
In “Padres on Mount Olympus: Los Angeles and The Production of the 1932 Olympic Mega-Event,” Sean Dinces offers a fresh perspective on the place and importance of the 1932 Games in Olympic history. He contends that research on these Games is underdeveloped because scholars generally have been more interested in the “Nazi” Olympics of 1936, which, he believes, have been given “undue consideration … as the holy grail of the movement’s development into legitimate global spectacle and enterprise” (138). Instead, Dinces argues that the “organization, promotion, and execution” of the 1932 Los Angeles Summer Games “played a critical role in transforming the modern Olympic Games from a sideshow into an internationally recognized site of cultural production” (138-139). He contends that the organizers of the 1932 Games constructed a general template for success in staging an “ideologically and commercially” successful Olympics that the 1936 German planning committee simply built upon four years later. To defend his thesis, Dinces examines two separate aspects of the 1932 Games. First, he looks at the planning and promotion of the Games through “fantasy, erasure, and opportunism.” Then, he focuses on the Games as a theater seen through Hollywood, the Olympic Village, and the “so-called” melting pot of US culture.

In terms of planning and promotion, Dinces discusses the Los Angeles elite who were responsible for planning the Games and shows how they
attempted to use southern California’s “fantasy past” and the “mission myth” to create an alluring destination for tourists. Unfortunately, this section may pose a challenge for readers who are not familiar with US history, since it offers only a cursory examination of early Californian missions and Spanish efforts to convert Native Americans, and, thus, raises more questions than answers about the relationship between the historical context in this region of the country and the development of the 1932 Games. That being said, readers who have an understanding of US history might appreciate the way Dinces tries to paint a colorful and concise overview of the 1932 Planning Committee’s desire to show Los Angeles’ “contemporary ideals of progress” (142).

In terms of understanding the Games as a theatre, Dinces discusses how the 1932 Planning Committee used the presence of Hollywood, a district in Los Angeles, to reinforce the belief “that nowhere other than in Los Angeles could such an event be staged so successfully” (146). For example, he retells the story of American javelin thrower Malcolm Metcalf who, after losing his luggage during his travels to Los Angeles, was greeted and assisted by Will Rogers, a Hollywood movie star in the 1920s and 30s. Additionally, actors became the “personal tour guides and entertainers for the athletes” (155). In essence, Dinces argues that by incorporating aspects of Hollywood into the 1932 Olympic Games, the athletes in effect became “super-celebrities,” that is, entertainers admired by even the most famous actors in Hollywood (156).

Dinces also discusses the 1932 Olympic Village – the first of its kind in the Olympic Movement. The 1932 Planning Committee’s decision to construct an Olympic Village was premised on the idea that a central living location for athletes would allow them to see that all competitors resembled one another in having “teeth, eyes, ears, arms, legs, hearts, lungs and the requisites of normal human beings” (148). The mission of the Olympic Village, which was to bring together men (females were excluded) from every walk of life, was successful: Charles McCallister, a member of the American water polo team explained that the “camaraderie was terrific” (148). Unfortunately, Dinces explains that the fairytale image of the Olympic Village disappears when compared to the failed attempts of minorities to find housing in and around Los Angeles, a struggle was taking place just outside the purview of Olympic athletes and spectators. In this case, Dinces does an outstanding job of exposing the façade the 1932 Planning Committee created about the “wonderfulness” of Los Angeles, just as Hitler and his regime did with the 1936 Games and their attempt to prove the dominance of Fascism over other ideologies.

Overall, Dinces has crafted an influential piece, not only on the 1932 Olympic Games, but on the Olympic Movement as a whole. Dinces’ research makes it abundantly clear that the 1936 “Nazi” Games have, indeed, been misidentified as the creator of the modern day “mega-event” spectacle that we now associate with the Olympics.