Sylvain Dufraisse explores the ins and outs of the geopolitical use of sports, which left its mark on the shifting and unprecedented alliances of the Cold War.

"Sportification" in a bipolar world

As major sporting events became increasingly shaped by media exposure, particularly after the 1924 Paris Olympics, sports drew closer and closer to spectators. Emotion became an effective means to serve new ambitions. Dufraisse, whose previous work examined the construction of the Soviet sports elite,¹ presents a balanced picture of the two sides of the Cold War and carefully explains how sports became often entangled in this conflict. Diverging from the Anglo-American narrative

¹ Sylvain Dufraisse, *Les Héros du sport. Une histoire des champions soviétiques (années 1930-années 1980)*, Ceyzérieu, Champ Vallon, 2019, 328 p.

that dominates contemporary historiography, Dufraisse's book takes a sidestep, a welcome approach that echoes Joseph Eaton's request from several years ago.²

The introduction explains the circumstances that resulted in the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two major powers that emerged from the ruins of the Second World War. Yet the genesis of the political use of sports goes back to the formation of new networks and alliances at the end of the nineteenth century, on the sidelines of which the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was born.

The sports movement was shaped by the organization of new international sporting tournaments, often "based on gathering a community of sportsmen sharing political affinities" (p. 11). In the 1920s, sports were gradually overtaken by the media and served the ideological agenda of fascist regimes, which acquired an indisputable influence in international organizations.

A Faustian bargain

This prehistory accounts for the IOC's interest in presenting itself as an independent organization, in addition to explaining the organization's anticommunist turn, which was complete by the Second World War. Moreover, the "presence of Soviet sportsmen legitimated, at little cost, the sports movement's so-called apoliticism and a universalism that transcended political cleavages" (p. 13).

Even so, the sports movement did manage to find spaces of expression and cooperation. The book discloses, in this way, the Faustian bargain made by the international sports movement, at a time when it was rapidly growing and increasingly and ever more effectively dominated by the media: sports acquired a maturity that aligned with its time, opening the way to competition on a much vaster scale thanks to the "acceptance of common rules" (p. 15). These rules turned playing fields into ideal battlegrounds for Cold War confrontations.

The first two chapters deal with international organizations as sites of negotiation in the postwar transition period. Dufraisse explains how some IOC

² Joseph Eaton, "Reconsidering the 1980 Moscow Olympic Boycott: American Sports Diplomacy in East Asian Perspective," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 40, n° 5, November 2016, p. 845-864.

officials were compromised by their association with fascist regimes and emphasizes the speed with which these black sheep were allowed to work again, thanks to the help of Avery Brundage--the OIC's vice president--and "in the name of the 'Olympic family'" (p. 22).

Such philo-fascist sentiments did not worry Soviet sports officials, who saw "bourgeois" sports as an opportunity to denazify the old Axis powers now under Soviet rule by rehabilitating and sublimating them. For its part, the United States leveraged sport to embody an ideology of the "free world" by championing Black athletes – such as Jackie Robinson and the Harlem Globetrotters – who symbolized American economic success.

The book discusses at length the way the United States relied on the "sports committee" of its new cultural politics organization, the US Information Agency (USIA). This agency, however, deserves a more thorough analysis, which might have considered the connections it forged with the newly created Council of Europe and UNESCO.

Dufraisse also considers the opinions formulated by NATO's Committee on Information and Cultural Relations (CICR), that sought to encourage "the development of competition in which the East-West conflict, as well as the solidarity of the blocs, could present itself in a 'civilized' manner,"(p. 68). Readers might have appreciated more details illustrating the period of peaceful coexistence, notably on the sources and differences of viewpoints within CICR, which was marked, as is well-known, by the constant suspicion among its various member countries..

The 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games were, for Dufraisse, a turning point: it was at this moment that "ideology slipped into every aspect of sports" (p. 64), as sports events became mass and media-focused phenomena and sports organizations redefined their norms.

De-Centering the Cold War

In the third and fourth chapters, Dufraisse examines the path that various states, which were now independent, took towards developing a national sports model. He considers the pressures on Algerian athletes, who found themselves pulled between the rock of the French colonial legacy and the hard place of independence. The

example of the very international Rachid Mekhloufi, who defended the colors of the National Liberation Front after wearing the jersey of AS Saint-Étienne and the French national team, is a well-chosen illustration of this dilemma.

The Soviets' sports cooperation was plain to see: coaches, materials, and infrastructure played the role of diplomatic mediators. As they fell behind, the United States developed a strategy under President Kennedy. Tommie Smith and John Carlos' 1968 stunt was simply part of the machinery of the "East-West conflict, [which] focused attention on sporting events with great symbolic potential" (p. 156).

The great powers denied that they engaged in rivalry through displays of sportsmen's bodies, demonstrating that sports events were now an obvious diplomatic tool. Whether in a chess match or the 1972 "Summit Series" hockey game between Canada and the Soviet Union, in performance optimization measures or the "subversion of the sexes," athletes' bodies were now on display.

Hence the inevitable "scientification" of sports, meaning that "the symbolic character of the performances pushed states and private organizations to support research in this domain" (p. 195), which Dufraisse compares to space program research. The emergence of sports science--which in many ways was a contingent discipline--as well as the all-pervasive question of doping in sporting competitions, which the IOC addressed only reluctantly, can be explained by the fact that "the public wants performances, and the success of Olympic competition depends on them" (p. 204).

Confront, subjugate, and normalize

The fifth and sixth chapters illustrate the precarious balance that characterized the international sports movement during the Cold War. The IOC's legitimacy depended on superpower cooperation, even as the United States and the Soviet Union insisted the IOC had to be apolitical to appear in the best possible light. With his measured approach, Dufraisse does not suggest that one side prevailed over the other.

To the contrary, he describes the 'Miracle on Ice' at the 1980 Lake Placid Winter Games, which saw the United States defeat Finland – rather than "the Soviets" (p. 212) – as an example of the necessary construction of national heroes. He also considers the

1980 Moscow Games as a 'moment of forgotten modernization' (p. 246) rather than a failure caused by the U.S. boycott.

The decline of Soviet athletics that was evident at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics is better explained by the advent of the "age of managers" than by "the internationalization of human rights, parallel forms of physical activity [surfing, sailing, and yoga, all characterized by a spirit of freedom] and the irreversible appeal of the commodification of sports and the rise of professionalism" (p. 213).

The latter point is explored in a particularly stimulating section dedicated to the example of West Nally, a company owned by Patrick Nally and Horst Dassler--the founder of the Adidas brand and "quasi-shadow counselor and kingmaker of international organizations" (p. 261).

Three trends

Upon completing the book, readers will have noticed three trends. First, the IOC had no choice but to bring together the major powers to avoid a new boycott. Second, East Asia, with its remarkable economic growth, had to be opened up. Finally, there was a need to blunt the offensive of major media corporations, which sponsored tournaments--like the ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) Tour in tennis--and rivaled local federations.

In the final years of the Cold War, Soviet clubs, particularly the legendary soccer clubs Dynamo Kyev and Spartak Moscow, gradually gained financial autonomy. Some athletes joined major North American leagues, like the basketball player Alexander Volkov, who joined the Atlanta--and not the "Atlantic" (p. 305)--Hawks, owned by the media magnate Ted Turner. Particularly noteworthy is the detail with which Dufraisse examines Yugoslavia's role in the restructuring of the sports movement, a model that initiated its "early conversation to self-management and self-financing" (p. 312).

With exemplary rigor, Dufraisse asks us to look beyond the idea that the history of Cold War sports is no more than a "history of diplomacy, in which states constantly turn to sportsmen to project their power on the global stage" (p. 347). The strength of Dufraisse's book lies in the author's determination to give a voice to all actors in the international sports movement. It is a synthesis that is impressive in its thoroughness

as well as its commitment to consider the diplomatic and cultural history of sports in a new light.

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