

Sport and Politics in the Modern Era

Pride Before a Fall — Germany in 1936 and England in the 1950s

The nineteen-thirties, which witnessed the rise of European fascism, also saw the dictatorships use convenient, if unsound theories of eugenics to support their political purges. The Italians and Germans, in particular, vaingloriously paraded their muscular young athletes and sportsmen and women in massive gatherings that made no attempt to disguise the message of physical and political supremacy. The Italians did gain world-wide acclaim for their achievement in winning the football world cups of 1934 and 1938. The Germans, on the other hand, were the subject of international and very public ridicule following the defeat of Hitler's Aryan supermen at the hands of Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Owens, a Black American, won four gold medals ahead of the much-vaunted Germans and caused Hitler public humiliation: the German leader refused to present the awards and left the stadium. The Germans had made a huge impression with their achievement in building the Olympic stadium and with their magnificent opening ceremony. Unfortunately for Hitler, fortunately for the rest of us, the myth of Aryan supremacy was exposed in the most emphatic way.

1953 was a year of great nationalistic fervour in Britain. The new queen was crowned and the ceremony brought the nation to a standstill as flag-waving royalists blocked city streets and crowded in front of new-fangled television sets. As if to show to the world that, having played her part in ridding the world of the menace of fascism, the British lion was ready to roar from on high once again, a British expedition conquered Everest. Sir John Hunt, leader of the expedition, succeeded in putting Britain on top of the world in the most literal sense possible, and all other nations were expected to sit up and take notice. It seemed to matter little that of the two men who made it to the summit one, Edmund Hillary, was a New Zealander, whilst the other, Sherpa Tensing, was Nepalese. It was British daring and British leadership which had triumphed. Britain's burgeoning political ambitions were mirrored in the athletic achievements of its sporting heroes. So, too, were its failures and embarrassments.

It was a misplaced belief in its own authority and influence overseas which saw the government precipitate the Suez fiasco of 1956. Similarly it was in a spirit of invincibility that England's footballers took on the Hungarians at Wembley in November of 1953. The previous five encounters between the two nations, four of which had been in Budapest, had seen England score twenty-six goals and concede only eight. The Hungarians' 6-3 victory on that day in 1953 stunned the nation, but was seen as an aberration. It was a chastened but still confident England side which travelled to Budapest six months later for a return match. This time Hungary won by seven goals to one, and England's 'sporting heroes' were well and truly humbled.

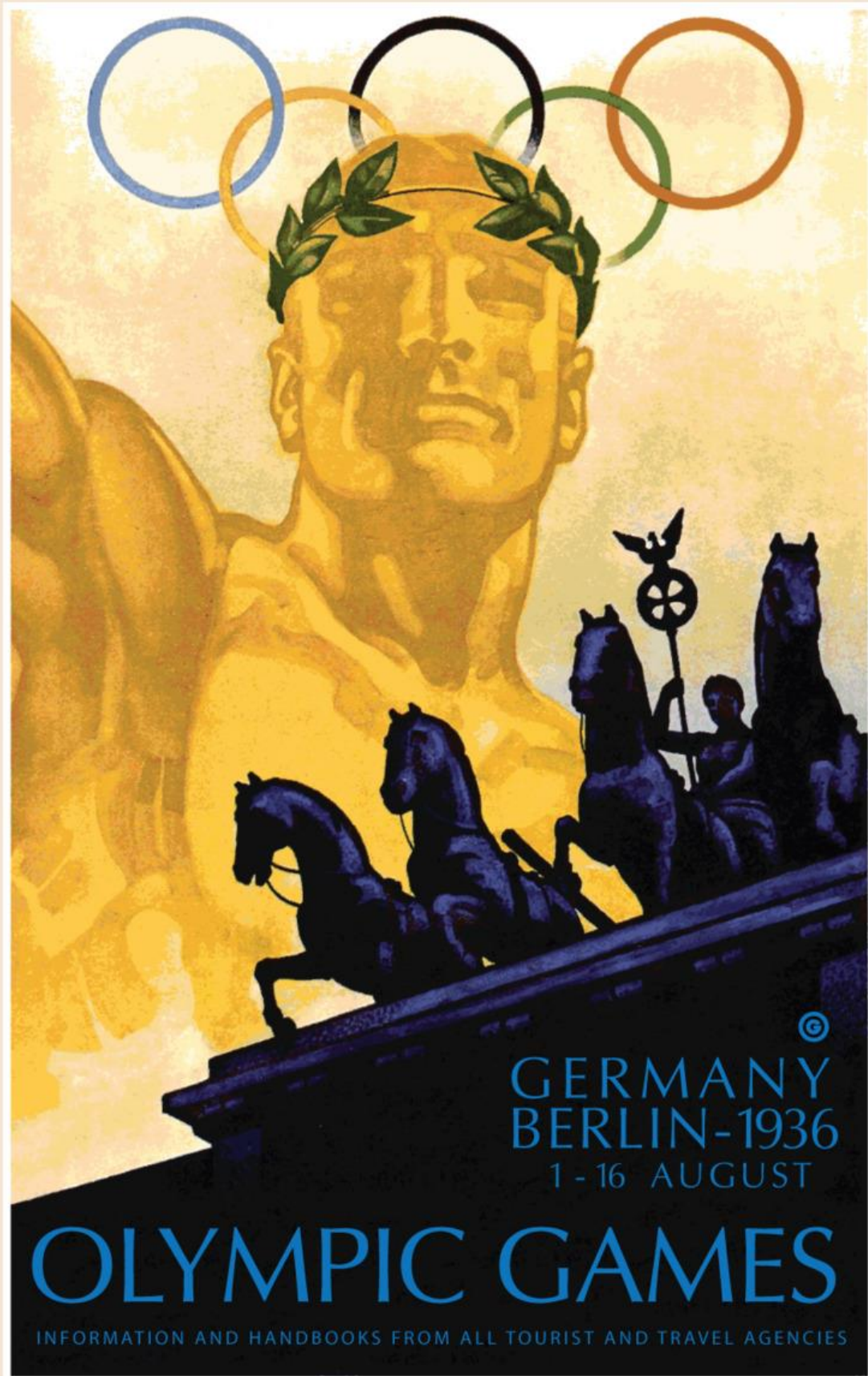
There were those in Britain [not least the Scots] who exhibited a considerable degree of Schadenfreude over England's humiliation. Among these were the die-hards of the last days of the amateur era, who saw the Hungarian debacle as proof of the inherent frailty of professional sport. In 1954, one of these amateurs, a bespectacled young Oxford man by the name of Roger Bannister, became the first runner to break the four-minute barrier for one mile. England's middle classes enjoyed showing the professionals' of the United States what they could achieve. It was an experience to be savoured, both in the sporting and the political sense, for it was not one which was to be repeated very often in the future. The decades to come — the sixties and seventies — were to bear witness to the rise of the Eastern Bloc countries as the main challenger to The United States in both spheres. As the cold war went on behind the Iron Curtain, the Olympic Games were increasingly dominated by Russia, East Germany and the Americans. Even countries with undeveloped economies such as Cuba, Romania, Poland and Czechoslovakia treated events such as the Olympics as a chance to beat the Yanks, quite literally, at their own game.

The British at Play – a social history of British sport from 1600 to the present, by Nigel Townson, 1997.

AS soon as I got to Borstal they made me a long-distance cross-country runner. I suppose they thought I was just the build for it because I was long and skinny for my age (and still am) and in any case I didn't mind it much, to tell you the truth, because running had always been made much of in our family, especially running away from the police. I've always been a good runner, quick and with a big stride as well, the only trouble being that no matter how fast I run, and I did a very fair lick even though I do say so myself, it didn't stop me getting caught by the cops after that bakery job.

You might think it a bit rare, having long-distance crosscountry runners in Borstal, thinking that the first thing a long-distance cross-country runner would do when they set him loose at them fields and woods would be to run as far away from the place as he could get on a bellyful of Borstal slumgullion— but you're wrong, and I'll tell you why. The first thing is that them bastards over us aren't as daft as they most of the time look, and for another thing I'm not so daft as I would look if I tried to make a break for it on my longdistance running, because to abscond and then get caught is nothing but a mug's game, and I'm not falling for it. Cunning is what counts in this life, and even that you've got to use in the sly- est way you can; I'm telling you straight: they're cunning, and I'm cunning. If only 'them' and 'us' had the same ideas we'd get on like a house on fire, but they don't see eye to eye with us and we don't see eye to eye with them, so that's how it stands and how it will always stand. The one fact is that all of us are cunning, and because of this there's no love lost between us. So the thing is that they know I won't try to get away from them: they sit there like spiders in that crumbly manor house, perched like jumped-up jackdaws on the roof, watching out over the drives and fields like German generals from the tops of tanks. And even when I jog-trot on behind a wood and they can't see me anymore they know my sweeping-brush head will bob along that hedge-top in an hour's time and that I'll report to the bloke on the gate. Because when on a raw and frosty morning I get up at five o'clock and stand shivering my belly off on the stone floor and all the rest still have another hour to snooze before the bells go, I slink downstairs through all the corridors to the big outside door with a permit running-card in my fist, I feel like the first and last man on the world, both at once, if you can believe what I'm trying to say. I feel like the first man because I've hardly got a stitch on and am sent against the frozen fields in a shimmy and shorts—even the first poor bastard dropped on to the earth in midwinter knew how to make a suit of leaves, or how to skin a pterodactyl for a topcoat. But there I am, frozen stiff, with nothing to get me warm except a couple of hours' long-distance running before breakfast, not even a slice of bread-and-sheepdip. They're training me up fine for the big sports day when all the pig-faced snotty-nosed dukes and ladies—who can't add two and two together and would mess themselves like loonies if they didn't have slavies to beck-and-call— come and make speeches to us about sports being just the thing to get us leading an honest life and keep our itching finger-ends off them shop locks and safe handles and hairgrips to open gas meters. They give us a bit of blue ribbon and a cup for a prize after we've shagged ourselves out running or jumping, like race horses, only we don't get so well looked-after as race horses, that's the only thing.

So there I am, standing in the doorway in shimmy and shorts, not even a dry crust in my guts, looking out at frosty flowers on the ground. I suppose you think this is enough to make me cry? Not likely. Just because I feel like the first bloke in the world wouldn't make me bawl. It makes me feel fifty times better than when I'm cooped up in that dormitory with three hundred others. No, it's sometimes when I stand there feeling like the last man in the world that I don't feel so good. I feel like the last man in the world because I think that all those three hundred sleepers behind me are dead. They sleep so well I think that every scruffy head's kicked the bucket in the night and I'm the only one left, and when I look out into the bushes and frozen ponds I have the feeling that it's going to get colder and colder until everything I can see, meaning my red arms as well, is going to be covered with a thousand miles of ice, all the earth, right up to the sky and over every bit of land and sea. So I try to kick this feeling out and act like I'm the first man on earth. And that makes me feel good, so as soon as I'm steamed up enough to get this feeling in me, I take a flying leap out of the doorway, and off I trot. [...]



Olympic Games Poster 1936 Berlin, a poster designed by Franz Würbel