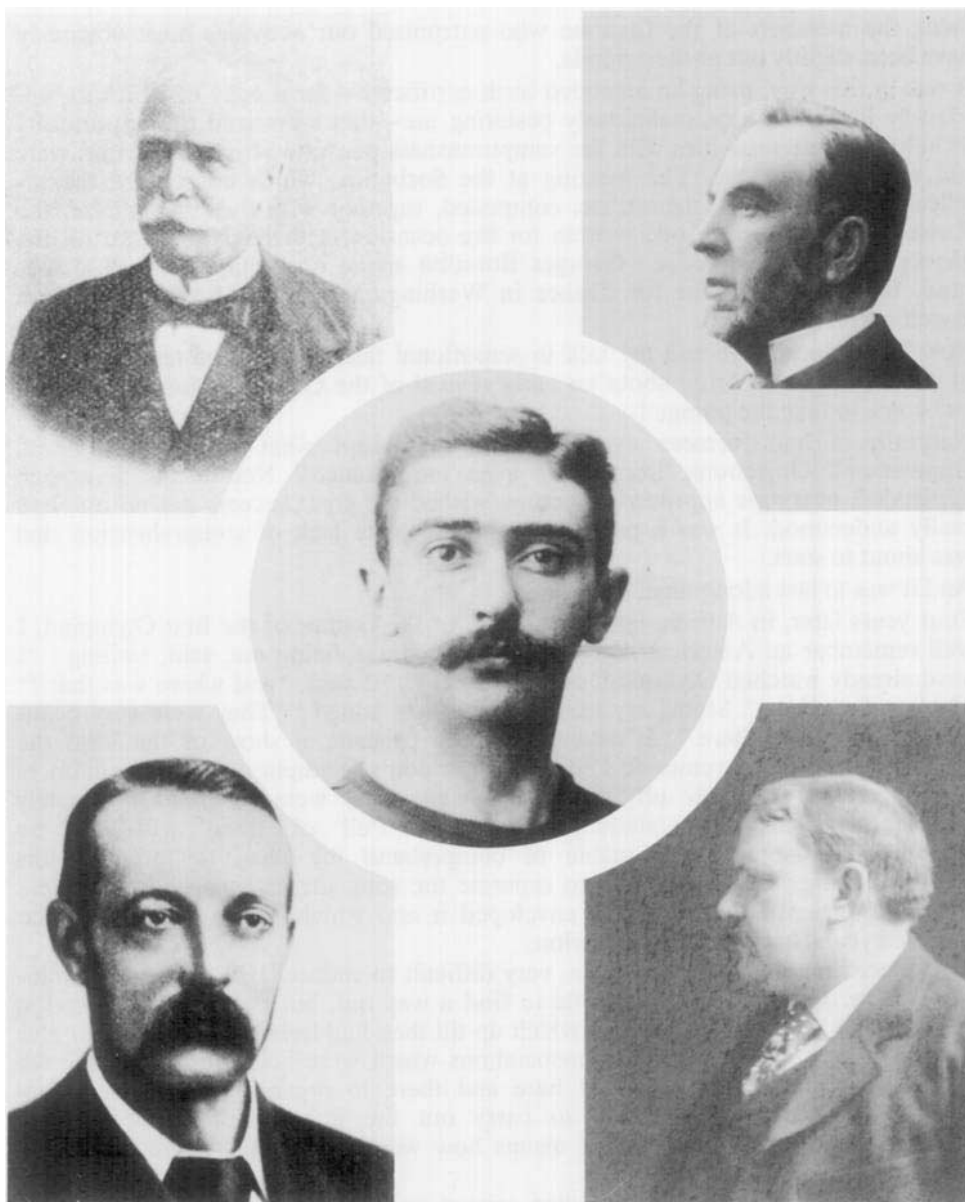


## I

## The Paris Congress and the revival of the Olympic Games

It was an evening in November 1892... Friday the 25th to be precise. The scene: the main auditorium in the old Sorbonne: a huge rectangle tinged, if I remember rightly, a dirty lilac shade and decorated with two square niches out of which jutted the august noses of two prelates, Bossuet and Fénelon. In this gloomy hall I had taken one of the written papers for my “bachot” and searched desperately for something to say on “Creative Imagination”. But the students crowded into the Sorbonne that autumn evening in 1892 were thinking of quite different matters. They were gazing in admiration at the platform, at the immaculate shirt front and dress coat of impeccable cut of the most prominent man about town of the time, Viscount Léon de Janzé, whom I had shortly before made President of the Union des Sports Athlétiques, being well aware that he was not only a leading figure of society but a man of great intelligence and reliable character. On either side of him were seated the Rector of the University, Mr. Octave Gréard, and Prince Obolensky, Marshal at the court of the Grand-Duke Vladimir, who had agreed to act as patron for this “jubilee” and was to come in person to the Bois de Boulogne two days later to present the prizes to our young athletes. In honour of which the amphitheatre was decked with Russian flags alternating with French flags; it was the Alliance some ten months ahead of time.

The jubilee of what?... We were supposedly celebrating the *fifth* anniversary of the Union des Sports Athlétiques with a series of festivities: a meeting at Ville d’Avray, a fencing match, a cross-country race at Meudon, the whole ending in a magnificent tea given and presided over by the famous astronomer Janssen... for at that time we had a number of helpers well placed in the worlds of letters, science and politics: Victor Duruy, Jules Simon, Georges Picot and a host of others who had been the first, in 1888, to lend their support to my initial campaign... So was it the fifth anniversary of the USFSA we were celebrating?... Not at all. The baby had been surreptitiously changed. It is true that on the same date; five years earlier, at the end of a frugal luncheon two small Paris clubs had joined forces to form the *Union des Sociétés Françaises de Courses à pied* (Union of French Running Clubs). And this in itself was a very fine, very daring gesture on the part of Georges de Saint-Clair, for members of the Stade Français were only grudgingly permitted to run on the terrace of the Orangerie in the Tuileries on Sunday mornings, and the Racing-Club’s lease at the Croix-Catelan could not have been more precarious. A little later, I had to intervene with the municipal authorities at the Hôtel de Ville in order to try and regularise the situation. You can imagine our surprise, Saint-Clair’s and mine, when we received a letter one day informing us that the club would be allowed to lay down running tracks in these lovely grounds, but that “immediately on request, the club was to be ready to roll them up and take them away”. Such were the bureaucrats of the day. For



1894 Congress: the three commissioners—Charles Herbert (bottom left), William M. Sloane (bottom right), Pierre de Coubertin (in the centre)—the President of the Congress, Baron de Courcel (top left) and Demetrius Bikelas, first President of the IOC (top right).

them, the members of the Institute who patronised our activities must obviously have been slightly out of their minds.

It was in this way, using an amended birth certificate—for a copy of which an unfriendly journalist kept maliciously pestering me—that we seized the opportunity of holding these festivities with the sumptuousness permitted by budgets that were still extremely meagre. The meeting at the Sorbonne, which constituted the intellectual part of the celebrations, comprised, together with the Marseillaise, the Russian anthem and an ode written for the occasion, a three-part lecture on the history of physical exercise: Georges Bourdon spoke on Antiquity; J. J. Jusserand, future Ambassador for France in Washington, on the Middle Ages; and myself on modern times.

Now I had decided to end my talk in sensational fashion with the announcement of the resolution to bring about an early revival of the Olympic Games. The time had come to take the plunge!

Naturally, I had foreseen every eventuality, except what actually happened. Opposition? Objections, irony? Or even indifference? Not at all. Everyone applauded, everyone approved, everyone wished me great success but no one had really understood. It was a period of total, absolute lack of comprehension that was about to start.

And it was to last a long time.

Four years later, in Athens, on the occasion of the Games of the first Olympiad, I well remember an American lady who, after congratulating me, said, smiling: "I have already watched Olympic Games." "Really!" I said, "and where was that?" "In San Francisco." Seeing my bewilderment, she added: "They were very beautiful. Caesar was there." A reconstitution, a pageant, a show of the kind the Hippodrome in the avenue de l'Alma, or London's Olympia were in the habit of putting on in those far off days, these were what were to stand obstinately between me and my audience in 1892. Full of good will—but no understanding—they were unable to comprehend my idea, to interpret this forgotten thing: Olympism, and to separate the soul, the essence, the principle... from the ancient forms that had enveloped it and which, during the last fifteen hundred years, had fallen into oblivion.

This placed me in a lonely position, very difficult to endure. If I had been a multi-millionaire, I would have been able to find a way out, but how, with the modest resources of my youthful income; which up till then had been just sufficient to give a little help to the school sports associations which were being formed in French lycées, or to allow me to travel here and there to organise various necessary meetings, could I be expected to carry out the international activities now required? And without sufficient means how were these activities to be carried out at all?

One other source of misunderstanding existed among sportsmen themselves: their inability to collaborate between one sport and another. The present generation will never be able to understand how things were at that time. In fact, when you come to think about it, the lack of understanding between sports is hard to explain since they all rest on the same foundation of physical well-being and preliminary physical training. Their psycho-physiological base is identical. But in the 19th century sportsmen were firmly convinced that as the practice of one sport

differed from that of another, the two were mutually harmful. A fencer would deteriorate if he were to box. An oarsman should beware of taking up the horizontal bar. As for the horseman of the day, the mere idea of running or playing football would have been extremely distasteful to him. There was only tennis, still in its infancy, and swimming that did not arouse any mistrust: the first of these sports was only an elegant pastime, and the second a useful accomplishment recommended for reasons of health and safety in case of accident or lifesaving.

The representatives of the different sports had never, as far as I know, met together for a joint purpose before I invited them to meet for the foundation of the Committee for the Propagation of School Sport; one year later, the Committee for the Organisation of the Contests at the 1889 Congress, the list of whose members I had drawn up, brought them together officially, this time at the Ministry of Public Education. It was amusing to see how they eyed one another with suspicion. But they were all mainly students, for at that time we were dealing with educational circles exclusively. The situation was quite different where the Olympic Games were concerned. Here we were dealing with adults...

The winter of 1892-93 went by without the idea causing any stir among the general public. Whenever any allusion was made to it, it was always the notion of a hippodrome-type spectacle that was uppermost in the person's mind. The great joke among "cultured" people was to enquire whether women would be allowed to attend the new Games as spectators and whether, as in certain periods of antiquity, general nudity would be enforced on the athletes in order more effectively to bar the weaker sex from the precincts of the competitions.

My plans, before the meeting in November 1892, had been based on the idea that the repercussions stirred up by the project would be great enough to ensure the success of an international congress, in which I rather naively imagined that governments and universities would take part with official delegations. I soon realised I had been too optimistic. What was to be done then? Very quickly, I decided to keep the idea of a Congress, but to use a little deception. In the files of the USFSA (for no sooner had it seen the light of day, than it acquired files like any bona fide modern organisation) there lay a project for an International Congress to settle the question of amateurism, proposed by Ad. de Pallissaux, one of the most loyal and enthusiastic pioneers of the early days. With what fond memories I look back on the friendly collaborators of the time, without forgetting the storm clouds that sometimes passed between us.

Amateurism, an admirable mummy that could be presented at the museum of Boulaq as a specimen of the modern art of embalming! Half a century has gone by without it seeming to have suffered in any way from the unceasing manipulations to which it has been submitted. It seems intact. Not one of us expected it to last so long. In tackling this problem we felt sure that we should succeed in less than five years. But for me, the planned Congress had above all the importance of providing me with an invaluable screen. I therefore drew up a preliminary programme and had it approved by the Congress of the USFSA, which had been transformed at the beginning of 1890. Henceforth it had a Board and a Committee, each merging into the other and separating with equal ease. In this way, it was a sort of Janus with one face looking at the Jockey-Club, from the ranks of which we recruited our honorary members at twenty francs a year, and the other

at the middle classes, a fraction of whom, full of drive and initiative, provided us with the enthusiastic assistants we needed and gladly entrusted us with the muscles of their sons. This fusion of the classes, not always easy to maintain, or even to bring about, amused me.

I have the programme of the 1894 Congress here before me as I write, in two distinct versions between which lies a space of some ten months. At the head, an immovable trinity composed of three members: C. Herbert, Secretary of the Amateur Athletic Association (London), for Great Britain and the British Empire; W. M. Sloane, professor at the University of Princeton, for the American continent; and myself, for France and continental Europe. This unusual geography was intended to simplify propaganda for me. My two colleagues had accepted mainly in order to please me.

Herbert, who was quite taciturn but much more understanding than he appeared at first sight, had at his disposal, as administrative head of the AAA, a whole propaganda network already organised on a wide footing. Sloane, owing to his position and his already great reputation, had access to the transatlantic university circles which I had already noticed in 1889 as dominating American athletics and without which nothing could be done.

After the names of the three members of the Board came the following eight Articles which, I believe, have never been reproduced since:

- I. — Definition of an amateur: bases of this definition. — Possibility and utility of an international definition.
- II. — Suspension, disqualification and requalification. — Facts motivating such, and means of checking them.
- III. — Is it right to preserve a distinction between different sports from the point of view of amateurism, especially with regard to horse-racing (gentlemen) and pigeon shooting? — Can one be a professional in one sport and an amateur in another?
- IV. — Regarding the value of the objects of art given as prizes. — Should a limit be placed on their value? — What steps should be taken against anyone selling the art object awarded to him as a prize?
- V. — Legitimacy of the funds produced by admissions to sports grounds. — May this money be shared among the clubs or among the competitors? May it be used as compensation for travelling expenses? — To what extent may members of the teams receive compensation from the rival club or their own club?
- VI. — Can the general definition of an amateur be applied to all sports? — Does it comprise special restrictions with regard to cycling, rowing, athletics, etc.?
- VII. — Betting. — Is it compatible with amateurism? — Means of stopping it from spreading.
- VIII. — Of the possibility of reviving the Olympic Games. — Under what conditions could they be revived?

The final programme published at the beginning of 1894 was more fully developed and more precise. It contained dates: 16th to 24th June 1894, the announcement that the sessions would be held in the Sorbonne and that the opening ceremony on 16th June would be presided over by Baron de Courcel, a Senator and former Ambassador to Berlin (as a matter of fact, it was Mr. Casimir-Périer, Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, who had first accepted this post and then declined, recommending me to get in touch with Mr. de Courcel). In addition, there were eight honorary Vice-Presidents, including an Englishman, an American, a Belgian, a Swede and a Hungarian; a few assistant officials,

including Frantz-Reichel, "for the press", and the announcement of a number of still somewhat vague festivities. The programme had had two new paragraphs added. Above all, it was now divided into two parts: the first headed "Amateurism and professionalism" comprised the first seven Articles reproduced above; the second, under the heading "Olympic Games", consisted of the 8th Article above and the two new Articles that follow:

IX. — Conditions governing competitors. — Sports represented. — Organisation, frequency, etc.

X. — Nomination of an International Committee responsible for preparing the revival.

Finally, regulations were laid down, while preserving as far as possible the elasticity I wished to confer on it, in particular by specifying that "the Unions and Clubs taking part would not be bound by the resolutions adopted". In this way the document assumed an appearance of assurance, of certainty far removed from the reality. In actual fact, I was embarked on an adventure about whose immediate success I was far from feeling reassured.

In the autumn of 1893, I had returned to the United States for four months. I had spent a long time visiting the Chicago Exhibition, stayed in California, and returned to Washington and New York via Texas and Louisiana. In Chicago, I had stayed in the luxurious Athletics Club and visited the Olympic Club in San Francisco, with its prophetic name. In all the universities I was visiting for the first time or had already visited in 1889, I had met with a warm welcome, in spite of the fact that my book *Universités Transatlantiques*, published in 1890, was not at all well received by the professors, who found the form somewhat light and the contents not sufficiently complimentary. In any case, nowhere did the idea for the revival of the Olympic Games meet with the enthusiasm it deserved. My kind friend William Sloane alone was wildly enthusiastic about the project. The day before I left New York to return to Europe, he gave a dinner at the University Club in New York, and the guests he had chosen with great care and thought were among the most receptive to the ideas of both sport and history. Very warm conversation, sincere interest, but an obvious feeling of inevitable failure. The same impression, only stronger, in London in February 1894. Sir John Astley invited a number of friends to the Sports Club to talk about my plans but the number of those who accepted gradually diminished to a mere handful of somewhat inert guests. Meanwhile, spring was advancing without bringing any encouraging promises. I never thought of giving up however. It would have been difficult anyhow, for applications to join, without being numerous enough or firm enough, were coming in from all over the world, from New Zealand and Jamaica, as well as from Amiens and Bordeaux.

There were two sources of anxiety however: the universities were not showing any real interest. I had counted a great deal on their participation to add body to the "classical" character of the scheme. And then Germany was not reacting as it should either. At the time, I had no connections in that country but I considered the support of the Germans indispensable alongside that of the British and the "Latins", an expression that I still used, only later coming to recognise how artificial and inaccurate it was. Armed with some sort of an introduction, I visited the German military attaché in Paris, the famous Colonel Schwartzkoppen, who was subsequently to become so tragically involved in the

Dreyfus case. On his advice, I wrote twice to a Prussian Minister, Mr. de Podbielski, who had been described to me as the big white chief of sport, but I never received any reply.

This inclusion of Germany in the affair risked causing the French gymnastics associations to withdraw their adhesion, which had been given, moreover, without the least enthusiasm. On 15th May 1894, Mr. Cuperus refused in virulent terms to allow the Belgian gymnastics associations to join: "My federation", he said, "has always believed and still believes that gymnastics and sport are *diametrically opposed* activities and it has always fought against the latter as *incompatible* with its principles." My own mind was made up on this matter. I considered such a doctrine absurd, but what could I do? The Union des Sociétés Françaises de Gymnastique had joined. Mr. Sansbœuf had advised me however that his members would resign if the Germans were to join. I found this not only annoying but humiliating. This perpetual "protestation" against the victors of 1870 exasperated me. In fact, what could have been less French, less chivalrous, less in the spirit of "Fontenoy" than raising one's fist in rage and anger, while remaining seated? Is this the way our fathers understood "the interval between battles"? I could not start to say to what extent, during my adolescence, I had suffered from this attitude, which a false, mean conception of patriotism imposed on my generation. Although I had grown up in the shadow of Sedan, I never felt in myself the soul of the vanquished. The awakening of 1878 inspired me and the magnificent turning-point of 1889 liberated me by giving me an idea of the capacities of the nation and faith in a future differing from the past but not unworthy of it.

As the date for the Congress approached, everything remained, as it were, streaked with light on a grey background. It was as if I had collected around me a small orchestra which, with its eyes fixed on my stand, was awaiting the signal to start, without knowing exactly what tune it was going to play. I concentrated all my efforts on the opening session and the first choral performance of the Hymn to Apollo discovered in the ruins of Delphi. Gabriel Fauré lent a hand with good grace.

Suddenly the name of the Congress changed. The words "Congress for the Revival of the Olympic Games" appeared on the letters of invitation, one of which can still be seen in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne. In the marvellous setting of the main amphitheatre in the Sorbonne (the new Sorbonne this time), graced with Puvis de Chavannes' "Sacred copse", after an academic speech by Baron de Courcel and between a fine ode by Jean Aicard and a clever commentary by Théodore Reinach, the playing of this sacred piece of music created the desired atmosphere among the huge audience. A subtle feeling of emotion spread through the auditorium as if the antique eurhythm were coming to us from the distant past. In this way, Hellenism infiltrated into the whole vast hall. From this moment, the Congress was destined to succeed. I knew that now, whether consciously or not, no one would vote against the revival of the Olympic Games.

It was in fact unanimously proclaimed at the last session on 23rd June. The Congress members had performed an honourable task. Divided into two commissions, one for amateurism, the other for Olympism, they were presided over, on the one hand by Michel Gondinet, President of the Racing Club de France, and on the other by D. Bikelas, member of the Pan-Hellenic Gymnastics Society. The Vice-

Presidents were Professor W. M. Sloane and R. Todd, member of the National Cyclist's Union, for the first group, and Baron de Carayon la Tour, member of the Société Hippique Française, for the other.

The sessions went very well. There were a number of interesting discussions on technical matters and on the question of amateurism, which the Rector of the University came down from his apartment to attend on several occasions.

As far as the Olympic Games were concerned, everyone accepted my proposals almost without discussion. The meeting voted one after the other the various fundamental principles I had previously decided on in my own mind: the interval of four years, the exclusively modern character of the events, the exclusion of school sports (Bikelas and the Swede Bergh would have liked to include competitions for children, which I considered impractical and dangerous), and finally the appointment of an International Committee—permanent in its principle and stable in its composition—whose members would be the representatives of Olympism in their respective countries.

As to the choice of Athens and the date of 1896, this did not fit in at all with my original plan for the reason that, underestimating like most of my contemporaries the youthful strength of the recently resuscitated Greece, I did not think she was capable of coping with the inauguration of world sports championships.

At one time I had thought of inaugurating the Games in Paris in the first year of the 20th century, as I explained in the *Revue de Paris* dated 15th June 1894, doing everything possible to "steep in Hellenism" the celebration of the Games. A number of conversations with D. Bikelas, whose friendship had charmed me right from the start, led me to change my opinion. For his part, he wanted them to be held in Greece but at the same time hesitated before the responsibility of involving his country in such an adventure. We encouraged each other and Athens was selected to the accompaniment of wild applause.

The idea of holding the Games in different countries was accepted without too many objections being raised. It was essential in fact. Otherwise no country would have been willing to accept the expense of such an undertaking. Greece, at any rate, would have been out of the question from both the technical and the financial points of view.

I was allowed a free hand in the choice of members of the IOC. Those proposed were elected without any amendment; the list comprised: Bikelas for Greece; Callot and myself for France; General de Boutowsky for Russia; Colonel Balck for Sweden; Professor Sloane for the United States; Jiri Guth (Bohemia); Fr. Kémény (Hungary); C. Herbert and Lord Amphyll for England; Professor Zubiaur for Argentina and L. A. Cuff for New Zealand; finally Count Lucchesi Palli accepted provisionally for Italy and soon afterwards Count Max de Bousies for Belgium. Nobody seemed to have noticed that I had chosen almost exclusively absentee members. As their names figured on the long list of "honorary members of the Congress", people were accustomed to seeing their names and readily assumed that they were staunch members always at their tasks. I needed elbow room at the start, for many conflicts were bound to arise. Some at any rate would want to seize the helm, either to benefit from the success of the venture or to modify the direction. Such is human nature.

(to be continued)