:03 Seconds From Gold (2002). Produced and edited by George Roy. Black Canyon Productions/HBO Productions. 59 mins.

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It was, to Americans, the foulest perversion of fair play ever committed against a sports team. To Soviets, it was undeniably within the rules. Two days before the closing ceremony at the 1972 Munich Olympics, the United States squared off against the Soviet Union in the gold-medal game for men's basketball. On one side stood the Americans—brash, young college players, defenders of the nation's unblemished Olympic basketball record. Opposite were the Soviets—a gritty veteran squad, well drilled and intent on ending America's basketball supremacy. In what many consider to be the freakiest finish to any athletic contest in history, the Soviet team eventually scored the decisive bucket, but only after the game's final seconds were played not once, not twice, but three times. More shock came the next day after an Olympic tribunal voted down what appeared to be a strong protest from the American team. United States players, coaches, fans, journalists—even casual observers—erupted in a chorus of strident outrage. Soviets from Leningrad to Vladivostok celebrated wildly. Some thirty years later, the contentiousness lives on.

Black Canyon Production's insightful documentary of the game entitled *:03 Seconds From Gold,* which aired on HBO during the summer of 2002, strives not so much to provide the definitive statement on which team truthfully won—though some American supporters may rethink their position—as it does to illustrate just how intensely and thoroughly the game became politicized. Indeed, that is the very point of the hour-length film: To examine sporting events between the United States and the former Soviet Union is to examine the impact of the Cold War on attitudes within both countries. That the game was embroiled in such controversy only further entrenched these attitudes. The film does a fine job bringing these views to light.

Equally commendable, *:03 Seconds From Gold* aspires to be objective. It has no propagandistic agenda, insofar as declaring the United States or the Soviet Union to be the real winner. As the film implies, so convoluted were the game's last moments, and so hardened have opinions become, that any attempt to figure out which team really won is a futile endeavor. Yet what at first appears to be a drawback is actually an advantage. Not pretending in the least to have solved the elusive basketball enigma, *:03 Seconds From Gold* does not bog down viewers in the morass of meticulous details, minutiae and repetitive accounts of the game. Second-guessing game plans and tactics takes up but a small part in the film. Black Canyon's documentary does indulge in quite a bit of sleuthing, but it is of a kind that seeks largely to redress those misconceptions based upon, and reinforced by,

[†]The author would like to thank Randy Roberts and Adrienne Chafetz for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of the essay.

Cold War expectations and stereotypes. With skill and nuance, *:03 Seconds From Gold* achieves this aim.

As the documentary shows, the basketball final concluded in a prickly tangle of whistles, shots, buzzers and inbounds plays. The events baffle the mind. For most of two halves the game belonged to the Soviets. Their disciplined, half-court brand of ball fit the slow tempo of the contest. But late in the second half the United States quickened the pace. The strategy paid off. With three seconds remaining, the Americans inched in front for their first advantage, 50-49, after guard Doug Collins swished two critical free throws. Wasting no time, the Soviets quickly entered the ball, but before a shot could be taken, the referee whistled the game to a stop. Two seconds had expired. After a spirited discussion among referees and Soviet and American coaches, the game restarted, with not one but three seconds remaining again. Once more the Soviets threw the ball in play, but their last-second shot missed just after the horn went off. Elated United States players and fans, thinking the game had ended, dashed onto the court, grinning and shouting, cheering an apparent comeback win. The celebration, however, was short-lived. With smiles still lighting American faces, word thundered down from Olympic officials that there would be another three seconds to play. Stunned and angered, American players and coaches argued the decision but, with little recourse, grudgingly gave in.

Again a Soviet toss initiated play. But instead of making a short pass, as was the case the previous two times, a Soviet player from behind the baseline flung the ball down court to a teammate standing in the three-seconds lane and surrounded by two United States defenders. The Soviet player leapt high and snared the full-court pass, while one American, bumped off balance during the play, fell to the side as the other over-jumped and ended up out of bounds. The basket lay undefended. The Soviets put the ball in the hoop, and a split second later, the horn blew. The Soviets had survived, 51-50. Their bench then exploded in a euphoric outpouring of emotion. For them, the revelry would continue the following day when an Olympic appeals committee voted not to reverse the last tally, ending America's perfect Olympic basketball streak.

Of *:03 Seconds From Gold's* seven segments, two—parts four and six—focus on the strange ending. Part four discusses the game's immense attraction, describes its rough action, and then smartly presents actual footage of the bizarre ending without added commentary or explanation. In this way, viewers not only experience the game's high drama but also relive some of the initial disorientation produced by watching the last seconds played and replayed and replayed again.

Part six, in contrast, contains less presentation and more clarification. Here, questions are answered, and puzzling decisions demystified. For instance, why was the game ever halted in the first place? The stoppage happened, the film explains, so the referees could address an outburst by the Soviet coaches, upset over not receiving the timeout they had requested moments earlier, after Doug Collins had made the first of his two crucial foul shots. The timeout was granted. Why were two seconds then added to the clock? The documentary asserts that one man was responsible: R. William Jones, General Secretary of the International Amateur Basketball Federation (FIBA), the organization that oversaw the Munich basketball competition. Going back to when the Soviets had called timeout, Jones motioned to the scorer's table to put three seconds on the clock, even though, as the

film observes, FIBA rules made no provisions whatsoever for play to have stopped so a timeout could be awarded. For his role, Jones drew the ire of an entire sporting nation, becoming in the United States basketball's public enemy number one, a sentiment that the film demonstrates still persists among many of those Americans involved with the game.

This segment also clarifies what was to Americans perhaps the most perplexing incident: replaying the end after it seemed the United States already had won. Without piling on blame, *:03 Seconds From Gold* nevertheless makes clear that the referee who gave the ball to the Russian player, and thus restarting the game, failed to notice that the timekeeper was busy resetting the scoreboard clock. The sound of the horn, coming almost instantaneously after the Soviets threw the ball inbounds, was not to indicate that the contest was over, as Americans believed, but rather to notify the referees that play had resumed before the clock had been properly reset to three seconds.

The film's other sections probe matters central to understanding the significance of the game's conclusion. The opening part explores the important role sport played in Soviet society (with some nifty, black-and-white scenes of old Soviet sports festivals), as well as the growing status of basketball inside the communist nation. Part two profiles the American squad and describes the team's boot camp-like preparation and the old-school approach of its coach Henry Iba. Moving slightly away from the game, the third segment underscores the tragic collision of politics and sport at Munich, recounting the horrific massacre of eleven Israeli athletes and officials by the Palestinian terrorist group, Black September. Parts five and seven demonstrate the acrimonious debate over which club ultimately prevailed, including an account of the United States players' unanimous decision not to accept the silver medal for second place and the war of words that the rebuff incited.

To capture this irreconcilable difference, *:03 Seconds From Gold* places oppositional points of view in dialogue with one another. It is an effective technique. Throughout portions of the film, contradictory statements, often about the same event, alternate in the back-and-forth rhythm of a courtroom drama. Accusations and counteraccusations fly. But in this Cold War caper, this basketball *whodunit,* adjudicating the case is not the film's primary goal. Rather, it is the evocation of a world built upon suspicion, paranoia, propaganda and ideological polemics—all of which help explain why so much discrepancy existed between what Americans and Soviets thought they had seen in the game.

Two examples from the film illustrate this point. First, many Americans maintained that the Soviets' length-of-the-floor connection, which led directly to the last basket, should have been nullified, since the Soviet player throwing the ball appeared to have stepped on the baseline while making the pass.[1] The Russians, of course, denied the charge. Second, there was the alleged bloc voting by the basketball tribunal. Americans believed that the United States' appeal died not because of its illegitimacy but rather because the jury had been rigged to the Soviets' advantage. Three of the five jury members came from communist nations (Cuba, Poland and Hungary). To most Americans, the evidence was irrefutable—the jury was guilty.

:03 Seconds From Gold proves these claims (and others like them) to be, if not untrue, a rush to judgment. Close-up camera work in the film clearly shows that the Russian player who made the game's last pass came close to but *never* stepped on the out-of-bounds

line. Later, the film challenges the claim that the appeals jury had placed politics above ethics. Viewers learn that Ferenc Hepp, the Hungarian delegate on the jury, may not have based his vote solely on ideological fealty. Hepp, according to one FIBA representative interviewed in the film, loathed the Soviet Union. His native Hungary had suffered greatly under the 1956 Russian invasion. More, Hepp had had family murdered by the Soviets. Seen in this light, facts—and not just politics—may have determined the jury's decision.

:03 Seconds From Gold would have done well to explore the reasons Americans were so convinced that politics motivated the jury. Perhaps it was more than just a case of communist jurors outnumbering noncommunist jurors. One significant factor not mentioned in the film was the belief that, overall, American athletes at Munich were losing to communist officials and Iron Curtain partisanship, not superior opponents.[2] The proof seemed obvious and abundant: in the suspect results of several events—gymnastics, wrestling, boxing, shooting and diving. All preceded the basketball final. In true spy novel fashion, it looked to Americans as if the KGB had muscled its way into Olympic judging boxes. The strange ending of the basketball game confirmed the idea for many in the United States that the Munich Olympics had become decidedly anti-American.

Another shortcoming is that the documentary does not detail the degree to which international politics pervaded the Munich Games. Doing so would further substantiate its argument that the basketball game both revealed and energized the clash between polarized political ideologies, since the game was played in not only a context where sport was being used for political objectives but also one where people were becoming politically active and engaged on a scale seldom witnessed before. There was the Rhodesian issue in which several African countries declared in the lead-up to the Games that they would not compete unless white-run Rhodesia was excluded.[3] Further, there was a culture of unrest in the United States, challenges to the status quo marked by political battles over civil equality and justice in the country for marginalized groups, as well as the pitched clashes over the war in Vietnam. These points never surface in the documentary.

Minor oversights notwithstanding, *:03 Seconds From Gold* is a film of accomplished storytelling, informative and compelling. It readily becomes apparent that the makers of the documentary have done their homework: key figures—players, coaches, officials, journalists and sports historians—are interviewed; actual footage (some from Russian archives) is shown; and the game unfolds true to history. One small drawback is that the background music, while evocative and catchy, grows a bit repetitive at times. But the writing is concise and unassuming, the editing nicely done; both qualities keep the presentation fresh and help offset any slight distraction the music might cause. Underpinning all of this is sound, intelligent documentary filmmaking. Videotape evidence and eyewitness accounts corroborate important conclusions drawn in the film, and each team's case for victory receives equal and fair treatment. Worthy of a medal itself, *:03 Seconds From Gold* reminds us of the terribly powerful impact the Cold War made on not only sports but all facets of life.

[1]Several sports pages across the country ran articles that discussed other possible infractions committed by the Soviet team on the last play. These included: a three-seconds violation by the Soviet player

who scored the last basket (not discussed in the film); a foul committed by the same player as he went up for the game's last pass (discussed in the film); and a traveling violation committed by the Soviet player before he scored the final basket (not discussed in the film).

[2]Before the basketball game was even played, magazines, newspaper editorials and sports pages from coast to coast reflected and intensified this perception.

[3]In addition, there were a handful of non-African countries that pledged solidarity with the boycott, as did several black athletes from the United States and other nations.