

1986 Commonwealth Games

The Year of the Boycott

Aleida van der Woerd
Janelle Stoter
Erica Klyn-Hesselink
PED 201
Dr. J. Byl
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The first Commonwealth Games took place in 1930 after many years of thought went into the idea of bringing athletes of the British Empire together for organized sporting events. The idea originated by Reverend Astley Cooper in 1891 when he suggested a “Pan-Britannic-Pan-Anglican Contest and Festival.”¹ Hamilton, ON, Canada hosted the first events, which included eleven countries, 400 athletes, and six different sports.² The sports included athletics, boxing, lawn bowling, rowing, swimming, and wrestling.³ Since 1930 the games have taken place every four years (except for the years surrounding World War II including 1942 and 1946) and have grown immensely in number of sporting events and participants.

In 1930, the games were known as the “British Empire Games” which ended up changing names two more times before being called the Commonwealth Games. The name was changed in 1950 to “The British Empire and Commonwealth Games” and then again it changed to the “British Commonwealth Games” in 1966. Finally, in 1974 the name was changed to the “Commonwealth Games” and remains as this today.⁴ The Commonwealth Games is a special event considering the historic factor of the games as it is not established on geographic or climatic factors as is common with most other events.⁵ An interesting aspect of the games is that all of the participants (athletes and officials) can communicate together in the common language of English, which has been one of the reasons that the games are often referred to as the “Friendly Games”.⁶

The 1986 Commonwealth Games took place in Edinburgh, Scotland. This was the second time the games were held in Edinburgh, the previous time was in 1970.⁷ These events were the XIII Commonwealth Games. Twenty-six countries participated, and there were 2123 participants – 1662 competitors and 461 officials.⁸ These 1986 games did not follow a similar progression as

previous games, due to the political uncertainties and protests in South Africa known as apartheid¹ (see footnote). There were thirty-two countries that did not participate in the Commonwealth Games as they had planned due to their refusal of apartheid in sports.⁹ Therefore, the XIII Commonwealth Games became known as “The Boycott Games”.¹⁰ Many countries, mostly those nations from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean, did not support the British government’s opposition to give consent against South Africa.¹¹ It is obvious that the games were much smaller in 1986 when considering there were 2773 participants and 57 countries represented in the 1990 Commonwealth Games.¹²

Compared to other Commonwealth Games, the 1986 events in Scotland were not as exciting, but very low key due to the surrounding political events. However, ten sports still took place including track and field, aquatics, badminton, boxing, cycling, lawn bowling, rowing, shooting, weightlifting, and wrestling.¹³ Key performances ranged from athletes of various nations: Lennox Lewis won gold in the super-heavyweight boxing competition for Canada, Heather Oakes won the women’s 100 metre sprint for England, Scottish long distance runner Liz Lynch beat her top competitor by 12 seconds in the women’s 10000 metre run, and Canadian Ben Johnson came first in the men’s 100 meter dash.¹⁴ Another big event in the 1986 Commonwealth Games was the introduction of synchronized swimming into the sporting events.¹⁵ Overall, England, Australia, and Canada dominated in athletes winning gold, silver, and bronze medals (England - 144; Australia - 121; Canada, 115). The country following in highest number of medals included New Zealand with 37 medals and Scotland with 33 medals.¹⁶

¹ Apartheid is a racial segregation between the black and white people in South Africa.

Despite all of the attention away from the XIII Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Scotland as a result of the boycott, the events were successful for those participating and the Games settled back on track in 1990.

In terms of media portrayal, based on the Hamilton Spectator, there was an overwhelming focus on the apartheid boycott surrounding the 1986 Commonwealth Games. This in turn diminished the overall focus of the “friendly” athletic competition regarding the interaction between countries, any outstanding athletes, and the overall results of the Games.

In the week prior to the commencement of the XIII Commonwealth Games, the Hamilton Spectator’s focus is predominantly on the Games becoming a political playground. A brief glance at article titles such as “Mounting Boycott May Turn Games Into All-White Contest”¹⁷, “Multi-Racial Games Now Look Like They Will Be an Almost All-White Affair”¹⁸; and “Commonwealth Games Have Given Britain a Diplomatic and Political Black Eye”¹⁹ seems to predict that the generally multi-racial Commonwealth Games would be an inherently all-white affair.

Commonwealth countries were being strung along like puppets, not only in the political realm, but also due to strong economic ties. This political strife was specifically related to countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone and many others who depended on South African financial assistance to uphold their countries. It had been suggested that South Africa was threatening to remove their financial support to these countries if they chose to participate in the XIII Commonwealth Games. Juan Antonio, President of the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.), commented on the disappointment that the boycott was instituting within the Games after he encountered a similar experience with the Moscow and Los Angeles Olympics. Antonio stated that the “...the big losers are those who are missing out on the Games.”²⁰

The Hamilton Spectator also revealed Canada's involvement with the Games. Canada felt as though uniformity would not be possible pertaining to the boycott issue at hand.²¹ It was Canada's desire to see politics left out of the Games, as it is not intended to act as a publicity stunt for politics. The Commonwealth Games were meant to be complete with tolerance and "friendly relations" amongst countries rather than intolerance of other countries' policies. Canadians felt their role was to avoid siding with specific nations, but to choose Commonwealth over the political boycott. They were considering the future of the Games by acting as a conciliator to regain friendship or goodwill through pleasant behavior. Canada felt as though the Commonwealth Games were becoming "an instrument of coercion of members who do not agree with the majority on the policy question."²² Ivan Dent, President of Canadian Association for Commonwealth Games, said he was proud of Canadian involvement and expected the Canadian team to do well in Edinburgh.

The Games began in Edinburgh, Scotland on Thursday, July 24, 1986. Not only did the Games experience a loss in participants this year, but they also opened the Games with a 4.2 million dollar (CDN) deficit. Much sponsorship for the Games was lost since companies feared offending the boycotting countries. It was anticipated that the opening ceremonies would rekindle the Games spirit that had been dwindling due to the looming boycott. Canada entered the Games with total and absolute support from their government, giving athlete Ben Johnson the honor of carrying Canada's flag for the opening ceremonies.

As the Games progressed, the focus on the boycott was never lost, however, there was an apparent increase of interest in the Hamilton Spectator pertaining to the athletes participating, Canada's rankings, and final competition results. Athletes such as Ben Johnson (100m

sprint/relay)²³, Dave Edge (marathon runner)²⁴, Sharon Bowes and Guy Lorion (riflery)²⁵, and Pam McPherson (swimmer)²⁶ to name a few, were expected to bring in medals. The Canadian swimming, boxing and wrestling teams were all expected to fare well in the Games competition, although still feeling the effects of the boycott.

The Hamilton Spectator also focused on the interests of other countries as well. Outside of Canada's experiences, Bermuda had a brief breakthrough of its own in regard to the ever present boycott. Athlete Bill Trott of Bermuda pleaded John Swan, Premier of the British Colony, saying that he was "...sick of athletes being whipping boys for politicians who saw them as the first option to any knee-jerk reaction to a problem or the need to make the media."²⁷ Trott's impassioned statement had an impact on Swan who finally conceded to the Bermudan athletes and allowed them to participate in the Games despite the boycott. This decision by Swan showed the true meaning of what the Commonwealth Games are intended to be, the Queen followed this decision with a warming statement of how the Games are to be a festival and sport and fellowship. Unbelievably, two days later, Bermuda's government revoked their support to the Bermudan team and flew home all athletes after having won a gold medal in the first two days of competition.²⁸

In view of Canada's rankings, their most prominent competitors were the Australians²⁹ and the British³⁰. Although coaches were content with the Canadian team medals thus far, they were disappointed with the absence of other nations, knowing that their presence would have increased the stature of the Games for all athletes. A direct quote from the Director General of Sports Canada Abby Hoffman, states "I can't think of a day in Canadian Games history that's been as fruitful as today."³¹ Hoffman was referring to the August 2, 1986, the last day of the XIII

Commonwealth Games, when Canada took home sixteen medals in that final day. In the end, Canada finished as the third nation for total number of medals, and first for total number of gold medals. England finished first overall with Australia falling into second place overall.³²

In the week following the Commonwealth Games, the Hamilton Spectator began to focus more on the effects of the boycott, rather than the rankings of the Canadian athletes, let alone any other athlete who participated. Canadian athlete Angela Phibbs views the XIII Commonwealth Games as “just another event”, stating that “it isn’t the Games for me with half of the Commonwealth not here!”³³. Although the Games were disappointing for all participants, Canadian Team Manager, Jim Daly, says “We couldn’t be more pleased with our [Canadian] performance.”³⁴

It was also re-emphasized by the Hamilton Spectator that there was an outstanding 4.2 million dollar (CDN) deficit which was accompanied by the proposed 1 million dollar lawsuit against the Commonwealth Games Association.³⁵ This lawsuit was intended to obtain funds for the rental of the Meadowbank Stadium, the Royal Commonwealth Pool, and advertising which all facilitated a part of the Games. The Hamilton Spectator made it apparent that the boycott was still in existence, but that with the conclusion of the Games there was a cessation of association between the boycott itself and the Games. Any articles now pertaining to the boycott were kept separate with more focus on the specific sanctions and political parties involved.

In conclusion, it can be determined that the Commonwealth Games have progressed in number of participants and events since the first British Empire Games in 1930. However, the 1986 Games did not conform to the patterns from previous years. There is no doubt that the apartheid boycott ruled the XIII Commonwealth Games and seized the majority of the media

focus determined by research utilizing the Hamilton Spectator Newspaper. The Hamilton Spectator had extensive coverage on the political events of apartheid relating to South Africa and various other nations. This resulted in a lack of coverage on Canadian hopefuls, and a diminished representation of competing countries and their athletes. Although the participants were not represented in the Spectator as might have been expected, some athletes did receive media attention due to their medal winnings. The athletes covered were primarily Canadian, both male and female. Even the excitement of a Canadian gold medal for the debut of synchronized swimming as an event did not make the Hamilton Spectator. Unfortunately the XIII Games held an alternative meaning from the typical “friendly games” of previous Commonwealth Games due to political differences among the nations of the British Empire.

Endnotes

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