

Olympics: big 'losers' even before flame is lit

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Everybody comes out a loser in the Olympic boycott.

The Moscow games can't help but be diminished to a significant extent by the US-led walkout of some 45 nations in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. At the same time, however, it's obvious that the Carter administration received far less than the full-scale support it had originally envisioned — especially from Western Europe. The final tally being prepared by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for release today shows clearly that despite the

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absence of such athletically and/or politically powerful nations as West Germany, Japan, Canada, and China (which would have been competing for the first time since 1952), enough important countries from both East and West will be on hand to keep the 1980 competition in the limelight as a major world event.

As for the athletes, it is a frustrating and bitter time for the ones who can't go, especially those who would have been among the top contenders in their events. But even the men

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Moscow Olympics

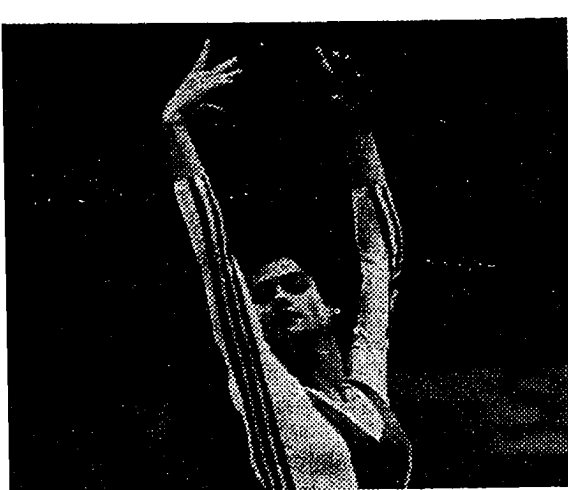
and women who do compete will have less than the full experience — and in many cases will know that any medals they win are a bit hollow.

Obviously the US absence alone cuts much of the glamour out of the track-and-field, swimming, basketball, and boxing competitions while decreasing the stature of numerous other events. West Germany and Japan, who were fourth and fifth in the medal count at Montreal, will also be acutely missed, while various other boycotting countries had potential contenders here or there.

“It will be an athletic event, but it won't be the Olympics,” a top State Department official said the other day. President Carter expressed pleasure at the number of countries supporting his stand. And State Department spokesman Hodding Carter III emphasized that the boycott had succeeded beyond any previous effort of its kind.

But that, of course, is the United States view. The Russian version is more along the lines of, “Too bad you aren't coming, since most of the top sporting countries and outstanding athletes will be there.” Editorials in the Soviet press said the United States was engaging in wishful thinking and claimed that the boycott had clearly been defeated.

In athletic terms, the Soviets have a point. Led by the USSR itself and East Germany, the countries planning to be in Moscow accounted for the lion's share of medals won in Montreal and featured such stars as Nadia Comaneci of Romania, Lasse Viren of Finland, and Alberto Juantorena of Cuba, all of whom will probably be back to defend their



Familiar faces like Nadia will be there; others, such as Rono, won't get chance

laurels. Add to this list Great Britain's triple world record setting middle distance runner Sebastian Coe, plus others who have come into prominence since 1976, and it's obvious there will be plenty of big names on hand.

So despite the predictable victory claims by both sides, there are really no winners as the official list of entries for the July 19-to-Aug. 3 competition is announced today. But even this may not be the final word on the subject.

Late last week, during the flurry of 11th-hour votes to beat the deadline, there were signs of intensive behind-the-scenes maneuvering to open the door for possible reconsiderations. Officials of both the West German and Japanese Olympic committees indicated they might change their minds, and although the IOC wouldn't confirm it, Moscow officials reportedly are willing to consider late acceptances.

On the other hand, the United States was



UPI photos

hoping for changes in the opposite direction, since most Western votes reflected a division between government support of the boycott and sentiment within the national Olympic committees in favor of competing.

It still isn't completely clear, therefore, who may actually wind up in Moscow. But at its current size the boycott has to be considered something of a failure in terms of what the United States originally had hoped to achieve (i.e., support so widespread that it would force the IOC to change the site, cancel the games, or at least postpone them for a year). Postponement seemed the most likely possibility, and there were reports that both the IOC and the Soviets might go that far if the boycott gained enough steam.

However, this didn't happen, as evidenced by the presence of Great Britain, France, and all of Western Europe with the exception of West Germany, Norway, and the tiny principalities of Liechtenstein and Monaco. The biggest disappointments to the United States among those countries waiting until the last minute to decide were Australia, Spain, and Italy, with all three Olympic committees acting in defiance of their own governments' wishes, as had that of Great Britain earlier. It was thus an ironic twist indeed that the very freedoms that separate the West from the Soviet bloc turned out to be Moscow's greatest ally in attracting a significant number of such nations to the games.

That number reached 82 unofficially over the weekend and is expected to approach 100 when the count is complete. In any event, it seems certain to be greater than that in Montreal, when a boycott by black African nations kept the total under 90.

A particularly sad case in terms of individual athletes is that of Kenya, whose outstanding runners such as Henry Rono have now been put in the position of missing two Olympics in a row — 1976 when they joined the African walkout and this year, when they supported the US position.

One of the boycott's strongest aspects is that it strikes hard at the sport considered by most everyone to be the centerpiece of the games — track and field. The traditional US strength in the men's competition will render these events far less meaningful. And even

though Eastern European athletes have dominated most women's events lately, the absence of Americans and West Germans diminishes interest there too. Not only did women from these countries win quite a few medals in '76, they were expected to do even better this year. US sprinter Evelyn Ashford, for instance, ended years of European domination by winning the 100- and 200- meter dashes in last year's World Cup races to establish herself as a top Olympic threat. Mary Decker, recent indoor mile world record-breaker, had emerged as a leading contender in the middle distances. And with numerous others readying for peak efforts, US women had hoped for their best showing in many years.

Men's swimming medals also will mean little, since the US totally dominated this competition in the '70s. First there were Mark Spitz's seven gold medals at Munich, then in an even more overwhelming team effort at Montreal, the US took 12 of the 13 golds and 27 medals overall, including four 1-2-3 sweeps. US women swimmers, though beaten by the East Germans in all but one race at Montreal, are always up there and were expected to better their seven-medal tally of 1976 — especially with Tracy Caulkins now ranking as one of the world's top competitors. Both the US men and women also traditionally do well in diving.

The luster is also off men's basketball. Before the boycott it loomed as one of the most emotion-charged events of all — sort of a Lake Placid hockey situation in reverse, with an underdog Soviet team counting on its home advantage in a bid to upset the near-invincible Americans, whose only loss ever in Olympic competition came in that still-disputed final to the USSR in Munich.

Boxing also takes a back seat without the Americans, whose 1976 team led by Leon Spinks and Sugar Ray Leonard won five gold medals and captured the fancy of the public.

Men's gymnastics will be watered down, too. The Japanese are traditionally strong in this sport (they won the team gold medal at Montreal), and this year the United States even had a top threat in Kurt Thomas.

Freestyle wrestling, weightlifting, judo, shooting, archery, volleyball, yachting, canoeing, cycling, fencing, and the equestrian competition are some of the other sports where one or more of the boycotting countries historically do well — and which now figure to turn into virtually All-Eastern shows.

US interest will be sharply diminished, of course, not only because there will be no American team but also because there will be no American television coverage to bring the 1980 equivalents of such captivating performances as those turned in by Olga Korbut and Nadia Comaneci.

Other boycotting countries will undoubtedly also show minimal interest. As for the rest of the world, the 1980 Olympics may not have the prestige of some of their predecessors, but they'll still be the only game in town. And despite the official US view, it looks as though they will still be the Olympics, at least to some extent, in most eyes.