

Cold War Olympics Highlights

1952 Helsinki Games: Cold War tensions first intruded in the Olympics when a Soviet team attended for the first time. The U.S.S.R. initially planned to house its athletes in Leningrad and fly them into Finland each day. In the end, Olympic officials set aside separate housing for Eastern bloc athletes. By the end of the Games, the Soviets opened their village to all athletes.

East Germany was denied its request to be included in the 1952 Games; a German team made up entirely of West German athletes attended. From 1956 through 1964, the two Germanys were forced to reach their own Olympic truce and compete as a joint team.

China participated in 1952 but boycotted the Games after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) recognized Taiwan. The Taiwanese team carried the "China" banner in 1956, and China did not return to Olympic competition until the 1980 Winter Games.

1956 Melbourne Games: China's boycott was one of three separate protests at the Australian Games. Switzerland, Spain and the Netherlands sat out to protest the Soviet crackdown in Hungary, while Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon stayed home to protest Israel's invasion of the Sinai Peninsula.

Emotions in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Hungary boiled over in Hungary's water polo match with the U.S.S.R. With Hungary leading 4-0, fights broke out in the pool, one player left the water bleeding, and the game was stopped.

1972 Munich Games: These Olympics are most often remembered for the terrorist attack that resulted in the death of 11 Israeli athletes. Then-IOC President Avery Brundage made the controversial decision to continue the Games.

On the court, the Americans lost the gold medal in basketball for the first time during the Cold War. The U.S.S.R. won the final game 51-50, after confusion over the time remaining on the clock allowed the Soviets to play the final three seconds of the game twice; the second time, they scored the winning goal. The U.S. team protested the outcome, did not attend the medal ceremony and did not accept the silver medal.

1976 Montreal Games: Twenty-six nations boycotted after New Zealand was allowed to compete. New Zealand's national rugby team had recently played in South Africa, which had been banned from the Olympics since 1964.

Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci became a beloved figure on both sides of the Iron Curtain, receiving the first perfect 10 in an Olympic gymnastic event. She earned seven perfect scores on the way to winning three gold medals and being named a Hero of Socialist Labor by her country.

1980 Winter Games: The Lake Placid, New York, Olympics marked the continued superpower rivalry in athletics. In a game dubbed the "Miracle on Ice," a U.S. team made up mostly of college players defeated the heavily favored Soviet squad 4-3, then went on to defeat Finland for the gold medal. It was the only time from 1964 to 1992 that the Soviets did not win the gold.

1980 Summer Games: As a result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter called for the Moscow Games to be moved to another city. In a statement on the 1980 boycott released before the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, Carter said, "I pointed out ... that continued aggressive actions by the Soviets would endanger the participation of athletes and travel to Moscow by spectators."

Carter asked the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to move the games, preferably to Greece. Congress and the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) supported the move, but the IOC rejected the request. Afterward, the USOC voted to boycott the games.

Though the boycott has often been attributed to the president, Carter's 1996 statement

emphasizes that he did not order it alone.

"It should be remembered that in the United States and other free countries, the national Olympic committees were independent of government control," Carter said. "In a few countries, including Great Britain, governments supported the boycott, but Olympic committees made the final decision about whether to send athletes to Moscow."

But Carter pledged to revoke the passports of U.S. athletes who went to the games, backing the boycott with the force of law.

In the end, some 60 teams boycotted the Moscow Games. Among U.S. allies, Great Britain, France, Italy and Sweden attended; some countries did not officially send teams but took no action against athletes who attended. If they won medals, those athletes were greeted on the medal stand by the Olympic hymn and flag, rather than their national anthem and flag.

1984 Summer Games: In 1984, the Olympics came to Los Angeles. The Soviet Union boycotted, citing concerns over the safety of their athletes in what they called an anti-communist environment. It was widely regarded as a retaliatory move for the 1980 boycott.

As a propaganda stroke, the boycott backfired. Despite the absence of the Soviets and their allies, the Los Angeles Games boasted 140 nations -- more than at any previous Olympics, and up from 81 in Moscow. With the backing of Hollywood and corporate sponsorships, the 1984 Games scored high TV ratings and were the first since 1932 to turn a profit.

The '84 Olympics were a bonanza for the United States in the medal count as well. Without Eastern bloc athletes present, Mary Lou Retton became the first American woman to win the individual gold medal in the combined gymnastics exercises. She also became an overnight sensation, appearing on cereal boxes and endorsing everything from batteries to drug store chains.

The U.S. team won 83 gold medals and 174 medals overall. Diver Greg Louganis, runner Carl Lewis and the advertising slogan "the official (fill in the blank) of the Olympics" all came into the public eye in 1984.

In a crowning bit of Cold War irony, while the Soviets boycotted, China returned to the Olympics in 1984 after a 32-year absence.

1988 Seoul Games: After the 1980 and 1984 boycotts, the 1988 superpower showdown in South Korea was widely anticipated. North Korea boycotted the Seoul Olympics and was joined by Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Cuba, but the Games went on with little interruption.

While the United States faced a kinder, gentler Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev, glasnost and perestroika did not bring a more forgiving Soviet basketball team to Seoul. Team USA, whose basketball dominance was as complete as the Soviet hockey dynasty, lost to the Soviets 82-76. It would be the last time college players would represent the United States in Olympic basketball competition. Following a vote by the International Amateur Basketball Federation to allow NBA players to participate in the Games, the first "Dream Team" was formed.

1992 Barcelona Games: Though no one knew it at the time, the Seoul Olympics had been the last Cold War Summer Games. In 1992, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia fielded their own teams, and the rest of the former Soviet Union competed as the "Unified Team." Winners were saluted with the flags and anthems of their countries. Germany's team was united again, and the ban against South Africa was ended.

After Germany's reunification in 1989, historian Giselher Spitzer reported that East Germany had sponsored an elaborate and massive system of doping involving some 10,000 athletes from 1968 to 1990. Spitzer reported that some 500 athletes suffered health effects, most likely from the drugs. Eleven former coaches and doctors have been taken to court and fined for causing harm to athletes, and investigations into 500 other doctors and coaches, as well as former Communist Party officials, continue. More trials are expected.