

The failure of the First African Games, in 1929

Originally planned for 1927, the First African Games were put off two years, and should have taken place in Alexandria (Egypt), beginning on April 5th 1929. By this time, the stadium was expected to be finished — which had not been the case in 1927 — and this was the reason for the postponement. Mr. Angelo Bolanaki, a member of the International Olympic Committee since 1910, and who died in Lausanne in 1963, had devoted himself body and soul to this work and had made it his own. The stadium had cost £125,000 and the organizing expenses of the Games had, by that time, reached £5,000. The failure of the Games to take place was a bitter disappointment to Mr. Bolanaki, who, many years later, was to find consolation in the success of the first Mediterranean Games, held at the same stadium in Alexandria in 1951. If Mr. Bolanaki was, as it were, the mainspring, the presidency of these Games was, however, conferred on H.E. Mohammed Taher Pasha — still a member of the International Olympic Committee — who was able to bring them to a successful conclusion.

The failure of the first African Games was due solely to political considerations. From out of all the countries invited, only one sent in its entry. This conspiracy of silence, which had nothing to do with sport, forced the organizers to abandon the project as hopeless, and, at the last moment, the Games were cancelled.

If we refer once more to this affair, which made such a stir in Olympic circles at the time, it is because we are now only a few months away from the new first African Games which will take place more or less for certain this time at Brazzaville. We wish them all success. It must be added that these Games are the result of the Friendship Games organized in Africa with French encouragement, the last of which took place at Dakar, in April 1963. The French, who were the prime movers, have now withdrawn, to leave the field free for the African Games which are to take place with the participation of athletes solely from that continent.

To return to that first attempt in 1929, we re-print here certain informative extracts. Let us also add that the International Olympic Committee Meeting of 1929 had been

arranged to take place during the Games at Alexandria, and that it was transferred at the last minute to Lausanne.

AN EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE AMSTERDAM MEETING IN 1928

Mr. Bolanaki, (member of the International Olympic Committee and organizer of the Games), asked the International Olympic Committee to approve the changes made in the conditions of entry for the athletes taking part in the first African Games. These changes would also enable those to enter who had been resident in Africa for at least two years.

After a discussion in which Mr. Sherrill (U.S.A.), Count de Baillet-Latour (Belgium), Mr. Keane (Ireland), Count Clary (France), Mr. Pescatore (Luxembourg) and Count de Panha-Garcia (Portugal) took part, it became clear during this discussion that it would be necessary to allow not only those of African birth, but also all those living in Africa to take part in the first African Games, in order to give these Games from the very beginning the necessary impetus. The committee adopted the proposed alteration.

Mr. Bolanaki, after having given an appreciation of the advanced state of the preparation for the Games, and in order to have the support of his colleagues, he stressed the necessity of having as many various colonies as possible as participants, so that the Games should be as imposing as possible. The 1929 meeting of the International Olympic Committee was to take place in Alexandria beginning, on March 31st of that year.

AN EXTRACT FROM THE SPEECH OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE, COUNT DE BAILLET-LATOURE, AT THE OPENING OF THE 1929 MEETING HOLD IN LAUSANNE, APRIL 8TH 1929.

The President announced that, owing to the state of mourning into which Egypt was plunged, the International Olympic Committee had been obliged to give up going to Alexandria. He asked Mr. Bolanaki to allow him, in these tragic circumstances, to

express to him the great admiration and deep sympathy of the International Olympic Committee. It was in fact due to Mr. Bolanaki that the Egyptian Olympic Committee, encouraged by the King and aided by the authorities, had found sufficient competitors to be able to hold the African Games in Alexandria, thus carrying out the project of Pierre de Coubertin, the great educator and Marshall Lyautey, the great colonizer. Although their means were different, they each had the same end, namely to bring to the races of the vast African continent the same benefits which other parts of the world derived from sport. The patronage of the International Olympic Committee, solicited for these Games, was immediately given. Not only had this plan been given the approval of Marshal Lyautey — which alone should have been enough to banish any fears — but there was also the experience gained in the Far-Eastern Games.

It was to be deplored that once more politics had meddled in sport to the detriment of everything. Under the influence of outside pressure and in the hope of allaying the vague fears expressed by certain people, the Egyptian Olympic Committee considered itself obliged to substitute for the simple and practical conditions which it had put forward, complicated rules for qualification. These had proved fatal in creating insurmountable difficulties, which were to put a stop to the Games, and in the end, as a result of this, the youth of Africa were the only victims.

In fact, the practice of sport on a wider scale would have been the inevitable result of these Games, and also the improved physical development of these young people would have contributed to the weakening of those influences which, from a moral point of view, were so pernicious. The Egyptian Olympic Committee, deprived at the last moment of the reward which was its due for the work of three years, could rest assured that its efforts would not be in vain. In building the Alexandria stadium, it would have given the national Federations all the installations necessary for training and improving these teams, and it had been a pleasure to see these teams represent Egypt in the Olympic Games of 1906, 1912, 1920, 1924 and 1928.

In February 1929 the Egyptian Mirror published the following article :

THE SAD OF A WONDERFUL PROJECT.
THE CANCELLATION OF THE AFRICAN GAMES .

'The news of the cancellation of the African Games has caused in Egypt, particularly in Alexandria, a real sense of stupefaction, as much by its suddenness as by the dashing of the well-founded hopes encouraged by this imposing manifestation of sport.

It has been, and still is, difficult to understand why these Games, which had been planned for years, which were under the patronage of H.M. The King and the International Olympic Committee, and for which had been built — and at what a price ! — one of the finest stadiums in the world, had received the support of only one of the countries invited ! Furthermore, it is difficult to understand why the Organizing Committee, composed of prominent Egyptians, who were therefore fully conscious of their heavy responsibilities, had not been able to extend the time limit for the replies and to put forward the date of the Games. This would have allowed a fresh attempt at negotiation with the same countries, and possibly other countries as well, with a view to taking part in a more comprehensive and more interesting series of Games to include the whole Mediterranean basin. Any arrangement, even a less ambitious one, would have added more to Egyptian prestige than this lamentable failure.

'To explain the failure of this project, political reasons have been put forward, and as always in these supposed machinations, the hand of England is seen. However, it would appear to have been forgotten that the British Olympic Committee had, more than a year previously, declined the offer made to it.

'This decision, which ignored some of the best — if not the best athletes, namely those from the Cape and the Transvaal, should have made the Egyptian Olympic Committee re-double its efforts to ensure that the co-operation of other Olympic Committees was obtained in good time, and refuse to accept vague promises.

'In addition, false hopes should not have been allowed to mislead a whole city expecting the manna from heaven of foreign visitors, but Egypt itself. There is no doubt that foreigners would have been attracted to the country by these unique Games, so new to the East.

'The moral responsibility of the Egyptian Olympic Committee was therefore absolute. It was in vain that the majority of its members tried to escape this responsibility by a mass resignation. This attitude had, furthermore, nothing gracious about it. The Olympic Committee had other aims besides the holding of games, and, at whatever cost to their pride, they should have stuck to their guns.

'In spite, however, of the generous and truly sportsman-like gesture of Prince Abbas Ibrahim in personally assuring the working of the Egyptian Olympic Committee with the few members who did not resign, and with the delegates of the Egyptian sports federations, this committee will not quickly recover from this blow to its prestige.'

This was in 1929 !