

BOOK REVIEW

Todd Cleveland. *Africa and the Olympics: Winning Away from the Podium*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2024. 208 pp. Map. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$80.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780896803510.

Todd Cleveland's *Africa and the Olympics: Winning Away from the Podium* examines how Africans used the Olympics to achieve various goals beyond sports, the role of the Olympics in African societies, and the complex political, social, and economic forces involved. Instead of judging the continent's Olympic success by medals won, Cleveland shifts the focus to how Africans have harnessed the Olympics for social progress, significant political actions, and improving life quality for individuals and entire nations. Cleveland argues that, despite Africans' apparent invisibility in the Olympic arena, African political and sporting leaders, athletes, and activists have effectively used the Olympics as a platform for social, political, and economic change. Thus, the book challenges the simple view of the Olympics as just a sports competition by examining the various ways Africans have engaged with it as a strategic effort to improve personal, national, and continental circumstances.


This book is typically organized into chronological chapters, guiding readers through Africans' involvement with the Olympics from the colonial period to modern times. Chapter One explores Africa's first participation in the Olympics during the final days of colonial rule and the years following independence. Cleveland notes that, due to systemic racism, Africans rarely competed directly against White settlers after European sports were introduced in Africa in the late nineteenth century. Consequently, Africans created their leagues and tournaments, mostly approved by colonial authorities who viewed them as harmless recreational activities that allowed African participants to engage in physical activity "rather than campaigning for improved rights and conditions in the face of oppressive, imperial overrule" (29). Under colonial rule, Africa's later Olympic participation alongside independent nations symbolized the independence Africans longed for. Participation after independence strengthened the legitimacy of new African states, enabling them to approach the international community with greater confidence. Domestically, new African leaders "identified sports as a tool that they could utilize to unite diverse populations" (27) created by colonial regimes.

Chapter Two describes the lengthy efforts to ban, suspend, and eventually expel South Africa (SA) from the Olympics. Despite many Africans gaining independence in the 1960s, the apartheid regime continued to humiliate Black Africans under White minority rule, prompting African sports officials, activists, and politicians to pressure the International Olympic Committee (IOC)—the Olympics governing body—to force SA to end apartheid in sports or to expel the regime from the Olympic community. During this effort, "sporting isolation served as a proxy for the broader,

global condemnation of apartheid, which over time circumscribed the ability of White South Africans to engage with the international community in any fashion” (60). Outside the medal stage, international efforts by sports officials, African activists, and politicians achieved two key victories: SA’s suspension and eventual expulsion from the Olympics. After SA’s expulsion, Africans quickly shifted their focus to other remnants of European colonialism, as Chapter Three highlights, targeting the White minority regime in Rhodesia and nations like New Zealand that still maintained sports ties with apartheid SA. During this period, boycotts or the threat of them were the most effective tools in the African nations’ Olympic strategy, as Africans consistently used them as a powerful sporting and political tactic to work toward their goal of freeing sports on the continent from racial discrimination.

Chapter Four shifts focus from African international lobbying efforts to the athletes themselves, examining how their participation influenced the well-being of Africans. Cleveland showcases the charitable initiatives started by these athletes to improve access to food, clean water, and education, empower vulnerable groups like women and children, and provide scholarships to intending African student-athletes in the West. Away from the Olympic medal podium, these altruistic efforts indeed represent “yet another victory in Africa’s overall advance” (127) with the unity fostered by these achievements transcending “ethnic, religious, racial, regional and other types of social divides” (129). The final chapter examines how African athletes “strategically used the Games to improve their own political, financial, sportive, or educational interests” (157), which commonly involves changing nationalities through defection or competing for other countries. Despite the “brawn drain” caused by this, African Olympians leveraged their success at the Olympics, securing scholarships at US colleges from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Overall, Cleveland uniquely combines diverse sources to craft a cohesive narrative centered on African sports, political figures, athletes, activists, and fans. Given limited resources and weak sporting traditions in many Olympic sports, it is unlikely that African teams will surpass their past Olympic performances. Consequently, the author accurately concludes that the African Olympic “wins,” often achieved outside the medal podium, will continue every four years and in between. Unfortunately, the author fails to recognize how political leadership issues frequently affect Africa, including its sports. Without addressing deep-rooted governance problems, the author misses the root causes of Africa’s struggles, turning a complex situation into a story of sporadic success. This limited focus on leadership issues shapes how readers interpret the sports history he presents. Also, while Cleveland’s frequent use of long direct quotes demonstrates thorough source engagement, some could be better paraphrased in the author’s voice to provide a clearer interpretation. Most readers expect this from a well-rounded book. Still, I highly recommend this book to researchers interested in African and sports history.

Abel Tobechukwu Ugwu 

University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MI, USA

abel.ugwu@usm.edu

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