

Fair Play: Allied Sporting History in Berlin

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Abstract

The Olympic year 2012 will be all about sports – reason enough for the Allied Museum to explore the sporting history of the Allies in Berlin. The collective experience of sports played an important role in creating closer relations between the Western powers and Berliners in the postwar period. This makes it all the more surprising that no special exhibition has yet addressed this fascinating aspect of Allied history.

Shortly after the war, the community-building effect of sports was already being used to cement the alliance and to deepen relations between the victorious powers. The “Interallied Little Olympics” of 1945 or the “Inter Allied Games” one year later gave soldiers the opportunity to meet each other and develop a feeling for their mission in Germany. Sports also helped to surmount cultural and linguistic barriers. Inter-Allied competitions continued to be organized later in the Allied occupation, too, in order to foster relations between the Western powers.

Sporting competition not only served the purposes of communication, but also offered participants an opportunity to compare their achievements and build self-confidence. For soldiers, sports were mainly a pleasurable activity that took their minds off everyday barracks life. Moreover, national sports such as cricket or baseball meant permanent ties to home. This also applied to families and children who played the same sports and participated in competitions in the Western zones of occupation. The fact that they regularly had to cross the Soviet zone of occupation to do so, thereby affirming rights of access to Berlin, was a positive side-effect.

Beyond the history of Allied sports, the exhibition will also document the central role of sports as a link to the people of Berlin. Playing sports together meant meeting one another and reducing mutual suspicions in a relaxed atmosphere. After the ban on fraternization was lifted in October 1945 it was mainly the Americans who emphasized sports especially in youth work as part of reeducation. The German Youth Activities programs (GYA) also offered a wide range of sporting activities. The intention was to convey team spirit, fairness, and respect and accelerate the democratization process.

As relations between the Western powers and Berliners became more relaxed, sporting relationships also grew more intensive. Thus increasing numbers of Allied sports clubs also opened their doors to German sports enthusiasts. Sometimes the Allies organized popular sporting events in the city. The half marathon “25 km de Berlin,” for example, which still has a firm place on the Berlin sporting calendar today under the name “BIG 25,” was started by the French in 1981. Thus the diversity of Berlin’s present-day sporting landscape still reveals traces of the Allied enthusiasm for sports. Many clubs consciously continue the legacy of the Western powers and promote communication and exchange between the various cultures.

The exhibition at the Allied Museum will follow these traces and show the rich diversity of Allied sporting history in Berlin. Beyond leisure and fitness training, sports were and are always political, a means of creating community and identity and at the same time of distinguishing oneself from others. Sports can break down boundaries and facilitate understanding. Thus the history of Allied sports in Berlin is also a history of rapprochement.