

Kings Get In Free

Olympic Torch Lights Up Wembley Stadium

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ENGLAND'S BIGGEST track meet in forty years opened this afternoon with a pageant of nationalism, an orgy of oratory and a paroxysm of symbolism but no running, jumping, or bulging of the biceps. The recorded casualties were a half-dozen Boy Scouts and Sea Scouts who fainted under the malevolent sun which beat upon Wembley Stadium with padded brutality.

King George VI, perspiring royally in his gold-braided sailor suit, and his missus, Queen Elizabeth, in some yards of pale blue fluff with a large, floppy hat to match, got in on passes (no tax or service charge). About eighty-two thousand cash customers paid up to two guineas apiece (\$8.40) to watch the stately and magnificent rinky-dink that set off the games of the fourteenth Olympiad.

The King earned his free ticket, though. The gentry and the costers who bought theirs had only to sit and swelter in the great, steaming, concrete cauldron. His Majesty had to stand at rigid, humid attention for fifty minutes, which is the equivalent of clutching a strap on the East Side subway from Parkchester to Fourteenth Street; he had to salute the flags of fifty-nine nations carried past the royal box. He had to make a sixteen-word speech. Never were the hardships of the monarch business more amply demonstrated although, admittedly, the hours and salary are usually very good.

Besides sitting and sweltering, the cash trade beat sweaty palms red, yowled and chanted and waved flags as the musclemen of their countries marched by. For let there be no mistake about it, these

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Olympics are the amateur sporting world's clearest expression of nationalism.

It was the desire of the games' founder, it says here in the program, that "the spirit of international comity be advanced by the celebration of chivalrous and peaceful contests," and Lord Burghley, the reformed Olympic hurdler who is chairman of the Organizing Committee which runs these games, spoke of "kindling a torch of that ageless and heart-felt prayer of mankind for peace and good will among men." But when their teams marched in, partisans hollered just as fight fans do for Rocky Graziano, who is no career torch-kindler.

They made clear the sound and healthy point that in the carnival of international competition which the ensuing fortnight will see, the idea is going to be, as it should be, to knock the spots off the other guy.

Wembley Stadium at two o'clock was a cooked gaboon of concrete, its gray slopes packed, its currycombed infield a vivid green encircled by a track of bright red clay. In one section of seats, the massed bands of His Majesty's Brigade of Guards blared and oompahed. Across the arena, about two-fifteen, a great covey of Olympic brass lined up in the sweaty elegance of silk hats and frock coats.

At two-forty-five exactly (in the king-and-emperor business, punctuality is of the essence) His Majesty came hiking out of a tunnel under the stands, shook hands with Burghley and the president of the International Olympic Committee, a silk-hatted Swede named J. Sigfrid Edström. With these two trailing him, the King then strolled the length of the waxworks, pumping hands with each exhibit. Amid a moderate patter of handclapping, he walked up to the royal box and sat at his spouse's left, directly under the tote board for Wembley's dog races.

Out of a runway at the east end of the oval came a Boy Scout with bare knees and a sign reading "Greece." Being the original Olympic nation, Greece's team led the march. The Greeks in the front ranks were all bald, obviously committeemen, caterers, and coaches. Their big silken flag, a white cross on a blue field, dipped as it passed the royal box. The King, standing, snapped to salute.

Thereafter, he remained standing as the flags passed in alphabetical order, never once shifting to relieve the heat on his royal bunions, saluting even those flags which were not dipped. About a half-dozen standards were not lowered, either because of national rules, or because their bearers hadn't been sufficiently rehearsed, or as a form of political criticism. Ireland's flag was half-dipped; grudgingly might be an accurate adverb. Colombia's didn't go down, but its bearer snapped into a majestic goose-step as he passed. By and large, the teams marched better than baseball squads do at the flag-raising on opening day.

The first wholehearted burst of applause came for Australia, first of the United Kingdom affiliates to show. However, the loudest enthusiasm manifested between A and E was inspired by the Danish team, whose clique set off a volley of yells and upped with a regular flurry of red Danish flags with their white crosses. Subsequently, this section boisterously hailed all Scandinavians—the Finns, Norwegians, Swedes, and even Iceland's team. As each such group appeared, the rooters gave off a chant that sounded, from this seat, like "Yale, Yale, Yale."

There were big teams and little. Panama was represented by one guy in a Panama hat, not Lloyd LaBeach, the sprinter. India's team wore baby-blue burnouses. New Zealand's had what looked like smoking jackets. The Swiss wore caps like lady softball players. The United States got a restrained hand; the last man in our ranks halted to snap the King's picture.

Well, the King finally got to sit down. He looked on while trumpeters trumpeted, speakers spoke, and attendants released a great mess of caged pigeons, which zoomed and swooped over eighty-two thousand unprotected skulls. The billing promised seven thousand pigeons, or one for every twelfth head, but it looked like maybe two thousand. Chances are the brass didn't dare turn loose that many squab in this hungry nation. Almost immediately twenty-one guns boomed. Sounded like first day of the duck season off Little Tail Point in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Now a tall young blond in his underwear burst through the entrance and circled the track, bearing aloft the Olympic torch, a blinding magnesium sparkler which hurt the eyes. Theoretically, the torch had been lighted on Mt. Olympus and delivered by Western Union boys running in relays across Europe, with a Ford truck following with a spare torch in case the real McCoy went out. Actually, the torch that appeared here was a ringer, a special oversize job carried on the last relay from a suburb like Bay Ridge.

The torch-bearer dashed up into the stands, brandished his torch on high and dropped it into a tall concrete bird bath—from which red flame arose. That flame will burn throughout these games.

The crowd made with the tonsils. It was hokum. It was pure Hollywood. But it was good. You had to like it.