

For over a month.

That's fun.

Yeah. How did exhibition baseball in the 1936 Olympics come about?

Are you ready for the answer now?

Yes.

Exhibition baseball in the 1936 Olympics really started because there was an American committee on baseball that was pushing very hard for baseball to be introduced and attached to the Olympics. The number of baseball players in the world were limited pretty much to Central American teams, to all the American teams, of course, all South African teams. The kinds of athletes who got started early through films, through television, and began to play at a very early age. It really got introduced because frankly, and I don't take this as a compliment for myself, because of Herman Goldberg, who was in charge of developing baseball in the country of Italy.

OK, but I want to go back to Berlin, because--

Oh, yes.

--that really needs to be our focus.

Please.

So the American Olympic Committee decided that they were going to try to promote baseball?

They were going to try to promote.

Who came to this decision?

Judge JL Hoffman of Cincinnati, Ohio was the one who headed the group that pushed very hard for baseball to be an Olympic sport. Also, the American Olympic committees wanted to see baseball in the Olympics. They had seen ski they had seen all the other sports, and they really wanted to see baseball in them. And it came about because the committees of the various sports finally agreed that it would be a good thing for American baseball to be on the calendar. And as far as I can tell that's when it started because I began to get mail, I began to get my first pieces of information about the possibility of baseball tournament being held.

So you must have been pretty exciting to be in this early.

It was very exciting because well, first, the stadium was very large, 125,000 people watching a baseball series. Unheard of, unheard of before. Most of the baseball teams in America, 40,000, 50,000, 60,000, maybe, but 125,000, who ever heard of such a thing?

You heard of it in Berlin, Germany for the first time and it was promoted by the small group of 28 American baseball players. There were 28 of us assigned to play a series of exhibitions against each other and then to go out into the countryside and demonstrate baseball to schools, to colleges, to many German institutions how it's played, what the difference is between baseball and soccer, what the rules were, how the umpires played the game. It was done because of America, and I was very proud to be part of the group that kept pushing without pushing.

We kept encouraging, encouraging, demonstrating. This is how left-handed first baseman behave, this is how right-handed pitchers do this. If you are left-handed, this is how it's done. And we put it on the map.

What was the reaction when you were playing these games in Berlin? What was the audience reaction?

The audience reaction was very poor, very poor. They didn't like the game, they didn't know the game. The diamond, the baseball diamond was never laid out like a diamond. They took a 4-inch white silky tape and they pressed it into the grass and they made a diamond out of it for baseball. But they never actually made a baseball field, never.

It caught hold to some extent, not to such great extent as in other countries, especially Central America. But it became a vivid activity because it came from America. A lot of the kids wanted very much to know more about America. And sports were very important to them too.

But the audience wasn't excited.

The audience was not excited because the pace of baseball, much slower than soccer. In soccer, the ball is moving, moving, moving, moving, moving all the time and the kids are kicking in and kicking and then kicking in and circling and they're beating out the other guy. Whereas, in the other sports, you play hard, we jump hard, you run hard, you do all of the things yourself. But in baseball, you're part of a team and it's necessary to understand that. And the crowds at the baseball fields were 100,000, not 125,000.

Now, let me ask you a few questions about the period before you went over to Berlin. And how much did you know at that time about what was going on in Nazi Germany?

I knew less than I guess I am told I should have known by many people who asked me how come you went to Germany when this was going on? The number of Jewish athletes were 8 or 9 out of 328. The number of Jewish athletes who made the team and then quit 3 or 4 of those. Knowledge about what was going on with Hitler beginning to become more close to us.

One of the most telling experiences that I had personally, we lived in a small cottage. Mine happened to be named Brandenburg cottage because Hitler had charged money to all the residents of Brandenburg to pay for his cottage, and then another group paid for their named cottage, another group paid for this. And I can recall very vividly the concern I had when I went down and I saw a big chain at the basement door of our village.

There were 28 players who lived in the Brandenburg, Dorf in our village. And what I saw in the rear of the cottage was a door and another door and then a chain. And I opened the chain and I started to walk downstairs in the bottom of the basement. And there was a big cavernous area, I didn't know what it was for, but I sure soon found out that it was for Panzer tanks, German tanks.

Because what they did was declare the Olympic Dorf the West Point of Germany. And the athletes and the military Chiefs were housed with the Olympic athletes were housed after the Olympics were over. And I was told by a woman who took care of that building, raus, raus, raus, get out of there, get out of there, get out of there. She didn't want me looking down in the basement.

I didn't know what was down there, but it turned out that it was large enough, the cellar or the basement, whatever you want to call it. In my cottage, you find these in picture material that was brought to the studio today. You will find structures that looked like resorts, but when you walk down there, cavernous, they're empty. The thick, the cement was about 10, 12, 15 inches thick and that couldn't be for just a car or a Jeep or a truck, something big had to be in a basement that had floors this thick, you never saw such thick floors. And it turned out that, that became the West Point of Germany.

At what point did you realize this was what this was?

I realized what it was after I was in Germany and after I had seen enough of the activity that led to the early movement of labor camp people into army men, and from boy scouts into young soldiers. And from ordinary men with ordinary credentials carrying shovels, dressed in regular clothes, but carrying shovels ready to clean out as soon as the American athletes left, ready to clean out what they could from there to get it ready for the army.

So you saw this as you were departing?

I saw this about halfway there. I would say about four weeks. Four weeks before we left, I saw it. And they were very strict, very angry because I was the only one who went down to the basement. And it was just the happenchance walking down a flight of stairs, removing a chain, and being yelled at by the German hausfrau and houseman who didn't like what they saw. I'm an American down on that property that was going to become a Panzer tank unit as soon as the games were over.

You stayed in Germany for how long after the Olympics?

About two weeks.

So I'm sorry, but I'm a little confused. When you said you saw people coming in with shovels getting ready to transform the Olympics--

Yes.

This was while you were over there for the Olympics?

Yes. And again, the materials we found in our beds, they were very large books marked Berlin, just the name Berlin on the outside. And in that book were pictures of men marching in parade, but they weren't equipped with army uniforms. They were equipped with regular clothes, with work clothes, with seemingly baskets, and then shovels on the shoulder and they were walking that way. And they were walking this way, this way, this way through that whole area there. And what we found out was that they were not only being prepared for their part in the Olympics, but some were already on the grounds ready to be instructed in how to go ahead and fill in the tanks that were going on.

You said there were books that would say Berlin or boxes?

There were boxes of books very, very large books.

With photographs of the Polish?

Yes. On the outside, it just said Berlin, one word, that's all. And we turned pages and you saw pictures of the army and you turn more. There was one on everybody's bed, your propaganda material. And it was on everybody's bed and nobody gave them up because you were intrigued. We were reading them, what is all this about? So I began to learn more about Hitler and Goebbels and some of the others after I had turned pages and noted that the Olympics were for other purposes than storage.

But how odd this is that they would leave this for you to see?

How what?

Odd this is that they would leave this for you--

How?

--to see-- odd.

How odd? And well, I would say it would be stupid, first. Odd, yes. An open door down to a basement that had no use other than for storage of large tanks and materials, that's how big they were.

So before you went to Berlin, you didn't know too much about Nazi Germany.

That's correct.

Now, there was some movement in the United States in regard to the boycott, were you aware of that?

I was aware of some of the activities that were going on throughout the United States and different parts. There were programs which displayed the feeling about Germany, what was happening, what was going on, Hitler's preparation. The activity going on in the fields, in the manufacturing areas, the building, the construction, all of those things were apparently going on.

Also, the American athletes and all other country had its athletes separated by action. And by that I mean by summer sports, winter sports, different kinds of activities trying to separate them. And you could see that if you opened the doors to look into places and the houseman and the hausfrau caught you, you'd get yelled at.

But they didn't do anything, they didn't want to hurt anybody, and they didn't want to give away some of their secrets about their non relations with the United States. That's one of them. I think first time, he ought to be aware of what is the surface on a courage game.

And if he has another chap, we should have the chat, we should have the chap we should not be afraid to have someone here telling us how he or she feels about what's going on. You may not get it all so smoothly. You may or you may and you have to work it out to find out what is going on that is happening with the Olympics that you are part of, yet you're really not part of because somebody else is running it now? And you're someone else in a khaki uniform ready to run for the next period of three or four weeks. I am not sure what else I can say on that particular topic. I may have messed it up.

No, no, you didn't mess anything up. But I was really just trying to get a sense of before you went to Berlin. Yeah, all right. Excuse me one minute.

Sure.

They have some questions they want to air in your experiences in Berlin. So--

Yes.

--I do want to just repeat the question, we're rolling over, about this effort for a boycott in the United States, were you aware of it?

Yes, I was somewhat aware of. The press gave some space to the problems in Germany. Not full space, not full description of what might be going on underneath the table. It wasn't that kind of a fullness of expression, but there was enough information coming because Hitler was beginning to make demands which were so great and impossible that you had to have a feeling that you were into something that was going to be very, very rough.

Was there a talk about a boycott, about not going to the games?

There was some talk going about it. Yes, there was. And a lot of the talk was directed at the president of the American Olympic Committee, who I think gave very little preliminary credence to it. But he wanted to see what was happening and he was an all time pole vaulter from Yale University and he headed the American Olympic Committee, behaved in such a way that eight or nine of us who were Jewish or were not in the games.

I was there because I was working with the demonstration group, not a competitive group at that time. We were striving to teach enough skills so that they would say next time around we want a baseball team, we want a baseball team. And it didn't happen that way.

So you were allowed to play in Berlin because you were in a non-competitive sport?

I think that would be one reason that the American Olympic Committee chairman, Norman Armitage, did not have any feeling against me or against Jews that he was visibly going to show.

Did you think before going to Berlin as a Jew that maybe you shouldn't go?

Not for one minute. Absolutely not one minute. I talked with a number of the sports leaders in our local area in Brooklyn, New York. I talked with the coaches at boys high school and I told them what the goals were. And I was not discouraged, I was not encouraged, I was just say, well, here's your chance to learn something. And I did not speak German, but I began to use some of the German that I knew in some of the discussions.

Now, the Olympic Village was about 12 miles from the city of Berlin. Marty Glickman and I were headed for downtown Berlin from the village town, down to downtown. We were interested in two things. One, a boxing match that was going to take place that day and some other events about kids who were in difficulty, but were good athletes.

Now, in the first instance that I mentioned, the bus we had missed, and there was a bus that ran every 30 minutes from the Olympic Village to downtown Berlin. If you missed the bus, you were out of luck for the next 30 minutes. And so Marty and I were headed for downtown Berlin and we did not make it, we were late.

And so we went out on the highway and we put up our thumb to get a ride. Dressed in the American Olympic uniform, we had no trouble being picked up. We were picked up by German athletes in uniform, a German army man actually in uniform with a sidecar, a motorcycle with a sidecar. And Marty and I got in the sidecar and he drove us.

We were almost through with the 12 miles and I asked the question, I asked the driver [GERMAN] Jackie Gleason, is Jackie Wilson from the United States of America going to be boxing tonight? Jackie Wilson from the United States going to be boxing tonight? [GERMAN] I use the word hind the Jewish word for tonight, instead of heute, which is the German word for tonight.

If I wanted to know are all of you going to the movies tonight, heute, are you all going tonight? So I didn't say it the right way. And he stopped the car, stopped the motorcycle very sharply, pulled over off the highway. And Marty and I waited right there and he said, autography, autography, autography, autography.

So we gave him our passport. He wanted to see our passport, the driver. He had no right to, he was not a police officer, yet I didn't want to start any fight with him. So we handed the two German Jeep drivers our passports. And we gave them to them and they gave them back to us and said autography,