



CRITICAL ISSUES OF OUR TIME

**SPECTACULAR OLYMPIC BODIES:  
FROM HOLLYWOOD TO  
HITLER AND BEYOND**

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# SPECTACULAR OLYMPIC BODIES: FROM HOLLYWOOD TO HITLER AND BEYOND

Kevin B. Wamsley and Katie S. Butler

## Introduction

With more than two hundred participating nations, the Olympic Games are a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, extending its reach to television and Internet audiences every two years to billions of viewers. Well beyond a status as cultural spectacle, the Games have historically played an important role in international relations among nation states since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Just prior to the Second World War, but foremost during the Cold War period and beyond, the Games became a prime venue for symbolic competition between countries — so much so, that nations invested heavily in sport systems and propaganda networks to advance their political ideologies and to herald the merits of specific political, economic, and social structures in opposition to those of their international rivals. The Olympic Games became a comprehensive, ubiquitous political tool. At the same time, however, the inner cogs of the organization and its power in the sporting world remained exclusive. From the inside, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), working in concert with the International Sport Federations (IFs), came to define who could participate in what sport under what conditions at the elite level. Sport drew lines demarcating differences in social class, gender, and ethnicity. The Olympic Games reinforced and sustained these boundaries in the early decades until the 20<sup>th</sup> century logic of sport placed increasing emphasis on competition and performance, creating shifts in the social values and hierarchies reproduced through sport. Nonetheless, from their outset to the present day, the body has been a central focus of the modern Olympic Games.

The Games' self-proclaimed founder, Pierre de Coubertin blamed France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) on the physical inadequacies of French youth due to an underdeveloped system of physical education in his country.<sup>1</sup> After Coubertin failed in his efforts to institute a more rigorous physical education in France, he directed his energies into establishing an international version of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek Olympics and Much Wenlock games of Britain, from which he borrowed many of his ideas. Coubertin's Games drew upon contemporary fascinations with ancient Greek culture, contextualized within the notions of modern spectacle of the World's Fairs of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the competitive energies of emerging nation states.<sup>2</sup> While the World's Fair displays of manufactured goods, machinery, the latest inventions, and architectural designs positioned modern nations in competitive array, the Olympic Games brought male and female bodies from the private club and university field, and limited athletic exchanges between countries into a new public domain where physicality, in a non-military context, became a primary marker of nationhood.

The cultural influences on Coubertin certainly varied and, as the development of his 'philosophy of Olympism'<sup>3</sup> indicates, the objectives he had in mind soon became loftier than the mere training of the body. However, from the outset, the Olympic Games stimulated a fascination with the physiques of those who competed, a specific venue and unique context for viewing the human body, while showcasing both the body's limits and its physical potential.

In their formative years, the Olympics, emerging at a time of social transition in the final years of Queen Victoria's reign, provided a unique arena in which the exposed athletic body could be consumed openly by the spectating public. Particularly with respect to women's bodies, and men's to a lesser degree, new ground was broken in what constituted socially- acceptable public displays of the human form, and also in what was permissible, indeed desirable, as the new, athletic physique gained increasing exposure and approval.<sup>4</sup> Most evident in the popular press during the early era of the modern Olympics (1896 to 1928), the nascent international sports process sexualized both male and female bodies, presenting a new medium which invited the gaze of the voyeur.<sup>5</sup> The sports process not only reinforced gender relations of the era; it also contributed to the emergence of a consumer culture at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which commodified many aspects of society, and offered them up for consumption.<sup>6</sup>

By the late 1920s, the Olympic Games were the most significant international sporting competition.<sup>7</sup> As such, they assumed a major role in reproducing social values through sport – how athletes should look, dress – structuring physical displays and gender performance. It was an intriguing venue to showcase femininities and masculinities. Until Coubertin's retirement as IOC president in 1925, women's sport made few gains in his Olympics. The early Olympic Games had never been women-

friendly, as it was understood by sports leaders and spectators alike that men were the 'real' athletes and women either admiring spectators or unofficial participants in events which did not directly challenge common perceptions of masculinity and femininity. The Western world press judged female athletes in the first instance by their looks, secondly by social decorum, with athletic performance a distant third. For men, athletic performance was primary, behaviour second, and looks a minor consideration.<sup>8</sup> In the 1920s, the world understood women's and men's athletic bodies quite differently; and sports officials firmly resisted women's entrance into traditionally male events in the Games. The rather contentious negotiations for the formal participation of women in limited and restricted events concluded in time for the 1928 Games in Amsterdam. By 1932, women conceded full control over their participation in international sport to the IOC and the International Sport Federations.<sup>9</sup>

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Having survived the inauspicious beginnings of the Games in the early part of the century and cancellation of the 1916 Games due to the First World War, it seemed the Olympics were firmly ingrained on the sporting calendar for future years. However, the Games continued growing and evolving within the context of broader societal changes of the Great Depression, the Second World War, and post-war eras. The representation of the body within the Games served as a key signifier for the particular ideologies invoked at each Olympic festival. Politics, culture, and the extant tensions between

athletic performance, gender performance, social decorum, and sexuality effected changes on common notions of the athletic body. In particular, the North American press, namely the *New York Times*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the *Toronto Star* reinforced and promoted gender-based, hetero-normative stereotypes of athletes' bodies in the Games of 1932, 1936, and 1948 — the period immediately following women's official entry into some of the mainstream events of the Games and just prior to the era of hypercompetition fostered by the Cold War Olympics of the next several decades.

### Spectacular Bodies

The performance and representation of the sexualized body remained central to the understanding and consumption of the Olympics in the lead up to, and immediate aftermath of,

the Second World War. In particular, newspaper and official Olympic Committee reports reveal, in part, what constituted appropriate and desired body types and how particular cultural and political interpretations steered such meanings in the service of broader ideological projects organizing gender relations and national identities.

The growth of the Olympic Games has continued since their outset, a strategy to achieve Coubertin's aims of true internationalism. With the exceptions of the 1904 St. Louis and 1932 Los Angeles Games, the summer Olympics experienced a growth in the number of National Olympic Committees (NOCs) participating at each Games.<sup>10</sup> By the 1948 summer Games in London, the number of NOCs in attendance had reached 59 with 4,104 athletes competing, compared to 46 and 2,883 respectively at Amsterdam in 1928.<sup>11</sup> By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Games constituted a significant cultural spectacle.<sup>12</sup>

In 1932, much of the world, particularly the West, was reeling from the Great Depression,<sup>13</sup> a problem unforeseen when the IOC awarded the summer Games to Los Angeles, uncontested, in 1923. The financial hardship endured by many of the National Olympic Committees, along with the geographical distance from Europe to California created genuine concern prior to the Los Angeles Olympics that there would be a severe shortage of competitors and spectators alike.<sup>14</sup> The Games drew much opposition from the economically-stricken American public and even President Herbert Hoover, who refused to open the Games, stating, "It's a crazy thing and it takes some gall to expect me to be a part of it."<sup>15</sup> Undeterred, the organizers continued to surpass proposed plans, building the key stadia with extensive capacity for spectators and a village to house the visiting athletes from around the world.<sup>16</sup> While spectator numbers did not match those recorded in Amsterdam in 1928,<sup>17</sup> 101,000 people attended the opening ceremony at two dollars each in Los Angeles and 87,000 attended the closing ceremony. By the end of the Games, approximately 1.25 million people paid \$1.5 million to attend events over the 16 days of competition. The attending audience was a key element in addressing the costs and in reaffirming the spectacle aspect of the event.<sup>18</sup>

Joseph Goebbels, Reichminister of Propaganda, convinced Adolf Hitler of the tremendous potential of the 1936 Olympic Games to herald Germany's ascent as an international power. Hitler replaced the original infrastructure plans with more visually-pleasing, elaborate stadia, a larger spectator capacity, and a carefully-choreographed spectacle to impress the world. Certainly in terms of the number of countries and athletes competing (3,963 athletes in Berlin, compared to 1,332 in L.A.<sup>19</sup>) the 1936 summer Games were larger; however, the crowds were of a similar scale to those in 1932. In the winter Games, Garmisch-Partenkirchen also attracted twice as many athletes as the Lake Placid Olympics, four years earlier.<sup>20</sup>

Organizers magnified the spectacle aspects of the Olympics throughout the 1930s, as did the London Committee for the first Games held after the Second World War in 1948. In spite of the widespread poverty and devastation caused by the Depression, then the war, the number of competing nations and athletes continued to increase.<sup>21</sup> Wembley Stadium held a crowd of 83,000 on the last day of competition – an impressive attendance, given the financial state of the country so soon after the war.<sup>22</sup> The lure of the spectacle and, undoubtedly, the organizers' appeals to a sense of patriotism, rallied the public to support the event.

Press coverage attempted to provide a sense of the excitement and the atmosphere at the Olympic Games, since few spectators could attend. Of course such reporting selectively highlighted specific aspects of the events and participants to create interesting images and stories for the readership. Particular sports and events at the winter and summer Games attracted larger crowds and greater spectator interest than others. The opening ceremonies were the most spectacular of the London displays, drawing the largest audiences and consisting of large-scale, dramatic, and visually-impressive parades.<sup>23</sup> However, in the sports programs of the Games of 1932, 1936, and 1948, press reports consistently focused on two events in particular, drawing full-capacity crowds and providing aesthetically-pleasing shows — women's figure skating and women's aquatic events.<sup>24</sup> It was an unlikely coincidence that the two sports positioned as the biggest crowd pleasers were those featuring women in the most revealing costumes. Even though sport leaders in the IOC and the IFs conceded women's participation in some traditionally men's events, the sports process of the era channelled women into feminized sports – those promoted as appropriately lady-like and artistic such as figure skating, swimming, diving, fencing, and gymnastics. Athletes on display in figure skating and aquatics underscored values of femininity embodied in the active but heterosexually-desirable woman. The feminized sports stimulated a baroque-like fascination and appreciation of skill, but not direct social challenges to the gender order. Beautiful, costumed, physically-capable women captivated the crowds and, as such, swimming and figure skating events became the iconic favourites of the press, highlighting the stars Eleanor Holm, Sonja Henie, and Barbara Ann Scott.

### **Hollywood, Sport, and Feminine Icons: Holm, Henie, and Scott**

As women's events at the Olympics gained recognition, the press coverage afforded to particular athletes increased. Female Olympic athletes became household names, similar to male Olympians and male professional sport athletes. However, for women in sport, beauty was the fundamental marker. Women who participated in events demonstrating speed, power, and strength directly challenged the physical basis on which modern sport had been established. Size, speed, strength, and power comprised the characteristics of the male athletic body



which organized social meanings about the quantitative or measured competitive sports. If men were faster and stronger in sporting contexts, how could women compete? Popular alternative events such as the Women's Olympics of the 1920s clearly demonstrated that women's participation in sport could not be denied. Critics, both men and women, countered that sport made women mannish or that the female body could not safely tolerate extreme levels of physical exertion.<sup>25</sup> The qualitative or artistic sports presented an outlet to relieve these social tensions. Promoting and popularizing feminine sports and feminine qualities of the era enabled an approach

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that was palatable, to male sport leaders and the general public, to incorporate women who wished to participate in international sport. Sonja Henie, Eleanor Holm, and Barbara Ann Scott met these criteria.

The feminization process in sport, aligning somewhat with Hollywood representations of femininity, created female Olympic icons – in a place traditionally reserved for male athletes. Holm and Henie embodied a stereotypical Western beauty and sexual attractiveness which reinforced hetero-normative femininity. The preceding celebration of Hollywood icons created a contextualized media fit for female Olympians, where traditional beauty met the physical ability of the sexually-attractive body. Hosting the Games in Los Angeles reaffirmed these cultural connections.<sup>26</sup> Admirers celebrated the iconic status of such Hollywood stars as Louise Brooks, Greta Garbo, and Marlene Dietrich. Louise Brooks, in particular, embodied the distinctive style of the 1920s flapper with her bobbed haircut, something for which she is more

remembered than any of her acting roles.<sup>27</sup> Within Hollywood, this practice was by no means gender specific, and the media subjected actors such as Clark Gable, Charlie Chaplin, and, later, James Dean to similar, superficial representations.

The press employed specific strategies which elevated athletes to iconic status: affording extensive coverage to particular individuals; flattering and detailed reporting of the athletes, both in terms of performance and appearance; and sustaining

a revered status by repeatedly reaffirming the athletes' popularity with the public. Both Henie and Holm competed in the Games of the 1928 Olympiad with success, but it was not until the 1930s that the press elevated their iconic status in earnest.

In the summer Olympics, the press identified Eleanor Holm as the media 'darling' of the 1930s. Holm won the 100m backstroke in 1932<sup>28</sup> and held world records in the 100 and 200m backstroke. Prior to the Berlin Olympics, she had not lost a race for seven years. Reporters marketed Holm specifically on her looks, with articles describing her as “Entirely too pretty to be an athlete”<sup>29</sup> and “the pretty little Brooklynite.”<sup>30</sup> The deep-rooted tensions between traditional, attractive femininity and physical ability coursed through Olympic stories. The *Toronto Star* article implied that athletes were men or mannish; such interpretations did not deny athletic ability but actively constructed a diversionary apologetic for the sporting arena, assuring the readers that femininity prevailed among some women in spite of athletic success.

The celebrity status of Eleanor Holm, already well-established by 1936, was further heightened by the events that happened on the United States team boat on its passage to the Berlin Games. Team officials accused Holm of drinking champagne and carousing late at night on board the ship; American Olympic Committee President Avery Brundage subsequently expelled her from the U.S. Olympic team.<sup>31</sup> The press reported extensively on the Holm incident and was, for the most part, sympathetic to her position. Reporters portrayed her as a victim of Brundage's unforgiving, hard-line approach to discipline in managing the team. Holm formally apologized and attempted to regain her place on the team, apparently supported by a petition signed by her teammates.<sup>32</sup> As a fan favourite, the *New York Times* described Holm as “courageous” noting that she “had the universal support of the masculine element.”<sup>33</sup> For the remainder of the Games, Holm's non-athletic endeavours in Berlin featured frequently in press coverage of the Olympics. The *Toronto Star* even employed Holm to write her own column for the newspaper throughout the duration of the Games.

In this column, Holm detailed her meetings with various dignitaries in Berlin,<sup>34</sup> underscoring her star status in the public domain, even outside sport, and this was no doubt aided by the notoriety she gained in her dismissal from the U.S. team. In one of her articles, Holm referred to letters she received from German-speaking fans. In an article entitled “Eleanor is Pleased with Her Fan Mail,” she disclosed that, “A farmer from some place I can't pronounce, let alone spell, wrote me a letter in German.” The article also detailed fan mail sent from German soldiers to the ousted swimming star.<sup>35</sup> The press, it seemed was most interested in her curfew violations and partying with the sportswriters.

Figure skater Sonja Henie competed in her third Olympics in 1932. At age 13, she placed third at Chamonix in 1924, and then won Olympic titles in 1928 and 1932. Additionally, she won ten consecutive world championship titles. In 1932, the *New York Times* described women's figure skating in Lake Placid:

The early contestants received their share of applause but it was not until Miss Henie skated to the centre of the ice that the moment had arrived for which all had been waiting. It was a striking picture that this girl presented. She was clad in shimmering white satin, flecked with rhinestones, and her jaunty toque, also made of rhinestones, was perched on her blonde curls...The applause was still heard as she started and never ceased until she was finished.<sup>36</sup>

The attention to bodily appearance and costumed beauty obfuscated the basic characteristics of physical performance such as straining and sweating, while denying the process of empowerment in spite of skilled and masterful performances. Certainly, the athlete could experience empowerment from the competition but this athlete-centred focus was lost upon readers who viewed women's athletic bodies in sexualized, glamorous contexts. The reporter neglected to describe the tremendous athletic abilities of the 21-year-old "girl." Four years later, reporting on the Garmisch-Partenkirchen Games, an article, again in the *New York Times*, described the sexually-charged atmosphere of women's figure skating:

Figure skating by young and beautiful women appropriately garbed for this exercise is a favourite spectacle at all Winter Olympics. For this initial contest here every seat in the ice stadium was filled and the boys were standing three deep in the corridors...the alluring Miss Henie, who was all in white, with the Norwegian colors displayed on her close-fitting blouse, evoked the usual popular demonstration when she appeared.<sup>37</sup>

A *New York Times* reporter, two days earlier, briefly highlighted Henie's abilities as an athlete: "About the skill and finish of Miss Henie's performance after eight years of holding Olympic championship there can be no question." In the follow-up, "Nor is there of her allure" – the ability-denigrating strategy of the feminizing process was clearly evident.<sup>38</sup> The reporter's descriptions of Henie as "peerless,"<sup>39</sup> "the most famous personality in the winter sports world,"<sup>40</sup> and "the queen of figure skating"<sup>41</sup> reaffirmed her iconic status. At the same time, however, in concert with Olympic and sport leaders, this gender-ordering language channelled women and girls into the feminized sports and taught spectators and readers, both men and women, how to interpret the performance of the female athletic body. Future IOC President Avery Brundage voiced his opinion, unequivocally laced with sexual overtones, on the importance of preserving traditional

femininity and attractive women's bodies: "I am fed up to the ears with women as track and field competitors...her charms sink to something less than zero. As swimmers and divers, girls are beautiful and adroit, as they are ineffective and displeasing on the track."<sup>42</sup>

Henie's decision to turn professional, along with the onset of the Second World War, ended her Olympic career. However, by 1948, the new women's world figure skating champion, Canadian Barbara Ann Scott, became a feminine icon. Hailed as a "worthy successor"<sup>43</sup> to Henie, the press positioned and promoted Scott in a strikingly similar manner to the Norwegian. Focussing more on her looks and femininity than athletic performance,<sup>44</sup> reporters described Scott as "The blonde, blue-eyed ballerina of the ice,"<sup>45</sup> "The blonde skating stylist,"<sup>46</sup> "Pretty Ottawa girl,"<sup>47</sup> and "The Canadian beauty."<sup>48</sup> As with Henie and Holm, Scott's femininity rested not only on her beauty, but also her physical size. The *Globe and Mail* referred to her as "The 104 pound Barbara Ann."<sup>49</sup> The media portrayed a "doll-like" picture of Scott, emanating from attention to her size, age, and appearance. Toy dolls of Canada's Sweetheart sold for \$5.95 in Canada during the 1950s.<sup>50</sup>

Underscoring Canada's new figure skating idol's popularity with the public, the press noted on several occasions, the positive reaction Scott drew from the crowds and photographers.<sup>51</sup> Jack Sullivan, observed in the *Globe and Mail*, in the opening ceremony of the 1948 winter Games that the heroine Miss Scott drew attention from photographers and cheers from the spectators.<sup>52</sup> He described her performance as graceful and her persona, before an admiring audience, dazzling.<sup>53</sup> Following Scott's Olympic win, Sullivan continued to fuel the image of Canada's champion as the centre of all attention at the Games, reporting that she was "almost smothered by photographers, reporters and admiring winter sportsmen."<sup>54</sup> By the end of the Games, the *Globe and Mail* claimed that "Barbara Ann won more world fame than any other single winner in the games."<sup>55</sup>

The press equated Scott's charm and iconic status to the Hollywood film star. The *Globe and Mail* article documenting her 1948 Olympic title addressed the issue.<sup>56</sup> Reporters of course drew comparisons with Sonja Henie's professional career and post-Olympic activities. Jim Coleman, writing in the *Globe and Mail*, observed: "MGM has produced all the very successful ice films. When they were looking for a successor to Sonja Henie, their gaze focussed, quite naturally upon Miss Scott."<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere, however, it was reported that Scott had no such plans to follow Henie into Hollywood, instead aspiring to take domestic science at university and "learn to cook."<sup>58</sup> Eventually, Scott skated professionally, appearing in skating exhibitions but she resisted the role of movie actress. Although appearing in a number of film 'shorts,' Scott did not appear in any Hollywood productions.

Unlike Scott, both Henie and Holm entered into the entertainment business later in their careers. This was an

aspect of both athletes' lives that the press carefully tracked. Endorsement of the increasingly-influential world of show business reinforced Henie and Holm's superstar status. Holm, in particular was linked with Hollywood throughout her career. Both the *New York Times*<sup>59</sup> and *Toronto Star* heralded Holm's Hollywood signing and the achievement of her selection as a "WAMPAS" girl. The Western Association of Motion Picture Advertisers selected 'baby stars' each year between 1922 and 1934, who were deemed to have shown promise in the movie business and they were subsequently afforded extensive media exposure, in an effort to further their careers. The organization selected women based on their "beauty, ability and youth." Olympic athletes fascinated Hollywood producers, too, during the 1920s and 30s. The Ziegfeld Follies act offered Holms a position, which she refused.<sup>60</sup> Conceding that she received several offers in film and vaudeville,<sup>61</sup> Holm starred in Billy Rose's *Aquacades*, alongside, among others, swimmer Johnny Weissmuller and Buster Crabbe. Once her Olympic swimming career was finished, after the 1936 Games, Holm starred in several Hollywood movies.<sup>62</sup>

Following the 1936 winter Olympics, Sonja Henie shed her amateur status to join the professional skating circuit.<sup>63</sup> On her Hollywood aspirations, Henie quipped, "Sure I'd like to be another Greta Garbo, but who wouldn't?"<sup>64</sup> She received less Hollywood attention than Holm, but appeared in 12 movies, including *One in a Million* (Sidney Lanfield, 1936), *Thin Ice* (Sidney Lanfield, 1937), and *Iceland* (H. Bruce Humberstone, 1942).<sup>65</sup> Beautiful, feminine athletes aligned seamlessly with Hollywood film projects; the central tenets of iconic status in sport – physical appearance and glamour – fit naturally with the requirements for movie star status. Hollywood producers also favoured male Olympians for specific movie roles. Sport training evidently created beautiful bodies for the movie screen.

### The Hollywood Olympians

In addition to Henie and Holm, several athletes took screen tests and starred in movies. Olympics swimmers Johnny Weissmuller and Buster Crabbe, and decathlete Glen Morris, all played the Edger Rice Burroughs character Tarzan<sup>66</sup> – a role that clearly capitalized on their athletic, muscularly-developed physiques, not to mention their ready-made star status as Olympic champions. The Olympic Games presented a corral of beautiful bodies for Hollywood producers and sports spectators alike, reaffirming the characteristics of desirable male and female physiques. Physically-trained male athletes were perfect specimens for the action hero roles such as Tarzan, Buck Rogers, and Flash Gordon (all characters played by Buster Crabbe). Reporters evaluated male musculature as a predictor of athletic performance as early as the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but, for women, the newly-revealed female physiques of the 1930s at Olympic venues represented a significant shift from the more heavily-costumed bodies of earlier years. However, women's bodies could not be

developed, muscular or large without raising criticism from the press and sport leaders. In this sense, the film and sport industries cut media darlings from the same mold.

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Hosting the Games of 1932 in Los Angeles Games provided opportunities for the conflation of the two worlds. Games organizers feared that the Depression economy would significantly impede the collection of gate receipts and overall revenues.<sup>67</sup> In order to boost ticket sales, Hollywood stars Marlene Dietrich, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford offered their services to entertain the crowds for free.<sup>68</sup> Bringing Hollywood and Olympic stars together created compelling storylines for the press. Newspaper columns noted the important social events and parties where the stars fraternized. Canadian sport columnist Alexandrine Gibb captured the social atmosphere during as the athletes arrived:

The entire contingent of women athletes here for the Olympic games moved out to the Fox Hill studios yesterday for lunch on the grounds, and for the time the girl athletes of the world forgot everything except the glamour and thrill of meeting the movie stars. And the movie people like the rest of the world played up to the athletes and saw that they enjoyed their first glimpse of the movie game.<sup>69</sup>

As a former star athlete and a tireless promoter of women's sport, Gibb grew tired of the Hollywood social scene and with any attention detracting from the spectacle elements of the Olympic Games:

The girls are getting quite blasé about these movie stars now...At first, any movie star was a thrill – a big, big thrill – but after a week of watching them parade up and down for the dear public to see them...the novelty has worn off and the girls have discovered that these cinema folks are only people after all. And so the movie lights move down the line and the newly-crowned Olympic champions take their place. And why not? This is an athletic show and a jolly good one, too.<sup>70</sup>

Gibb's annoyance with the celebrity status of Hollywood stars interfering with Olympic events, undermining the symbolic value of star athletes, intensified throughout the Games. Gibb

accused the actors of utilizing the Games to enhance their star status:

The novelty of having famous movie actors and actresses in the stands every day is wearing off. At first the two races got but little consideration when Douglas Fairbanks, Al Jolson, Joe Brown and some of the fair sex of the movies were discovered in the section next to the competitor's stand. Somehow or other it seems as if they were trying to nip a little publicity on the head of the Olympic games. Certainly they were not adverse to rising, taking their bows and signing innumerable autographs. After all, this got boring, particularly when you were trying to witness exciting races which occur only once every four years.<sup>71</sup>

In spite of Gibb's misgivings, the Los Angeles Games enhanced the public recognition of Olympic athletes, both men and women. However, the growing connection to the Hollywood film industry was not merely an issue of star status. Similar to the role of the production contracts, movie studios, and film directors determining the contexts of performance for actors, strict regulations governed the performances of athlete's bodies both in and out of sport venues. Amateur regulations strictly prohibited athlete performance-for-pay and approved amateur status was a mandatory element for all competitors in the Olympic Games. Amateur leaders such as the President of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) of the United States, Avery Brundage, carefully monitored the lives of athletes outside of the competitive arenas. Prior to the Los Angeles Games, in February of 1932, the AAU announced that athletes who appeared in movies would lose their amateur status and be prevented from competing in the Olympics.<sup>72</sup> The argument, according to the *New York Times*, was rooted in the opposition to athletes earning money from sport or indirectly profiting from their sporting (especially Olympic) successes. In an interview, Eleanor Holm discussed this issue and detailed the technical loopholes that allowed her to sign a contract with Warner Brothers in 1932, whilst continuing to compete as an amateur at the Olympics. She recalled: "I didn't lose my amateur standing, even though I was under contract to Warner Bros, because they were training me to be an actress. They were sending me to dramatic school. I never thought of myself as an actress. Never."<sup>73</sup>

Based on the strategies employed by the IOC presidents following Coubertin, to ensure that the Olympics would not challenge the established hierarchies for body performance, the historically-specific, gender ordering links between Hollywood and the Olympics are not surprising. Both venues displayed and promoted performative bodies, transforming individuals into cultural icons whose performances could be consumed in particular contexts by admiring audiences. Championships and medals became indices of cultural, social, and economic progress for nations early on in the Olympic

Games. At the same time, the public display of athletic bodies became ideologically instructional for growing audiences. The spectacle qualities of the 1932 Games eminently clear to the team of German observers in Los Angeles accentuated the propaganda potential for the winter and summer Games four years later in 1936.

### Hitler's Olympic Bodies

Widely regarded by historians as a propaganda tool for Hitler's Nazi party, the 1936 summer Olympics have received much scholarly attention.<sup>74</sup> In particular, Leni Riefenstahl's film, *Olympia*, released in 1938, has been well-analysed and is itself a controversial piece of film-making, due to its apparent promotion of Nazi ideology, in particular in relation to the Aryan body.<sup>75</sup> Obviously, the physically-active and muscularly-developed body was central to Riefenstahl's work. Graham McFee and Alan Tomlinson,<sup>76</sup> in their examination of *Olympia*, argue that it is the supposed and much-espoused 'purity' of the Olympics that makes them a useful tool for conveying ideology; and secondly, they highlight the extent to which the body is a value-laden signifier, even if this is not always clear to the uncritical observer. They note: "The apparent universality of Olympic Games fools viewers into believing in the transcendent nature of filmic texts."<sup>77</sup> Although the authors point their analysis toward the Riefenstahl film, its application effectively reveals the political dynamic underscoring the representation of sporting bodies for the voyeur in virtually all of the previous Olympic Games:

The potential universality of the bodily culture can veil the specifically political ideologies of a moment. A seductively visual celebration of the human body – in, say the classic tradition – can invite the spectator, viewer or onlooker to assure its innocence, its apartness, and to overlook the values, dynamics and ideologies of which it is an integral part.<sup>78</sup>

Athletes participated in Olympic competitions which the IOC positioned as universal phenomena that transcended cultural and political ideals. This international arena invoked the body as an innocent vessel; in reality, bodies carried significant ideological baggage. J.A. Mangan concurs in his interpretation of the fascist body as political icon: "Of course the body can have different meanings imposed on it by every age and is sponge-like in its ability to absorb them."<sup>79</sup> The sporting body was a versatile cultural and political signifier – the Olympics provided the venue.

Since the first Olympic Games in 1896, athletes wore different uniforms for each event. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sport organizations and National Olympic Committees raised concerns over revealing costumes, particularly for women, and they drafted regulations for athlete dress.<sup>80</sup> Riefenstahl's film presented muscular male athletes posing naked and emerging from ancient Greek statues; female athletes danced naked.



Mangan argued that the simultaneous sexualisation and politicization of the body were not the goals or outcomes of fascist representations such as in *Olympia*: "What is fascinating about fascism is that this power demanded that the male nude was visible rather than invisible in pursuit of spiritual, racial and nationalistic ideals and aspirations. Fascist male nudity represented politics not pornography."<sup>81</sup> In the Olympic Games, however, the valorization of athlete's bodies was always both sexual and political.

The 1936 Olympics provided Hitler an ideal opportunity to showcase the new Germany to the world and the superiority of the Aryan body over that of 'lesser' races.<sup>82</sup> John Hoberman contends that the Nazis were more interested in the rational use of the body than in the creation of elite sportsmen. He argues:

Nazi lack of interest in creating superathletes contradicts our deeply rooted assumption that these unscrupulous people stopped at nothing to ensure their success in every field of endeavour...In fact our tendency to believe that Nazis did carry out such a project suggests that the world outside Germany has projected its own experimental impulses on this ultimate gangster regime and assumed that, on such morally alien territory, these forbidden wishes would be fulfilled.<sup>83</sup>

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INTO  
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CAREERS.

It is unlikely that the development of athletic performance constituted a long-term project within the Nazi regime; however, the importance of fielding a successful Olympic team, representative of the Aryan body should not be underestimated. It was important to affirm both German national identity, and support for Hitler's regime, and the Olympics had always provided the host nation with the opportunity to showcase its organizational abilities, facilities, and culture to all attending nations. The historical, military connections to sport in most nations are unequivocal. Physically-trained bodies marching in uniform held tremendous

symbolic value and winning competitions of all natures was fundamental to nation state formation. In the modern era, since the early 1800s, political leaders turned to exercise and sport to motivate, inspire, and train their young men. The Germans responded to their defeat by Napoleon with turnen,

a widespread political gymnastics movement; the Swedes, Danes, and Czechs established similar gymnastics movements; the British introduced violent, but rule-bound, sports to train future leaders in the private schools; Coubertin responded to the defeat of the French by Bismarck with plans to incorporate a more rigorous system for physical education, but settled for a modern Olympics – he wrote in 1892, "whoever learns not to shrink from a football scrimmage will not retreat from the mouth of a Prussian cannon;"<sup>84</sup> and, the Americans utilized sport and the Olympic Games in a widespread campaign to promote national identity – Mark Dyreson referred to American Olympic athletes as "athletic missionaries."<sup>85</sup> After showcasing the new Germany, Hitler planned to host the Olympic Games in perpetuity in his utopian city.<sup>86</sup>

The majority of research into the so-called 'Nazi Games' has centred upon the Berlin summer Games.<sup>87</sup> However, in terms of showcasing Aryan superiority, the winter Olympics, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, was perhaps the more successful event for the Nazi cause. By 1936, the track and field events – the blue ribbon sport of the summer Games – were increasingly dominated by non-white athletes. Indeed, one of the key arguments cited in defence of Riefenstahl against claims that *Olympia* was a piece of Nazi propaganda is the fact that she gave centre stage to non-Aryan athletes such as marathon winner, Kitei Sohn and U.S. athlete, Jesse Owens.<sup>88</sup> The Berlin Games have become synonymous with Owens's successes. Jesse Owens's four gold medals overshadowed the 33 gold medals won by the German team.

There was a certain degree of complexity to the North American and British press's reporting on the 1936 Games. While concerns were expressed overtly about the reports of Hitler's treatment of Jews and racial intolerance at the time,<sup>89</sup> there was also a tendency to privilege and pay detailed attention to the description of athletes fitting with the blonde-haired, blue-eyed ideal of the Aryan body culture. The *New York Times*, for example, frequently cited Sonja Henie's blonde hair and blue eyes as defining characteristics,<sup>90</sup> while similarly drawing attention to the blonde hair and pink cheeks of the ski patrol during the opening ceremony of the winter Games.<sup>91</sup> In the summer, American gold medal decathlete, Glenn Morris captured significant press attention as one of the top athletes of the Games and later he, too, played the Hollywood Tarzan in one film, *Tarzan's Revenge* (D. Ross Lederman, 1938). Hitler's massive team of athletes did not reign ideologically over the non-Aryans, but the Olympic project, a platform for German engineering and organizational prowess, impressed the world to no end. The spectacle of the Games prevailed.

## Conclusion

Sport has always been a site for the production of cultural meanings about the body. From the early era of the Olympics, through the 1930s and in 1948, the body was central to the viewing experience of the Games. The early Games reinforced

the dominance of the male body in the public sphere. Crowds marvelled at women's bodies, too, but this did not translate directly into social empowerment at the community level, like other women's sports of the era.<sup>92</sup> Instead, the sports process focused interests toward beauty, grace, and heterosexual attractiveness. The spectacle of the Olympics gave primacy to the visual element of the Games, especially in the qualitative sports and events in which athletes were clothed in a more provocative manner, such as figure skating and swimming. The feminized sports attracted the largest crowds and tickets were sold for disproportionately high prices.<sup>93</sup> Eleanor Holm, Sonja Henie, and Barbara Ann Scott emerged as the new female media icons of the sporting world. They personified notions of appropriate and attractive femininity, reinforced by their acceptance into the parallel world of the entertainment industry. For sport leaders who faced increasing pressures from women who sought participation in the Olympic Games, the aesthetic sports presented opportunities to incorporate women's participation which did not challenge elements of the traditional gender order and they drew attention away from women who participated in 'men's' sports.

For athletic women who fit the part, the Olympics created opportunities to capitalize on media attention to parlay sport performances into entertainment careers. Henie, Holm and, to a lesser degree, Scott, and other athletes (men and women) harnessed both their looks and fame won through their participation in the Olympics to make money in the world of Hollywood and shows such as the Ziegfeld Follies and Billy Rose's Aquacades. Sexual attractiveness and beauty were appropriate qualities for Olympic women but these characteristics were not to be translated into commercial gain. Avery Brundage fought tirelessly against athletes using their abilities to create professional opportunities. Brundage did not fight the gender order sustained through the Olympics or the commodification of the body for symbolic gains; indeed, Brundage invoked feminine ideals through sport for the remainder of his career as IOC president. Rather, he resisted the commercialization of athletics and the Olympics, seeking to maintain a significant distance between Coubertin's project, the professional sports, and the entertainment industry. The organizers of the Hollywood Olympics of 1932 effectively blended the star qualities of movies and sport to create a successful spectacle entertainment, at a time of great economic challenge. Hitler followed with a massive spectacle to announce his arrival in 1936.

The Olympic Games, historically, have created, promoted, and sustained gender orders and hierarchical relations of gender. While these relations drew meaning from gender polarities extant in broader social, political, and economic contexts, the Games provided a cultural venue which uniquely displayed women and men for the consuming public, where the world gazed upon these spectacular Olympic bodies on parade.

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