



MALMÖ HÖGSKOLA

ISSN 1652-7224 • Published September 3, 2008

Printer-friendly version

Read more about the Olympic Games on idrottsforum.org

Read more in English at idrottsforum.org

Cinematic Salutations

Wendy Varney

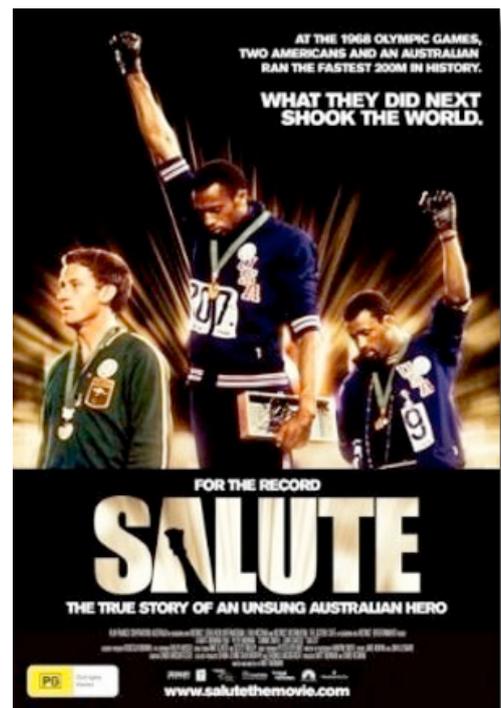
Institute of Environmental Studies, University of NSW, Sydney, Australia

The Australian Olympian Peter Norman died in 2006 from a heart attack. He was 64 years old. After a long and successful career as a track and field sprinter, he is known mostly for two feats, his silver medal in the 200 meters sprint event at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, and his act of sympathy with the African-American struggle for civil rights in the United States. Norman stood next to Tommie Smith, who won the race, and John Carlos, the bronze medalist, the two latter with gloved fists raised in the traditional Black Panther salute, and Norman wearing an Olympic Project for Human Rights badge in explicit solidarity with the protest on the podium. In July 2008, a two-hour documentary about Peter Norman and the Mexican protest and its aftermath went on general release in Australia. *Salute* is directed by Peter Norman's nephew Matt Norman. Wendy Varney, our own correspondent down under, went to the cinema, and we're pleased to publish her review for the benefit of the forum's surfers. Hopefully we'll be able to see *Salute* in the Nordic countries before long – why not on public service television?

An episode in the TV series “Seinfeld” has the Seinfeld characters refer to one of the “Three Tenors,” Jose Carreras, as “the other one.” Peter Norman, 1968 silver medallist in the Mexico City Olympics 200 metres sprint event, probably could have identified with that.

Before his untimely death in 2006, Norman had two strongly woven claims to fame, one athletic and one a courageous stance in support of a social issue. Arguably, neither of these had been fully acknowledged until the release of “Salute,” a film painstakingly and passionately put together over a number of years by Norman's nephew, Matt Norman.

Nineteen sixty-eight was a year of fierce protests and social upheaval all around the world. There were crippling strikes and vehement protest in the streets of Paris; the Soviet Union had invaded Czechoslovakia to put a halt to its Prague Spring, fearing that the calls for socialism with a human face might infect other nations in the Soviet bloc; and the United States and Australia were already out of their depth in a war against the Vietnamese and the backlash this was causing on their respective domestic fronts. Protests seemed to be breaking out globally against war, racism, ongoing colonialism and much else. It was hardly surprising, then, that the Olympic Games was embroiled in some of the action.



Just prior to the opening of the Mexico City Olympics, demonstrators had been shot dead in the streets. The response of Avery Brundage, then International Olympic Committee (IOC) President, was that it was purely an internal matter and of no consequence to the IOC nor outside of Mexico. This was not an unusual response by institutional power to moves afoot for social change.

It was clear that Brundage would be totally unsympathetic to a boycott that was being mooted by African-Americans who were desperate to bring attention to the inequalities suffered within their own country. The assassination of civil rights advocate Martin Luther King earlier that year had threatened to reverse some of the gains made against racism in the USA. While the boycott did not proceed, there were murmurings of possible protests, using the Olympic spotlight to cast scrutiny on black poverty and inequalities.

Meanwhile in the much awaited final of the 200 metres men's sprint, the Australian Peter Norman upset the expected placings and clinched the silver medal, finishing with a remarkable dash that had him split African-Americans Tommy Smith and John Carlos. Of course on the podium the silver medallist stands to one side of the gold medallist, in this case Smith. That positioning has allowed Norman to be cut out of the hotly debated events, until now largely told from a US point of view, sometimes with pride and sometimes with contempt.

At San José State University a huge statue of Smith and Carlos, shoeless and with heads bowed and black-fisted hands raised, celebrates the contentious protest that saw the two Americans expelled from the Olympic village for this stance as the American national anthem was played. Following this, they became social outcasts until more gains had been made by and for African-Americans, at which time their actions became more celebrated and less reviled.

But the statue erases Norman and with it his support for the protest, which brought its own repercussions for the Australian sprinter. The film explains that, despite having qualified for the Munich Olympics fifteen times and being among the top five contenders in the world in his event, Norman found himself excluded from Australia's athletic team for Munich for reasons that have never been adequately explained.

This is an ambitious film. Matt Norman has claimed that primarily he made the film to pay tribute to his uncle and to make better known Peter Norman's contribution to the famous protest. The Australian medallist had worn an Olympic Project for Human Rights badge, told Smith and Carlos he would support them, and even suggested the Americans share the one pair of black gloves they had between them. This was in line with Peter Norman's concerns about social injustice. The film is therefore a salute to Peter Norman and a worthy one.

But the film fittingly does more than that. It is also about the salute given by Smith and Carlos, putting it in its social and historical context. The documentary is an important contribution to the debate about whether sport and social issues mix, a question that has again reared its head in this year of the Beijing Olympics, the same year that China has stepped up its repressions against Tibet.

Interestingly, for me it was the clear and well articulated statements by the third American sprinter in the race, Larry Questad, that consolidated why social issues have a role in the Olympics, although Questad took the opposite viewpoint. Questad's statements, included in the film, summarised succinctly the argument against the 1968 protest. He claimed firstly that the podium was not the correct venue for Smith's and Carlos's protest. But the Olympic podium in 1968 was precisely the right venue for such a protest because it was the only place where African-Americans could be taken seriously and where they would have a global audience. That was the whole point of making the protest at the Olympics. African-Americans resented that their medals counted and were applauded while, outside of the sporting arena, black American athletes did not count as human beings. Their cause was a just one and was supported by Norman for that reason.

Questad's second argument was that Smith and Carlos might have been happier, healthier and wealthier had they not taken the stance they did. That may be the case but there are issues where the sacrifice of one's personal interests to the greater social good is called for and such a sacrifice was made by all three athletes on the podium that day at Mexico City. Certainly all three faced reprisals and long-term repercussions.

Looking at the larger picture and bringing it up to date, this is not to insist that it is up to athletes to carry the can for China's abuse of human rights at home and in Tibet. Rather it is an argument that peaceful methods of protest are fair methods of protest at the Olympics, just as protest against all-white South African teams were reasonable methods for protesting against apartheid throughout the 1970s and 1980s and contributed to an understanding of the broader injustices suffered at the time by black South Africans.

The Olympics absorb a huge number of resources both from the host nation and guest nations and the people of all

nations have a right to expect those resources to be both scrutinised and used towards social improvement, not entrenchment of social ills and wallpapering over deep social flaws with sporting slogans and propaganda.

The 1968 protest is shown to have played a role in scrutiny and demands for social progress in the world at that time. The film does well to open with footage of global events and a discussion of the racism that was intrinsic to Australian society in 1968. This underpinned the backlash against athletes taking a strong stand against racism, a stand that was unpopular among conservative Olympic officials. Having set the background, the film then covers the Olympic races and all the excitement they aroused and offers a well rounded discussion of both the athletic feats and the protests.

Matt Norman does well to pull these themes together so that by the end the audience has an understanding of the historical importance of the events and of the price paid by all three medallists for their stance. The film finishes with Peter Norman claiming he would like to be remembered simply as “an interesting old guy.”

Thanks to this fine film, he will certainly be remembered as that and much more.

(A book has also been published, giving a more in-depth account of Peter Norman’s life and the famous race: Damian Johnstone and Matt Norman, *A Race to Remember: The Peter Norman Story*, JoJo Publishing, Melbourne, 2008.)

Copyright © Wendy Varney 2008