Incident 1: The United States boycott (Moscow, 1980)

The tension between the political systems of the USA and the Soviet Union was high in the late 1970s. (This tension finally came to an end when the Soviet Union dissolved into its many constituent states in the late 1980s and early 1990s.) Until the mid 1980s, each of the two political systems used international sport as a context in which to demonstrate their superiority to the other – superiority both as a political system and as a society.

In 1980, Moscow was scheduled to host the Olympic Games. But just before these Games, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, and the US President accused the Soviet Union of 'aggressive action'. The Soviets argued that the invasion was to protect the Soviet Muslim population and the Soviet interest in oil and arose out of the need to uphold the political system in Afghanistan.

To put pressure on the Soviet Union to pull out of Afghanistan, US President Carter announced that the US would boycott the Olympic Games. This led to a lot of debate among politicians, the media, and athletes. Many athletes opposed the boycott because they believed that the peace-promoting principle of the Olympics was being compromised – and also that all their training efforts would be wasted! Many US politicians, on the other hand, argued that Soviet aggression had to be addressed and that this boycott would send a powerful message to the world.

The US Olympic Committee strongly expressed their view that sport should not be used as a political tool and that the best way to address Soviet aggression was to beat them in the Olympic arena. However, the US did boycott these Games, and many other Western countries followed suit. The Moscow Games were still a magnificent celebration, but they lacked the glamour of previous Games and of the Games that were to follow.