

Remembering the **XIX** Olympiad Mexico City 1968

Susan Sellers was a young journalist working in Mexico City in 1968. This is her eye-witness account of that historic summer when the Canadian Equestrian Team first captured Olympic gold.

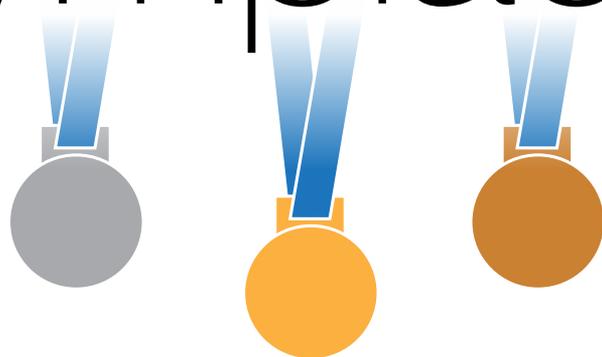
Enveloped in a haze of controversy, the Olympic Games came to Mexico in 1968. Naysayers complained bitterly about the effects of high altitude on athletic performance (Mexico City lies at 2250 metres above sea level) and the folly of holding the Games in a “third world” country – in Latin America, of all places! People worried about accommodations, about the logistics of transportation to the various venues, about sanitary conditions, and about safety issues.

Mayhem and massacre

Massive demonstrations, riots and strikes had rocked Mexico City for months. One of the largest and most terrifying of these demonstrations occurred in the afternoon of August 27th when about a half a million angry students, workers and their supporters marched down the main boulevard, Paseo de la Reforma, waving banners and shouting their discontent with the entrenched regime. I remember leaving my downtown office early, panicked and skittering past tanks, army patrols and police blockades on side streets, trying to make it home to a neighborhood west of the city. Heart in my throat, it took me over three hours to reach the sanctuary of my tiny apartment.

Elsewhere, 1968 had been a tumultuous year too, with student demonstrations in Paris, the unspeakable murders of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy; escalation of the Vietnam War and Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Mexico seethed in discontent all during that spring and summer, culminating in the bloody Tlateloco Massacre on October 2, just ten days before the Games' opening ceremony. Hundreds died as the army opened fire on the estimated 10,000 students, workers and innocent bystanders gathered outside of the Three Cultures public housing complex near downtown Mexico City for what was ostensibly a peaceful student rally.

The military moved in quickly, mopping up, hauling activists and leaders off to jail, while government officials whitewashed the whole affair. Nothing was going to stop those hard-won Olympics from going ahead. As a very young and naïve journalist working for a major publication, I was told to stop probing



The gold medal Canadian show jumping team on their way to collect their medals: (l-r) Jim Elder and The Immigrant, Jim Day and Canadian Club, and Tom Gayford with Big Dee.

facts about the horrendous massacre, for I was “... opening a bottomless can of worms.” Mexican president at the time, Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, eventually shouldered government responsibility for the massacre – but not until well after the Games were over.

A multitude of firsts

Teams and their entourages, reporters, cameramen and other media personnel along with spectators from all over the world began arriving. Some 5,500 athletes from 112 nations participated. Opening ceremonies began as scheduled on October 12th and sports events, along with an amazing cultural exposition, continued for the next two weeks without serious incident to their memorable closure at the Olympic Stadium on October 27th.

These Olympics presented a number of firsts: the first time the Olympic Games were held in a Spanish-speaking country; the first time doping tests were implemented; the first time the two Germanys were represented by one flag, and the inaugural television broadcast in colour throughout the world.

This Olympics is noteworthy also for the 22 track records made. American Bob Beamon leapt 8.90 metres, shaving an astounding half-meter off the previous long jump record that was not bettered for 23 years. Dick Fosbury, also of the US track and field team, won gold in the high jump with his revolutionary "Fosbury Flop" (heading into the jump backwards, head first) which forever changed high jump technique.

It was also the first – and will probably be the last time – a pony competed in the grand prix jumping event. Ridden by the indomitable British rider Marion Coakes, Stroller, a bay gelding of thoroughbred-cross-Connemara ancestry measuring just 14.2 hands high, won the silver medal over one of the biggest Olympic courses ever built. One oxer measured 1.52 metres in front by 1.80 metres behind with a spread of 2.21 metres (6'x5'x7'3"). The wall was set at nearly 1.80 metres (6') and the first jump at 1.52 metres.

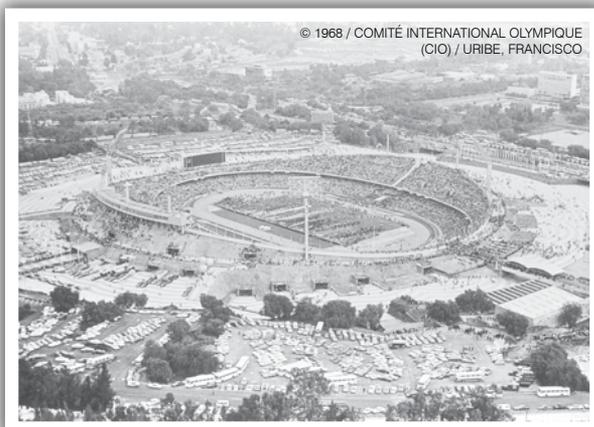
American Bill Steinkraus on Snowbound went clean and won the individual gold, while David Broome representing Great Britain won the bronze. Jim Elder, aboard The Immigrant, finished in a respectable sixth place, the best of the Canadian team which also included Tom Gayford and Jim Day.

Meanwhile, at Avandaro nestled in the mountains west of Mexico City, the Canadian Eventing Team slogged it out to finish in eighth place after the grueling three-day test. Robin Hahn placed ninth individually. Dressage was held in a park near my apartment: the Canadians faced incredibly tough competition from many seasoned European competitors. I remember being mesmerized by the superb Russians on their gorgeous black horses winning team gold, followed by the West Germans and Swiss. The Canadian dressage team of Inez Fischer-Credo, Christilot Hanson-Boylen and Zoltan Sztehlo made a fine showing, finishing seventh in that event.

The politics of sport

The Games were especially memorable for the political actions of several high-profile athletes on the podium. Tommie Smith and John Carlos, African-American teammates and winners of the gold and bronze medals of the 200-metre race, raised their fists in the Black Power salute after receiving their medals as the band played the Star Spangled Banner. I remember holding my breath, watching those two courageous athletes who so effectively turned world attention to the continuing racial discrimination in the US.

Like most in the hushed stadium, I was stunned and feared what would happen next. Smith, Carlos and silver medal winner Australian Peter Norman simply filed off the field and events continued. We later learned that Smith and Carlos were expelled from the Olympic Village and flown back to the States. Only much later did I learn how hard their lives became – often shunned by their own community,



The Olympic Stadium in Mexico, 1968. The months leading up to these Games were violent and tumultuous, while the Games themselves saw their fair share of great sport, broken records and political statements on the podium.



Stroller - the 'winged pony' - flew over the enormous Olympic show jumping courses with Marion Coakes (GBR), winning the individual silver medal. Stroller continued competing after the Olympics, winning some 61 international competitions in all. He died at 36 after 15 years of celebrated retirement.



Jim Elder and the Immigrant.



Dressage riders receiving their individual medals: Gold - Ivan Kizimov (URS, centre) and Ijor; silver - Josef Neckermann (FRG, left) and Mariano; bronze - Reiner Klimke (FRG, right) and Dux. (For you youngsters, FRG referred to the old Federal Republic of Germany, or more commonly, West Germany).

black-listed from athletic competitions and job possibilities. The same athletic boycott happened to Norman, one of Australia's greatest sprinters, who had quietly supported Smith and Carlos by wearing a civil rights badge on the podium.

Vera Caslovska, the celebrated Czech gymnast, protested the Soviet invasion in August of what was then Czechoslovakia by turning her head down and away on the podium while the Soviet anthem played. Nicknamed Mexico's *novia* (sweetheart) because she married long-time boyfriend, track star Josef Odlozil, in Mexico City after winning her four gold and two silver medals, Caslovska was probably the most popular female athlete at the 1968 Games. When she returned to her homeland, although a heroine for her silent protest and athletic achievements, she was forced by the communist regime to retire and was forbidden to speak out in public.

Gold for Canada

Team Canada was represented by 138 athletes wearing snappy red uniforms. They participated in 124 events and 14 different sports while the new Canadian maple leaf flag flew for the first time at an international athletic gathering. In all, Canadians brought home five medals; four in swimming and one gold won by the show jumping team of Tom Gayford, Jim Elder, and Jim Day.



Jim Day with Canadian Club.

At 39, Tom Gayford was the "senior citizen" and captain of the show jumping team. He had already competed in two Olympics (Helsinki 1952 and Rome 1960) riding as a member of the Canadian Three-Day Event team. Jim Elder, 34, also had years of show jumping experience under his belt, including a bronze medal on the Three-Day Event Team at the 1956 Stockholm Olympics. Jim Day was only 22, but already a gutsy competitor who had won the individual gold medal in stadium jumping at the Pan American Games in 1967. This would be Day's first Olympics.

Added together, the horses they rode cost about \$1,900, a far cry from the millions incurred in fielding an Olympic-caliber mount today. In that era, the Canadian government did not finance international-level sports the way it does now, so the team had to raise \$11,000 for chartering the airplane which flew their horses to Mexico City and back to Toronto.

I remember watching the team jumping event in the hot October sun on the last day of competition, just before the closing ceremonies in the Olympic Stadium. The stands were packed with 80,000 enthusiastic spectators; the host nation fielded three experienced competitors who were wildly cheered each time they entered the arena. Missing, however, was their greatest equestrian and team hope, Major Victor Saucedo Carrillo. Sadly, just a month before the Games began, his exceptional grand prix jumper, Toltec, had died of "mysterious causes."

The strong French, German, British, and American teams were all favored and expected to medal. No one had considered the Canadians. Tom Gayford, always a fierce competitor, jumped the torturous course first as the "pathfinder" on Big Dee, a horse that had nearly died from colic two days before the event. Jim Day entered the arena as the team's second rider on Canadian Club. Both riders did well enough to put Canada in second place.

In the third round, penultimate rider Pierre Jacques d'Oriola uncharacteristically made matchsticks of the obstacles, opening the door for a Canadian gold. It all came down to anchor Jim Elder on The Immigrant. As last rider in the event, he knew that if he could make it through this course of 17 jumps with under six knockdowns, the Canadian team would win.

Elder trotted into the ring and cantered to the first jump. The tension was palpable; every equine enthusiast in the stands was holding their breath. They cleared the first obstacle, the second and then came a knockdown at the third. A collective gasp and on to the fourth jump. Elder's helmet popped off, his arms began flapping and the feisty gelding bucked and kicked after clearing the next obstacle. Gordon Atkinson, a former Canadian broadcaster who had watched Elder compete for years, claimed these were all good omens.

Elder and The Immigrant rose to the occasion, clearing every jump except four, insuring the gold medal for the Canadian team. This was the only Canadian equestrian gold in the Olympics until Eric Lamaze and Hickstead won an individual show jumping gold medal at the Beijing Olympics 40 years later.

The XIX Olympiad ended with a spectacular closing ceremony right after the Canadians, French and West Germans received their gold, silver and bronze medals, respectively. The stadium lights went out, and MEXICO 68 was replaced by MUNICH 72 to a sensational display of fireworks. As the national teams marched into the stadium accompanied by 200 Mariachis playing traditional music, pandemonium reigned. Athletes broke ranks and dashed around, hugging each other and the officials; spectators jumped from the stands and joined them in a festive melee. Sombreros were tossed, people shouted, danced and laughed as hundreds of white doves were released and flew high above the stadium lights into the night.

Most agreed that the Olympic Games in Mexico were a stunning success. Athletes broke records, wowed the crowds all over the world; and if they made political protests, they were done peacefully. And for Canada, the very first show jumping team ever sent to the Olympics returned home golden. 🐾




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