

*Sports Diplomacy: The Track and Field Meets Between the United States and the Soviet Union, 1958-1965*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

The Cold War was one of the tensest periods in human history, and diplomacy was instrumental in ensuring nuclear war did not break out. One diplomatic method to try to thaw the Cold War was an exchange of athletic competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. These meets ran from 1958 to 1965, and the friendly but competitive spirit between the competing athletes helped to build camaraderie. The analysis of these track meets can be used to attempt to formulate new strategies of diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this thesis, I analyze these track meets, their effects on diplomacy between the United States and the Soviet Union, and if these track meets met their goal of helping to thaw the Cold War.

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## Process Analysis Statement

As I considered what I wanted my final thesis to focus on, I wanted to ensure that it was on a topic that was not within my major. I have spent my college career focused on chemistry and biology, and I wanted to attempt to broaden my horizons with a thesis topic that would both interest me and expand my horizons to new areas of research. As someone who has studied history on his own, I decided to think back on any history thesis topics that my honors professors had mentioned to recall if any of them stuck out to me. As world politics have appeared to break down over the past years, notably with the war in Ukraine, I wanted to take a path to study how world tension was dealt with in the past. The Cold War was one the tensest periods in the past century, and it was the perfect time to test out unique forms of diplomacy. I decided to choose the topic that Dr. Geelhoed posed to us in HONR 199 during my sophomore year: the track meets between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1950's and 1960's.

“Sports Diplomacy: The Track and Field Meets Between the United States and the Soviet Union, 1958-1965” is an analysis of the events that led to the Lacy-Zarubin agreement which led to the first track meet, the events of the track meets themselves including numerous athletes and the relationships built during the meets, and the eventual outcome of the meets including their successes and their failures. The research which makes up the bulk of this thesis was found both through primary sources such as *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times*, and an interview with US female athlete Grace Butcher. I am also one of the first to use *Track and Field News* to collect information on the US-USSR track meets to combine into one paper. *Track and Field News* is considered the primary source of track and field information, and the importance of a compilation of information from this source should not be understated. Various secondary sources were also used to collect various scores for the meets along with background information

on the athletes and commentary on the races. The research process posed some difficulties as many of the track meets analyzed had limited information on them, and many pieces of information had to be compared to form a complete picture. While this was frustrating at times, I was glad to be able to take the first steps towards piecing together a piece of history that people are not likely to know about.

The process of carrying out this thesis has shown me that we can look to the past to understand how our predecessors were able to analyze and execute a unique strategy to attempt to calm one of the tensest periods in world history. I was saddened by the lack of complete material that covers the US-USSR track meets, but researching this topic has helped not only to start the process of compiling full accounts of the track meets but has also reminded me that writing about history is a great way to take lost lessons of the past into the future. This project shines light on an obscure part of history that we can look to so we can start to solve world tensions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Cold War was the world at its most tense moment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tensions between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were growing steadily since the end of World War II, and the world came close to a nuclear war on more than one occasion. The world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has not changed much in the time between the modern day and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. World tensions are reaching highs not seen since the days of the Cold War, and very little, if anything, is being done to ease these tensions to ensure that humanity does not cause its own nuclear destruction.

In the 1950s, both the United States and the Soviet Union realized that a way to ease world tensions needed to be created to decrease the risk of potential war. The Eisenhower administration, concerned about the potential use of nuclear weapons, wanted to find a way to

thaw the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> To do this, exchanges of culture, science, and education were used between the United States and Soviet Union as a medium to ease world tensions. One of the exchanges that took place was an exchange in athletics via a friendly competition between the two world superpowers. The sports medium that was chosen between the superpowers was track and field.<sup>2</sup> Track and field was the medium chosen due to track and field being a universal form of athletic competitions. For example, the Soviet Union would not have done well at basketball and the United States would not have performed well in hockey.



The Lacy-Zarubin Agreement was the pivotal document that allowed for these exchanges of culture, education, and scientific advancements.<sup>3</sup> The two representatives that negotiated the agreement were William S. B. Lacy for the United States and Georgy Zarubin (pictured left) for the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> The document was officially signed on January 27, 1958, and this

document allowed for the US-USSR track meets to officially begin in 1958. The USSR was the first host with the United States track team going to Moscow to begin a series of meets that ran annually from 1958-1968, and the meets continued, while not as regularly, until 1985.<sup>5</sup>

Many new opportunities for international relations were created due to the Lacy-Zarubin agreement, but this document also allowed for some of the biggest changes in culture between



Americans. These track meets, due to the strengths and weaknesses of both the United States and Soviet athletes, competed together in the same event.<sup>6</sup> One female athlete can be seen from the 1964 image of Wilma Rudolph (pictured left).<sup>7</sup> This was revolutionary for women's sports since men and women were considered so physically different in the United States that their competitions were always held separately,

but since the Soviets had their men and women compete together as teams, the United States chose to do this to help ensure that the competition would accommodate both countries.

This paper will cover the track meets from 1958-1965, as this was the time when the track meets were most in the public eye. A paper with comprehensive coverage of these track meets is one of the first of its kind and will provide a unique perspective into ensuring that the world would not be plunged into a nuclear war. It will also include an account of the 1959 track meet from Grace Butcher, one of the female 800-meter runners at the meet. This is also the first time that I am covering something of this topic before and can hopefully bring both an outside perspective onto this unique point in history, but also help to remain as unbiased as possible in both my presentation of the facts of the events and their significance in history.

In 1958, the same year that the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement went into effect, the first US-USSR track meet occurred. The turnaround from the signing of the document to the first track meet was remarkably quick, and this was on purpose. Both the US and the USSR wanted to have the track meet right away to begin the process of easing tensions. The first meet took place at Lenin Stadium in Moscow on July 27, 1958. The atmosphere of the US team, according to Coach George Eastmont, was that of excitement and competitive spirit.<sup>8</sup>

One of the key athletes in the 1958 meet was decathlon world record runner Vasilii Kuznetsov of the USSR. The top United States decathlete, Rafer Johnson, noted that his competition against Kuznetsov was not just a competition between two men, but it was a competition of ideologies. To quote Johnson, "...was not just man-on-man for the unofficial title of World's Greatest Athlete, it was Communism vs. the Free World."<sup>9</sup> At the end of their decathlon, Johnson beat Kuznetsov 8302 points to 7897 points. This was a major upset in the decathlon as the Soviets were better known for their distance runners and endurance, and an even bigger upset since Kuznetsov was the world record holder for the decathlon.<sup>10</sup>

This difference in event specialization can be seen when comparing the other long-distance events vs. the shorter events such as the 400-meter relay and 400-meter hurdles. The United States in the 400-meter relay had a time of 39.6 seconds while the Soviets had a time of 40.3 seconds. The 400-meter hurdles first and second place were Glenn Davis and Joshua Culbreath respectively, with the Soviets athletes Yury Lituyev and Anatoly Yulin coming in third and fourth. Davis was a key athlete in the 1958 meet for the United States. Davis was a star for US short distance running and held many records in the short distance category. Shortly after the US-USSR meet, Davis achieved a world record in the 400-meter hurdles with a time of 49.20

seconds. He also achieved a record in the 400-yard hurdles, 440-yard race, and held two Olympic records in the 400-meter hurdles.<sup>11</sup>

There is one story between two athletes that help to demonstrate the ability of two people



of opposing ideologies to overcome

the boundaries to love. Harold

“Hal” Connolly, a hammer thrower

for the US, competed in this meet

while married Czech Olympic

discus thrower Olga Fikotova

Connolly (both pictured left). Olga

Fikotova competed in this meet as

well, but despite her Czech nationality, she competed on the US team due to her move to the US when she and Connolly married in 1957. Olga Fikotova and Hal Connolly also competed in the 1962 meet on the same team together, and this helped show the world that people are not so different even if they come from countries with opposing ideologies.<sup>12</sup>

Though the competition between the Soviets and the US was fierce, the final score for the US men was 126 while the final score for the USSR men was 109. However, the Soviet women beat the US women 63 to 44. This led to a total score of 172-170 for the Soviets, thus making them the overall winners of the meet.<sup>13</sup> However, though this was a Soviet victory in the meet, the world won a victory as well. This meet was a success as the US and USSR track teams were able to compete in a friendly manner. Two ideologically different enemies came together to ensure that the world took steps towards thawing the Cold War and were able to cheer on their country’s track and field teams.

In 1959, the United States was hosting the joint track meet. This meet was held at



Franklin Field in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on

July 18 and 19 (pictured left). The atmosphere

was again one of competitive spirit instead of

ideologically tension, and the attendance of this

event was noticeably high for the dual meet

series. According to an interview with Grace

Butcher, one of the US female 800-meter

runners, "...I don't recall any negative feelings

about the meet...". Grace went on to discuss how

though the athletes may not have had much

ability to direct communicate with each other

unless a translator was available (pictured left), the

athletes were focused more on the competition than

any issues between the two countries.<sup>14</sup>



The weather at this meet was noted by Grace

and others to be extremely hot which led to the

collapse of Bob Soth in the men's 10,000-meter race.

The collapse occurred 22 laps into the race, and Soth

had to be helped off the field by medical staff. Soth

was not the only runner to collapse due to the

extreme heat of the event. Two other runners,

Aleksey Desyatchikov for the USSR and Max Truex for the US, collapsed after finishing the

race. There was controversy over this race as well. The officials miscounted the laps which caused Desyatchikov to run another lap. Also, Truex caught up to Estonian runner Hubert Parnakivi and passed him, and then Truex ran the additional lap that Desyatchikov ran to come in what should have been second. However, the Soviets protested Truex's second place as they claimed Truex was lapped by Parnakivi halfway into the race. This gave Truex a third-place finish in 33:13, Parnaviki a second place in 32:49, and Desyatchikov in 31:40.6. An important precedent that this race set was that the Soviets not only took athletes from Russia, but from Eastern European countries as well.<sup>16</sup>

This was not the only controversy that swept the 1959 meet. While the US team went along with the Soviets to include the women's scores along with the men's scores to determine the total outcome of the meet, there was more pushback against this at the 1959 meet. According to Grace Butcher, "We, of course, didn't treat our female athletes as being of the same value as the male athletes and scored men and women separately so that our men 'won' and our women 'lost'." Grace says that there were "endless examples of that kind of discrimination back in those days."<sup>16</sup> This helps to demonstrate that though women were allowed to compete in the meets, which was still a huge victory for women, the sexism of the time was still present.

Even though there was controversy in this meet, the races still had plenty of competition. In the 1500-meter race, the US athletes Jim Grelle and Dyrol Burleson narrowly beat the Soviet athletes Yuvgeni Momotkov and Yevgeniy Sokolov. The two US athletes tied for first and second with a time of 3:49.4. However, the Soviets fared much better in the 5000-meter race with Soviet athletes Aleksandr Artinyuk and Pyotr Bolotnikov finishing in first and second respectively with times of 14:17.8 and 14:18.0. The American athletes Bill Dellinger and Lew

Stieglitz came in third and fourth with times almost 30 seconds behind Bolotnikov: 14:48.8 and 15:24.1.<sup>17</sup>

The 1959 meet was the last meet for 2 years. The 1960 meet did not occur due to the Olympics as both countries agreed that the Olympics should take precedence over these track meets. The 1961 meet took place in the Soviet Union as it was its turn to host, but the 1962 meet



is widely considered to be the best meet that the dual meet series had to offer. The 1962 meet occurred at Stanford Stadium in Stanford, California on July 21 and 22, though the time before the meet was perhaps as enjoyable for both sides as the

event itself. Some of the Soviets lived in the private homes of American families, and friendly games of basketball and baseball occurred in the streets and parking lots. The press events were also charming, and the high jumping world- record holder Valery Brumel (pictured left) performed his infamous trick of kicking the net of a basketball net with his foot.<sup>18</sup>

Brumel was one of the key athletes in the meet. He was a high jumping world record holder multiple times over, and he set numerous records. Before the 1962 meet, Brumel set 3 world records in 1961 alone: 2.23, 2.24, and 2.25 meters. At the meet, Brumel set a definitive first place over the other athletes with a jump of 7 feet 5 inches. Brumel was able to accomplish this feat without using modern jumping techniques also. Brumel used the “straddle” method, and was still able to clear a bar that was 16 inches over his head.<sup>19</sup>

Hal Connolly made another notable appearance at this track meet. Connolly was able to beat Soviet athlete Yury Bakarinov in the event with a throw of 231 feet 10 inches in the hammer throw. However, even though the men put on amazing displays of athleticism by accomplishing these two world records, the efforts of the women in the meet should not go unstated. While the American women in the meet did lose 66 to 41, one notable female athlete, Wilma Rudolph, put up an extraordinary performance at the meet. Rudolph managed to pull in two victories for the women's 100-meters and 400-meter relay. This display by Rudolph was amazing not only due to the athletic feat itself, but also because Rudolph was battling infantile paralysis as a child. The athletic display showed to the world that US women were capable of amazing feats of athleticism, and they should be considered able to participate in the events that the men were able to perform in.<sup>20</sup>

The men's total score in the meet was 128 to 107 with the US men taking the victory, and the women's score was 66 to 41 with the Soviet women taking the victory. Though the total score ended up being 173-169 for a Soviet win, neither side's athletes cared about the scores when the competition finished. Two athletes, John Thomas for the US and Viktor Tsybulenko for the USSR, acted as flag bearers and walked to the middle of the stadium. The two shook hands in



the middle before starting to lead their teams out of the stadium, but Tsybulenko had another plan.<sup>20</sup> He turned to Thomas and said that they should go the whole way around the stadium. The

crowd stood and cheered the athletes as they walked around the stadium with Soviet and American linked arm-in-arm. Some in the crowd cried uncontrollably as the athletes walked and eventually left the stadium. The US Marine Corps Band, after playing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “God Bless America,” “Pomp and Circumstance,” and the “State Anthem of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics”, they ran out of music and had to improvise music as the crowd did not want to leave.<sup>21</sup> The camaraderie that was found in this meet would never again be repeated, but this event was a light in the darkness of what would be the most dangerous year in the Cold War.

While the 1958, 1959, and 1962 meets are the most important meets in terms of helping ease diplomatic relations between the US and USSR, the importance of the other meets should not go unnoticed. After the break due to the Olympics, the Soviets hosted the next meet, and it was once again held at Lenin Stadium in Moscow on July 15 and 16, 1961. This meet, unlike the first in 1958, seemingly lacked Soviet hospitality as flight plans to the USSR were disrupted and poorly covered under the guise of a flight show taking place at Moscow Airport. Both sides were still taking the competition extremely seriously however, and three world records, the high jump, long jump, and 4x100 meter relay, were broken at this meet.<sup>22</sup>

The American women put on an impressive show as Wilma Rudolph led her team to a world record in the 4x100 meter relay with a time of 44.3 seconds. In addition to leading her team to a world record, she had an impressive display at the 100-meter sprint by tying the world record of 11.3 seconds. The high jump world record was claimed by Valeriy Brumel with a height of 2.23 meters (7 feet 3.72 inches). This was Brumel’s first world record, but he would set more throughout the meet series until 1964. A Soviet female, Tatyana Shchelkanova, set the long jump world record with a distance of 6.48 meters (21 feet 3.12 inches). Shchelkanova would go

on to set another record in 1962, and then 6.70 meters (21 feet 11.8 inches) before the 1964 Olympics.<sup>23</sup>

The US men put on a good display in the running events with the men taking first and second in both the 800 meter and 1500-meter races. In particular, the 800 meter second and third places came down to 1/10<sup>th</sup> of a second with US runner Jim Dupree squeaking out second over Soviet athlete Vasily Savinkov. Dupree had a time of 1:47.3 while Savinkov came in third narrowly with a time of 1:47.4. The men had trouble in the 5,000- and 10,000-meter distance races with only US athlete Max Truex coming in above third place. Truex ran the 5,000-meters and came in second with a time of 14:05.4. However, despite the US men not performing well in the distance races, the men still beat the Soviets with a score of 124 to 111. However, the Soviet women beat the US women 68 to 39 which led to an overall score of 179 to 163 for the Soviets which made them the winner of the 1961 meet.<sup>24</sup>

The 1963 meet occurred in Moscow. The US distance runners in this meet demonstrated the lack of focus the US had on distance runners compared to the Soviets, and the results of the distance races clearly demonstrated this. The Soviets had the 5000-meter race firmly in their grasp. The Soviet runners, Yuri Tyurin and Leonid Ivanov, left the American runners James Keefe and Jeff Fishback in the dust. Tyurin and Ivanov claimed an easy first and second with times of 13:50.0 and 13:50.4. These times were over 40 seconds faster than Keefe's and Fishback's times of 14:30.0 and 14:51.4. The 10,000-meter race was much the same story. Ivanov also ran in this race with his teammate Boris Yefimov to easily defeat the US athletes Pete McArdle and Leonard Edelen. Ivanov and Yefimov came in first and second place with times of 29:10.2 and 29:25.0 while McArdle's third place time was 20 seconds slower than Yefimov's.<sup>26</sup> McArdle had a time of 29:46.0 and Edelen had a time of 30:04.0.<sup>25</sup>

However, despite the lack of victories in the long-distance races, the Americans had great performances in the other events. The 1500-meter race was firmly in the hands of the United States even as the US athletes Dyrol Burleson and Thomas O'Hara were up against the Soviet veterans Savinkov and Ivan Belitsky. Though the race was much closer than the distance races, Burelson and O'Hara managed to leave a gap of 3 seconds between second and third with their times being 3:41.0 and 3:41.3. Savinkov and Belitsky came in third and fourth place respectively with times of 3:44.8 and 3:45.6. Through victories like this, the US men won with a score of 119 to 114, but the women came up short in this event with the Soviet women winning 75 to 28 for a total Soviet victory of 175 to 167.<sup>26</sup>

The meet in 1964 had major effects on the culture around running in the United States. The meet was held in Los Angeles at the Los Angeles Stadium on July 25 and 26. Sadly, though this meet was held in a city with a bigger population than the 1962 meet, the number of spectators did not reach the number 1962's meet brought in. As usual, the US men put up an amazing performance in the sprints and hurdles. US athlete Henry Carr completed the 100-meter sprint in 10.3 seconds, and John Moon narrowly beat Soviet athlete Edvin Ozolin to claim second place with both athletes having times of 10.7 seconds. The US also swept at the 110-meter hurdles, but Blaine Lindgren came in first over the favored athlete Hayes Jones. Lindgren put up a time of 13.6 seconds to Jones's 13.7 seconds.<sup>27</sup>

However, in stark contrast to previous meets where the Soviets were dominant in long distance events, such as the 10,000-meter race, the US had caught up this year. Gerry Lindgren



(pictured left) was up against experienced Soviet distance runners Nikolay Dutov and Leonid Ivanov. Lindgren stayed with Dutov and Ivanov for the first 15 laps, but then Ivanov established a 20-meter (21.9 yard) lead. However, after 100 yards, Lindgren's coach, Sam Bell, yelled at Lindgren to go around Dutov and catch up to Ivanov if he felt alright. Lindgren, upon hearing this, not only broke free from

Dutov and caught up to Ivanov, but he passed Ivanov and established a 7-yard lead. Lindgren not only led for the rest of the race, but he continued to add distance to his lead every lap until he finished with a time of 29:17.6. Ivanov finished with a time of 29:38.8, while Dutov and the other US athlete John Gutnechet finished with times of 30:51.8 and 31:22.2 respectively. This upset is what likely heralded the beginning of the running craze that swept the US. Lindgren's training was not conventional compared to his fellow athletes as he ran year-round while his competition typically only ran during the fall or spring seasons. This inspired men and women all over the country to begin running year-round as well, and the running craze in America swept through the nation.<sup>28</sup>

Through the US men's stellar performance in running at this meet, the men took home a dominant score of 139 to 97. The US women put up fierce competition against the Soviet

women, but the Soviet women took the win with a score of 59 to 48. However, the total score of the meet was 187 to 156 for the US.<sup>29</sup> This gave the Americans their first overall meet victory in the series.

The final track meet that would occur for 4 years occurred in 1965 in Kiev at Central Stadium. The US men had many injuries, ailments, and perhaps a sense of overconfidence from the 1964 meet that their performance this meet was subpar. Gerry Lindgren could not pull off the same feat he pulled off the previous meet and fell behind Dutov and Ivanov. Dutov and Ivanov came in first and second with times of 28:22.0 and 28:29.8 while Lindgren and Bill Morgan came in third and fourth with times of 29:00.8 and 29:32.0. Lindgren is reported to have had a cold which could have led to his third-place finish, but it should not go unnoticed that Lindgren still ran faster in this meet than 1964 which demonstrates Lindgren's willingness to continue training to become faster and his ability to perform under the worst circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

The American men did not perform too well in the short distance races either. US athlete George Germann managed to secure first place at the 800-meter race, but the other US athlete, Morgan Groth had an injury and limped to the finish line almost 30 seconds behind third place Estonian athlete Rein Tölp. Germann managed to pass Valery Bulyshev in the final turn and took home a time of 1:46.8 to Bulyshev's 1:47.6. Tölp had a time of 1:48.0 while Groth limped in with a time of 2:17.0.<sup>31</sup> Though the US men did not perform well in this short distance race, the US men still put on a good display. In the 1500-meter race, Jim Grelle and Jim Ryun were able to claim first and second over Soviet athletes Ivan Belitsky and Oleg Raiko's third and fourth places. Grelle and Ryun had times of 3:39.2 and 3:40.4 while Byelitsky and Raiko had times of 3:42.0 and 3:44.4.<sup>32</sup> Ryun's appearance at this meet is of particular note due to his fame as being the first high schooler to run a mile in under 4 minutes. Ryun, like Lindgren, wanted to

demonstrate to Americans that getting into running is not an unbreakable barrier, it only takes time and effort.<sup>33</sup>

The 1966 meet was scheduled to be held in Los Angeles, California. However, six days before the meet was to take place, the Soviets abruptly cancelled the meet and ended the successful 8 year streak of meets. In addition to this, the Polish track team that was to compete in Berkeley, California cancelled their scheduled meet. This cancellation made headlines in newspapers, and for good reason. The Soviets and their satellite states cancelled their meets as a protest to the increasing US military action in the Vietnam War. For the first time since the cultural exchange started in 1958, a track meet would not be held, and this set a new precedent for how sports would enter the political games of the era. While the Soviet Union claims that it was their athletes that initiated the boycott of the track meets, Americans believed that it was the Soviet leadership that cancelled the meet to look committed to promoting the spread of communism.<sup>34</sup>

With the Soviet protest of the track meets, the most popular era of the meets ended abruptly. While the track meets did continue in 1969 at the Los Angeles Coliseum, they never grew to the popularity that they saw during the 1958-1965 period. During the time the track meets were in the public eye the most, were the track meets successful as a way of easing Cold War tensions? After two successful meets in 1958 and 1959, Francis Gary Powers was shot down in a U2 spy plane while performing a reconnaissance mission over Soviet airspace on May 1, 1960. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev walked out of the Paris Summit which was a summit between western leaders and Soviet leaders to discuss disarmament. However, the meet in 1961 was still held in Moscow, which demonstrated the power that these meets had in hopefully still ushering in an era of peace when tensions were still high.<sup>35</sup>

In my opinion, these meets were successful in the short term, but I believe that they failed their ultimate objective at easing hostilities. In the days and weeks before and after the meets, the world celebrated the successful meets that let Americans and Soviets meet each other in a friendly competition rather than on the battlefield. However, from the U2 spy plane incident to the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, their ultimate goal of thawing the Cold War did not succeed.<sup>36</sup> However, these track meets have provided the world with a unique history on what worked and what did not in terms of sports diplomacy. The modern world, with tensions rising to heights not seen since the Cold War, should study the past to find a peaceful way forward not only for the benefit of the countries involved, but also for every human on the planet.

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