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Carson Cunningham, American Hoops: U.S. Men's Olympic Basketball from Berlin to Beijing

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Carson Cunningham, *American Hoops: U.S. Men's Olympic Basketball from Berlin to Beijing*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009). Pp. xix + 508, index, 21 illustrations, 17 tables. \$40.00 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-8032-2293-9.

What do satellite television, Nike, the Grateful Dead, communism, and the Phillips Oil Company have in common? They have all had a profound effect on the history of the men's Olympic basketball tournament. Carson Cunningham explains how these and other cultural entities have played a part in the evolution of the United States men's Olympic basketball team – a team by which other nations have traditionally modelled their elite programs.

In *American Hoops: U.S. Men's Olympic Basketball from Berlin to Beijing*, Cunningham presents a view of the evolution of basketball and our social world through the prestigious Olympic men's hardwood (or, in the 1936 Berlin Games, "dirt and gravel court" (23)) tournament. He argues that Olympic men's basketball is a lens through which one can understand the changing world. From 1936 when the United States beat Canada 19-8 for the gold medal in an outdoor court with a rain-soaked ball, to 1952 when the Soviet Union first entered the tournament, to 1972 when the United States first lost an Olympic basketball game, to 1992 when the U.S. "Dream Team" of National Basketball Association (NBA) stars won gold by an average of 43.8 points per game (343), to 2008 when the U.S. "Redeem Team" reclaimed America's seat at the throne of global basketball, Olympic basketball has not only reflected but also affected cultural change in an increasingly globalized world.

Cunningham's contribution to the current knowledge of sport history is most notable through his depiction of the evolution of American Olympic basketball. Originally, the Amateur Athletic Union governed the national hoops organization. Over time, the National Collegiate Athletic Association attained a controlling stake. More recently, however, the NBA has ceded dominion over the happenings of American Olympic basketball.

Cunningham also astutely explores the U.S. Olympic basketball team's relationship with the rest of the world. From the early Olympic basketball tournaments, the author argues that American opponents found themselves pushing for rule changes to limit American dominance, searching for domestic prototypes of American star players, copying American strategies and tactics, and buying into the appeal of American basketball culture. Cunningham's chapters on these early tournaments and their global ramifications – especially behind the Iron Curtain – prepare the readers for his analysis of what has transpired in more recent Olympiads. That is, his early chapters are fascinating in themselves with tales of player fundraising, administrative jealousy, poor travel conditions, awkward diplomacy, and incapable opponents. The influence that these early quadrennial tournaments had on successive Olympiads clearly values his less historical and more journalistic expositions on more recent Olympic tournaments.

Throughout each of Cunningham's chapters, though, a flowing thesis smoothly unfolds. American Olympic basketball teams have been the archetype for hoops teams around the world just as American technology, media, fashion, sports equipment, and commerce have been at the fore of global developments. The author explains that, while the 1992 Dream Team that dominated its competition in Barcelona justifiably receives most of the credit for escalating the convergence of basketball with other American cultural entities to a global market, this had been happening to a lesser degree throughout the proceedings of the previous Olympic basketball tournaments. After the 1956 and 1960 Games, national teams scoured their populations for agile and versatile athletes like Bill Russell and Oscar Robertson that made the game more fast-paced and fun to watch. During the next two Olympiads, opponents of the U.S. squad envied their

well-made and sport-specific Converse basketball sneakers – especially those players under communist regimes that had limited access to them. In the 1970s, American television networks increasingly transmitted Olympic events to media outlets across the world, even though the broadcasts included a heavy American bias. In the 1980s, many of the emerging basketball-crazed countries sent their coaches to study under American basketball experts or invited U.S. teams to play exhibitions against their elite players, hoping to learn the secrets of American basketball success.

Cunningham weaves his multi-layered storylines as both a historian and a basketball expert. Thus, his analysis of the changing world through American Olympic basketball does not cloud his main subject – namely, basketball. As a basketball player, coach, and historian, astutely identifies the forces that moulded the game into what it is today. More impressively to his overall work, though, his basketball experiences have enabled him to broaden his research methods beyond conventional sources. Cunningham supplements traditional historiographical research methods such as news and archival material with personal interviews with many of the icons about whom he is writing. Indeed, personal stories from such figures as Pete Newell, Larry Brown, Clyde Lovellette, Dick Pound, John Wooden, and others add previously unknown, impressive, interesting, and hard-to-find details to his historical narrative.

The revelations that come from Cunningham’s insightful interviews with many of the giants in American basketball and sport around the world enable the reader to understand the fact that *American Hoops* is primarily a book about basketball in the changing world between 1936 and 2008. Basketball fans and scholars will appreciate how Cunningham weaves his understanding of the game into his prose with assessments of the personnel and tactical decisions that have made the United States’ Olympic basketball teams among the most powerful sporting entities. Those interested in the basketball’s influence on globalization will appreciate the breadth of topics covered in this manuscript. Corporate sponsors, technology, and the media have both affected and been affected by Olympic basketball. Those looking for a descriptive and innovative history of the last seventeen Olympiads may be disappointed, for this book carves relatively few new notches into the knowledge tree of Olympic history. Outside of personal revelations from his interviewees and basketball-related insights, little of the Olympic history in this text is new, even though it is interesting and well-researched nonetheless. The author uses Olympic history simply to contextualize his revelations about U.S. Olympic hoops teams. Regardless, Cunningham has produced a comprehensive history that insightfully chronicles the evolution of the United States Olympic basketball team in a changing world.

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