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‘Dreamers and Schemers’ Review: Angel Games

The 1932 Olympics made Los Angeles the city it is today and marked the beginning of the long love affair between Hollywood and sports.



The 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

PHOTO: AP

By John Buntin

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The traveling salesman is an American archetype. The real-estate agent, by contrast, is often overlooked. This is curious. Real-estate agents have long exercised tremendous influence over how American cities have grown. And nowhere has this influence been greater than in Los Angeles. In “Dreamers and Schemers: How an Improbable Bid for the 1932 Olympics Transformed Los Angeles From Dusty Outpost to Global Metropolis,” Barry Siegel tells the story of one of history’s more significant real-estate agents, William Garland. It’s the story of how Los Angeles came to be what it is, and how Hollywood mass culture came to include the sporting world.

Garland was born in 1866 in Maine to a family of preachers and farmers. Instead of going to college, as his high-minded mother insisted, he set out to become a businessman. He left school early, moved to Boston and got a job as a clerk at a crockery firm. Boredom and a bad cough

drove him next to Daytona Beach, Fla., where he worked as a stagecoach driver. Then came six years in Chicago, where he worked his way up to the position of receiving teller. This was progress, but not the sort that sufficed for an ambitious young man. In the winter of 1890, he arrived in Los Angeles with \$23 in his pocket. He was 24.

Four years later, Garland formed his own real-estate firm and set to work developing a subdivision on Wilshire Boulevard, at the time a remote parcel of land miles away from downtown and wholly lacking in infrastructure. To this and all his other business ventures, writes Mr. Siegel, Garland brought “a certain flair. He had an infectious personality, abundant enthusiasm, unflagging energy and a powerful handshake. On top of that, he projected composed, eye-on-the-ball certitude.”

It was an effective combination. In quick succession, Garland married a New York railroad heiress, survived a troublesome lawsuit that accused the rising realtor of conspiring against his clients, and co-founded the powerful Los Angeles Realty Board. In early 1918, he and a few of his newspaper-baron acquaintances espied a new way to promote Los Angeles, not just to the country but the world. It came in the form of the International Olympic Committee.

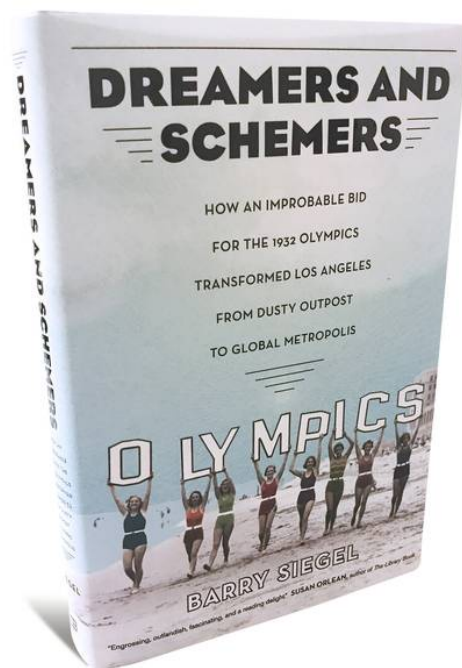


PHOTO: WSJ
DREAMERS AND SCHEMERS
By Barry Siegel
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The IOC was the creation of Charles Pierre de Frédy, baron de Coubertin. It was Coubertin who had revived the Olympics, staging the first modern Games in Athens in 1896. In the years that

followed, he worked tirelessly to sustain the fledgling Olympic movement. The bantam baron, a mere 5 feet 3 inches tall—formal, fussy and aristocratic—was not an obvious friend for the open-faced, 6-foot-tall Garland. Yet Garland soon won the baron over, and the IOC awarded Los Angeles the 1932 Games. Garland envisioned a marketing triumph. Instead, he got the Great Depression.

It was a difficult time to host an athletic pageant. A huge homeless encampment had risen on a 5-acre site near the Coliseum—which Garland had convinced taxpayers to fund a decade earlier—a visible manifestation of the spreading poverty. Yet Garland and the Olympic organizers were asking voters to approve \$1 million to support the Games. Worse, it was not clear other countries, also hit hard by the Depression, would participate. Sending athletes from Europe required two weeks of travel each way plus a month in Los Angeles.

Garland's lieutenant came up with an innovative solution to the cost of housing athletes, creating the first Olympic Village—a makeshift complex of temporary bungalows where athletes could stay for \$2 a day. Still, by the summer of 1931 not a single country had accepted an invitation to the 1932 Olympics. When the organizing committee suggested canceling the Games, Garland and Harry Chandler, the publisher of the Los Angeles Times, backed the critics down.

With hyperbole that would have no doubt pleased Garland, Mr. Siegel's subtitle suggests that the Olympics somehow created Los Angeles. The opposite is more nearly the case. The Los Angeles Games assembled a huge audience and fused sports with celebrity. The event also took a big step toward the full participation of women, especially in track and field.

The 1932 Los Angeles Games were a triumph. Thirty-seven countries sent athletes to Los Angeles. More than 1.5 million tickets were sold, after Hollywood's reigning couple, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, took to the radio to tout the event. Athletes and international luminaries rubbed elbows with celebrities such as Groucho Marx, Will Rogers and Clark Gable.

Mr. Siegel, a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer for the Los Angeles Times and now a professor of literary journalism at the University of California, Irvine, skillfully portrays the drama in the athletic contests. We meet the swaggering, outrageously talented Mildred "Babe" Didrikson, champion javelin thrower, sprinter, broad jumper and baseball thrower. We watch the lanky blond Stanford grad Ben Eastman and 5-foot-6-inch Bill "Wee Willie" Carr battle for gold in the 400-meter race.

And then it was over. A few athletes, such as the 18-year-old swimming sensation Eleanor Holm, went on to careers in Hollywood. Some went back to their jobs. Others returned to the dole. As for Garland, he went home to his mansion in West Adams and to Casa Ladera, his rambling, three-story house in Pebble Beach. In 1933, his son married Harry Chandler's daughter. Garland stayed involved in the Olympic movement until World War II. He died in 1948, at the age of 82. But long before others did, Garland saw the world that was coming into being—a world of sports celebrity, a world where facilities like Los Angeles's Coliseum were the center of civic life. He helped create it.

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