

Representing the Nation

Sport and Spectacle in Post-
Revolutionary Mexico

Claire Brewster and Keith Brewster



Sport in the Global Society

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First published 2010
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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This book is a reproduction of the *International Journal for the History of Sport*, vol. 26, issue 6. The Publisher requests to those authors who may be citing this book to state, also, the bibliographical details of the special issue on which the book was based.

Typeset in Minion by Value Chain, India

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN13: 978-0-415-47415-3

Representing the Nation

Mexico City's staging of the 1968 Olympic Games should have been a pinnacle in Mexico's post-revolutionary development: a moment when a nation at ease with itself played proud host to a global celebration of youthful vigour. *Representing the Nation* argues, however, that from the moment that the city won the bid, the Mexican elite displayed an innate lack of trust in their countrymen. Beautification of the capital city went beyond that expected of a host. It included the removal of undesirables from sight and the sponsorship of public information campaigns designed to teach citizens basic standards of civility and decency.

The book's contention is that these and other measures exposed a chasm between what decades of post-revolutionary socio-cultural reforms had sought to produce, and what members of the elite believed their nation to be. While members of the Organising Committee deeply resented international scepticism of Mexico's ability to stage the Games, they shared a fear that with the eyes of the world upon them, their compatriots would reveal Mexico's aspirations to first world status to be a fraud. Using a detailed analysis of Mexico City's preparations for the Olympic Games, we show how these tensions manifested themselves in the actions of the Organising Committee and government authorities.

This book was previously published as a special issue of the *International Journal of the History of Sport*.

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SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD

On 1 January 2010 *Sport in the Global Society*, created by Professor J.A. Mangan in 1997, was divided into two parts: *Historical Perspectives* and *Contemporary Perspectives*.

These categories will involve predominant rather than exclusive emphases. The past is part of the present and the present is part of the past. The Editors of *Historical Perspectives* are J.A. Mangan, Mark Dyreson and Thierry Terret.

The reasons for the division are straightforward. SGS has expanded rapidly since its creation with over one hundred publications in some twelve years. Its editorial teams will now benefit from sectional specialist interests and expertise.

Historical Perspectives draws on IJHS monograph reviews, themed collections and conference/workshop collections. It is, of course, international in content.

J.A. Mangan
Mark Dyreson
Thierry Terret

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Prologue: The Genre of Sport as a Means to an End

In April 2001, I had the privilege of interviewing Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, chairman of the organizing committee for the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. I ended the interview by recalling my own memories of the games, as a 12-year-old watching the events on a black-and-white television in England. For me, four salient moments stood out: Bob Beaman's record-breaking long-jump; Dick Fosbury's revolutionary technique in the high-jump; the raised fists of the African-American athletes; and, being British, the unforgettable commentary of David Coleman, as he saw David Hemery home to victory in the final of the men's 400 metres hurdles. Expecting a positive reply, I asked if he was pleased that the majority of my recollections were of great sporting moments. He replied with a blunt 'No'. Although he understood why I remembered what I had, he said that what the organizing committee had wanted above all else was for the world's audience to remember Mexico. [1].

Bearing Ramírez Vázquez's words in mind, this collection asks what Mexicans hoped to achieve by hosting the games and what image of Mexico they sought to portray. In doing so, it considers what these aspirations reveal about the nature of Mexican society 50 years after the Mexican Revolution (1910–17); a destructive civil war that was credited with having ended class privileges and ethnic tensions, and that had led Mexicans towards a bright future in which all its citizens had a stake. The 1968 games provided a rare opportunity for the nation to demonstrate such advances to a world-wide audience. It also presented an opportunity to separate substance from rhetoric and reveal the true extent of progress in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Mexico's bid to host the Olympic Games could hardly have come at a more contentious phase in international relations. As Cold War politics went, the 1960s was a particularly chilly period. The construction of the Berlin Wall, the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Cuban Missile Crisis were all fresh in the minds of International Olympic Committee (IOC) delegates as they descended upon Baden-Baden in October 1963 to consider the candidates bidding for the 1968 games. In the years that followed, President John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X would be assassinated; the Vietnam War would escalate to new heights; Ernesto 'Che' Guevara would be killed trying to export revolution to Latin America; and European colonialism would enter terminal decline as former African territories took on new names and new leaders and embarked on new disputes with their neighbours. In the year of the games themselves, Soviet tanks rolled into Prague; the streets of major European and US cities were filled with students who dared to 'take on the system'; Martin Luther King

and Robert Kennedy were assassinated; and 'flower power' competed with Black Power for US airtime. Through it all, the IOC remained committed to the principle that the Olympiad should be an apolitical celebration of youthful endeavour. Mexico's difficult task as host was to uphold Olympic ideals while having to deal with the practical consequences of a world in which ideologies, races and generations were increasingly ill at ease with each other.

The responsibility that IOC delegates bestowed upon Mexico by awarding it the games appeared to be in recognition of the country's strides towards modernity. Since the end of the Second World War, state investment and protective import tariffs had nurtured a home-grown manufacturing base. In the 1940s and 1950s Mexico had enjoyed a dynamic economy. Unprecedented government investment had been channelled towards improving the country's infrastructure, with roads and hydro-electric stations bringing real changes to provincial Mexico. The gross domestic product (GDP) was growing at an annual rate of 6 to 7 per cent, and the expansion of welfare programmes contributed towards inspiring many Mexicans to believe that they were indeed living through what politicians had termed the 'Miracle Years'. In Mexico City itself, citizens could reflect on the recent completion of the National University campus, new housing complexes and the beginning of an underground railway network as signs of such investment. [2] In the world of politics, while things may have been far from perfect in the early 1960s, Mexico nonetheless appeared to be faring better than most Latin American countries. During the process of reconstruction that followed the Mexican Revolution, the political elite effectively formed a single-party state, with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) creating a monopoly on national politics. Given that it claimed to be the guarantor of the revolutionaries' hard-fought gains, to criticize the PRI was tantamount to a betrayal of the nation and its history. Political obedience lay in electoral rigging, sporadic repression and liberal amounts of state patronage. Its lack of effective democracy notwithstanding, by the 1960s Mexico could boast several decades of uninterrupted civilian government; a stark contrast to the Latin American tendency towards military dictatorship.

It is with a certain degree of irony, then, that as Mexico prepared to host the world's greatest sporting event, its political system should show signs of falling victim to its own successes. Always reticent to accept government patronage and interference, students became significantly more vocal in their criticism during the late 1950s and 1960s as a result of the government's successful policies to expand higher education. State attempts to counteract the emerging independent youth culture of the 1950s merely underlined the fact that the generation of the Revolution had lost touch with its offspring. When student demonstrators marched through the streets of Mexico City during the summer of 1968 they did so for a variety of reasons: some, no doubt, were protesting at the trajectory of global international affairs. Certainly many harboured more localized, domestic grievances; others were just caught up in the excitement of breaking free from the reins of state paternalism and raising their political voice of opposition. Whatever the students' motives, the state's violent response, which culminated in the massacre of several hundred students just

ten days before the Olympic opening ceremony, was more than a display of panic or ineptitude. It reflected fundamental strains within the political system that had remained hidden during the decades of post-revolutionary stability.

It should already have become apparent that this collection is not concerned with how many world records or personal bests were achieved at the Mexico Olympics. Our approach to Mexican sport, and to the hosting of the Olympic Games in particular, is informed by our background as political and cultural historians. As such, we present the genre of sport as a means to an end rather than the end in itself. Indeed, this method reflects a broader trend among scholars of Mexican sport that places less focus on the minutiae and more emphasis on the broader context. Although the parameters of these studies are often temporally or geographically limited, they usefully inform discussions on the relationship between sport, politics and society. Encouragingly, in a genre that has too often focused on male sports, a new generation of Mexican scholars is exploring the role of sport within society from a gender and/or ethnic perspective. Even so, current work still shows a strong bias towards popular sports such as football, baseball and basketball. Rather less time has been given to minority sports that do not command the same degree of media and/or financial attention. [3]

Given its exceptionality, it is surprising that Mexico City's staging of the Olympic Games has not experienced the more nuanced analysis that has been witnessed in other areas of sport. Paradoxically, the very fact that it only happened once and lasted just 16 days may have persuaded historians of its limited value in tracking socio-political changes in Mexico. As a result, treatment of the 1968 Olympics has tended to become polarized. One perspective might best be described as '[sports] history with the politics left out', [4] with accounts concentrating on the performances of athletes competing in the rarefied atmosphere of Mexico City. [5] The other reason that the staging of the games has not attracted much attention is due to the significance of two coincidental events, both of which have led to an approach that one could view as *political* history with the *sport* left out. [6] The traumatic culmination of the Mexican student movement overshadowed the 1968 Olympic Games and has produced a series of studies in which the imperative has been to understand the political antecedents and consequences of the movement. Likewise, the podium protest of African-American athletes at the Mexico Games has produced fine studies looking at its broader significance within the civil rights movement of the late 1960s. [7] In both of these cases, sport and Mexico City's role as host have been pushed to the margins. So although Allen Guttman suggests that there is now an acute awareness among sports historians of the 'intersection of sport and politics', the extent to which this has penetrated perceptions of 'Mexico 68' is questionable. [8] Occupying separate spaces, the failure of previous approaches to engage in dialogue has resulted in partial, de-contextualized versions of the games.

There are notable exceptions to this overview of the historiography of 'Mexico 68'. Ariel Rodríguez Kuri has extended his long-term interest in the historical development of Mexico City to incorporate the ways in which hosting the Olympics