

David Wallechinsky

“Pass the Wallechinsky” doesn’t exactly roll off one’s tongue, but it is a phrase frequently heard this time of year. Beginning with the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, writer-historian David Wallechinsky has produced the bible of the Olympic Games — a fact-filled compendium of stats, analysis, and anecdotes that has become a must-have for journalists and Olympic aficionados. The most current version — “The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics: Athens 2004 Edition” (Sportclassic) — has just been published.

Wallechinsky grew up in Los Angeles. He attended Palisades High, about which he co-wrote (with Michael Medved) the book “What Really Happened to the Class of ‘65.” He attributes his avid interest in the Olympic Games to his father, Irving Wallace. The famed novelist took his son to the 1960 Rome Olympic Games; they watched boxing and swimming events, as well as the Opening Ceremony. “It was fantastic,” Wallechinsky remembers.

Now 56-years-old, Wallechinsky has written 16 non-Olympic books. He also writes athlete biographies for the IOC website. He lives with his family in Santa Monica and Provence, France. SportsLetter caught up with him as he was getting ready for the Athens Olympic Games.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: You co-wrote the original “Book of Lists.” Now it seems as if every newspaper and magazine publishes a list of some sort; Fox Sports Net even has a half-hour show that is just about lists. What do you think of this?

David Wallechinsky: We had no idea it would be like this. I now have a collection of 150 other book of lists - the U.S. Marine Corps book of lists, the Beatles book of lists, and so on. It started when my father and I wrote "The People's Almanac." One chapter was lists, and it was really popular. It just seemed like, in an era of information overload, that the list was a simple way of organizing and bringing together disparate information. I guess we were right.

SL: Do you trace your Olympic interest to the 1960 Rome Games?

DW: It goes before that. I do trace it to my father even before he took me to Rome. As much as he loved baseball and football, he loved the Olympics. He gave me books about the history of the Olympics and raised me with the stories of [marathoner] Dorando Pietri and others. I couldn't get enough of that. Also, my father had been the ghostwriter for Jim Thorpe and showed me memorabilia that Jim Thorpe gave him.

I was 12-years-old when we went to Rome. Seeing the Opening Ceremonies was my favorite — it made a huge impression. I also remember going to see boxing. One of the boxers was Italian, and all of the fans in the arena were chanting for him: "Lo Popolo."

SL: When did you next attend the Olympic Games?

DW: I didn't go again until 1984. I had signed up to be part of a tour to go to the 1980 Games. After the boycott was announced, it happened that a part of the world that my wife and I had hoped to visit [northwestern China] opened up for Westerners for the first time. So we decided to go there instead.

SL: When did you first get the idea to write a comprehensive history of the Olympic Games?

DW: In 1960, on the way to Rome, we stopped off in London, I found the British Olympic Association report on four previous Olympics, prepared by Harold Abrahams. It had statistics on the top and stories about the Games on the bottom, and I just soaked it up.

As 1984 approached, I knew two things: the Olympics were going to be in my hometown and I finally had the time to do the research. I was excited because I knew that this book did not exist. I started thinking about it in 1980 and compiling information in 1981. I had a lot of problems finding a publisher. When I finally got a deal, I worked on it non-stop for 2 1/2 years. The first one came out in the winter of 1983 because, at the time, the book included information about both the Winter and the Summer Games.

SL: What was the biggest obstacle?

DW: In the early years, pulling together all of the statistics was extremely difficult. Getting event information for the early Games was just a mess. The IOC did not have a library. The USOC kept its records in a converted depot. The British Olympic Committee had its information in a shed with ivy growing on the wall. I came across a fantastic scrapbook complete with articles from newspapers and magazines about the 1908 Games — and they had no idea they had it.

Now, thanks to Dr. Bill Mallon [one of the founders of the International Society of Olympic Historians], my job has gotten easier. What Bill did over the years was to complete two remarkable projects. The first was, in the absence of Official Reports of the Olympic Games in the period between 1896–1920, he created unofficial official reports. And in the years when there were Official Reports — in 1908 and 1912 — he went back and corrected mistakes and published them with McFarland.

The second project was to head an all-volunteer group to compile a date base of all of the names of all of the competitors, as far as we know. That is now possession of the IOC. It was completed in 2002.

SL: So the mission is complete?

DW: Well, it's ongoing because you turn up new information all the time. And we still have mysteries to solve. The most enduring one involves the [pair-oared shell with coxswain] rowing event at the 1900 Paris Olympics. The Dutch pair realized that they were slower than the French team because the French were using children as coxes. Their boat was lighter. So the Dutch kicked off their heavy cox, grabbed a French kid off the

street, and won. We have a photograph of the kid with the Dutch team — it's in the book — but then he walked off into the streets of Paris and we have never found his name. He may be the youngest winner in Olympic history.

SL: What's new in this year's edition?

DW: I have a new publisher — this is my third one — and the formatting is different. Instead of listing all of the sports in alphabetical order, we break them up into different categories, like aquatics, combat sports, team sports. Also, the publisher used wider spacing. The book is longer, but it's easier to look at. So, I like these changes. Also, with Lexis/Nexis and the Internet, I did research on every gold-medal winner in every event. So there's a lot of material that's new prior to Sydney. This keeps it fresh.

SL: The cover of the North American edition features two athletes: swimmer Michael Phelps and sprinter Marion Jones. Whose choice was that?

DW: I didn't know about it until I saw it on Amazon. I called up the publisher and asked them: Why didn't you consult with me on the cover? They said, we thought you were in the loop. I thought it was a bad decision. I never had a cover that I didn't approve. Too late now.

I'm sitting here with the British edition, which has six photographs showing a range of athletes from different sports on the cover. I would have gone in that direction.

SL: Do you plan to publish an Internet version of your book?

DW: No one's made me an offer. That's why it hasn't happened. It would be easy to do.

SL: In what other languages is the book published?

DW: It is still English-only. It has never been translated.

SL: You recently wrote an article in *Sports Illustrated* about how a planned

Chinese-language edition was scuttled after you refused to cut certain passages in the book. You've visited China eight times - did you expect that reaction?

DW: That was the first time another country had bought the rights, and I was curious to see how they would respond. But I've spent enough time in China to know what it's like. Look: a lot of people want to forgive China. They've opened up economically. They supply American companies with cheap labor. But they're a Communist dictatorship. The publisher wanted to remove my comments about China's human rights violations. Also, in the front of the book, there's a list of the Olympic athletes who have tested positive for performance enhancing drugs. They wanted me to remove one name from the list — Wu Dan — because they have never told the Chinese people about this. That's outrageous.

SL: How many sections of the book did the Chinese publisher want to remove?

DW: Seven. I just said: if you can prove that this information is untrue, I give you permission to eliminate it. Of course, it's all true.

SL: You write another list entitled "The World's 10 Worst Dictators." This year, you rank Hu Jintao, China's leader, third. Do you think that had any impact on the publisher's decision?

DW: No, I don't think so. That's separate.

SL: And yet, you remain supportive of China hosting the 2008 Olympic Games. Why?

DW: I remember when Jimmy Carter announced the boycott of the 1980 Olympics. I was very much opposed to the boycott because I felt that that wasn't going to do anything to change the ways of the Soviet Union. All the boycott did was punish the athletes. If the United States wanted to affect change in the Soviet Union, they should have sent as many western tourists as they could to talk to the Russian people and to go to the events and hold up Afghan flags. We could have done that. That would have been something the Soviets would find hard to control. In the case of China, it's

the same thing. I would like to see Americans flock to Beijing. They should flock aggressively.

SL: Are you looking forward to Athens?

DW: Despite all the negative press, I think it's going to be very exciting with wonderfully dramatic moments. You're seeing the best athletes in every sport in every event, with the exception of boxing and soccer. Plus, having the Opening Ceremonies in Athens should be incredibly special. Having said that, I am concerned. "Ready" is a relevant term. In terms of security, I'm concerned. I was close by when the bomb went off in Atlanta. At the same time, I did encourage my family to go.

SL: You're a track and field fanatic: what events are you most looking forward to?

DW: I always like the events that are 800 meters and longer. They don't run in lanes so strategy comes into play. In the 1500 meters, I'll be watching [Morocco's] El Guerrouj: is he over the hill or did he have an allergy? And, of course, I'll be watching the 10,000 and the marathon.

SL: When you're in Athens, do you work on the next edition of the book?

DW: I don't do any writing — that comes later. At the Games, what I do is collect everything I can — books, magazines, press guides. One thing I do is try and get each country's team book because they list all of the competitors by name. In my free time, I go around the international center, visit the office of every country, and ask them if there are any stories that their people are really following. And it's a fascinating experience. When you visit the Iranians, they always have the greatest pistachios. With Cuba, they usually have speeches of Fidel Castro blaring in the background.

SL: Will you be doing any radio commentary this time?

DW: Yes, I'm doing commentary for Westwood One/NBC, as I have since 1988. My duties are the Opening and Closing Ceremonies and track and field. I'll also do some work for MSNBC.

SL: What are you packing for Athens besides your Wallechinsky?

DW: Lots of sunscreen. A camera. And my favorite electronic device: a pockey, which is an 80 gigabyte hard-drive that fits in your pocket.

SL: What's your next project?

DW: I'm working on the book version of the world's worst living dictators. And, my sister [Amy Wallace] and I have just completed a new "Book of Lists." The U.S. edition will be out next year.