

Track & Field News



Olympic Games

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Halfway through the 10,000--the Games' first final--the style of all distance racing has been set: Africans and more Africans, and almost always upfront. Here, runners from that continent occupy five of the first nine places in an event Africans eventually swept. Mexican JUAN MARTINEZ (615) enjoys his time in the lead, with NIKOLAY SVIRIDOV right behind. Only other non-Africans still in the first pack are RON CLARKE (102) and NEDO FARCIC. Waiting to pounce are NAFTALI TEMU (575) and MAMO WOLDE (behind Temu), the one-two men. WOHIH MASRESHA (327), KIP KEINO (565) and FIRKU DEGUEFU (327) accompany them. (Don Wilkinson photo)

Blacks of Africa, US Prevail in Mexican Olympic Fiesta

by Dick Drake and Joe Henderson

Mexico City, October 13--African Olympics. Black Olympics. If you're the type who wants labels on things like this, these descriptions best fit the track and field events of the XIX Olympiad in this Latin American capital.

Forget pre-meet boycott threats and post-race victory stand protests for the moment. On the track and on the field of Estadio Olimpico, athletes from three continents demonstrated black power in its most positive and convincing form. Black runners and jumpers from Africa, the Americas and even Europe accounted for a staggering 40 of 90 medals--the count including four per relay--and exactly half the 24 championships. From sprints to the marathon, to the hurdles, to the jumps, they had a huge hand in making these--again--the finest Games of all in most respects.

Africans, Kenyans in particular, rose to the forefront as the Australasians had done earlier in this decade and the eastern Europeans had done in the Games of the late 40s and early 50s. Distance runners from the emerging continent collected all the medals in the 5000 and 10,000, two in the steeplechase and one each in the 800 and marathon. The Kenyans added a set of second-place medals in the 1600 relay. In all Olympic history, the only black African winner before Mexico City had been two-time marathon champion Abebe Bikila. Africans won five times here, the five longest running events, and it's a gross oversimplification to credit altitude completely for their victories.

US blacks, for their part, went one-three in both the 100 and 200, swept the 400, made up all the two world record-setting relay teams, and took first and third in the long jump. Only two whites, Dave Hemery and Ralph Doubell in back-to-back events, won track races.

Yes, black was the color of the 1968 Olympics. But for the athletes, it wasn't a color battle, any more than past Games have been the primarily communist/non-communist struggles the press has attempted to create. Individual vs. individual remained essentially the name of the game, with all types of individuals getting a part of the action.

Pick your own hero. The hotly-contested, record-jammed eight-day fiesta had several in each event, enough to make the term "star" lose its significance. The meet had enough surrealistic marks that entire concepts about what is possible and impossible in track and field had to be altered. And of course the normal quotas of expected and unexpected, revelation and heart-break also made the meet an emotional and memorable experience, as all others have been.

Based on three criteria (quality of mark, margin of victory and significance of the man-to-man competitive performance), four men rose above the other winners and highlighted the Games: Bob Beamon, who covered more ground in a single bound--29'2 $\frac{1}{2}$ "--than anyone since Superman, and made the long jump record the best in track; Dave Hemery for the way he upset, make that buried, the finest intermediate hurdle field ever assembled, and improved the world record by seven-tenths of a second to 48.1; Kip Keino, who after discouraging experiences in both the 10,000 and 5000 (and while running his sixth race in eight days) ran as if the altitude factor didn't exist and left Jim Ryun struggling in the wake of his near-record 3:34.9 1500; and Al Oerter, the only repeat winner from 1964, who extended his discus dominance to four Olympiads, with personal best distance, after nearly everyone had written off his chances of beating world recordman Jay Silvester.

Records? They fell like the rain which visited Mexico City suddenly and often during the Games. In the 21 Olympic events where world records are

kept, marks were matched or mutilated for nine of them--often over and over again. The count no doubt would have gone higher but for the obvious limitations that altitude placed on the distance runners. Besides the record efforts of Beamon and Hemery, Tommie Smith ended up with one in the 200 (19.8), Lee Evans in the 400 (43.8), Viktor Saneyev in the triple jump (57'3 $\frac{3}{4}$ "), and the US sprinters in both relays (400, 38.2; 1600, 2:56.1). Jim Hines tied his 100 best of 9.9, and Ralph Doubell got a surprising share of the 1:44.3 800 mark. These were the teams and individuals who had the world records when the Games closed. Others enjoyed only brief moments on top of the world, like triple jumpers Giuseppe Gentile and Nelson Prudencio, two of the men who helped improve the standard five times. Jamaica tied the global 400 relay record once, broke it once, then finished fourth in the final. The Games were like that.

Lesser types of records took similarly merciless poundings. European marks were broken 11 times, as were those of the British Commonwealth. Americans bettered their previous national bests eight times.

Some non-record competitions were equally fantastic. Who could say differently about Gyula Zsivotzky's hammer triumph over Romuald Klim after second in the 60 and 64 Games? Or Bill Toomey's drawn-out decathlon struggle with the two West Germans? Or Bob Seagren's cool, chess-like pole vaulting moves? Or Janis Lusis' last-throw javelin win over Jorma Kinnunen?

Back to those amazing African runners. Four men took home more than one individual-event medal--all Africans, and all winners in the demanding distance events. Two of them got gold and silver sets--Keino (1500 and 5000) and Mamo Wolde (marathon and 10,000). Mohamed Gammoudi, a light-colored North African, and Naftali Temu took turns placing first and third in the 5000 and 10,000. With revelation-of-the-meet Amos Biwott's win in the steeplechase, Kenya totaled three gold medals, an amount only the huge and powerful American delegation bettered by winning half the 24 events.

As always, too, the spectacular produced plenty of emotional, heart-breaking moments. The failures, if they can rightly be called that, of popular champions Ron Clarke, Abebe Bikila and Jozef Schmidt are prime examples. Oxygen-starved Clarke ended the 10,000 flat on his back, unconscious, but came back a few days later and fought well in a 5000 that also was destined to be a losing effort. Bum-legged Bikila abandoned his quest for a third marathon title after going less than 11 miles. Schmidt, his severely injured achilles tendon covered by a steel brace and his leg taped from the knee down, still came within inches of his world record... and placed seventh.

These, too, will go down as the Olympics of black protest, a fact that drew floods of publicity away from the smoothly-running competition. Before the Games, two forms of black boycott threats--one by non-white Africans aimed at protesting South Africa's readmittance, and the other by US blacks over racial conditions in their country--had clouded the meet's future. Grievances were smoothed over well enough to let everyone but the South Africans come here. For better or worse, depending on your views, the politics which were so strongly a part of these Olympics, continued after events were run. John Carlos' and Tommie Smith's protest stirred, to put it mildly, an uproar.

Track crowds, normally quite vocal and appreciative ones, ranged from 65,000 to near-capacity at the 80,000-seat stadium. Many sections of empty, cold and damp concrete seats appeared during the first days, but crowds grew steadily after that, despite sudden and drenching rains on three of the eight days. No one with a smattering of track knowledge doubted they were witnessing the greatest eight days in the sport's history.

In an arms high gesture of jubilation, TOMMIE SMITH streaks across the finish line with a wide smile, the 200-meter gold medal safely his and a 19.8 clocking that will undoubtedly enter the books as a world record. (Ed Lacey)



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