This Day in History… August 26, 1972

Opening of the 1972 Summer Olympics

On August 26, 1972, the Summer Olympics, officially known as the Games of the XX Olympiad, opened in Munich, West Germany. The first games held in Germany since 1936, they were overshadowed by the "Munich Massacre."

Stamp issued nine days before the games opened.

Munich won the bid to host the games in 1966, beating out Detroit, Madrid, and Montreal. These would be the second Summer Olympics to be held in Germany. The first had been in 1936, when the Nazi regime was still in power. The motto for the 1972 games was "The Cheerful Games," and the official logo was a blue sun called the "Bright Sun." These were also the first summer games to have an official mascot, a multi-colored dachshund named Waldi.

The games officially opened August 26, 1972. The opening ceremonies were held in the afternoon and included an extensive artistic display, including experimental music and children's folk dancing. The ceremonies also included the first Officials Oath and the first woman to take the Athlete's Oath.

The gymnastics competition was a part of the first modern Olympic games in 1896, and has been a part of the Olympic agenda continually since 1924. However, it wasn't until the 1972 Olympics that the sport received a great deal of attention from the mass public. The person credited with bringing this excitement to the sport was a woman, Olga Korbut of the Soviet Union. She captured the hearts of millions as she took three gold medals. Audiences around the world saw Korbut's dramatic performance, and soon most major countries began to promote gymnastics, particularly for women.

Stamp picturing stylized runners in the colors of the Olympic rings.

Perhaps one of the most memorable events of the games was men's basketball. The United States team, who had been on a winning streak since 1936, faced-off against the Soviet team. With the American team ahead 50 to 49, the Soviets had one last chance to score. However, based on controversial referee decisions, the clock was reset by three second, and the Soviets were given extra time, which they eventually used to score the winning basket. Following "the most controversial game in international basketball history," the US team challenged the Soviet win, but was denied. To this day, every member of the US team has refused to accept their silver medal for the event.

The US team's Mark Spitz set a world record by winning seven gold medals in a single Olympics. Spitz's record stood until 2008, when Michael Phelps, also representing the US, won eight gold medals. And Frank Shorter became the first American to win gold in an Olympic marathon in 64 years. Additionally, Dab Gable became the only Olympic wrestler to earn a gold medal without having a single point earned against him.

Handball and archery made their returns to the games after long absences – handball had last been held in 1936 and archery in 1920. Slalom canoeing made its Olympic debut at these games and badminton and water skiing were introduced as demonstration sports.

Sadly, the Games were overshadowed by an act of terrorism known as the "Munich Massacre." On September 5, eight Palestinian terrorists broke into the Olympic Village and took 11 Israeli athletes, coaches, and officials hostage. After negotiations broke down, the Israelis were killed, along with five of the terrorists. Security measures were increased, and competition was suspended for 24 hours to hold memorial services. But the Olympic president insisted that the games resume, to show that the terrorists didn't win

The games ran until September 11. In all, 121 nations participated, which was the most up to that time. A total of 7,134 athletes competed (6,075 men and 1,059 women) in 195 events in 21 sports. The Soviet Union dominated the Games, winning a total of 99 medals, 50 of which were gold. The United States also had an impressive run, taking 94 medals, including 33 gold.

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