

The Women's Olympics

From start to finish, the Olympic Games in London served as a celebration for women athletes everywhere



BOB LATHAM

There are a number of reasons why the London Olympics have been dubbed the “Women’s Olympics.” Among them: the U.S. team for the first time had more women than men; all countries including (for the first time) Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Brunei sent women athletes; and the women’s soccer final between the

U.S. and Japan was played in a full Wembley Stadium before 80,203 spectators. I was therefore pleased to attend these Games with someone close to me who is on the verge of womanhood—my daughter, who is a senior in high school. To her, I offer these observations of our time in London.

You weren’t with me for my first 2012 Olympic moment as I was in a sports bar (still in the U.S.) two days before the Opening Ceremony to watch the U.S. women’s soccer team play France. When Carli Lloyd’s goal put the U.S. ahead, 3–2, the male-dominated sports bar erupted in applause—a total Title IX moment. But you were with me at the Olympic volleyball venue, where you saw a sold-out women’s quarterfinal featuring China vs. Japan and Russia vs. Brazil that was as exciting as anything in the Olympics. You saw exuberant Brazilian and Russian men screaming, chanting and singing for female athletes.

You saw the definition of grace under pressure when Jessica Ennis finished her heptathlon win by sprinting ahead of the competition in the final event, the 800 meters. That event showed that she was one of the grittiest athletes in London, as she gave herself and her home crowd a magical moment. You were there to hear the roar of the crowd for a female athlete drown out a screaming track announcer over a state-of-the-art sound system.

You saw a resilient Jordyn Wieber transform herself from heartbroken 17-year-old after she didn’t qualify for the individual all-around final to consummate team member and world-class competitor to help the U.S. win the team gold medal. And you witnessed the female bonding of that team as they watched Gabby Douglas compete in the uneven bars final, after which Douglas came into the stands to be with her teammates to watch the men’s vault together.

You were able to see the beautifully efficient running form of Allyson Felix and Sanya Richards-Ross, two exem-

plary athletes, as they rounded the turn in the 200 meters in front of us. Felix has been as consistent, versatile and classy as any sprinter this country has produced, and after silver medals in 2004 and 2008 she finally won individual gold in the 200 meters, showing that the good guys (in the gender neutral sense, of course) do win.

Did you notice the number of flag bearers who were women? In the days of the old Soviet Union, its flag bearer would be some man-mountain, such as weightlifter Vasily Alekseyev or wrestler Aleksandr Karelin. In these Olympics, Maria Sharapova carried the flag for Russia. The U.S. Olympic athletes once again got it right by selecting fencer Mariel Zagunis as our flag bearer.

If you want a lesson in sustained excellence, you can look to Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh Jennings. You had a chance to see that beach volleyball players, while putting on a fabulous show at the greatest venue at these Olympics, also have tremendous athletic ability—not to mention concentration to focus on their craft in a festival atmosphere, knowing that one error could end their Olympic experience.

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On television, you saw the confused looks of many of the athletes at the closing ceremonies when Annie Lennox came out to sing. Those looks seemed to say “how did Megan Rapinoe get a singing gig?” It’s nice to think that a U.S. women’s soccer player is as recognizable as Annie Lennox.

There was a time when women’s sports were viewed as a novelty or as a change of pace from the men’s competition. At these Olympics, they presented many of the brightest, magical and most memorable moments. You and I saw many promotional pieces for the Olympics featuring the Clash’s “London Calling,” but now it’s time for us to sing the final verse: “London calling at the top of the dial, and after all this, won’t you give me a smile?” ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and an International Rugby Board member. A collection of his columns titled “Winners & Losers: Rants, Riffs and Reflections on the World of Sports,” will be released October 2. He can be reached at blatham@jw.com.