

BOYCOTT

STOLEN DREAMS OF THE
1980 MOSCOW OLYMPIC GAMES

Tom Caraccioli and Jerry Caraccioli

Foreword By Vice President Walter F. Mondale

NEW CHAPTER PRESS

BOYCOTT: Stolen Dreams of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games by Tom Caraccioli and Jerry Caraccioli is published by New Chapter Press (www.newchapterpressmedia.com) and distributed by the Independent Publishers Group (www.ipgbook.com)
ISBN: 978-0942257403

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Design by Visible Logic

Special thanks to Chris Nicholson, Irene Tan, Ewing Walker, Emily Brackett and DeAnne McCaslin

Printed in the United States of America

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Olympian*

The asterisk earned dubious notoriety as a reference mark in 1961. For nearly half a century, the * has continued to dot the landscape of professional and amateur sports with an equally questionable distinction.

In 1961, then-Major League Baseball Commissioner Ford Frick made one of the most controversial rulings ever regarding the history of the game. After watching New York Yankees outfielder and slugger Roger Maris eclipse the immortal Babe Ruth's single-season home run record of 60 on the final day of the 1961 season, Frick convinced baseball historians to list Ruth's and Maris's marks as separate records based on the number of games each player had to accomplish their respective marks.

Frick reasoned, or some say "caved into" his former sportswriter brethren, that Ruth had produced 60 homers in a 154-game season and Maris had recorded 61 in a 162-game season. Therefore, Maris's homer mark should be

listed in the record books with an asterisk. From that day on, the * became part of baseball lore and history. And it stayed that way for the next 30 years. Today, the * has become a permanent part of the sports vernacular.

The asterisk in today's sports world continues to denote a questionable achievement and has come into vogue again when talking about baseball's home run records. With the proliferation and accusations of steroids, human growth hormones and other performance-enhancing substances, historians and record keepers continue to be flummoxed when debating the * and its potential use.

For members of the 1980 United States Olympic Summer Games team, the * is a reference mark they would rather not have to invoke when discussing their Olympian status. And though Olympic historians and fans of the Games have never made it an issue, some members of that team feel like that dubious symbol follows them throughout their personal history.

For swimmer Glenn Mills, the * hit him right between the eyes when he was looking through his college alma mater's swimming media guide. "I went to school at the University of Alabama," explains Mills. "In the press guide, Alabama gives its history of all the people that were NCAA champions, Olympians, and things like that. When everything is listed, always next to our names is an asterisk, under the asterisk it reads: 'Made 1980 Olympic team, but country boycotted.' It's very seldom that you see any of our names listed as Olympians without an asterisk. It kind of implies, 'Well, they're Olympians, but maybe not really.'"

Mills suffered further indignity when he traveled to Colorado Springs in the early 1990s to coach at a Select Camp. "We were staying at the Training Center. Some of the coaches were just hanging out, so we decided to go into the gift shop. As we were walking down the hallway into the shop, I saw this kiosk that had a sign that read—'Find Your Favorite Olympian.' I said cool, let me check this out. I love seeing my name on those things. So I punched up

Mills. There were about four or five different Mills on there. I saw my name and clicked on it, and the screen came up. On the top it said, 'Glenn Mills' and under it said, '1980 Swimming.' Where the bio was supposed to be, all it said was, 'Did Not Compete.'

"I just stood there looking at it and actually started laughing. I looked for some of my other friends, like Craig Beardsley, and he had a picture in there, but it said, 'Did Not Compete.' It didn't say anything about being the world-record holder. It was really kind of sad."

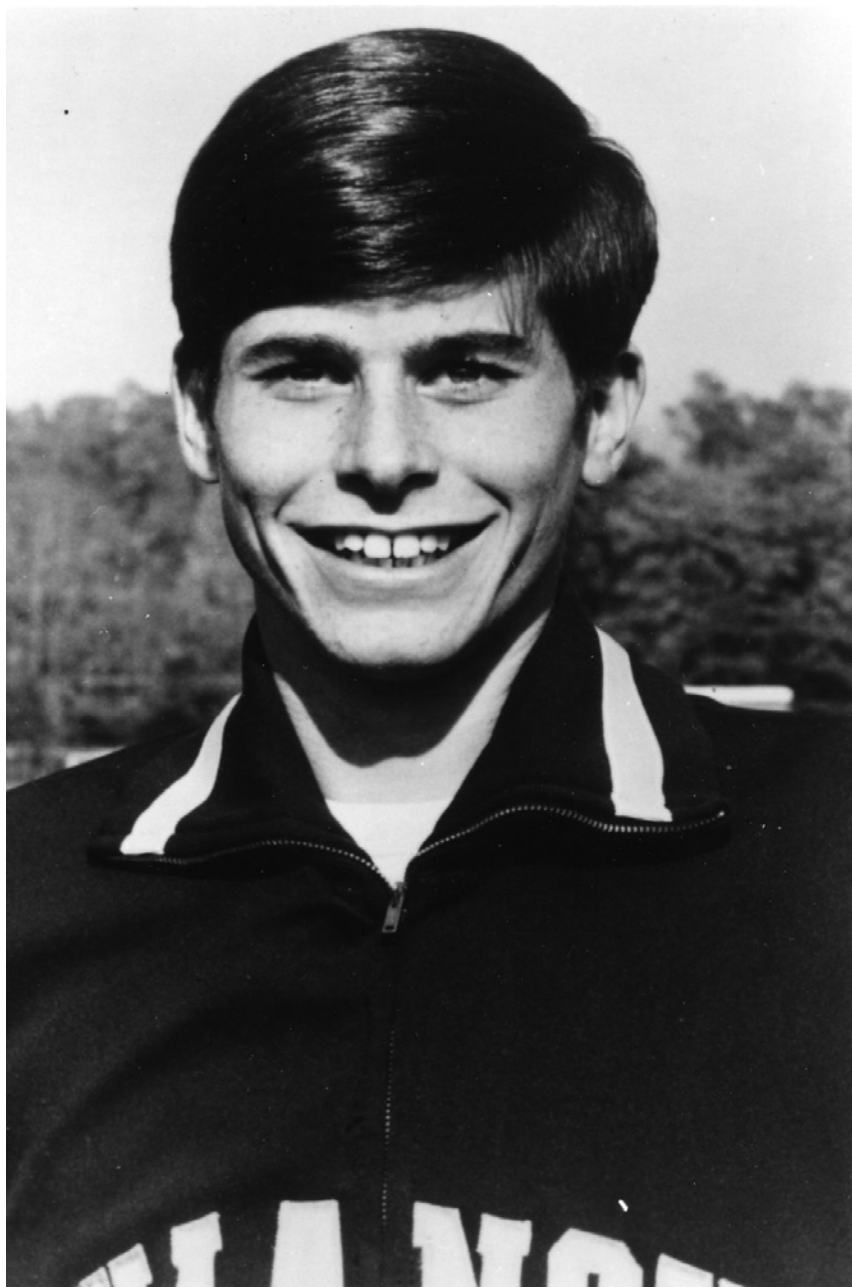
Amy Koopman, who was one of the youngest members of the 1980 team at 13 years old, earned her trip to the Olympic Games in Moscow in gymnastics. Even today, though she doesn't dwell on it, Koopman still thinks about being a forgotten part of Olympic history. "I'm disappointed that I never got to compete for the U.S. at the Olympics. Everyone asks, 'Oh... how did you do?' I tell them, 'We didn't go.' Everyone forgets that we didn't go."

Linda Cornelius Waltman, a pentathlete who, in 1980, had one shot at competing in the Olympics, sits quietly in front of the television every time the Olympic Games are staged. She thinks about what she missed. "The worst was four years after when the Olympics were in Los Angeles. I remember sitting in front of the television watching the Opening Ceremony, just crying and thinking I never really got a chance to be a part of that. It just really hit home. Every time watching an Opening Ceremony of an Olympics—I don't think I've missed one—I always shed a tear. Always."

And those tears always accompany the thought that the 1980 team is special. Though, each member of that team also thinks there's little they wouldn't give for a chance not to be so special, not to have an asterisk next to their name. Instead, this team is left with an indelible mark in Olympic history. A mark that is not easily definable. Not easily accepted. And not easily understood.

U.S. volleyball player Debbie Landreth sums up her Olympic experience and how she deals with questions about her past athletic life in a thoughtful and respectful tone. She still feels the pain of not being able to compete, but has not let the * diminish her career and aspirations as the head coach of the women's volleyball team at the University of Notre Dame. "It was definitely a situation where it was much bigger than a match loss," Landreth says. "You had to pick up and move on in life. I wasn't just going to quit. I had to ask myself, 'All right, what am I going to do now?'"

Los Angeles Deputy Sheriff Gwen Gardner, who ran the 400-meter on the U.S. track and field team in 1980, voiced similar displeasure and disappointment when discussing the decision to boycott the Moscow Games. "It was an opportunity that we missed and it didn't change anything by us boycotting that particular competition. It was a great disappointment," she says, her voice trailing off into quiet contemplation that needs no explanation or reference mark.



Don Paige — 1980 U.S. Olympic Track and Field Team

Don Paige

Track and Field

When the 800-meter race at the 1980 Olympic Summer Games in Moscow came on the television screen in Don Paige's family home in Baldwinsville, N.Y., the United States' most celebrated half-miler couldn't bear to watch. Instead, he went outside and sat in the backyard. "My Dad came out and told me Steve Ovett out-kicked Sebastian Coe," remembers Paige more than a quarter century later. "And then he said, 'Boy, I would've loved to have seen you in that race.'"

Don Paige—now president and founder of Paige Design Group, dedicated to building track and field facilities—was, on that day, a six-time NCAA track and field champion at Villanova University, winner of the 800-meter run at the Olympic Trials, and one of the premiere members of the U.S. Summer Games track and field team.

As a tall, skinny kid growing up in a middle-class, blue-collar suburb of Syracuse, N.Y., Paige was one of five siblings who had sports in his blood. "Growing up, we were all pretty athletic. Starting out in ninth grade it seemed like the thing to do, so I took a look at football," Paige recalls with a chuckle. Because of his slender build, he figured football was probably not a healthy option in high school. "I looked at soccer. Soccer wasn't all that popular but it was beginning to grow at our school. So I took up cross-country and found I had a passion for running. That's how I got involved in running in 1971.

"I had a great high school coach in cross-country, Chuck Wiltse," Paige remembers. "Chuck coached JV cross-country and did one of the single most

important things that led me to becoming a good runner. He recognized that I could've run varsity after only four or five weeks into the season, but he kept me in ninth-grade cross-country where I ran against ninth-graders. And it taught me one of those deep-down lessons—learning how to win. I could've gone to varsity and probably wouldn't have won. I won a lot of my races in ninth grade and that had an effect on me and was very valuable.”

Not only did Wiltse set the young freshman on a path to success, but he also became his lifelong mentor—one of several who helped set a course for Paige's Olympic dream.

Teaching a gifted athlete how to win was only one facet of Wiltse's influence. Wiltse taught the ninth-grade Paige the fundamentals to build a winning attitude and a killer instinct. “You start learning early from a good coach that the basics of a good foundation are important,” Paige says. “The other thing ninth-grade cross-country taught me was how to be competitive. Times never really were that important to me. What meant more was to learn to win. I was fortunate that I had a cross-country coach that truly understood that, and understood me.”

Paige's success throughout high school landed him at a crossroads about his future. He welcomed the attention from the nation's top college track and field programs. “My top three were Villanova, Kansas and Georgetown,” Paige recalls “Tennessee was really up there on my list, too. I was looking for a school where I could get a good education along with good athletics.” It looked as if Tennessee coach Stan Huntsman would successfully woo the Central New York phenom to the Volunteer State after a successful recruiting trip left Paige wondering if he might be happy south of the Mason-Dixon line. But, not for the last time in his life, policy altered fate. “Stan had a policy where he usually waited longer in the season before he offered full scholarships,” Paige says. “So, he didn't offer me a full scholarship. I then went on to finish my recruiting trips.”

One of those trips included a visit to Villanova and a meeting with the inimitable James “Jumbo” Elliott. After several weeks had passed, Paige returned to Philadelphia for the Penn Relays still not having heard from Tennessee. “Getting a scholarship was very important in my family because we were middle-class, the lower end of middle-class, and college would’ve been a real hardship,” explains Paige. After winning the high school division of the Penn Relays, he called Elliott at Villanova and accepted his invitation to attend school in Philadelphia. Within one week, Huntsman finally offered a full scholarship to attend Tennessee, but Paige had to turn it down.

“The funny part of this story is that we now travel around speaking at different engagements across the country and [Huntsman] tells the story of how he could’ve had Don Paige on his team, but he didn’t offer him a scholarship when he was on campus,” says Paige with a chuckle. “And he took it one step further and explained that probably wasn’t his biggest mistake, because he didn’t offer ‘Skeets’ Nehemiah, Renaldo Nehemiah, one either.”

At Villanova, Paige found a mentor and another future lifelong friend in Elliott. “At Villanova, we called Mr. Elliott, ‘Mr. Elliott,’” Paige says. “No one called him ‘Coach.’ Only his closest friends called him ‘Jumbo.’ And if anyone ever called him ‘Coach,’ we knew that guy didn’t know Mr. Elliott very well.”

In track and field, the Olympic dream evolves in stages, if you have talent and desire. “I think a lot of people don’t understand the process of becoming an Olympian,” explains Paige. “By the time I got to 11th grade, I was a pretty good high school runner. By that time, you’re thinking about running in college. You don’t start thinking about the Olympics, but you do say to yourself, ‘If I run a little better, I may be able to get a scholarship to college.’”

Paige got the scholarship and, in Elliott, a coach who had guided future Olympians (Marty Liquori, Eamon Coughlin) and knew if one of his runners had talent enough to compete on the world’s biggest athletic stage. And