

Rafer Johnson on the Olympics

by Rafer Johnson

I think most Americans would agree that the Olympic Games is one of the stellar attractions of sports. In recent years, there have been times when the high drama of the Games unwittingly focused the global spotlight on both the tragic and the controversial.

Indeed — even today — two years before we compete in Moscow, some are telling us that a boycott of the 1980 Games would serve as our strongest protest against the rejection of human rights behind the Iron Curtain.

It's not my purpose, though, to survey the international political scene. I'd like to bring some of that attention back to an area I know best. That is, amateur athletics — specifically, the thousands of young Americans who are spending nearly every waking moment mentally and physically preparing for Moscow, Lake Placid and beyond.

Regardless of who they are, where they live or the sport they've chosen, these bright, aggressive and healthy Americans are bound by a common purpose. They're working as hard as they can, under the best available trainers, to qualify and represent this country in international competition.

In my eyes, nothing compares with the thrill and satisfaction of making the U.S. Olympic team, and the pride in knowing you're a member of a team made up of the best amateur athletes in the nation. It's a proud moment for all Americans when we sit in the comfort of our living rooms and watch one of our own athletes lean forward to be draped with a gold, silver or bronze medal.

But how does a young American reach that grand achievement of international victory? How, for that matter, does he or she reach the level of Olympic caliber?

One answer, as I mentioned already, is hard work. Sadly, though, many of the athletes we applaud during Olympic Games are there only because their commitment has driven them to make one personal sacrifice after another. The parents, relatives and friends of many amateur athletes remain the single source of the financial support so desperately needed to prepare for Olympic competition. And the situation hasn't really improved since I first competed more than twenty years ago.

The grand irony of U.S. amateur athletics is that the major athletic organizations themselves have chosen to ignore one of the most basic doctrines of sport: teamwork. The Amateur Athletic Union, the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the U.S. Olympic Committee have never really pulled



RAFER JOHNSON

together in the interest of our athletes. I think the obvious friction between the organizing bodies has prevented them from even talking sensibly to each other in the past ten years.

But I don't wish to sound completely pessimistic, because there have been some hopeful signs in recent times. The landmark contribution by Toyota of a million dollars to the Olympic Committee, for the training of American athletes preparing for the 1980 Moscow Games, appears to be the leading edge of a trend that sees private enterprise becoming more involved in amateur athletics. There's also the special Olympic Job Opportunities Program, involving about sixty U.S. firms.

Likewise, I hold great faith in a key piece of federal legislation, the pending Amateur Sports Act of 1978, that has passed the Senate and is now awaiting approval in the House. As a member of the President's Commission on Olympic Sports, I participated in the preparation of this bill, which, for the first time, will establish an equitable representation among the organizing bodies, the federal government and the athletes themselves through an overall coordinating body.

A true coordinated effort — genuine national teamwork on behalf of our amateur athletes — is long past due. We only have to look at the East European countries to find that unified effort. But don't get me wrong, I neither agree nor approve of their approach to amateur sports. We can build a national team the way it works best for us, by providing our athletes with the freedom to train as they wish, giving them expert instruction and the best

High school season begins

by Bill Schaefer

You're watching one of the season opening high school football games this Friday night. The visiting team faces a fourth down and 25-yards-to-go situation for a first-down. The punter is roughed up but you, as a home town fan, aren't worried. It's only a 15-yard penalty so it's still fourth and ten for the other team, right?

Wrong. A major rule change this season for all Oregon high school teams calls not only for a 15-yard penalty but an automatic first down for the kicking team.

The reason for the rules change, says John Hilsenteger, assistant executive secretary of the Oregon School Activities Association, is to dissuade teams from taking advantage of a kicking situation such as that mentioned above.

"Until this year, the defensive team could come as hard as they wanted knowing that the kicking team would still have to punt even if they were roughed up," Hilsenteger said. "Now we've taken care of that."

The other major change in Oregon high school football rules this year involves an invalid fair catch signal.

A valid fair catch signal on the part of a punt receiver calls for him

to wave an arm above his head. If he failed to do this in the past — for example, if he merely raised an arm above his head without waving it — his team suffered a 15-year penalty from where the ball was snapped.

Now, an invalid fair catch signal will result in only a five-yard penalty from the point of the snap.

"It's a more equitable penalty," Hilsenteger said. "An invalid fair catch signal shouldn't result in a first down for the kicking team. That was giving the kicking team too much of an advantage."

The high school football season is starting one week earlier than last year to avoid having to play playoff games over the Thanksgiving Day weekend.

For the first time, the state's Class AA football teams will play an expanded sixteen-team championship format, following on the heels of the highly successful sixteen-team playoff system held for the first time last season by the Class AAA schools. The Class A and eight-man championships will involve eight teams.

The girls volleyball season also opens this week but with no major rules changes having taken place. Other sports that will be getting underway this fall include gymnastics and cross country for boys and girls.

facilities we can muster.

I don't regret having had to work in a peach cannery during college summers, and at a hamburger stand after I was graduated, just to obtain enough money for basic needs while training. Maybe I'm the better for it. It's also possible that my own experience showed me the vital importance of providing every opportunity for American amateurs to be as completely prepared as they can. Full-time training for Olympic competition is enough of a personal sacrifice for our athletes.

Who can be less than amazed, for example, at Al Oerter, our greatest discus thrower? Oerter first competed in 1956, won four consecutive Olympic gold medals, captured the national championship six times and set world records twice. Through it all, he was working for a living and finding time to train. On the comeback trail at 41, he's preparing for the 1980 Games in Moscow. Even more amazing than his record is the news that Oerter is training for the first time with a coach.

I'm putting out a call to all Americans who care. Let's support our amateur athletes for four years, not just once every four years. Let's get the message to our legislators, the national organizing sports bodies and the business community. And let's not just worry about the next team or the next Games. Instead, let's plan to broaden our focus to bring along youngsters from the age of eight.

The winning and the medals will take care of themselves. It's time to shift the emphasis to an organized program that will result in continuous fund-raising, training facilities coast-to-coast, top-notch coaching and anything else that best serves the interests of our amateur athletes.

The Olympic movement is for everybody — from the gold medal winners to the grade school hopefuls.

And it's for you and me. I like to think of my three-and-five-year-olds as potential Olympians. I'm exposing them to as many activities as possible. Even at those ages sports works wonders as an organized effort that simply means having fun and meeting new faces.

I think there are hopeful signs, and a national momentum seems to be gathering. A great number of people down through the years deserve credit for what's beginning to materialize. Robert F. Kennedy pushed for a united effort in the '60s. Today, Senators Culver, Stevens and Stone, the Congressmen Kent, Metcalfe, Michael and Mineta are among those in Washington carrying the message forward.

In amateur athletics and Olympic competition, teamwork is the only tonic we'll ever need.

Reggie Smith

(Continued from Page 1 Column 3) the goals of the NASCD," she said.

Smith announced plans for the first annual Reggie Smith Celebrity Tennis Classic, proceeds of which will benefit the NASCD. It will be a two-day celebrity-amateur tournament to be held at Mountain Gate Country Club on November 11th and 12th.

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