



**The Center for the Study of
Contemporary European Jewry**
The Lester and Sally Entin
Faculty of Humanities
Tel Aviv University

PERSPECTIVES

No. 37, July 2024

The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: cst@tauex.tau.ac.il. We are glad to share with you the thirty-seventh issue of Perspectives.

It Doesn't Mean Anything

Olympic Reflections, from Max Nordau to Artem Dolgopyat

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A quick trivia question for hot summer days: which country ended No. 2 in the medal table of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, just behind the Soviet Union?

You know it is not the United States, or I would not have asked.

The answer is East Germany. Otherwise known as the German Democratic Republic.

Five of the top 10 nations in those Olympics were East European Communist states.

Back then, the sensational East German achievement served as supporting evidence for the common perception that in the DDR, Communism was doing better than in any other country of the Warsaw Pact and will survive longer.

In less than two years, East Germany ceased to exist. It turned out that its Olympic achievements were based in part on a huge drug doping industry. As with many other features of Communism (and as is the case in today's Russia), its sporting culture was based on deception.

There is a simple rule about the correlation between doing well in sports and doing well as a nation: it does not exist.

Sports are associated with discipline, hard work, team spirit, and the realization of ambitious objectives, so it is tempting to analyze the character of societies and the direction of nations based on the trophies their athletes collect.

Which does not mean it is a meaningful method.

The United States has been the Olympics' No. 1 country for over three decades. It is a nation obsessed with professional sports. It nurtures physical education as a primary aspect of elementary, junior, and high school life.

The bottom line: A society whose national cohesion is shattered, with declining life expectancies and epidemics of obesity and depression.

There was a time around fifteen years ago when Spain won the world championship in almost every popular sport there is. A remarkable achievement for a country its size. That was also the time of the Great Spanish Depression, which brought the local economy to the verge of collapse.

Last August, Alfred Drexler, a commentator for the mass-circulation German tabloid *Bild*, lamented the decline of Germany on the international sporting stage.

His column, entitled "The German Shame," and supported by a damning table of recent failures, blamed the decline on parents who spoil their kids by picking them up from school with their cars instead of encouraging them to walk home, as well as allowing them to spend all their days with their smartphones instead of playing outside.

Two weeks later, Germany won the basketball world championship for the first time.

Which brings me to the Jewish people and their state.

I still remember the day Israel won its first Olympic medal. Silver, in Judo. Yael Arad. Barcelona 1992. There was a true sense of jubilation in the country, although few people, including myself, cared about judo or understood why Arad made it to the final and not her opponent.

Finally, a medal!

It was front-page news not only in the Israeli media but also in the New York Times.

The reason for the fuss was that Israelis had been frustrated for years with their terrible international sports record.

Wellington said – well, actually, he probably didn't – that Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. No one argued that the Six Day War or the Yom Kippur War were won on any kind of playing field.

Israeli teams and athletes excelled in the 1950s and the 1960s in the Asian Games and other Asian competitions. But the quality was only third- or second-tier on the international scale.

As compensation, Israel ranked No. 1 in the world in the authoring of penny books for young readers, in which its footballers were described as the best. The protagonists had the tremendous ability to score goals shortly after they exhausted their rivals on the field with passionate Zionist speeches.

In the late 1970s, when Israel was kicked out of Asian competitions for political reasons, it did well in one sport: European basketball. Yet that was, to an extent, an illusion: It benefited for a time from American *olim*, naturalization laws that gave Israeli teams and its national team an unfair edge, and the limited interest in this sport in Europe.

The majority of the 1980s were largely arid sports-wise with the Olympics shining as the once-in-four-years embarrassing manifestation that Israel lags behind other developed nations in sports. This happened at a time when Israelis could already watch (on very special occasions) international sports live on television.

The frustration was fed by the misconception that winning medals does the image of a nation good. That is, of course, nonsense; no one became fonder of the USSR because of its achievements in sports. So many medals are awarded anyway that to get noticed (other than in the NYT) you need to either win a lot, or have once-in-a-generation sports hero. A Nobel Prize winner in chemistry is worth 100 gold medalists not just in terms of service to humanity, but also in terms of public relations.

But failing in sports hurt the Zionist ethos of normalcy, of being a nation like all other nations.

Max Nordau's desire to see a new type of Jew, one who cultivates physical and mental strength, articulated at the time the Olympics were just revived, was actualized in the IDF, in the Kibbutzim and Moshavim, and elsewhere, but not in sports, and Israelis wondered why.

While Yael Arad's medal opened the door for others, medals remained rare.

Then, three decades later, in Tokyo 2000, taking place in 2001, Israel won a record four medals, including two gold, including for the first time one in one of the three most important Olympic sports.

Its athletes demonstrated what can be achieved through hard work, modesty, and team effort.

So?

The Tokyo achievements were no reflection of the direction of the country. If anything, they were a precursor to what has been arguably the most catastrophic time in Israeli history.

Gold medalist Artem Dolgopyat did not become a national icon and role model. He had nothing to offer but professionalism, dedication, attention to detail, and shyness.

The difficulties faced in his personal life were another painful reminder that Israel had yet to determine its identity.

It is hard not to be sour about the Olympics.

A celebration of human fraternity stained forever in Berlin 1936, where the Games served to sport-wash Nazism; that more than once helped all kinds of despots hold their heads high; that went on almost business as usual after the Palestinian terror attack of Munich 1972.

A celebration of human excellence in which many excellent athletes cannot participate because of caps on representation per nation.

A celebration of technological progression, which too often encouraged cities to make grand investments in the wrong places at the expense of their citizens.

A celebration of human diversity, in which certain negligent sports are arbitrarily included, while other, more popular, are not.

A celebration of love for sports epitomizing the basic immorality of present-day sports: too much money is involved, sending the wrong message about what should matter most in society.

Add one more problem:

A competition between nations that risks leading to wrong conclusions about their actual state of affairs.

There is every chance that Paris 2024 will be the best Olympics for Israel ever.

I wish Israeli athletes win big time, return with a record number of medals, and have Hatikvah played again, and again, and again in French stadiums, to the dismay of Israel-haters.

I fear this will send the wrong message to a nation in deep need of soul-searching and a restart.

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