

Canoe-Kayak: The path to the Olympic Games*

Every competitive sport strives for the highest mark of recognition, —inclusion in the Olympic Games.

In the year 1924, that saw the foundation of the IRK (Internationale Repräsentenschaft für Kanusport) in Copenhagen, demonstration races in kayaks and canoes were staged during the VIIIth Olympiad in Paris, with competitors from the canoeing associations of the USA and Canada. The races were over a course of 2,000 metres and included singles, pairs and fours for both single and double blade. At that time neither of these association was a member of the IRK, nor had the Americans replied to an invitation to take part in the first IRK regatta held in Hamburg a weekend later. As a result, a real opportunity to gain a firmer footing with the International Olympic Committee was missed. In Paris the USA won all the events for double blade, and the Canadians all the single-blade events. It seems strange today that the same men competed in both classes of boat. In this way the American, Havens, had three wins and one second place, and the Canadian, Nurse, two wins and four second places.

The races in Prague on the occasion of the Olympic Congress held in that city, do not appear to have achieved anything; nevertheless hope continued that canoe races might still appear in the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, and this led the German Canoe Association to organise, in the summer of 1926, the first Olympic training courses for kayak paddlers. All the efforts of the IRK were in vain, both for 1928 and later for 1932, when the Olympic Games were held in Los Angeles, though the associations in Germany and Czechoslovakia applied considerable pressure. It was in the summer of 1929 that

the IOC decided to reject canoeing, pelota and lacross because no more than six nations participated in these branches of sport.

And so the formation of more national canoeing associations, and their inclusion in the IRK, became one of the most important tasks facing the new President of the IRK, Dr. Eckert. Dominating the IRK Congress on 30th October, 1932 in Vienna, was the question of admission to the programme of the Olympic Games in 1936. After thorough discussion it was decided that all national associations of the IRK should apply to the IOC, through their own National Olympic Committees, for the inclusion of canoeing in the Berlin Olympic Games. Although the IRK had become a corporate member of the IOC, the IOC meeting in Vienna in 1933 rejected the application, not least because of the advice of the President of FISA, Ricco Fioroni of Switzerland.

An additional factor was the failure of several canoe associations to supply their IOC members with information on canoeing, and this was confirmed by the President of the IOC, Count Baillet-Latour, in a statement in the autumn of 1935. Nine National Olympic Committees gave their support to the application from the IRK, which, in the meantime, had enrolled 15 member associations. In 1933 the Congress of the IRK decided to protest against the rejection of its application, and launch a propaganda campaign directed at the IOC members. This proved successful and led to a promise to Dr. Eckert that the IRK application would be placed on the agenda of the next IOC Congress in 1934, in Athens. In Athens the IOC accepted the application from the IRK or, as it was known under its Olympic name, "Fédération Internationale de Canoë", and canoeing was included in the programme of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, with nine events.

Whereas ten nations had taken part in the first European championships in Prague in

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First Olympic canoe-kayak champions: Gregor Hradetzky (Austria), Paul Wewers and Ludwig Landen (Germany), Sven Johansson and Eric Bladstroem (Sweden).

1933, and nine, a year later in Copenhagen, now, for the Olympic canoe regatta on 7th and 8th August, 1936 in Berlin-Grunau, the cream of racing canoeists from nineteen nations took part, with the exception of Latvia and Brazil, the whole of the membership of the IRK at that time. There were large entries for all the events, and Germany, the host country, Austria and Czechoslovakia entered for all nine events. The smallest teams came from Poland, with two members, and Italy and Norway each with one member.

Canoeing's Olympic premiere was a complete success. At ten minutes past three in the afternoon of that memorable 7th August, the runner with the torch arrived at the regatta headquarters in Grunau, where an altar for the Olympic flame had been prepared. Then another runner, standing erect in the bow of a team "Canadian", carried the Olympic flame across the Langer See and then further runners took it on to the Bismark Tower in the Müggelberge. When, punctually at 4.30 p.m. the Olympic flame was ignited on the Tower, there rang out the shot of the starting gun for the first of the 10,000 m. races over a straight course from the north-east corner of Lake Seddin to the finishing line in front of the regatta headquarters in Grunau.

Surprisingly, the paddlers from overseas failed to come up to the standard of those from Central Europe. Only Canada was able to make an impression, and this in the three "Canadian" events. The Austrians gained most successes, with three gold, three silver and one bronze medal. The Germans took second place overall with two gold,

three silver and two bronze medals, in front of Czechoslovakia with its two gold and one silver medal. The medals went to eight nations, and in addition to those mentioned, Sweden gained one gold and one bronze; France one silver; Holland three bronze; and the USA one bronze. The most successful competitor in the Olympic canoe regatta, and therefore the leading kayak paddler of the pre-war years, was the Austrian Gregor Hradetzky, who gained two gold medals.

Other aspects contributed to the unforgettable canoeing climax in Berlin; the high standard achieved in the technical organisation of the regatta; the two gigantic grandstands; the great canoe cruise of over 350 boats from Mecklenburg, crossing lakes and travelling along rivers, to attend the Olympic Games; the International Camp on the Muggelsee with 3,000 campers in 1,500 tents and drawn from 15 nations; the huge Youth Camp on the Muggelspree with 2,000 young people. In addition there was the demonstration by 24 German canoeists in Eskimo kayaks, performing the "Eskimo Roll" in front of the main grandstand, and the impressive concluding spectacle provided by a ceremonial paddle past of 95 "War Canoes" along the Olympic regatta course.

The first appearance of canoeing in the Olympic Games had been an enormous success.



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