The Play's the Thing

Marty Glickman: The Life of an American Jewish Sports Legend. By Jeffrey S. Gurock. New York: New York University Press, 2023. 238pp.

No one who has seen film footage of Jesse Owens speeding to victory in the 100 meter dash in the Berlin Olympics in 1936, before the eyes of Hitler himself, is likely to forget it. Although the event is usually interpreted as a blow struck against the myth of Aryan supremacy, the fact is that the American Olympic Committee had no wish to embarrass Hitler. The recently published biography of Owens' teammate Marty Glickman suggests that while Hitler detested the sight of a black American with a gold medal around his neck, he preferred it to the sight of a decorated Jew. In what is probably a noncoincidence, on the last day of the Berlin games the coaches of the American track team kept Glickman and his fellow Jew Sam Stoller out of the 4x100 meter relay—the only members of the American delegation who saw no action—and replaced them with Owens and another black runner, Ralph Metcalfe. With Glickman and Stoller watching, the American team glided to victory, and Owens earned his fourth gold.

A single sentence toward the end of Marty Glickman's autobiography, *The Fastest Kid on the Block* (1996), notes that the German press at the time of the Berlin Olympics scoffed at the Americans' dependence on "black auxiliaries," as if athletes like Jesse Owens were members of some kind of reserve army. Perhaps picking up on this, Glickman's biographer Jeffrey Gurock observes in passing that the status of American black athletes as "auxiliaries" made their victories less intolerable to the Nazis than those of a Jew. Why so? Though his sidelining in Berlin lies at the center of Marty Glickman's story, we receive no clarification of this critical

point, and indeed learn rather less about the entire affair than we do in *The Fastest Kid on the Block*. According to both sources, the make-up of the 4x100 relay team was changed at the last minute on the laughable pretext that the Germans had hidden their best sprinters for the race: a move Glickman always believed was designed to exclude both Jews from competition and deny them a probable gold medal. The wound of this double-cross remained with Glickman his entire life, though no trace of it was heard in the radio voice, first of the Knicks, then of the football Giants and Jets, that became a beloved household presence throughout New York for decades.

Blessed with remarkable speed, Marty Glickman excelled in city-wide, collegiate and national competitions only to be denied in Berlin, at what should have been the summit of his career in track. In his judgment, AOC president Avery Brundage, an avowed admirer of Hitler, had a hand in his removal from the relay. If Brundage believed in sport for its own sake (the official Olympic ideal), then Marty Glickman should certainly have been allowed to run; if, on the contrary, he believed in winning for one's country, then Glickman also should have run, given that he was one of the four fastest Americans. Evidently, something about his exclusion from the relay was off. Yet the move was adroit. In that it resulted in two black runners (Owens and Metcalfe, the first and second finishers in the 100 meters) joining the team, it was not discriminatory to the naked eye, and if the American team were to win, as seemed very likely, then Glickman and Stoller could not possibly complain about their removal from it without sounding like spoilsports.

In opposing the campaign to boycott the 1936 games, which he attributed to Jews and Communists, Brundage wrote and circulated a pamphlet quaintly titled *Fair Play for American*

Athletes. Implying disciplined effort, character-building, and respect for the game, fair play was a popular American ideal. (The young Marty Glickman sought to model himself on a fictional exemplar of the good sportsman, Frank Merriwell.) And yet the position into which Glickman was thrown was far from fair. Upon returning to the United States in 1936, if he had protested his exclusion from the relay team that won gold, he would have been seen as placing his own fortunes above those of his team and his country, contrary to the spirit of sportsmanship. As a complainer, he would have been reduced to a sore loser who hadn't even lost. In arguing that he would have won gold if only he had been allowed to run, he would have come across as a self-promoting special pleader; in athletics, the only proof of what you can do is what you actually do, which is why Glickman himself declined the offer of a "replacement medal" by the United States Olympic Committee in 1998. In effect, by a bit of dexterous wire pulling, Brundage—if it was Brundage—made it impossible for Glickman to object to his removal from the relay team without appearing like a proverbially greedy, trouble-making Jew who felt no loyalty to the greater community. That Glickman *did* feel such loyalty is one reason he did not protest the injustice done to him by a man openly sympathetic to the Nazi cause.

For half a century Marty Glickman seethed in silence. Upon his return to the Olympic stadium in Berlin in 1985, he was overcome with a rage as red-hot as if he had just been swindled out of a gold medal and a place in history. By then, it seems, the American public was finally ready to hear the story of Jesse Owens' teammate, Marty Glickman. As he said in an interview in 1988, he and Stoller "were replaced to save Hitler and his entourage and the Nazis generally from further embarrassment by having Jews compete and stand on the winning

podium." How is it that Glickman was able to say fifty years after the fact what could not be said when it mattered most?

According to Gurock, Marty Glickman's eventual openness about what befell him in Berlin reflects the cooling of anti-Semitic sentiment over the decades and the greater acceptance of Jews in American life. "By the time Glickman let loose with his feelings about his experiences with anti-Semitism, a new era of American Jewish self-confidence was well underway as this minority group increasingly felt accepted within American society." But it is also true that when Glickman finally told his story, the practice of letting loose with one's feelings had become normative. Reticence was out, soul-baring in. Oprah was on the rise, soon to be the queen of television. By an accident of history, a man who could no longer suppress his fury at being cheated in Berlin found himself in step with the times. Yet the triumph of emotionalism should be not mistaken for an improvement of standards. At the time of Marty Glickman's ascent to prominence as an announcer, a person in public life was expected to master his troubles, not vent them, and Glickman conducted himself accordingly. The reporter did not become the story. Regardless of the rage and resentment pent up inside him for decades, he not only gave no sign of inner turmoil, and not only enabled millions of listeners to "see" basketball and football with a sense more vivid than sight itself, but became such a model in the profession he helped re-invent that two generations of sportscasters acknowledge him as their mentor.

Upon his death, Marty Glickman was remembered in the *New York Times* as an announcer whose voice had "the clarity of a bell." Unfortunately, his biography clunks the English language. "One allegation had to have struck Starobin in the craw." "All of his disciples

would gloweringly attest to how supportive Glickman was as they moved forward in their own careers." A "brief kerfuffle . . . was editorialized in favor of the protesters in an op-ed in the *New York Times*." At some point infelicity matters. In 1998 Howard Cohen of the National Jewish Sports Hall of Fame sought to convince William Hybl, then president of the USOC, that Glickman should be awarded the gold medal he did not receive in 1936. Writes Gurock, "After reviewing the facts that Cohen presented to Hybl, an attorney, asserted that he 'was used to looking at evidence [and] the evidence was there.'" What does this sentence or non-sentence mean? And what does "the evidence" refer to? According to Marty Glickman's obituary in the *Times*, Hybl believed the evidence showed that Glickman was sidelined in 1936 because he was a Jew. In Gurock "the evidence" seems to show that Glickman would have won a gold medal had he run. Later on the same page, "Hybl" is rendered as "Hybil."

For all the problems of its prose, and they are many, this biography inspires an admiration of its subject. A man who was bumped from third place to fifth in the Olympic trials by one of the coaches who benched him in the Olympics itself took pride in the accuracy of his descriptions in real time. Robbed of glory in Berlin, he found glory of another sort at home. If his identifiably Jewish name limited his market to New York, he declined to change it and flourished in his chosen world, in the process creating play-by-play as we know it. If he met with anti-Semitism in New York, the attackers dishonored themselves, not him. Moving from one success to another, Marty Glickman simply did not allow his life to be blighted by hostility to Jews, whether that of Avery Brundage, the New York Athletic Club, or Maurice Podoloff, the President of the fledgling NBA and a Jew himself.

As Gurock reminds us, many Jews who came to the United States from the Old World carried with them a suspicion of sports; hence the concerned father who wrote to the editor of *Forward*, "I want my boy to be a *mensch,* not a wild American runner." Olympian, Marine, founder, teacher, father and grandfather, the hero of *Marty Glickman: The Life of an American Jewish Sports Legend* emerges as both a runner and a mensch.

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