

The Olympic festivals of mid-Victorian England

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It is a little-known fact, even in Britain, that Olympic athletic festivals were held in England in the 1860's. These festivals upheld and encouraged the ideals of true amateurism right from the beginning.

The most important and the most well-documented of these festivals were held in Liverpool in 1862, 1863, 1864, in North Wales in 1866, and again in Liverpool in 1867.

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The early 1860's had witnessed a surge of interest in sport in England. The Industrial Revolution had brought enormous wealth to the leading families and by 1860 many of the highly skilled and professional workers had also gained the privilege of a Saturday afternoon weekly holiday. The upper and middle classes were thus in a position to seek some form of organised recreation to occupy them in their newly-acquired leisure time. Scores of newly-formed cricket, golf, bowls, sailing and rowing clubs sprang up in most industrial areas of England.¹

Amateur athletic meetings were also increasing in popularity and the sport of track and field athletics received a tremendous boost from the activities of the Volunteer Brigades which had been formed in Britain as a direct outcome of the nation's concern about the army's performance in the Crimean War 1854-6 and Indian Mutiny 1857-9. The Volunteer Brigades provided large groups of young men drawn from the upper social classes; they met regularly; one of their declared aims was the improvement of physical fitness; and their parade grounds provided ready made stadia. Their influence on the development of organised athletic meetings was considerable.

From the very beginning the ideal of amateurism was upheld at the Olympic athletic festivals, whose aim was declared to be

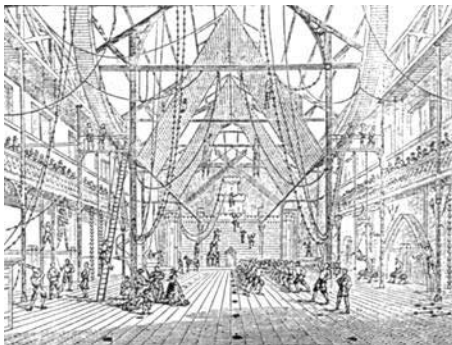
"for the purpose of affording the young gentlemen an opportunity of enjoying healthful and invigorating recreation".²

Great stress was laid in outlining the rules of the competitions lest they be confused with the pedestrianism and foot-racing of professional runners.

The gentlemen of Liverpool banded together and formed the Liverpool Athletic Club. The President of this club was Charles Pierre Melly, the generous philanthropist who had been responsible for providing public gymnasia in Liverpool, and the Honorary Secretary was John Hulley, later to become the first Director of the Liverpool Gymnasium. Both these gentlemen were muscular Christians of the highest order and made great contributions to the development and organisation of physical recreation in Liverpool in the 1850's and 1860's. They were both, through their official capacities in the Liverpool Athletic Club, very actively concerned with the planning and organisation of the first Olympic festival held at the Mount Vernon Parade Ground, Liverpool on 14th June 1862.

The programme for this Olympic festival was as follows:

Liverpool gymnasium, Myrtle Stret (the property of the Y.M.C.A.): an artist's impression of activity in the gym in 1882.



**Grand Procession of Competitors
headed by the Band of the 4th L.A.V., to the platform
where the name of the prize essayist will be announced
by the President, C. P. Melly, Esq.**

<i>No. Event</i>	<i>Competitors</i>	<i>First Prize</i>	<i>Second Prize</i>	<i>Third Prize</i>
1. Flat race 120 yds	24	Silver	Bronze	
2. Broadsword	6	Silver	Bronze	
3. Flat race 880 yds, under 18 years of age	12	Silver	Bronze	
4. Vaulting	8	Silver	Bronze	
5. Flat race 1½ miles	16	Gold	Silver	Bronze
6. Fencing	4	Silver	Bronze	
7. Boxing	9	Silver	Bronze	
8. Flat race 330 yds	21	Silver	Bronze	
9. Indian club exercises	8	Silver	Bronze	
10. Sabre versus bayonet	4	Silver	Bronze	
11. Steeplechase 1,200 yds	14	Gold	Silver	Bronze
12. Gymnastics	16	Gold	Silver	Bronze
13. Walking match 4 miles	15	Gold	Silver	Bronze
14. High running jump	3	Silver	Bronze	
15. Pole leaping	4	Silver	Bronze	
16a. Wrestling heavyweights		Silver	Bronze	
16b. Wrestling lightweights		Silver	Bronze	
17. Flat race - members of L.A.C.		Silver	Bronze	
18. Gymnastics - amateur frequenters of free public gymnasia	10	Silver	Bronze	
19. Throwing the disc	5	Silver	Bronze	
20. Jumping the cricket ball	8	Silver	Bronze	
21. Jumping	8	Bronze	Bronze	
22. Dumbell exercises	6	Silver	Bronze	

The Champion's Gold Medal presented by his Worship the Mayor R. Hutchinson, Esq. will be awarded to the most successful competitor of the day.

A novel feature of this festival was the establishment of a prize essay competition, the subject chosen being "Mens Sana in Corpore Sano".

Over fifty essays were submitted to the Olympic Committee and the successful essayist was presented with a gold medal.³

As expected the festival was a complete success and an observer wrote that:

*"Before 3 o'clock... The Mount Vernon Parade Ground, the scene of the Olympic contests, was thronged with an immense concourse of people... The occupants of the stand were principally of the gentler sex, who were present in great numbers... The number of spectators was large, being variously estimated at from 7,000-10,000 and they were of a highly respectable class, including the elite of the neighbourhood..."*⁴

The Olympic festival of 1863 was even more successful and it was estimated that 12,000-15,000 spectators were present, 3,000 of these being seated. The programme had now been extended and included a swimming race, starting from New Brighton and finishing at the Prince's Pier.⁵

Although the competitors for the 1862 festival came mainly from Liverpool and district, its fame soon spread, and over half the entries at the 1863 festival were from other parts of the country. Despite such obvious popularity the days of the Liverpool Olympic festivals were numbered and their death-knell was sounded on the 1st October 1863, when an advertisement in the *Liverpool Mercury* tersely stated that:

*"The Mount Vernon Parade Ground is now one sale in building lots, apply..."*⁶



Gymnasium, Myrtle Street.

Undaunted by this misfortune the Liverpool Athletic Club sought an alternative venue at which the 1864 festival could be held and finally the Zoological Gardens was decided upon. This was a most regrettable decision as much of the respectability that had attended the Mount Vernon meetings was lost. One newspaper was extremely critical:

*"It was with great regret that we found that the Liverpool Athletic Club had resolved even for once to avail themselves of a place so contaminated in public opinion by the associations ordinarily connected with it..."*⁷

These evil associations were declared to be drinking, gambling and the fixing of races. It was inconceivable that, at these times, any person who declared himself to be a lady or gentleman should attend a place contaminated by such vices.

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A further factor which hastened the decline of the Olympic festival was the opening of the Liverpool Gymnasium in 1865. C. P. Melly and J. Hulley, who had been the driving forces in the organisation of the early festivals, now channelled their energies into the administration of the Liverpool gymnasium and the annual custom of holding an Olympic festival in Liverpool fell into disuse in 1865.

The organisation of the Olympic festivals was now conducted by the Athletic Society of Great Britain and although no evidence is available of any festival in 1865, the

following year it was held in Llandudno. In 1867 the festival returned to Sheil Park, Liverpool. The programme of events had now been greatly extended and took three days to complete. A huge crowd of spectators was present on each of the three days. In fact, the crush was so great that on the final day the barriers broke and the crowd surged into the enclosure in front of the stands, to the great annoyance of the ladies. This was the last Olympic festival staged in Liverpool and probably the last organised by the Athletic Society of Great Britain.

There is little doubt that the Olympic festivals were abandoned because the respectable classes withdrew their support. At the first Olympic festival the promoters went to great lengths to inform the public that

*"the contests will be open to amateurs only, the most stringent precautions having been taken to exclude the professional and semi-professional, for it is among these classes that disputes and disturbances most frequently arise."*⁸

With this assurance nearly 10,000 of the respectable people of Liverpool turned up to witness the contests, it being pointed out that

*"they were of a highly respectable class, including the 'elite of the neighbourhood'."*⁹

Yet two years later, when the venue of the Olympic festival had been changed to the Zoological Gardens—the favourite resort of the wrestlers and pedestrians—these assurances were flouted and even betting men allowed on the ground *"to carry on their nefarious craft"*. The immediate outcome of this was that the respectable people of Liverpool withdrew their support of the festival, a factor which may well have decided the Liverpool Athletic Club to discontinue the practice of holding annual festivals.¹⁰

R. R.



¹ R. Rees: "The Development of Physical Recreation in Liverpool during the 19th Century", M. Ed. Thesis, University of Liverpool, 1968, pp. 43-59.

² Liverpool Mercury, 20th June 1857.

³ A copy of this essay is available at the Records Office of the Liverpool Library.

⁴ Liverpool Courier, 16th June 1862.

⁵ Liverpool Mercury, 18th June 1862.

⁶ Ibid, 1st October 1863.

⁷ Porcupine, 17th September 1864.

⁸ Liverpool Courier, 1st June 1867.

⁹ Ibid, 18th June 1862.

¹⁰ Porcupine, 17th September 1864.