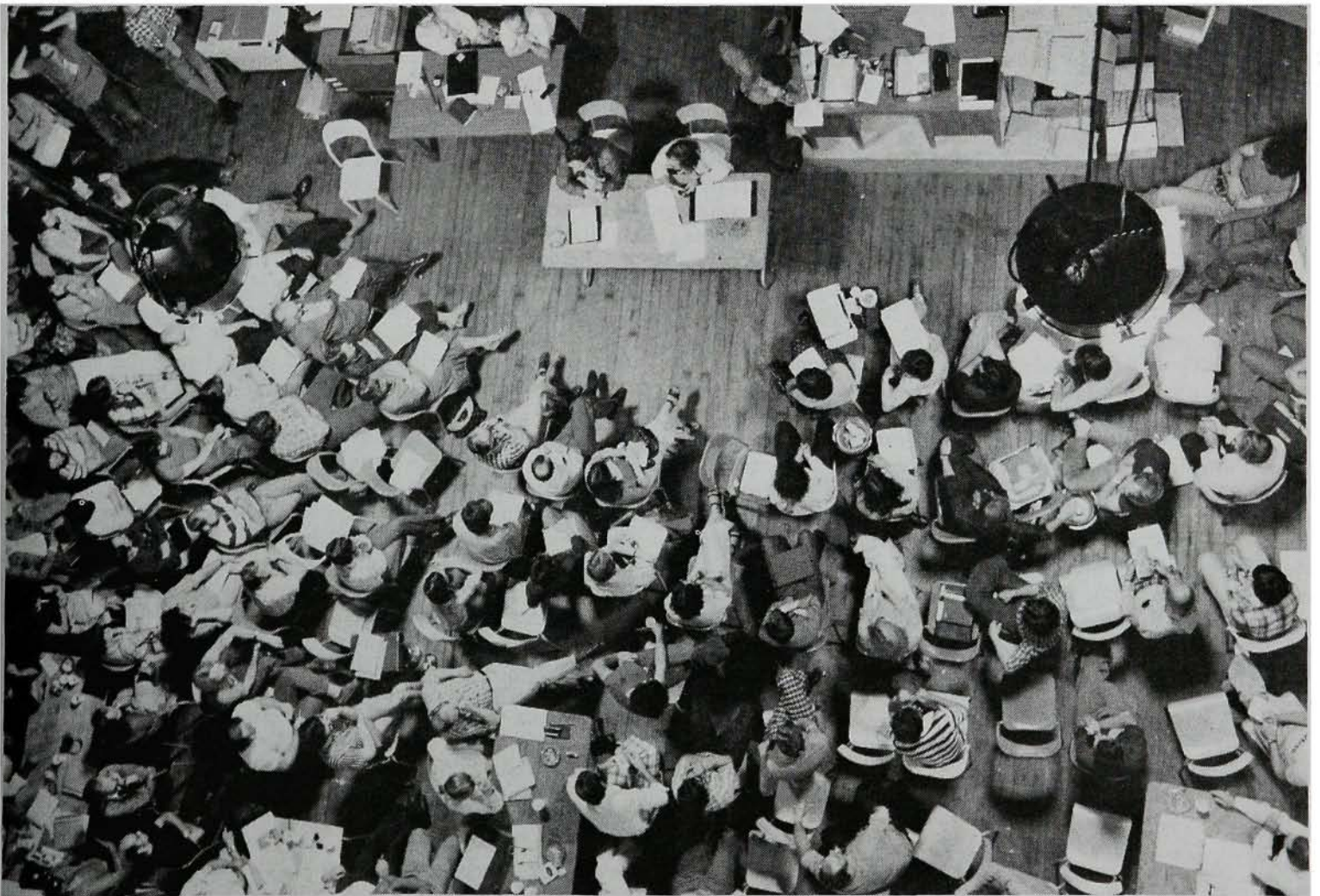


The critical reaction to the official Olympic film has been exceedingly varied; sportsmen tend to tear it to pieces while film critics find it an interesting and oftentimes successful document. Tom Waugh and John Reeves give us their critical reactions below while Werner Nold, the film's editor, tells us about his work and his problems in coping with so complex a film.

# an olympian effort



Getting part of the production crew together for the Olympic film

# 1) Demystifying the hype

by Thomas Waugh

It might have seemed that the *cinéma-direct* and the Olympics would be ill-matched bedfellows: a medium which can pick up the minutest nuance of everyday behavior would surely be at a loss in a world of mass regimentation, split-second timing, and security guards.

But the official Olympics film, currently reaching a wide audience in both its English and French versions, has succeeded splendidly in refuting this logic, and has provided us with a surprisingly fresh view of this grandiose and expensive spectacle which Jean Drapeau forced down our throats last summer.

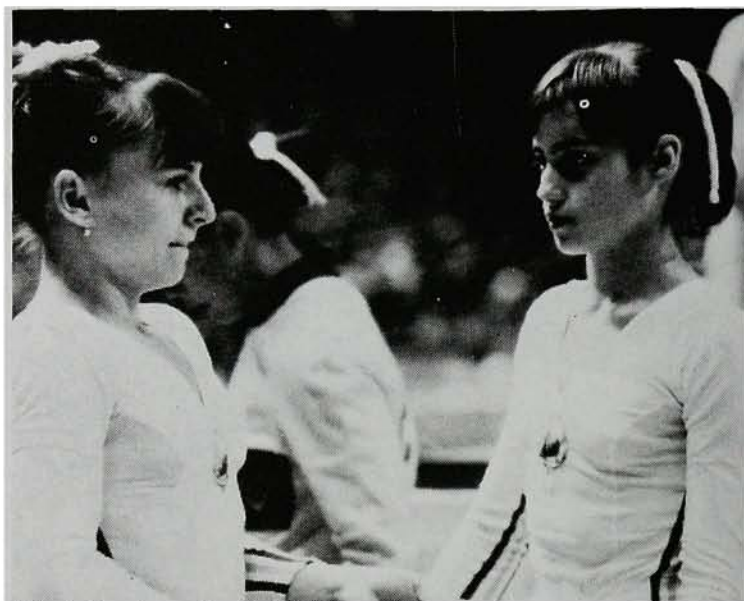
Jean-Claude Labrecque, who has shot some of the best examples of the Quebec tradition of the *direct* as well as two finely tuned but underrated features, **Les smattes** and **Les vautours**, headed the huge production team, and clearly knew what he was looking for within this labyrinthine complex of events. He decided, fortunately, to give scant attention to the ceremonial and the official aspects of the Games, and to concentrate instead on "the human dimension," as he puts it, following at close range a selected number of athletes (plus a trainer or two) during their participation in the events.

This strategy has paid off handsomely. Instead of showing us a lot of lifeless scores and records that everybody saw on TV anyway, Labrecque has introduced us to real people, closely observed in their everyday styles and rhythms. His cameras have found real emotion and insight – and humor thankfully – in the endless stretches of time between photo-finishes where the sportscasters see only empty spaces to fill up.

In giving attention to the quiver of the lip of a sprinter who never makes it past the trials, or to the crack in the brittle façade of a television announcer, or to the spontaneous birds-on-a-wire choreography of a row of six listless Montreal policemen, Labrecque and his team restore a kind of balance to the warped universe of big-time sports, and begin to cut through all of the nonsense that the Olympics have come to mean. Of course, they couldn't go too far: after all COJO and the NFB were handling the million-dollar-plus budget. It's obvious that the real political meaning of the Games for Quebec and Canada is something they couldn't begin to approach.

One of the things they did get away with, I think, is challenging the mythology of "ennobling competition." For the most part, the athletes come across as uptight, pampered, egotistical, usually victimized, and often boring people (and sometimes downright obnoxious, as in a scene where Bruce Jenner berates an attendant who obviously doesn't understand what's going on). This makes the rare exceptions discovered by the cameras all the more exciting, Avilov, for example, the Soviet decathlon contender, who seems to be the only person in the whole complex at ease and enjoying himself, sprawling around the stadium with his legs all over the place listening to "Windmills of your Mind" on his pocket transistor.

The coaches and the trainers as a rule come across even worse than the athletes – some of the film's most successful comic moments are at the expense of those tense,



The ladies shone, but briefly

ridiculous men from Eastern Europe for whom it's all out of proportion.

In general, there's a feeling that these people, athletes and trainers alike, are trapped, expending themselves unquestioningly, masochistically, in the performance of absurd rituals demanded of them by a system and a value structure that is out of all control. The camera gives the impression, for example, while eavesdropping on an argument between the Soviet gymnast Nelli Kim and her coach (she explodes and says she's fed up with the Olympics as a whole) that the coach is under real pressure to find a way to humor and manipulate his teenaged charge in order to coax the best performance from her, in spite of herself, and that her integrity as a woman is largely irrelevant.

In short, the filmmakers have succeeded in showing us a very intricate political and emotional landscape indeed where the thrill of victory and all of that business occupy a very insignificant place.

Now for the bad news, as they say. **The Games of the XXI Olympiad** is the most insidiously sexist document to come out of the NFB in quite some time.

Some of those dynamite feminist filmmakers up there at the Board should have taken Labrecque and crew aside in the corridor one day and explained a thing or two (the small number of women on the 168 member production team, mostly pretty far down the hierarchy, apparently weren't enough). For instance, that a film about an event which institutionalizes nineteenth-century conceptions of sexual roles doesn't have to perpetuate those conceptions. That it might be possible to subvert or at least question some of those ideals which are inscribed into the very structure of the Games, ideals of manhood as strength, endurance and soldierly skills, ideals of womanhood as grace, nimbleness, and sensitivity.

Instead, Labrecque and his team – and the editors apparently share a large part of the blame – more or less play along, accepting things the way they are. They ape the media, for example, in their shocking underrepresentation

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Thomas Waugh is a film professor at Concordia University in Montreal whose special interest is the documentary form.

## 2) The right to take liberties

an interview with Werner Nold by Jean-Pierre Tadros

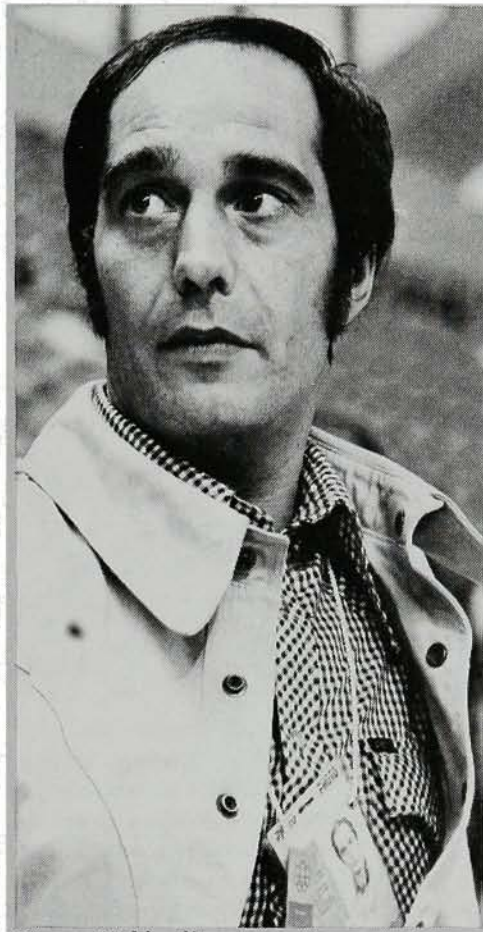
*The making of the film **Games of the XXI Olympiad** was a great collective effort. This is true in the making of all films, but in this case, "collective" meant that 168 people were involved. One must not forget, either, that there were only 15 days in which to shoot, and absolutely no possibility of retakes. The monumental proportions of the task cannot be denied.*

*An equally important task, one we tend to underestimate, is that of editing. Obviously, editing is an acquired skill and its seemingly mechanical aspect is apt to make us think that both the editor and the editing of a film are only an extension of the director's ability. This is often the case; however, a good editor and thus, good editing, can make all the difference. A wise director keeps this in mind when choosing the editor for his film.*

*In the case of the film on the Montreal Olympic Games, the editor's task could be resumed by these two basic jobs: to assemble a well-structured, 2-hour film out of 200 hours of shooting, and to do this within 6 months. The contract between the NFB and COJO in fact stipulated that a final copy of the film be ready by January of this year - exactly 6 months after the opening of the Games in Montreal.*

*These, then, were the two simple and precise obligations which put tremendous pressure on Werner Nold, the chief editor of the film. As he puts it, the editing represented a "titanic effort", and this, without exaggeration. Quite the contrary.*

*Werner Nold was well prepared because of his excellent formation and his long years of experience. He was born in Switzerland in 1933. After studying photography for three years, he came to Montreal and went to work for Film-Photography Service of the Quebec Government (which was to become the Office du film du Québec, and finally the Direction générale du cinéma et de l'audiovisuel). He was the cameraman for two consecutive series made for television and later worked for Nova Films in Quebec City, both as cameraman and editor. However, he quickly opted for editing.*



Werner Nold, editor

*In 1960, Werner Nold joined the National Film Board where he eventually edited some 50 shorts and features. He worked with Gilles Carle (**La vie heureuse de Leopold Z**), Pierre Perrault and Michel Brault (**Pour la suite du monde**), Michel Brault (**Entre la mer et l'eau douce**), Marcel Carrière (**Saint-Denis dans le temps; O.K... Laliberté; Ti-Mine, Bernie pis la gang**), Francis Mankiewicz (**Le temps d'une chasse**) and Jacques Godbout (**IXE-13; La gammick**). He also edited **60 cycles** by Jean-Claude Labrecque.*

*In February, 1976, he was named chief editor of the official Olympic film. How did it happen? How did he meet the challenge? What exactly did it mean in terms of editing? The following are extracts taken from an interview with him just after the first official screening of the Olympic film in Montreal, April 21. Werner Nold answers some of our questions:*

I have worked for the National Film Board since 1960 and I know pretty well how it operates. I know too when you put cameras into the hands of some 100 people how much footage I'm going to get. In fact, I estimated 400,000 feet and got exactly 331,608.

At first, I thought I'd be able to work with National Film Board editors. The difficulty there was that they were my peers, my equals, and there was no reason for them to consider me their boss. They were prepared to work with me as colleagues, but this would have meant hours of discussing and consulting with each other... If this happened, I couldn't guarantee that the film would get done on time or that I would have a rough-cut of 45 hours ready for November.

In this kind of undertaking, it's important that someone be able to make decisions, that someone assume responsibility. So I said to myself, I've been given responsibility for the film and I'm going to accept it. I sought out some former assistants of mine who were working in the private sector, and who had become editors. Working with them proved to be easy because they were more flexible than National Film Board editors and because they were tremendously efficient. They were François Labonté, Alain Sauvé, Claude Langlois and Gérald Vansier.

*Once the games were over, how did you proceed with the editing work?*

I invented a methodology; I distributed the work about evenly among the editors, taking into account their preference in sports and their relationships with the different filmmakers. For example, François Labonté knew Marcel Carrière well and I thought that they would work well together. By the same token, Alain Sauvé worked on the footage shot by George Dufaux. The others got more varied material.

I applied a Germanic military discipline. It was terrible. I feel bad just thinking of it. I had to though or we wouldn't have been able to go fast enough.



The men were racing ahead

of the women's events, an imbalance of four or five to one, by my reckoning.

But it is not only a question of this disproportion, bewildering and insulting as it is. From over 180,000 feet of rushes, the footage chosen inevitably tends to perpetuate the most anachronistic and vicious of sexual stereotypes. Is it an accident, for example, that the two major women's events portrayed in the film a women's handball game, and the gymnastic competition, both suggest by their selection of material and cutting the "bitchy", unsportsmanlike (for want of a better word) behavior that Hollywood has taught us to expect from women?

When the editors cut from Nadia Comaneci's sylph-like tour de force to outgoing champion Olga Korbut's expressions of intense concentration and nervousness (while the soundtrack tells us that her "reign" is over, a loaded word if ever there was one) and still continues the applause for Nadia on the soundtrack, Olga's look comes across like daggers. Then, mercilessly, we are given the event in which Olga makes a momentary slip. It's Bette Davis and Anne Baxter all over again, direct from the editing table. Hollywood itself couldn't have given us a better fiction of the desperate, cut-throat rivalry between an older woman and her young usurper. The men, of course, are all presented as jovial jocks, slapping victorious rivals on the back in the best British public school manner (or kissing and hugging in the East European manner) — there isn't a sorehead in the lot.

I suspect that the main reason that the Soviet — G.D.R. women's handball game got into the film (aside from the fact that the Soviet coach periodically turns bright red, stretches his neck in the most peculiar manner, and has to be restrained) is that the women are particularly nasty to each other on the court, and a penalty shot scene was available to round things out. We all know how cinematic nasty women are.

Without wanting to take away from the ineffable beauty of the women gymnasts' achievement, I would even go so far as to guess at a reason why so much attention is given to the women's gymnastic events in this film and in the media in general; straight male filmmakers and television sportscasters seem to be embarrassed and repelled by the hefty, broad-shouldered women of the athletics field (of whom we are barely permitted a telephoto glimpse in the film) and in contrast find petite, vivacious Nadia... well, sexy.

The worst is still to come. I'm willing to put up with a few gratuitous cutaways to appealing women spectators from time to time. I know sometimes it's hard to resist. However, I really wanted to throw up when the climactic coverage of the decathlon event, won by plastic blonde American Bruce Jenner, was intercut with footage of plastic blonde Mrs. Bruce Jenner in the stands, hoarsely cheering and flag-waving him on. Again pure Hollywood. Cheerleader and jock. Barbie and Ken dolls. Her breasts jostling with significance beneath her T-shirt as blatantly as his muscles beneath his. That prolonged intercutting of passive female spectator and active male athlete compresses an entire oppressive system of sexual roles into one apparently innocuous sequence.

Don't ever let anyone tell you how Riefenstahl puts across the ideals of Nazi civilization beneath the charming surface of her *Olympia* without mentioning that Labrecque et al. have come up with a film no less loaded with various deformed ideals of ours.

If the filmmakers are to be commended for demystifying so much of Olympics hype with their penetration of "the human dimension" of the Games, it is to be profoundly regretted that they didn't go a few steps further and tackle some of the sexual mythology also floating around inside that expensive, unfinished stadium. □

Once the material was distributed, we had to screen it, which I did. 7 hours a day, 5 days a week. At that rate, a person can go crazy. It was a gigantic task.

After screening the rushes, I had to start choosing the material and deciding what I would keep and what I would eliminate. It wasn't easy, but it had to be done. From the start I had had long discussions with Jean-Claude Labrecque whom I had known for 20 years. I had edited most of Marcel Carrière's films, and had known George Dufaux for 20 years too. With their consent, I started making a selection on a strictly intuitive basis. It was in keeping with the general mandate we had given ourselves.

Instinctively, I eliminated about 70% of the footage. That way, it was easier to go and get a shot that was needed, than to carry around 70% more material just in case...

Sometimes, the selection was easy. You sort of end up saying to yourself "This is a great shot so I'll take it, this one too", or, "I won't take this because I've got another shot which is just as good or better". Once in a while you get panicky, especially after 3 hours of screening when you still haven't chosen anything. At this point, you really have to force yourself not to quit, and to persevere.

After that, I spent 1½ to 2 hours every day looking at the selected, cleaned material with each of the editors. We would talk about the form a certain sequence would have. I found myself miming things I wanted to see. You had to invent a language for each of the editors: with Sauvé I tried to articulate the editing to go with Jenner and Avilov, and so on.

The next day I would go in to see what they had done, and to make adjustments if they were necessary. When I felt I had something, not necessarily definitive, but serious enough and without considering length, I would call Labrecque. We would discuss the sequence and would decide on another form if it was called for.

Three months later, we had put 4½ hours of film together. The work of my assistants was now completed, with the exception of that of François Labonté, who stayed on with me. At that point, I started to bring the film down to 2 hours. That was it. It was a very difficult time. I have already said that there is a 6-month gap in my life. It's true. There are 6 months that simply



Director Jean-Claude Labrecque

don't exist anymore. I don't know where they went.

*One realizes that editing that sort of material is far from easy, especially when you are limited by the same movements being repeated over and over again – running, jumping, swimming, throwing. It would be interesting to know how you got around the demands made upon you because the film was sponsored.*

You simply have to fight. After a screening, if the COJO told me that such and such a sport was missing, I'd say to myself, "I just have to add it". At the same time, I was forced to think of what I would take out. The film couldn't be longer than two hours. So I'd start to defend my own choices.

To be sure, there were no judo sequences in the film. But if I had to add one, I would have to cut an equivalent sequence out, and it isn't always possible to do that without destroying the balance that you want to achieve. For example, if much more had been taken out of the Hungarian pentathlon sequence, it wouldn't have had any reason for being there at all. You just have to stay within certain limits. This is what was hard – not destroying everything just because of one addition.

So I fought to keep the Hungarian sequences and not to add another sport. That was finally accepted, but that doesn't mean I didn't make compromises. I had to. An experienced eye can see that the shots of little boats and little canoes here and there were added to please COJO. But this doesn't spoil the whole, and

even adds a few moments of leisure to the film.

When you think about it, I worked under rather unusual circumstances.

*Let's go back to this instinctive, or intuitive selection you made after the first screenings. Besides quality, what guided your choice.*

It was simple. In my opinion, what distinguishes this film from other Olympic films is that it was made by the National Film Board. It consisted of taking a 16mm camera, plugging it into a Nagra, and getting as close to people as possible with it. Whenever I found something the least bit human, I pounced on it. That's why a knock-out punch was less important than the two boxers' attitude and sportsmanship towards each other at the end of the match.

That's the way it was. Basically, sports don't interest me that much; what interests me is a human being. And if the film means so much to me today, it isn't because of the sports, but because of those people who participated in them. I wanted to get the human side of these athletes – the real person.

Also, concerning the editing, I think it's important to mention that in recent years I have worked on more fiction films than documentaries. This helped a lot; it helped me give the film more continuity. I feel that I succeeded in making the track in the stadium really look oval, something I've never seen in other Olympic films. And if I did succeed, it's because of the fiction film, not the documentary.

The fact too, that there were so many cameras at the stadium helped me to treat the film as "fiction", something you can't normally do. In a documentary, you work with one camera, and are forced to use ellipses. You take the good moments when they come. With this film, I always had another angle from another camera. I could re-situate myself that way, and I do think that in the finished film you never feel lost when looking at a scene.

There are no cut-aways in the film. When you see spectators sitting in the stands, they are somehow linked to what is going on below. In this way the public is integrated with the action. There is a continuity I'm quite proud of.

*In getting so close to the individual, one finishes by losing sight of the whole context. Is it fair to say that this is a weakness in the film?*

# 3) Shallower, emptier, weaker

by John Reeves

The National Film Board's film of the Montreal Olympic Games is a disaster. A disaster with redeeming moments. But far too few of them.

Let me begin by admitting that there never has been and never will be a good *comprehensive* film of an Olympic Games. And that is no fault of the filmmakers'; the Games are so large that no one film could do them justice. Even Leni Riefenstahl's recourse to two films, instead of one, scratched the surface. After all, almost every event (there are very few turkeys) comes as close to perfection as the best competition in the world can push it. A comprehensive film would have to cover everything, including significant semi-finals and heats, in every discipline; the world's best divers have just as much right to coverage as the world's best gymnasts, in terms of the quality of their achievement.

If the Games ever were to be filmed comprehensively, the footage would have to be divided into several films; in fact, each sport would need a separate film, made by specialists and aimed at the fans of that sport. The market for such films would be vast, and it is surprising that no one has tapped it. It is not, perhaps, surprising that the International Olympic Committee has never organized anything along these lines, for it is not composed of men responsive to such notions as the importance of history. But it is surprising that the International Federations which govern the Olympic sports have not seized the opportunity to record the proceedings for posterity and at the same time turn a tidy profit.

However, it's never been done. And because it hasn't, a serious dilemma faces the filmmaker who is asked to make an Olympic film of average length. He has to decide whether to address specialists, or generalists, or the lay public. Each course has its dangers. To devote two hours to one sport, on a specialist level, will alienate all who are not devotees of that sport. To devote eight quarter-hours to eight sports, on a semi-specialist level, assumes that sports fans tend to be catholic in their interests, and this is seldom true. To ignore special knowledge or special interest, for the lay public, is likely to irritate many potential ticket-buyers by diluting the quality of the reportage.

Nevertheless, the last course, properly pursued, is probably the wise one. Filming the Games as a sports film can only work well if done at enormous length for several expert audiences. To satisfy one general audience, it's necessary to film the Games as a human interest story. If this is done well, the result will satisfy not only lay viewers, but specialised viewers too. The latter will gladly forego the specialised coverage, which they have access to in print anyway, if the film offers real insights into the athletic version of the human condition. Sports, at the top level, are not merely a matter of physical strength and skill; they make huge demands on the athlete's mental, emotional, and spiritual resources; they involve the whole person. In other words, they cannot be understood unless they are seen as a vocation, like higher mathematics, or music, or religion, or even filmmaking.

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*John Reeves: by avocation a long-distance runner and former holder of all Canadian veterans' records from the half-mile to the ten-mile; by profession a broadcaster and writer, winner of the Italia Prize for Radio Drama in 1959. Publications: three plays in print, one LP of verse.*



The human dimension, in pain and victory



And that is why the NFB film of the Montreal Olympics is a disaster. Having elected to film the Games as a human interest story, the NFB directors failed completely to get inside the skin of almost every athlete they shot. Indeed, they can hardly be said to have tried to do so. Let me document this by appraising their coverage of some of these people.

Lasse Viren. This Finnish runner epitomises the spirit of the Olympics. At Munich he won the 5,000 metres and the 10,000 metres. At Montreal he became the first man in history to repeat this feat and followed it up with a superb run in the marathon. Between the Olympiads he fell into relative obscurity, partly through injury and partly through a wish to save himself for the next Games. Shortly before Montreal he began to re-emerge as a force to be reckoned

If what you say is true, it doesn't really bother me very much. Everybody had a chance to see the actual events on television. In fact, we purposely wanted to show something other than what had been shown on television.

That was our point of view, but it was unavoidable. Everybody accepted it. We were even predisposed through our formation. And that way, we avoided showing again what everyone had already seen.

*During the film, there are many little sequences which are only there because they are unusual... bizarre. Some might say that the editing was facile, that you were just using the bizarre events for their own sake.*

Oh! Let's just say we used them to relax the viewer. The Hungarian sequence, for instance is good, but heavy. So we alleviated the feeling by using somewhat provocative and unexpected situations. Naturally, one has to be careful when using this technique. But these little moments do constitute a part of life.

I don't think it can be called voyeurism - merely observation. That's what makes it interesting.

*Was it very difficult to give the film a certain rhythm?*

Yes, and I suppose it's a problem with all films. Suppose you have someone crossing the screen in six steps. Even if we cut the shot in half, you have someone taking 3 steps, but still at the same speed, and therefore just as slowly. Others often tell you that you should cut more, and tighten up the editing, that way obtaining a faster rhythm. But it doesn't work that way. All you do that way is shorten the length of the film. The rhythm is in the images; it never varies.

You can't save a film through editing. There isn't an editor in the world who has ever saved a film. Some have ruined films, but that isn't quite the same thing. An editor doesn't save a film; he either edits it well, or not so well, or else he just plain spoils it.

*Did you adapt André Gagnon's music to the marathon sequence or did the music itself just fit in well there?*

At the very beginning, I had gotten all the marathon material together into a half hour sequence. I showed it to Gagnon to give him an idea of what it was about, and he



Getting a shot at the cyclers

then composed his music. I then edited the sequence from the music, and obtained a very precise rhythm because of it. It is easier to give musical rhythm to images, than to force a musician to invent a rhythm which is perfectly adapted to the edited film.

Now, according to the original script, the marathon sequence was to reappear at different intervals throughout the film as a leitmotiv. I tried to do it that way but it didn't work. Whenever the marathon scene appeared, the film just seemed to block. We realised that we couldn't use the marathon sequences in this way, and so placed them at the beginning and the end of the film instead.

Actually, we tried 6 different structures for the film. In one, there was even a comparative study of the pentathlon and decathlon events. On top of that, there was the marathon which kept popping up periodically. That didn't work out either, especially since the contrast between Jenner and the Hungarians was so great that we couldn't get any cohesiveness.

*With so many records beat in swimming, it is surprising to see that this event occupies so little space in the film.*

I can explain that quite easily. And now I'll give you a really personal opinion - that it is terrible to make films with only 2 or 3 heads sticking out of the water. I find that awful. We did have a lot of material on the swimming events, but it would have been too complicated to use.

In fact, it was difficult during the shoot as well as during the editing. All you had were these heads on the water. I found it far more interesting at the end of the competition when they embraced and congratulated each other.

And there was something else. The noise inside the Olympic swim-

ming pool was deafening. The synchronised sound was inaudible and that didn't help any.

*Since we are on the subject of what is missing in the film, why is it that women seem to occupy so little time. Was this done consciously?*

Firstly, I'm not sure it's true. The part with the gymnasts Nelli Kim, Nadia Comaneci and Olga Korbut constitutes a fairly big chunk of the film. There were also the swimming and handball sequences... However, it's true that we had to eliminate some of the women's sequences, and I think I can explain why.

For example, we had a whole sequence of the women's high-jump. That would have been the third time we used the high-jump in the film what with the decathlon event and Gregg Joy. We preferred to keep the one with Gregg Joy, first because he won, and second, because we also had Ferragne in it. That sequence also showed the audience at the stadium spontaneously and unanimously rising to their feet with joy (no pun intended).

We also had a women's 400 metre relay. But to me, the men's 400 metre relay was a historical moment in filmmaking, and again we had to make a choice. I don't believe it was a prejudice, but simply a case of putting filmmaking before any other consideration. Cinema had priority. - that was the only thing I had in mind.

*Through the editing, you sometimes created situations that didn't really exist. For instance, there was the relationship between Jenner and Avilov at the stadium, and the surprising way it was portrayed. What was the truth behind that?*

I think we had the right to take certain liberties. ORTO prepared and showed on television what really happened and I don't think it could have been done better. Since a factual account exists, I felt free to somewhat alter the reality.

It's true that when you show Avilov relaxed and listening to his transistor radio, and then suddenly cut to Jenner who is not looking particularly happy, something is obviously being implied. That's what cinema is all about.

One mustn't forget that editing is also creating, fabricating emotions. I think I succeeded in doing that in the film on the Montreal Olympic Games. □

with. And behind this re-emergence lay months of dedication and discipline which only a very big man would be able to endure – in this case, a complex and private man, with an engaging sense of humour and a sensible refusal to take himself too seriously. After Munich his fellow-townsmen wanted to erect a statue to him and he was appalled at the idea, so they pooled their skills (their skills, not their money – here and there in the world there is still some direct contact with reality) and built him a house, at the edge of the forest where he loves to train. This is the man, an iron and gentle soul, who came to Montreal and massacred the 10,000 metre field in the fastest time of the year. He then faced as fine a field of 5,000 metre men as has ever been assembled, and controlled the first half of the race from the front, like a virtuoso conductor taking charge of a major orchestra, and took everything they could throw at him in the final lap, one of the supreme final laps ever run, and calmly finished first while they fell about the track in his wake. The *next day*, in the first marathon of his life he finished fifth in a time which has not yet been beaten this year. And what does the NFB give us of Lasse Viren? Nothing of the 10,000 metres, one shot of his marathon finish, in which he goes unidentified and nothing is said of his achievement, and the last two laps of his 5,000 metres. Well and good. Those two laps were the crown of his achievement and could serve to sum him up; you can say a lot in two minutes, visually and on the sound-track. Visually, the NFB spent half its time on shots of a sports commentator getting excited *about* the race, instead of showing us the race. It even omitted the available footage of that extraordinary moment, coming off the last turn, when all the runners still in contention were stripped down to their last shred of will. This showed most eloquently in their faces and their bodies, and all of them caved in except the one great man, who had foxed them into a slowed-up tempo half-way through and now was running them into the ground. On the sound-track, the NFB had nothing to say except that the winning time was slow! It is excusable, in a non-specialist film, that there should be no thorough analysis of Viren's tactics. It is inexcusable that there should be no glimpse of his heart and mind; the more so since the avowed aim of the director was "to make the film in such a way that at the end you will have met some people and will have grown to like them".

At the end you will have spent a substantial length of time with the decathlon, the modern pentathlon, the women's gymnastics, the heavyweight weight-lifting, the bicycle team-pursuit, and the men's 100 metre dash; you will have spent a little, uninformative time with the marathon. You will have seen cut-away shots of sailing, rowing, canoeing, and boxing. And you will have had token minutes, illuminating neither character nor achievement, with the men's 400 metre track relay, the men's volleyball, the men's long-distance bicycle race, the men's high jump, the men's 110 metre hurdles, the men's 1500 metre run, the men's backstroke, the men's tower dive, the men's sabre, the men's 400 metre run, the women's freestyle, the women's 200 metre dash, and the women's team-handball. This last sequence, in a film slightly inattentive to female athletes, seemed devoted to the proposition that women have just about made the grade as mindless and brutal jocks.

Ultimately, the film must stand or fall on its six major sequences. One of these is extremely successful, four are mediocre, and one is a grievous failure.

The successful one is a portrait of Vasily Alexeev, the Soviet weightlifter. Virtually nothing is said on the sound-track, by him or about him, but a tremendous amount is conveyed nevertheless. Here, one feels, is a man willing to say of his life, "I am what I do", and what he does comes

across as an awesome contest between the law of gravity and one man's willingness to challenge it with the sum of himself. The director and the editor have achieved this portrait by the simplest means, by allowing the material to speak for itself, and by not hurrying it; the long passages in which Alexeev psychs himself up to attack the bar are extraordinarily moving – close-up at its best.

Close-up at its worst was demonstrated in the modern pentathlon coverage. Here, in the fencing event, the director saw fit to rely on head-and-shoulders shots of the contestants: no shots of the weapons. The coverage, as a whole, followed the Hungarian team through the five events, indicated that the result fell disappointingly short of the team's expectations, and purported to explore the members' experiences and feelings in some depth. Depth? This is what we see. We see failure; a rider falls off a horse, and the coach tears his hair. We see competence in swimming and shooting and fencing. We see anxiety, and emotional and physical stress. And we see inexperience; a runner stops five yards short of the finish line. All of which adds up to a collection of shallow snippets. We have not "met some people and... grown to like them". But we have met a superficial journalist.

The same shallowness mars the sequences devoted to the bicycling, the sprinting, and the gymnastics. Of these three sequences, that of the gymnastics is the most nearly acceptable, but this is almost entirely because of the charming qualities of the activity itself. The two girl-stars, Nelli Kim and Nadia Comaneci, remain throughout enigmas as people, and the one moment of true human contact is with Olga Korbut in defeat, but it's arguable that even this depends for its effectiveness on our memories of her in Munich, outside this film. There is a similar, and successful, moment of wistful poignancy in the sprint sequence when the injured Cuban runner Sylvio Leonard has to watch his event from the sidelines. This shot would have had compelling validity if it had climaxed a sequence in which we had gotten to know Leonard well and to care about him. Since we weren't enabled to do that, the shot amounts to no more

The exhilaration of winning





than exploitation, the willingness to use a man's injury and disappointment for the sake of pathos. A similar charge has to be laid against the bicycling sequence. Apart from its technical inefficiency (the excitement of a team-pursuit race is lost if the camera doesn't take a long enough shot to show you both teams simultaneously), the sequence made no attempt to portray the cyclists as people, to explore their individual make-up and their superb functioning as a team; when one of them, in victory, broke down and cried, the effect on the viewer is of a tasteless invasion of privacy.

Blunders of that sort, usually, are caused by two things: insensitivity to people, and lack of respect for the material. Both of these faults are extensively present in the sequence devoted to the decathlon, which ought to have been, and could have been, a marvellous film achievement. The decathlon is a gruelling ten-event competition, held on two successive days, in which men strive to excel in widely differing track-and-field disciplines. They jump, they throw, they pole-vault, they hurdle, and they run. The winner is rightly called "the world's best all-round athlete". The winner at Montreal was Bruce Jenner of the United States. The runner-up was Nikolay Avilov of the Soviet Union. It was obvious in advance that one of these two, barring injury, would win, more probably Jenner. The NFB realised this, and assigned a crew to follow Jenner around full time during and between events. This was time which could have been better spent beforehand. If the NFB had followed Jenner around in California during his final preparatory year, it might have been possible to grasp what goes into the making of a champion decathlete, not on the technical level, for that would be a specialist's film, but on the human level. And this was a human story worth a whole film.

Athletic excellence, of this magnitude and diversity, can only be attained by living the disciplines 24 hours a day 365 days a year. For Jenner, living in a society which cares nothing for excellence unless it's packaged as showbiz, this meant months, extending into years, of total dependency on his wife. She earned the necessities of life while he trained and trained and trained and trained and trained and trained and trained and trained and trained at his ten necessities of greatness. Small wonder she was overwrought at Montreal, to the point of near hysteria. It was her gold medal almost as much as his; without her love and understanding and support he couldn't have won. But we were denied any knowledge of these things by the NFB. To anyone not knowing them, the shots of her breaking down must seem scarcely distinguishable from the partisan emotionalism of the more obnoxious kind of hockey parent. And that is a deep injustice to a loving wife. Moreover, to anyone not knowing them, there must be a feeling of cynicism and almost repellent flippancy when Jenner finishes up turning his back on the decathlon for ever, with apparent unconcern. That is a deep injustice to a loving husband, who had vowed to devote his time from then on to earning all the household money and enabling his lady to pursue an avocation of her own. It takes a director insensitive to drama to omit, as Labrecque did, the astounding episode in the pole-vault when Jenner "passed" heights dangerously near to his personal best. It takes a director insensitive to sport to omit, as Labrecque did, any examination of how a man can drive himself to achieving a lifetime best on the two days when it counts. But most of all it takes a director insensitive to people to omit, as Labrecque did, the story of the Jenner marriage from the story of the Jenner medal. That is a failure of the heart, and not easily forgiven.

The motto of the Olympics is "Citius, altius, fortius": "Faster, higher, stronger". The verdict on this film, compared with what it might have been and compared with even the worst of the previous Olympic films, has to be "Shallower, emptier, weaker". □



The Wesscam in action

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Jacques Robert

### **Director**

Jean-Claude Labrecque

### **Associate Directors**

Jean Beaudin

Marcel Carrière

Georges Dufaux

### **Film Editor**

Werner Nold

### **Second Unit Directors**

André Bélanger

Alain Chartrand

Paul Cowan

### **1st Assistant Director**

René Pothier

### **Production Manager**

Ashley Murray

### **Production Administrator**

Louise Carré

### **Technical Directors - Camera**

Jean-Pierre Lachapelle

Jean Roy

### **Technical Directors - Sound**

Serge Beauchemin

Jacques Drouin

Claude Pelletier

### **Location Managers**

Lise Abastado

Marie-Andrée Brouillard

Michel Dandavino

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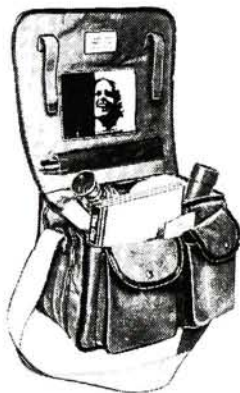
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