Warm Up for Olympic Festival With ‘Athletes’ Photo Exhibition

NORMAN — An exhibit of photographs of “Athletes” past and present at the University of Oklahoma Museum of Art offers a good way for visitors to get warmed up — at least aesthetically — for the U.S. Olympic Festival July 21-30.

Quality is high in the touring show, which includes photos of famous and not-so-famous athletes taken by famous and not-so-famous photographers from 1860 to 1986.

Nickolas Muray offers us a surprising 1927 picture of “Babe Ruth” who looks more like a knight of woeful countenance than he does a happy-go-lucky slugger as he sits quietly holding a bat in his pinstripe uniform.

There is something posed about Lusha Nelson's 1935 photograph of “Joe Louis” and Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1976 picture of “Arnold Schwarzenegger” flexing his muscles in front of a paisley curtain.

Both photos create a nearly theatrical impact, making their subjects look as much like matinee idols as athletes.

 anonymous struggle is emphasized by Pierre Boucher in ‘Training of Coaches,” a 1940 picture of men in shorts struggling over a wall, and by Ernst Heiniger in a 1941 photo of a line of mountain climbers struggling up “Bianco Ridge.”

The body of a “Swimmer under Water” seems disembodied and dreamlike in a 1917 photograph by Andre Kertesz.

Even more surrealistic is a 1979 color picture taken by Joel Sternfeld, “Near Lake Powell, Arizona,” which contrasts the familiarity of a weathered basketball goal with the scenic monumentality of the desert behind it.

Lucien Aigner opts for a more documentary approach in a 1935 Paris photograph which shows a crowd of people ignoring a visually seductive wall advertisement for Jantzen swimwear to concentrate on posters relating to the threat of war.

Organized by the International Center of Photography and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, the show of 73 photos, curated by Ruth Silverman, runs through Aug. 21 at the OU Museum of Art, 410 W Boyd.

— John Brandenburg