



A dancer lights the Olympic flame with a parabolic mirror in Olympia, Greece in April. The flame will be transported by torch relay to the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro.

PHOTOGRAPHY • THANASSIS STAVRAKIS, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Getting podium ready

Find your Olympic spirit with these six sporty books and movies

BY JULES TORTI

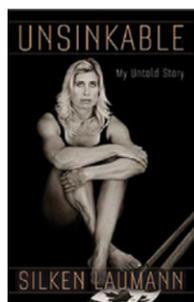
With athletes from around the globe converging this summer on Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, now is the time to get in an Olympic frame of mind.

To help immerse you in the burning spirit of Rio, we've selected a six-pack of Olympic-themed books and films that have earned podium rights of their own. Host your own Olympic-themed book club meeting or blend some protein shakes and invite a crowd over for a motivating movie night.

Unsinkable by Silken Laumann

Silken Laumann's bronze-medal finish in the 1992 Olympic Games in single sculls rowing shook not only her cheerleading homeland but the world. Just 10 weeks before the Barcelona Games, Laumann was struck by a pair of German rowers during training. The collision left her with a fractured fibula, sheared muscles and the devastating possibility that she may never row again.

In "Unsinkable," Laumann revisits the incident and illustrates her tenacity in overcoming obstacles. Her smooth and controlled presence on the surface of water is an impressive balancing act when readers begin to tread the turbulent waters that marred the three-time Olympic medallist's childhood. Laumann's courage to compete after the 1992 accident (which required five invasive surgeries) and return to her boat after just 27 days pales when she discloses her family dysfunction, chronic anxiety and battle with anorexia. Her physical accomplishments are the mere surface of a life spent trying to outpace demons, self-loathing and a troubled mother-daughter relationship.



The Power of More: How Small Steps Can Help You Achieve Big Goals by Marnie McBean



Three-time Olympic rowing champ Marnie McBean's insights have a silver lining, despite her three gold medals and bronze swag. If you're looking for an instant life coach, her calculated (and proven) concepts of "How Small Steps Can Help You Achieve Big Goals" are a foolproof formula. Her blueprint is applicable to everyone — regardless of your ambitions, career or athleticism. In fact, the mentorship offered in "The Power of More" is designed for passion projects, verbalizing goals and even the simplicity of starting necessary conversations. Of course, there are lots of gold nuggets about the Olympics, juicy behind-the-scenes reflection and eavesdropping on the life of a driven athlete.

Her writing spirit is contagious and you can feel the empowerment sneak in. How can it not? McBean wowed us with her rowing prowess, but the now-retired Olympian continued to share her secret to sport domination with the Canadian Olympic Committee as a specialist in athlete preparation. She showcases her glittery 15-year rowing career and peppers it with fun and unexpected trivia like her Kilimanjaro climb, mad chess skills and once-upon-a-time employment as a snowboard instructor.

It's not all gloating and gold medals. There are honest admissions of failure and her own struggles to be and do more (like competing in the Canadian Eco-Challenge and hitting a wall, despite the physical accolades that proceeded her).

If you need some serious cheerleading and a big boost up the ladder of success — climb onto McBean's shoulders and she'll give you a quick leg up on the competition.

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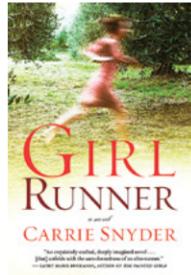
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Girl Runner
by Carrie Snyder



For a fictional foray into the Olympics, “Girl Runner” shares the story of 104-year-old Aganetha Smart. “I have outlived everyone I’ve ever loved and everyone who ever loved me.” A bit deaf by admission (“but not so deaf as they think”) and not-quite blind, Smart grapples with what little remains. Has she become just a name in a forgotten record book? Riding on her diluted fame in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games, Smart hooks arms with readers and brings them to the first Games where women were allowed to compete in track and field events.

“Girl Runner” keeps a swift pace from the suspended days of solitude at the nursing home to the adrenalin of the start line thanks to the arrival of two strangers. The contemporary mystery braids narratives from the past and present, running fingertips over the memories of war, the Depression, gender inequality and a rural Ontario childhood in poetic verse. While many run away from their past, Smart races headlong toward it, ignoring the wheelchair that confines her.

For runners, the author’s note that follows is loaded with peculiar Olympic history and astonishment. Snyder’s research touches on women being banned from races further than 200 metres until the 1960 Games in Rome. She shares the reasons behind her portrayal of Miss Alexandrine Gibb (the one character in her book based on a real person), team manager of the Canadian women’s team in 1928 and sports columnist for the Toronto Daily Star.

Fast fans of the Waterloo-based writer can find more of Snyder’s work online at her well-fed blog, Obscure CanLit Mama.

Chariots of Fire

The soundtrack of this 1981 film is what finish line sprints are made of. It’s been



covered by countless musicians from Gheorghe Zamfir to Alvin and the Chipmunks. Sweeping the Oscars in four categories, “Chariots of Fire” tells the story of British track athletes

Eric Liddell, a Christian, and Harold Abrahams, an English Jew. Anti-Semitism assumes a starring role and religious morals are challenged as the men compete against the clock, family expectations and religious doctrine. Taking place in the fever around the 1924 Olympics in Paris, Liddell’s devout family members are not supportive of his decision to prioritize running practice over worship. His path is to be a missionary in China and being asked to run on the Sabbath puts his religious convictions and family ties in a chokehold.

It’s a timeless battle between honour, sacrifice and inner religion. Guarantee, you’ll be humming this score over Drake’s latest as you pound out that five-kilometre route. “Chariots of Fire” will undoubtedly make you question what you’re running for and against.

Foxcatcher

The most surprising part of “Foxcatcher” is Steve Carrell’s twitchy portrayal of multimillionaire and wrestling aficionado John du Pont. Those who know him best from “The Office” and slapstick comedies like “Date Night” won’t recognize him as a disturbed eccentric chasing a misguided dream. When du Pont

invites Olympic gold wrestler Mark Schultz (Channing Tatum) to move to his estate at Foxcatcher Farms so he has the proper foundation to train and focus on the 1988 Olympic Games, du Pont’s overbearing psychosis emerges. Tainted by his wealth and the seduction of du Pont’s promises, Schultz agrees and the film takes a dip into a dark psychological drama with unex-

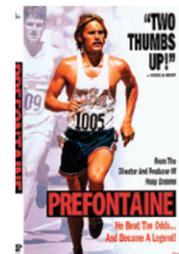


pected lethal consequences.

When Schultz’s equally successful older brother Dave (Mark Ruffalo) is invited to the estate, the conflict erupts. Mark has spent a lifetime in Dave’s shadow and is finally coming into his own. As Mark falls deeper into the suffocating mind warp of du Pont and his spell, the brothers clash like rutting elk. Vanessa Redgrave is stellar as du Pont’s ego-crushing mother, who vocalizes her disapproval of her son’s interest in such a low-brow sport at every turn. The tragic ending of “Foxcatcher” is the result of a fragmented childhood, mental illness and misdirected passion. It proves that the greatest wrestling matches often happen in the mind.

Prefontaine

This 1997 biopic follows the fast and furious life of Olympic contender Steve Prefontaine (Jared Leto). The University of Oregon student and talent-smacked long-distance runner established a quick reputation for his aggressive approach to races and routinely cleaned up at cross-country races, going full throttle from the starter gun’s blast.



The film’s heaviness is felt at the Munich Games in 1972, when terrorists threaten to cancel the Olympic events. Prefontaine fails to medal and ekes out a living bartending and calling a trailer park home, pacing until he can challenge Finland’s Lasse Viren again in Montreal’s Games in 1976. His finish line came sooner than that. Prefontaine was killed in May 1975 at age 24 in a booze-fuelled car crash. He once held the United States record in every distance from the 2,000 metres to the 10,000 metres.

He ran for his country but also for the betterment of amateur athletes’ lives, funding and governance. Steadfast, he challenged the role of the United States in preparing runners for competition in an international market with athletes who had enviable financial injections and sponsorship. 🇨🇦

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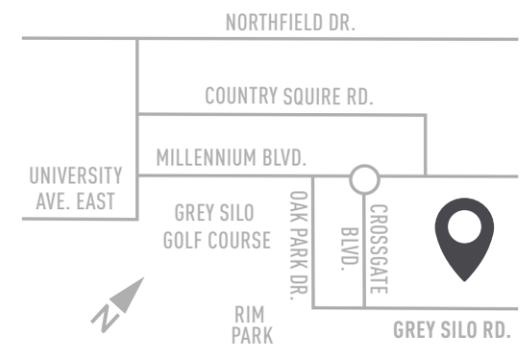


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