

Mexico City: Tomorrow is Here

by Dick Drake

Altitude and a series of problems basically unrelated to the actual competition have already made the Games of the XIX Olympiad the most publicized version in history. Even so, the quadrennial event in Mexico City will bring together more athletes (7225) from more nations (119) for the largest gathering of peoples from so many diversified backgrounds in the history of this planet.

The Mexican Organizing Committee has faced a number of near crises since it was awarded the 1968 Olympics by the IOC in the fall of 1963. The last 12 months have been infused with frustration, beginning with the proposed boycott by US blacks, followed by holocaust over the admission of South Africa in face of racial discrimination and more recently by the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia--all of which threatened the Games by mass withdrawals of athletes. Each problem was eventually resolved. Critics, from within and outside the borders, have taken continual pot shots at Mexico. Mexican officials have had to contend with assertions that their small, emerging nation with a reputation for leaving things to do until tomorrow could not stage such a mammoth production. Internally, all the citizens did not support the project either and, since the beginning of summer, students have demonstrated their displeasure with the \$150 million allocation to the Games and with other policies of President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz' government. Riots broke out in mid-September as police and army units emptied the 98,000-student Ciudad Universitaria--the main buildings of which are adjacent to the 80,000-seat Estadio Olimpico where the opening and closing ceremonies as well as track and field competition will be staged.

Each nation that has hosted the Olympic Games since World War II has faced a series of problems and cynical critics but has emerged with a successful chapter in Olympic history. And the Mexican Olympics will be no different. While they may not have the efficiency of the Tokyo Games, they will lend their own unique flavor and style that should only enhance the pride and image of Mexico.

This month, Mexico will be concerned with today's reality as well as tomorrow's aspirations. For Mexican officials, there'll be no siesta until the Games have concluded, but for athletes, fans and press journeying to the land of the Aztecs, they should encounter a marvelous blend of sport and fiesta--Latin style.

There will be a number of new dimensions surrounding the Mexico Olympics, and certainly the most dramatized--perhaps in all Olympic history--concerns how the altitude will affect the athletes and their performances. For the first time, track and field athletes as well as most other contestants will battle the rarified air of Mexico City's 7350-foot elevation as well as each other during an Olympics. It has become an issue which has virtually obscured such other firsts for these Games as the first to be contested in a Latin American or Spanish speaking nation, first to be staged in a country without a "track tradition", first to have a woman torch bearer, first to emphasize cultural presentations and first to provide a synthetic track and field running surface.

Thousands of rubles, kroners, pesos and dollars have been spent by nations attempting to study and assimilate information concerning the effects of less oxygen and in preparing athletes at high altitude training camps. In the end, it will have been revealed that no conditioned athlete dies as the result of lack of oxygen, athletes are affected differently by the altitude as they are by hot, cold, windy or rainy weather, and that times are faster in events shorter than 800-meters and proportionately slower in those longer. Olympic records are likely to be swept away in all events save the seven longest running and walking tests where oxygen debt becomes a factor. On the other hand, the Olympic standards should go with even greater ease than normal in the sprints, relays, hurdles and jumping events where the reduced air resistance will assist the great array of competitors. Weight events aren't basically affected by altitude but the caliber of performances has progressed so far that Olympic standards of the past may not even earn a medal here.

Perhaps only the US's 1600 relay squad (with four of the five fastest one-lappers in history) can be rated to have a victory "wrapped up"--which suggests some wild duels for the gold medals and wide open battles for not only the medals but all six places. With the caliber of competition such as it is--including the all-time world leaders in all but four of the 22 open events, world records could well get bombarded. Even though the world standards in the 100, 200, 400 and intermediate hurdles have taken a beating this summer, these along with the

high hurdles, both relays, pole vault, long jump and hammer throw are the most vulnerable in such severe competition.

These will be the Games when Jim Ryun, Randy Matson and Janis Lusi, three super-stars since the last Olympics, will attempt to cement their illustrious competitive records and add to their world marks with a gold medal in the 1500, shot and javelin. These will be the Games when Al Oerter will go for an unprecedented fourth straight victory in the discus while Abebe Bikila and Jozef Schmidt will be after rare thirds in the marathon and triple jump--but all three will encounter severe challenges enroute. These will be the Games of the fierce sprint battles among the six fastest dashmen in history over 100-, 200- and 400-meters: Charlie Greene vs. Jim Hines, Tommie Smith vs. John Carlos, and Lee Evans vs. Larry James. But these could also be the Games of the emerging nations, a symbolic coincidence coming as the event is staged in a developing nation.

It is quite likely that athletes from Africa will emerge in Mexico City much the same way that Eastern European contenders moved into the Olympic picture from 1948 through 56 and Australasian contestants did in 1960 and 64. Seven (Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Tunisia and Senegal) from among the 27 eligible African states will provide solid contenders for placers in every running event except the high hurdles, plus the triple jump. They should pick up medals in at least five events (800 through marathon). Kenya's Kipchoge Keino could well come forth as the hero of the 1968 Olympics as he is scheduled for a triple in the 10,000, 5000 and 1500 which involves racing on six of the eight days of competition, beginning on October 13 and concluding the 20th. Trained all his life at high altitude, he not only holds the altitude records over 7300-feet in all three events but possesses the second or third fastest times of all-time for the exact or yard equivalent of those distances.

Aside from Keino, these Games will probably result in more medals for more athletes as specialization, partly because of the increased difficulty in recovering from races at high elevation, has become nearly universal. Only three other athletes rate any real possibility of picking up more than one individual victory--or even one medal. Belgium's Gaston Roelants has announced he will try a triple in the steeplechase, 10,000 and marathon, while US's George Young has a chance in the steeple and 26-miler and Tunisia's Mohamed Gammoudi in the 5000 and 10,000. All are strong candidates but they must also face the altitude as well.

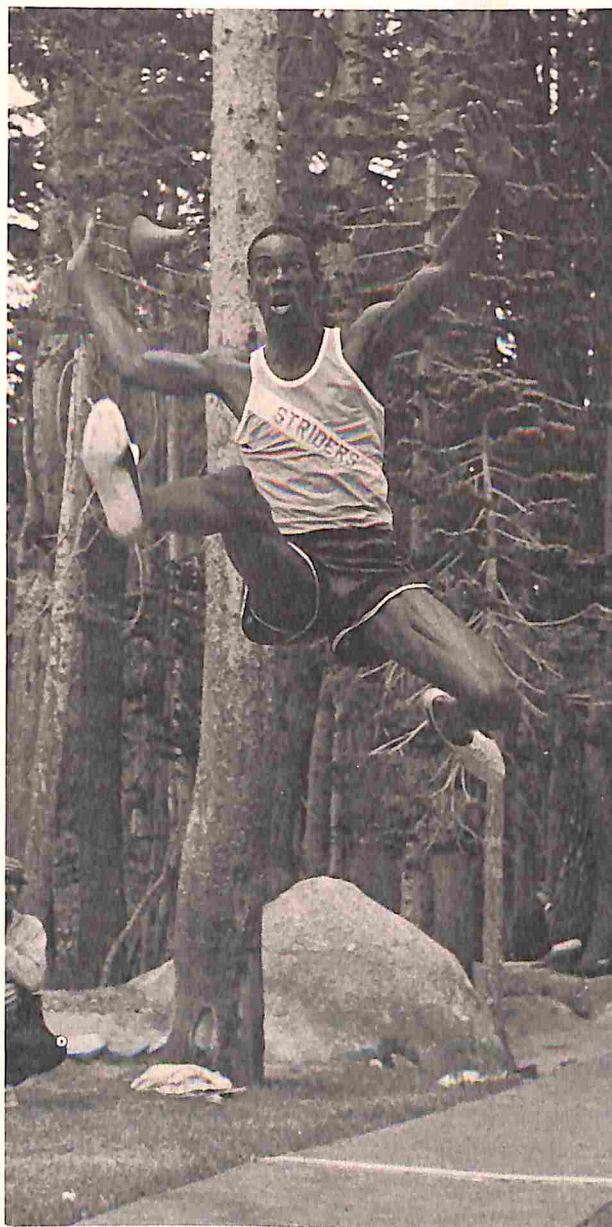
In order to assist our readers enjoy this athletic extravaganza, T&FN has prepared this Olympic Preview issue. A brief introduction will clarify some points.

The thumbnail sketches, normally six to 10 per event, are close looks at those athletes given the best chance to win medals and the next three places. In a few cases, leading contenders are omitted because we lack adequate information. Each US athlete gets a profile, regardless of his chances. In this section, and the analyses which come later, we abbreviate liberally to save space: A-E=Americas vs. Europe; AG=African Games; BEG=British Empire (now Commonwealth) Games; CAG=Central American Games; CISM=International Military championships; Ech=European championships; ECup=European Cup; EInd=European indoor championships; FOT=US Final Olympic Trials; m=meters or metric time (not converted); OD=Olympic Development meet; OG=Olympic Games; OP=Olympic Preview meet; PAG=Pan American Games; PR=personal record; r=relay time with running start; SOT=US Semi-Olympic Trials; WR=world record (EWR=equals world record); y=yards, yard time (unconverted).

The analysis generally wraps up the event while the best bets section ranks the contenders:

A=almost certain to win; B=good chance to win; C=possible winner, good chance for medal; D=little chance to win, definite chance for top six. Commas indicate definite order of preference. Athletes separated by hyphens are rated equally and listed in alphabetical order.

Our special thanks go to Roberto Quercetani, Roger Gynn, Bernie Cecins, Peter Matthews, P.N. Heidenstrom and Hideaki Miyagi for providing special editorial information. Each event concludes with the personal predictions of a six-man international panel: BN=Bert Nelson, CN=Cordner Nelson, DD=Dick Drake, all of T&FN; RQ=Roberto Quercetani (Italy), T&FN European editor; MW=Mel Watman (England), editor of Athletics Weekly; RP=Robert Pariente (France), track writer for L'Equipe. All=composite picks of the six "experts".



The "Big Three" who've ruled long jumping all this decade--Bos-ton, Ter-Ovanesyan and Davies--face the real possibility of battling each other for second at Mexico City. BOB BEAMON, here leaping a windy 27'6½" at the FOT, hasn't lost all year. (Chadez)

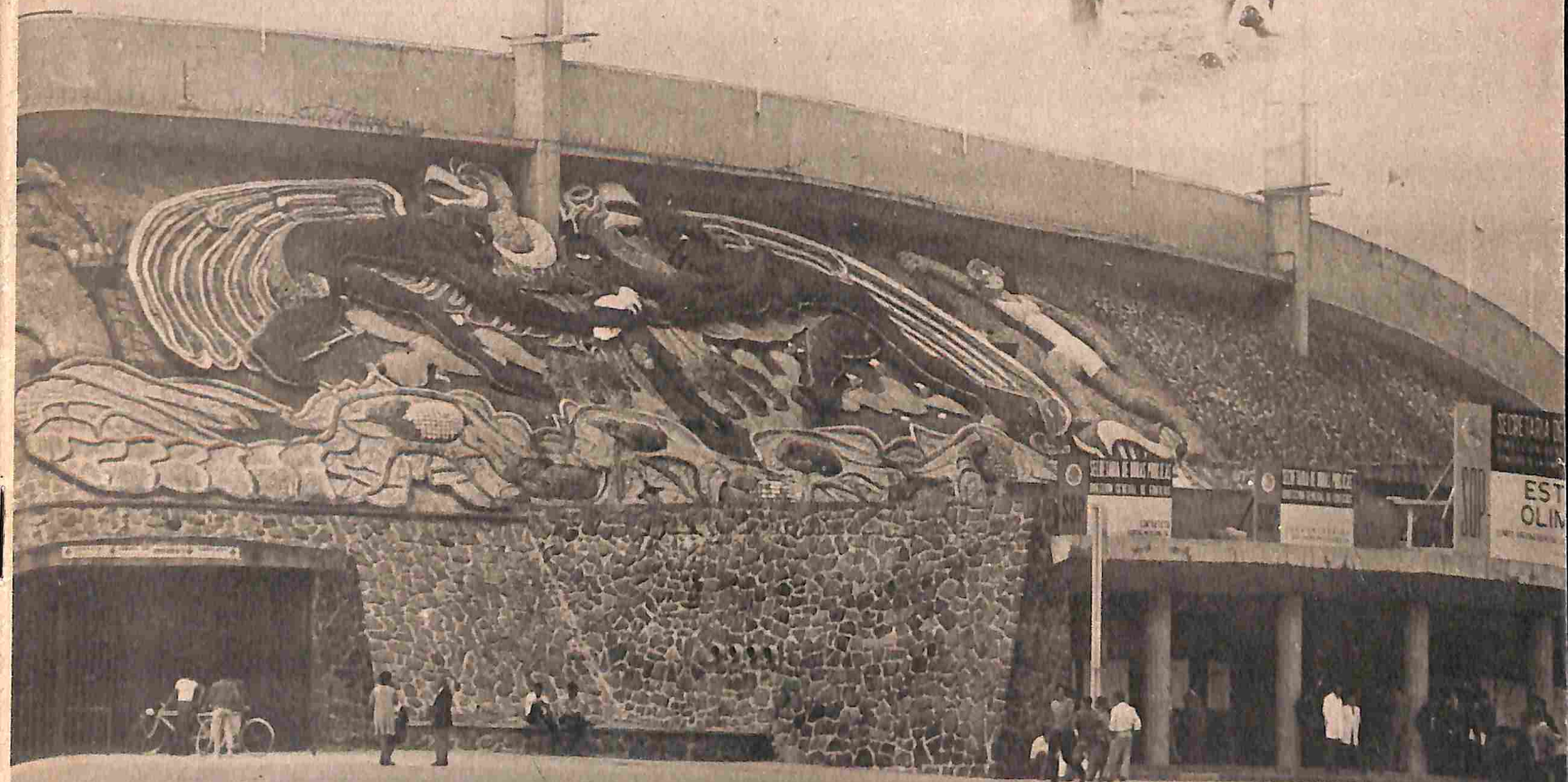
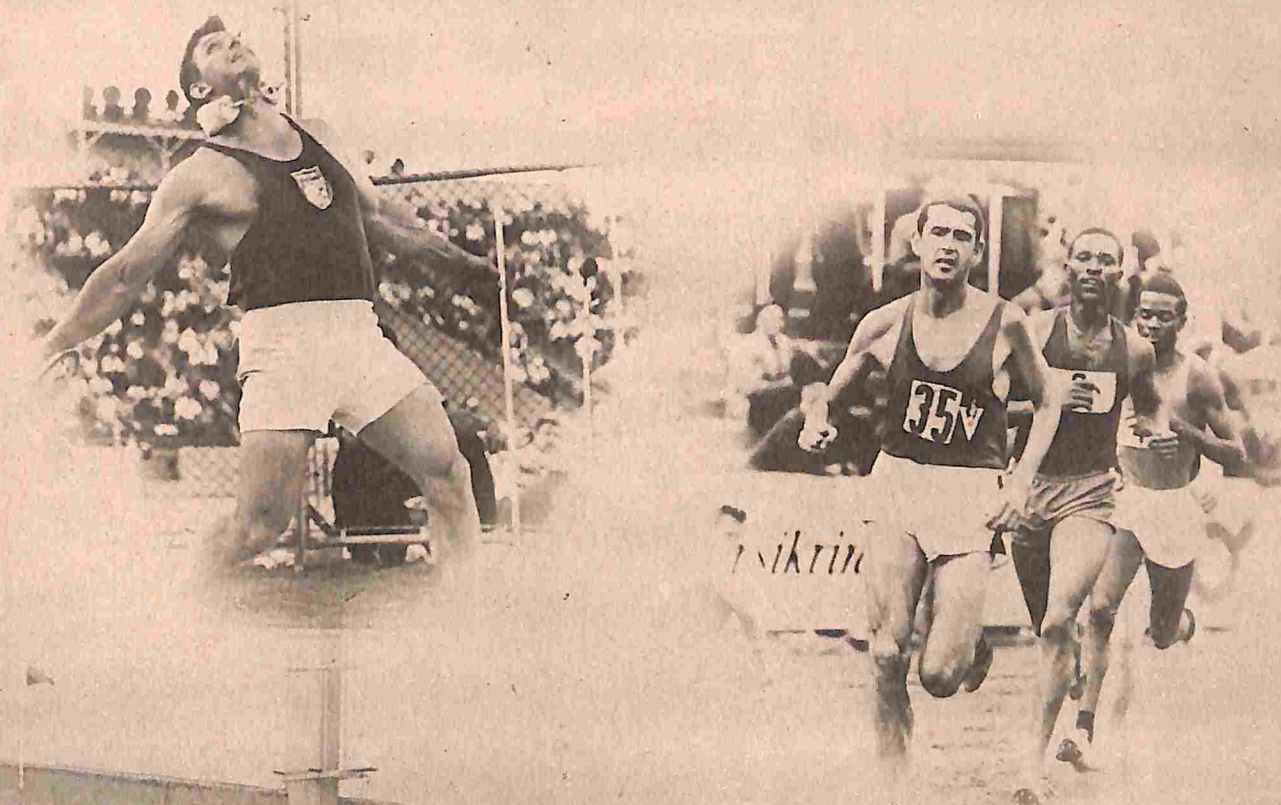
Track & Field News

World Wide Coverage of Track and Field

September 1968, Vol. 21, No. 14

Box 296, Los Altos, Calif. 94022, U.S.A.

\$5.00 per year (18 issues), \$1.00 This Issue



Olympic Games Preview