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Moscow Olympics Relived in New British Film

By Des Brown

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Sebastian Coe, second from left, running at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. **RIA Novosti archive, image #556242 / Yuriy Somov / CC-BY-SA 3.0**

The Sebastian Coe-Steve Ovett clash at the Moscow Olympic Games was one of those quintessentially British sporting stories that are legendary at home but not so well known overseas. A new British film, ''Gold,'' announced last week, throws the spotlight on those Cold War Games of July and August 1980. Starring Daniel Radcliffe as Sebastian Coe, it will be directed by James Watkins and is written by Simon Beaufoy and Will Davies. This BBC Films/BFI production is due to start shooting in England and Russia in April 2014.

BBC Films' Christine Langan said: "Compelling, funny and moving, ''Gold'' is a gem of a story and BBC Films is proud to be participating in bringing it to an international audience."

Adapted from the book "The Perfect Distance" by Times journalist Pat Butcher, the drama chronicles the rivalry between the two British runners that culminated in the showdown

between them at the 1980 Moscow Olympics in both the 800 meters, which Ovett won and the 1500 meters, which Coe won.

Coe and Ovett were the undoubted champions of middle distance running during the late 1970s. Coe set three world records in 1979 and the 800 meters record in 1981. The two men first raced against each other professionally in the 800 meters in the 1978 European Championship, before their two clashes in Moscow.

Coe went on to retain his 1500 meters title in Los Angeles four years later, the only man to do so. He then entered parliament, became a life peer and served as chairman of the London 2012 Olympic Games Organizing Committee, staging Britain's biggest and most successful ever sporting event.

As a result, at the end of 2012, Coe came second in The Daily Telegraph's Britons of the Year list — only Queen Elizabeth II beat him to the top spot. The newspaper described him as "the architect of Britain's finest sporting year, Coe was the magician who made our summer."

Ovett's post-Moscow career could not have been more different. He failed at the Los Angeles Olympics and never won another Olympic medal. He retired from athletics, moved to Australia and almost never gives interviews.

Beaufoy told the BBC in February while writing the script: "I tried to speak to Steve Ovett, but true to form, he doesn't want to. He never in his career talked to journalists ever, famously refusing interviews. Sebastian Coe will give an interview at the drop of a hat, also true to form. Very polite, very media conscious, very aware of his image. They both are. They both respond in completely different ways."

The film's production team has quite a pedigree. Beaufoy is one of Britain's most successful screenwriters, having won an Academy Award for "Slumdog Millionaire" and also wrote "The Full Monty" and "127 Hours." He has worked on the project with Will Davies, the writer of Disney's animated hit "How to Train Your Dragon."

James Watkins helped establish Radcliffe's post-Harry Potter career with 2012's supernatural drama "The Woman in Black." Radcliffe is still a major draw — the international success of "The Woman in Black" is a testament to his global fan base. His post-Potter screen roles have varied, from "A Young Doctor's Notebook" on British TV, to his current role as Allen Ginsberg in "Kill Your Darlings," to his next role as Igor in a new film version of "Frankenstein." Radcliffe has a certain Coe look about him and is the right age — Coe was 24 in 1980, which is the same as Radcliffe.

"Gold" follows another recent production "Rush" which chronicled the 1970s rivalry between James Hunt and Niki Lauda on the 1970s Formula One circuit — still on international release and it opened in Russia last month. The film has made $74 million and rising, perhaps a promising sign for future sports films such as "Gold."

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