

Medal Counts & Manifest Destiny: Team USA at the Olympics

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OLLI CSUEB

Sign up for [the course here](#)

Thurs pm in August
1:30-3:30 PST, 8/4,11,18,25

"...a ragtag group...mostly Ivey Leaguers, with little support from the country—stood at the top of the podium for...unexpected triumphs..."--1896

"...this flag dips for no earthly king..."—1908

Since 1896, American Olympic athletes have dazzled the world. But their performances have always had a subtext, whether validating capitalism, promoting democracy, or confirming American exceptionalism. We will explore these subtexts, the history behind the history, starting with how an upstart nation sought a foothold with Europeans in the sporting world and to prove itself as a world power.

We'll look at how Olympians like Jesse Owens and Bob Mathias acted as proxy soldiers for America in tense international moments. We'll look at how the flag and other props or gestures substituted as placeholders for foreign policy. We'll explore what was said about American performances, how the media shaped perspectives, and why reporting often strayed from fact in order to support a broader narrative.

We'll chart the movement of protests onto the Olympic stage, from the Black Power Salute to Joyner-Kersey's "red toenails." The games continue to evolve, influenced by economics and our conflicting needs to prove American superiority and yet strive for equality. Even now, the media, athletes, and powers-that-be continue to feed the Olympics and use the Olympics to promote a variety of agendas.

GENERAL OUTLINE:

CLASS ONE: The Athlete/the Nation/the Ethos The ragtag band of upstarts; the Points system; taking on the Europeans; the self-made nation. (1896-1928)

CLASS TWO: The War Through Sport Foreign policy and sport; the Nazis, the Cold War, and the death of colonialism; "closing the gap" (1932-1960)

CLASS THREE: Protest and Capitalism Unleashed, Knocking on the door; Boycotts and other Agendas; Flags and Symbols (1964-1988)

CLASS FOUR: The New (Business) Model The demise of (sh)amateurism; the Melting Pot; Ad-diversity; Everybody Can Play (1992-present)



The 1896 U.S. Olympic team



Avery Brundage, runner-up to Jim Thorpe and later president of the USOC and IOC



U.S. Fitness programs launched during the Cold War.



Olympic protests, 1968