



SPORT

Politics in sport: Top 10 moments

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Joe Louis v Max Schmeling, 1938

The political sporting clash to end all political clashes and a nightmare for anyone who claims that sport and politics don't mix.

In the white corner, representing Aryan racial superiority, was the German Schmeling with the evil scumbag Adolf Hitler shouting the odds on his behalf.

And in the other mainly white corner was Negro Joe Louis, representing segregated America. Some wit reckoned it was the only time that a "black man could end up being a white hope".

This was a rematch, Schmeling having shocked Louis two years earlier - a knockout the Nazis naturally put down to skin colour. Louis, with the weight of expectation on his shoulders and even President Roosevelt in his ear, smashed Schmeling at Yankee Stadium before a packed house and a worldwide radio audience.

Unfortunately, Hitler didn't take the hint and poor old Schmeling lost his German hero status.

As it turned out, Schmeling was a hero, having been anti-Nazi to the point he had a Jewish manager and saved a couple of Jewish kids from the Gestapo. He became mates with Louis, who fell on hard times, and the pair's relationship has been portrayed in books and on film. Schmeling helped with the fallen champion's medical bills and was a pallbearer at his funeral.

He became a Coca-Cola king, and lived to the ripe old age of 99. What started out as a vicious political punch-up ended up as a heartwarmer despite the sad demise of Louis.

2.

The Christmas truce soccer match, 1914

German soldiers inspired a brief truce on the Western Front, in which gifts were exchanged with their British enemies and a soccer match was played. The last survivor, a Brit who died in 2000, said the game was loosely structured and may have involved about 50 people

on each side.

The truce and the match can be interpreted as a strike by the poor soldiers against their war-mongering leaders, and against war itself.

They may also have wanted a few moments of joy in their dreadful existence. An uptight British officer brought the match, which lasted less than an hour, to an end and hostilities resumed within a couple of hours.

Of course, a film has been made based on this premise. The only suggestion of a score that I could find was a German victory by 3-2. It would be no surprise, given what has happened since, if they had won on penalties.

3.

Hungary v USSR, water polo, 1956

This Melbourne Olympics contest is not only the most famous water polo match in history, but maybe the only famous one. Like all great sports stories, it led to a Hollywood (documentary) film, which, and I'm only guessing here, is the most famous Hollywood water polo film in history. The background was the Hungarian uprising against the Soviets and such was the violence that it became known as the "Blood in the Water" match.

The Hungarians sledged the Russians, and it was all on for young and old. Spectators - including Hungarian immigrants - crowded around and spat at the Russians in a blatant breach of standard pool etiquette. Frustrated and humiliated under Soviet rule, and on red alert fearing for friends and family back in Hungary, the Hungarian players got in a few blows of revenge and who can blame them. But they also used the distraction for a tactical advantage, as their star scorer Ervin Zador later revealed, in seeking to restore some pride for a country under the hammer and sickle.

The Hungarians won the match and went on to claim yet another water polo gold medal.

4.

Jackie Robinson enters baseball's major leagues, 1947

Another famous case involving American civil rights. America has a marvellous gift for storytelling - iconic moments are not left to fade into history and are instead spread far and wide.

Robinson broke the baseball racial barrier when he played his first game for the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was a brilliant baseballer but had to face taunts from opponents, and even reticence among some teammates. America, the "land of the free", is a place of contradictions.

The pursuit of a buck can help break down barriers. A prime example - the charismatic Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight boxing champion, struggled to get an initial title fight because this prized crown was the reserve of white men. A big purse persuaded Canadian Tommy Burns to put his title on the line against Johnson in Australia in 1908. This was another famous political moment in sport, although Johnson's victory caused an outcry in white communities and led to demands for a white man to reclaim the crown.

5.

Jesse Owens, Olympics 1936

What a story. It starts, ostensibly, in Berlin, but takes more significant shape in the good old US of A. Owens, the brilliant sprinter and long jumper, won four gold medals under the eye of Adolf Hitler. It was often claimed that Hitler, who in private poured scorn on black athletes as primitive subhumans, snubbed Owens. However, Owens said he got a good reception from the Germans, that it was President Roosevelt who ignored him. Ironically, American commercial opportunities were denied Owens because of his race but Adi Dassler - the German who set up the adidas company - got Owens to wear his shoes at the Olympics.

Life really took off for Owens after the Olympics, including a thrilling stint pumping gas and getting nailed for tax evasion. He even raced horses - as in racing against horses. But he seemed unable to escape the constraints of his upbringing and ended up appearing, or being portrayed as, a naive man caught between two worlds who failed to fight for the black cause. The political flashpoints Owens became involved in were not of his doing, and he didn't want much to do with them.

6.

All Blacks v Springboks, rugby, 1981

A terrific stoush between old friends and the rugby wasn't bad either. This was mate against mate at its finest as New Zealand was split by the South Africans' visit. The second tour match against Waikato was called off because of an aerial protest threat, and the tour finished with a light aeroplane pilot dropping flour bombs on the third test match at Eden Park.

That's the spirit - you can call off a provincial match because a light plane might crash the venue but a deciding test match is a completely different matter. It would be nice to think that the anti-apartheid protests may have played a part in hastening the end of an ugly regime, but Rob Muldoon's government hung on for a few more years. On a more optimistic note, the passionate uprisings surely helped hasten the end of the wicked apartheid system in South Africa.

Rugby took an image battering for a while but that was rectified by the 1987 World Cup.

7.

Kathrine Switzer and the marathon, 1967

Our very own Switzer ... well, that's stretching the truth: Switzer is an American who lives in Wellington for six months of the year. She struck a famous blow for women's rights by becoming the first registered woman runner to compete in the Boston Marathon.

Women weren't allowed to do really strenuous things back then, apart from looking after the brats all day. Women certainly weren't allowed to go marathon running in the 1960s, which is where Switzer stepped in by secretly entering the 1967 Boston race.

The race organiser, Jock Semple, tried to manhandle her out of the race but her boyfriend - with the nickname of Big - was also in the race and came to the rescue. The story made headlines, as did the pictures of Semple versus Runner 261. Switzer finished the race with battered, bloody feet. She went on to a fine career, including an unimpeded win in the 1974 New York Marathon.

8.

Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Olympics, 1968

No politics-in-sport list would be complete without including the gloved-fist Black Power salutes by these two American sprinters on the Olympic medal dais at Mexico in 1968. Winner Smith raised his right fist, and Carlos his left. Aussie Peter Norman, the 200m silver medallist, is often credited for the moral support he gave, although to all outward appearances he just stood there, fists at his side.

The usual death threats ensued for Smith and Carlos, but they have lived to this very day to tell the tale.

Unfortunately, the right fist and the left fist no longer know what the other is doing, as they bicker about who thought of the protest and whether Carlos threw the race so Smith could win.

Carlos also blamed the suicide of his first wife on the pressures he faced after the Olympics.

This adds up to an unfortunate sequel, but their protest was an iconic and pivotal moment in civil rights history.

As to the Carlos claim that he threw the race - if this was indeed the case, why did he let the Aussie come second?

This one has yet to make it in Hollywood.

9.

Maradona's World Cup 'hand of God' goal against England, 1986

The hardest number in these lists: who do you choose and who do you leave out? There were plenty of contenders left. I've plumped for Maradona's quarter-final miracle in Mexico, an Argentinian riposte to the Falklands War.

Cheating aside, it was a great leap by the diminutive Diego, who got higher than England's big goalkeeper Peter Shilton. Maradona put the goal down to his head and divine intervention - but 'fessed up to the hand ball later.

He also took God out of the equation, and said he used his hand to score as revenge for the Falklands War defeat. Maradona was a sensational footballer but he lacks a bit of consistency in the storytelling department.

10.

Muhammad Ali... and Vietnam, 1967

The boxer born Cassius Clay took a black Muslim name, refused to fight in Vietnam, and lost the world crown for his troubles. Sport's most famous mouth also had a remarkable instinct and courage. Ali had to survive a conviction, prison and the predictable taunts of being a traitor. But what his critics called draft dodging became a famous anti-war message.

... and the Ohio River: The did he or didn't he on this list. Ali claimed to have thrown his 1960 Olympic gold medal in the drink as an anti-racist gesture. Given that no one was on hand to witness this, it always appeared to be an odd gesture from sport's ultimate showman and Ali eventually did a u-turn, claiming the medal had been lost.