



OLYMPIA is the August, 2013 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

OLYMPISCHE SPIELE 1936 Germany 1938 release black-and-white  
225 minutes documentary feature both English-language and subtitled  
German-language versions 2 dvd set Producer: Leni Riefenstahl for Tobis Films,  
Germany

17 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\*\* ½ of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

\*indicates outstanding technical achievement

#### Points

2 Film Editor: Leni Riefenstahl

2 Cameras:

Part One --- Festival of the Nations: Wilfried Basse, Leo De Lafrue,  
Josef Dietze, E. Epkins, Hans Ertl, Walter Frentz, Hans Karl Gottschalk,  
Richard Groschopp, Willy Hameister, Wolf Hart, Hasso Hartnagel, Walter Hege,  
Paul Holzki, Werner Hundhausen, Albert Hocht, Carl Junghans,  
Herbert Kebelmann, Sepp Ketterer, Albert Kling, Ernst Kunstmann,  
Leo de Laforgue, E. Lambertini, Guzzi Lantschner, Otto Lantschner,  
Waldemar Lembke, Georg Lemke, C. A. Linke, Kurt Neubert,  
Erich Nitzschmann, Albert Schattmann, Hans Scheib, Wilhelm Schmidt,  
Hugo Schulze, Leo Schwedler, Alfred Siegert, W. Siehm, Ernst Sorge,  
Karoly Vass, Andor Von Barsy, Eberhard von der Heyden, Fritz von Friedl,  
Heinz von Jaworsky, Hugo von Kaweczynski, Alexander von Lagorio,  
H. von Stwolinski, Willy Zielke (all uncredited)

Part Two --- Festival of Beauty: Wilfried Basse, Leo De Lafrue, Walter Frentz,

Hans Karl Gottschalk, Richard Groschopp, Willy Hameister, Walter Hege, Werner Hundhausen, Albert Kling, Ernst Kunstmann, Guzzi Lantschner, Kurt Neubert, Erich Nitzschmann, Hans Scheib, Hugo Schulze, Karoly Vass, Andor von Barsy, Fritz von Friedl, Heinz von Jaworsky, Hugo von Kaweczyński, Alexander von Lagorio, Willy Zielke (all uncredited)

Underwater Cinematography: Hans Ertl (uncredited)

Camera Operator (Parts One and Two): Georg Fleischmann

2 Music: Herbert Windt, Walter Gronostay (uncredited), Richard Strauss ("Olympic Hymn"), Paul Hoeffler ("Farewell To The Flag"), Ludwig von Beethoven ("The Flame Dies")

1 Script: Leni Riefenstahl

2 Art Direction: Robert Herlth

1 Lighting

1 Sound: Siegfried Schulze, Hermann Storr, Max Michel, Johannes Ludke, Arnfried Heyne, Guzzi Lantschner

2 Ambience

2 Creativity

2 Insightfulness

17 total points

OLYMPISCHE SPIELE 1936 is the official record of the Berlin Summer Olympics of 1936, planned to showcase superiority of Aryan athletes. Since the film's producer is more enamoured of well-toned bodies than Nazi ideology, what cameras reveal is heroic competitive athleticism, independent of country of origin. Of course, the speakers (Dr. Paul Laven and Rolf Wernicke) focus on German athletes and their disciplined efforts. Otherwise, the picture would never pass government censors. But, being a documentary, it faithfully records flag-raising and ribbon-awarding ceremonies for winners. While it does not completely muzzle biased commentary, OLYMPIA, as it has become known in the English-speaking world, is by no means a propaganda triumph for the Third Reich. What is seen sometimes belies what is heard. Cameramen employed by Riefenstahl are diligently observant and apolitical in pursuit of cinematic excellence, which makes this elaborate piece of filmmaking simultaneously archival and timeless.

Opening with mysteriously fog-enveloped scenes of Greek ruins shot by Willy Zielke, Riefenstahl's epic documentary slowly and wordlessly evokes classical art, initially presenting stony architecture. But then, through overlapping dissolves, it gradually proceeds to sculpture featuring human models. Unexpectedly, an enigmatic statue morphs into a posed living athlete. Though isolated, the solitary figure strains in preparation for throwing a discus. This is followed by shots of another discus toss, a javelin hurl and a shot put trajectory. A woman's arms appear, passing a ball to another player. Naked figures are observed dancing.

Then the camera begins moving at a faster pace, attempting to keep rhythm with a scantily-clothed runner. A torch appears in his hands, manifesting connection to twentieth-century Olympic ritual.

Scenes of steady loping across rocky Grecian landscapes eventually yield to shots of maps indicating cities along a winding route running from the Peloponnesus to Berlin. This torch run is the brainchild of Carl Diem and has no historical precedent. As each map vanishes it is replaced by a stock photo of the corresponding metropolis. Functional, but rather pedantic.

Through Sofia, Budapest, Vienna, and Prague, a relay of runners carry a windblown flame, each carefully keeping one arm upraised outward, fending off endless showers of sparks with grim determination. A cutaway shot reveals an enormous bowl, crowded with clamorous spectators anxiously awaiting arrival of the final firebearer. This is followed by a sequence cunningly edited in stages divided into stadium approach, pace adjustment, display circuit, trot to platform facing crowds for photo opportunity, jog up to cauldron pedestal, view of cauldron alone, and lighting of Olympic cauldron.

After treating viewers to Adolph Hitler's official opening speech, diplomatically devoid of Aryan boosterism, Riefenstahl proceeds to record introductory review of national delegations as they pass before Hitler's scrutiny. Individual and group reactions to the Fuhrer are intriguing. Americans give a polite traditional officer's salute, Swiss and British teams snub him, only the leader of Japan's squad deigns any kind of formal overture, French athletes welcome their host with something resembling a sieg heil, which may or may not be the authentic one, as members of that group claimed to have employed a similar antique substitute. Since the

salutation means “hail to victory” it could be used as an unadulterated tribute to competitive triumph. Is that what the French intended?

Once political pageantry concludes, focus shifts to track and field events. From this point on, emphasis is primarily upon grace and effort. German winners and competitors receive primary attention, understandably, since the documentary is being shot and edited by their countrymen. But American, Italian and British winners get fair coverage. Their respective anthems and fans receive considerable screen time.

Speaking of screens, Pathfinder’s release print version of the Riefenstahl epic is not notable for sharpness of definition. Hairline artifacts crop up in spots also. Sound quality is markedly poor, with occasional asynchronization, as well as precipitous trimming at some scene changes. There are clearer prints with better sonics available even on videocassette.

Historians may find fascination in closeup shots of Jesse Owens and Glenn Morris, both of whom appear more engaged in battling time pressure for world records than physical rivals.

Willingness to use platforms, towers, and even ditches to shoot footage is startlingly evident. There are supplemental aerial shots of venues, massed spectators, marathon runners ribboning out as weariness attenuates what begins as a dense pack. Throughout, the music of Herbert Windt and an uncredited Walter Gronostay align rhythmically with observed movements of athletes, escalating tension and speed as event conclusions loom.

Often overlooked are frequent reaction shots of fans, capturing an enormous range of responses from angry disappointment through ecstasy to undisguised boredom. Cheers of visiting Americans and Japanese are by no means slighted. If a particular frame looks promising, Riefenstahl includes it, often for aesthetic appeal rather than newsworthiness. This emphasis on sheer beauty is consistent across the production, even if it violates propaganda commands.

Contrary to an opinion expressed by various Internet reviewers, closeups are not eschewed and individual athletes are spotlighted. However, the intention of these is invariably to humanize both performers and struggles. Physical and attitudinal strains are balanced, with reaction shots of incredulity, dissatisfaction,

or exaltation abounding. There is no need to auditorily interview individual winners or losers. Faces and gestures alone tell the story dramatically enough.

Preparations for events receive about the same amount of screen time as their actual durations, probably because Riefenstahl prefers showing us states of mind and body rather than repetitively discussing them. She understands better than many successors the anticlimactic redundancy of interrogation efforts by post-event interviewers with weary captive subjects.

Pioneering developments in telescopic lens photography enhance viewer appreciation of outsize Olympic architectural grandeur. By dodging comparisons with Berlin's potentially competing urban monuments, the track and field stadium appears in matchless majesty. What is not shown, however, is as significant as what does appear: red shirts and storm troopers are conspicuously missing. Likewise traffic jams, slums and advertisements. All of these would damage markedly what the producer hoped to achieve: a pure representation of athletes in motion.

Part Two of the film foregrounds that ideal, beginning with nearly seven minutes of conversation-free footage. Moving to Olympic Village at Estal, about nineteen miles from Berlin's center, relaxed pictures of mist-shrouded country runs, a spider preoccupied constructing its web, bucolic riparian settings of warmup exercises, open-air splashing horseplay by nude bathers, and vigorous scrubbing rites amid crowded steaming showers are linked to establish a preparatory sensuality. Silhouettes alternate with corporeal symbols of organized activity. Yes, there is a formal elegance in apparently endless serried ranks of women executing precisely synchronized exercises. But also on view are individuals gracefully demonstrating extremely difficult balances and shifts, with straining, determined faces clearly visible. Symmetry, paramount in Part Two, is demonstrated just as effectively by birds and arachnids as humans.

Humor and character come center stage in the equestrian event, lensed by Gustav Lantschner, which includes one hurdle followed much too closely by a waterway into which horses and riders plunge with varying consequences. Several mounts rebel at being ordered to gallop uphill over yet another obstruction, defying master and course layout. Others lose footing and pace in slippery liquid,

with tumbles and tosses resulting in entertaining embarrassment as veteran champions are suddenly reduced to awkward amateur status.

Later in Part Two, renowned high diving sequences appear, an audiovisual spectacular of slow motion arcs, time suspensions and fusions of sparkling waters with dazzling sunbeams. Hans Ertl distinguished himself in shooting the majority of these plunges. Shades of Walther Ruttmann's LICHTSPIEL are in evidence. These scenes virtually define the term "scintillating."

Another awesome exhibition of light and sound concludes Part Two as participants from forty-nine nations unite their countries' flags under a wigwam of searchlights while Paul Hoeffler's "Farewell To The Flag" and Ludwig von Beethoven's "The Flame Dies" are fittingly sung by thousands of voices. Smoke from the eternal flame merges with encircling duskiness.

Forgotten and overlooked is the final medal count. Host Germany, as is customary, beat chief challenger United States by a whopping 89 to 56. The Deutschlanders also finished with nine more gold medals and seven more silvers. They were assisted in stockpiling those by the competition day yanking of two Jewish sprinters, Sam Stoller and Marty Glickman, from the United States 4 x 100 relay team and a boycott of the Games by Spain, the Soviet Union and morally conflicted Jewish Olympic qualifiers.

Riefenstahl's script is minimalist and rarely obtrusive, privileging photography over rhetoric. This, in retrospect, is a major reason why OLYMPISCHE SPIELE 1936 retains attraction for contemporary screeners.

Lighting varies considerably in clarity. But definition is mostly acceptable.

Pathfinder's double-disc dvd edition includes as bonuses a sporadically murky, narrationless thirty-two minute 1936 Winter Olympics documentary titled JUGEND DER WELT (YOUTH OF THE WORLD) co-directed by photographer Carl Junghans and Dr. Herbert Brieger. Its equation of downhill skiers with birds is questionable. But there is masterful sound recording and dynamic cinematography. No sportsmen are individuated by name, letting the interplay of nature and Olympian carry viewer interest and the film itself. Walter Gronostay's score is harmonious with onrushing action. Highly recommended, despite flickers due to filming conditions and inept editing.

Less enticing is a twelve and one-half minute documentary featurette titled DIE KAMERA FAHRT MIT (THE CAMERA MOVES ALONG). Released in 1936, it's a barely watchable print disastrously advertising technological advances in newsreel production and distribution under the supervision of National Socialism. Though scenes from OLYMPISCHE SPIELE 1936 are included, they fail to reflect any cinematic glory in their appearance here.

A five minute deleted scene of Germany's Sports Minister declaiming the Olympic Oath is sonically scratchy and resoundingly hypocritical. Not recommended.

Additionally, twelve minutes of alternate scenes from the Italian version of Riefenstahl's film focus on exploits of national heroes in sailing, gymnastics, fencing, wrestling and boxing. Picture quality is mostly inferior, which is probably why German editors excised them.

David Calvert Smith's accompanying essay is informative. Another extra, a gallery of still photos, is pleasant to look at, but adds nothing to the main film.

Because of abundant nudity, OLYMPIA is recommended viewing only for adults. Despite reservations expressed above, it is mandatory watching for all film buffs and sports enthusiasts over the age of twenty. Truly a film that must be seen to be believed.

The reviewer wishes to acknowledge a deep indebtedness to Frederick Ott's book THE GREAT GERMAN FILMS (Citadel Press, Seacaucus, New Jersey: 1986 copyright), which includes a very detailed description of Riefenstahl's film and its preproduction. Thanks also to Wikipedia for Olympic medal count data and to IMDB for credits information.