

VII*

1905. – A successful Congress and a few real achievements

In the panorama of “Olympic years” unfolding in my mind, the year 1905 strikes me not necessarily as the most brilliant but certainly as one of the most useful and productive.

For me, it began with a fairly long stay in Rome, where the purpose of my visit was twofold: to ensure the Roman celebration of the 4th Olympiad, which fell in 1908, and to persuade the Vatican to raise the sort of interdict laid on sports education in many clerical circles. The first point was not achieved; the second was, and fully.

Everything seemed to conspire towards the success of the next Games. Rome had all the resources which, at the beginning, had been lacking in Athens; everyone seemed favourably inclined, from the King down to the humblest official. Actually, this favourable attitude was not exactly accompanied by any wild enthusiasm, but this was perhaps not necessary for continuing the work even though Hellenic fervour had been essential for founding it. But we still needed an Organising Committee. The one that Count Brunetta d’Usseaux had formed the year before was without a head. No one could be found for the post and, consequently, the regionalist tendencies to which I have already alluded could not be halted. When I speak of regionalism, I am not suggesting that Italy was not united at the time; there was no longer, of course, any of the secessionist inclinations of earlier days among Piedmontais, Venetians, Romans, Neapolitans or Sicilians. But their character, temperament, way of seeing and doing things remained so different that, apart from questions of truly national interest, co-operation was difficult and misunderstandings frequent and lasting. Obviously I do not intend here to go into details of the innumerable negotiations and conflicting ambitions. I have already touched on some of them in a book of souvenirs published in 1908. As had been the case in Athens eleven years earlier, I had had to set to work myself to make up for the deficiencies of others and draft the plans and estimates for the Games myself. The King and Queen were kind enough to suggest the « Piazza di Siena » in the Villa Borghese, a natural stadium of perfect beauty which was in fact ideally suited to athletic sports. I chose the Piazza del Armi for the gymnastic events and Caracalla’s Baths for the combat sports. What wonderful settings and how simple to prepare! The Tor di Quinto was available for equestrian sports and games; the River Tiber, between Pons Molle and Ponte Margherita for rowing and swimming; the Capitol for the ceremonies and receptions... The initial estimate based on all the details compiled was divided into twelve sections. The total amounted to 303,000 liras. Happy days! Admittedly, as in 1896 and in 1900, the 1908 Games seemed designed mainly for an elite: five hundred competitors and

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approximately fifteen to twenty thousand spectators. The estimate included the prizes—statuettes and medals—which would increase considerably in value as I had decided to have the moulds broken as soon as the Games were over (I always demanded that this should be done after each Olympiad—but to no avail) and the salary of a Director General, to which post I planned to appoint the General Secretary of the Racing Club de France, Mr. Gaston Raymond, subject of course to the club's agreement.

Negotiations with the Vatican were much less difficult. Unlike most heads of religious establishments, Pope Pius X, who regularly gave prizes for the famous regattas held in Venice, and Cardinal Merry del Val, State Secretary, who had been educated at Eton, were not at all prejudiced against sport (I am talking here of real sport and sports contests and not the tame, purely *recreational* games allowed up till then in such establishments). His Holiness, interested in the idea of a Roman Olympiad, spoke very favourably of it and at the same time promised early, tangible proof of his sentiments. The following season a festival of gymnastics was held during a pilgrimage of French, Belgian and other Catholic guilds, which the Pope presided over in the famous courtyard of St. Damase; a very symptomatic spectacle, the photographs of which have always been a great success on occasions when slides and photographs depicting the early days of Olympism have been shown.

When the IOC met in Paris in the spring of 1901, it had to discuss three converging proposals concerning the convening of an International Congress for the Standardisation of Sports Regulations. One was made by our German colleagues, the other by various Swedish groups, and the third by the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States. The first proposed drawing up a sports code which would be made compulsory for all future contests. It was much too dictatorial, and besides why should the IOC feel entitled to institute such peremptory legislation without consulting the federations and technically competent clubs? Here, we had a glimpse of the confusion that was to prevail between the Olympic Games and ordinary international championships for such a long time to come. The members of the IOC were "trustees of the Olympic idea" and were responsible for ensuring that the four-yearly contests were held according to this spirit; this did not make them fit to take the place of the technicians in the actual running of these contests. People outside the Committee found it difficult to understand this and even—sometimes—those on the Committee.

The second proposal, as I have said, was made by Sweden; it was inspired by that rather over-simplified and infuriatingly logical way of viewing questions which, combined with certain unexpected complexities, often makes the Scandinavian mentality so difficult to understand, even by those foreigners who are the most enthusiastic about everything Scandinavian. To their mind, since we were reviving the Olympic Games, we should do it faithfully, rigorously cutting everything modern out of the programme and limiting it strictly to the events held in ancient times. I have no need to point out the negative, impractical and, finally, destructive character of such a proposal.

The third proposal was the only one worth retaining. Mr. L. P. Sheldon, sent by the American Athletic Union for the purpose, was allowed to put it to the IOC himself. He did so with talent and moderation. It was suggested that we should encourage an exchange of views among all those interested in the question of drawing up regulations for sports contests and give the backing of our authority

to any agreements reached. Why not? Especially as it lay completely within the spirit and possibilities of the IOC.

This brings us to the Brussels Congress. In December of the same year, 1901, I took advantage of a visit to Paris by King Leopold of the Belgians to ask for an audience with a view to obtaining his patronage. Leopold II was probably the most intimidating of all reigning monarchs. A sort of ankylosis had made him accustomed to remain standing up, leaning on his stick, and he was in the habit of receiving visitors in this fashion even if, interested by the conversation, he allowed it to go on a long time. His great height, his always slightly mocking gaze, and his trenchant remarks made him quite formidable. If he took a dislike to his visitor, he could turn quite nasty. Did he like sport or, rather, had he liked it earlier? I am not very sure, but as a means of training men to be strong and fit he realised its great value and the contribution it could make to his colonial aims. Some years later, he asked me to produce plans, regulations and programmes for a “college for colonial preparation” which I took the greatest pleasure in drawing up for him in considerable detail. Naturally, sports training played a great role. The project came to nothing; I had made it secular and the King approved it this way, but the clerical influences at work in the country thwarted it.



Count Brunetta d'Usseaux



Count Henry de Baillet-Latour

The Congress planned for 1904 was adjourned until 1905. We were joined by an invaluable new member for Belgium, Count Henry de Baillet-Latour who, before taking over from me twenty years later as head of the IOC, was to play a leading role among us and render the Olympic cause outstanding service. His predecessor, alarmed at the responsibility of organising the Congress, had suddenly retired—so suddenly in fact that his conduct brought us within a hair's breadth of disaster, from which we were saved by the spontaneous intervention of a French diplomat favourably disposed towards the IOC.

On 7th October 1904, Count Smet, the Belgian Prime Minister, whom I knew personally, informed me that the Foreign Minister had agreed to allow the invitations to be sent out by the Belgian legations. This was an important point. He deeply regretted moreover that the Burgomaster of Brussels, Mr. de Max, had refused us the use of his famous Town Hall. But Count de Baillet arranged for us to have the Palais des Académies, which was in fact more conveniently situated and better suited to our purpose.

The official opening ceremony of the Congress, which was held in June 1905, was honoured with a speech by Marcel Prévost, President of the Literary Society, who had come specially from Paris to speak on *“The Mind in the School of Sport”*: a

charming contribution to the sessions which, apart from this speech, were dedicated wholly to technical matters. It was the turn of the latter, as at Le Havre it had been the turn of education. The programme was very ambitious. It was pretentious enough to attempt to cover all aspects of the question; it filled five or six octavo pages and formed a complete list. Naturally it was impossible to go into all this in full detail; it was more of a manifesto. One point of discussion which it is interesting to recall was the role of sport in the army. The French representatives began to show themselves in favour. The German representatives, and all their followers, declared themselves against the idea. According to them, it was purely a waste of time for soldiers, and an occasion for troublesome breaches of discipline. Everyone will remember how, ten years later, this reluctance on their part was swept away by the force of the evidence and how the value of sports training suddenly took on the greatest importance.

The IOC's Session, held during the Congress, produced a great number of concrete results. The German Committee had *appointed* its new President, General Count von der Asseburg, to replace Prince Salm-Horstmar, who wished to retire. This was contrary to the very essence of the IOC. There was no question of giving in. But when the General contacted my colleagues individually, as a delegate to the Congress, he said that it was his Committee that had made a mistake and that he wished to apply for election. Naturally we then elected him with the greatest pleasure. He was a charming man on whom one could always count. Olympism had caught his enthusiasm right away. He helped a great deal in Brussels to maintain a pleasant atmosphere. The circumstances were actually quite difficult. Delcassé had just resigned as a result of the Kaiser's landing at Tangiers and the ensuing events. People were talking of the possibility of war. The Belgians were suspicious. The Scandinavians for their part were on edge, for the sudden separation from Sweden, demanded by the Norwegians, had not been accomplished without friction. But all this was forgotten in the excellent sporting atmosphere. This meeting of over two hundred members, sometimes divided into commissions, sometimes grouped in plenary session, carried on its discussions in an excellent spirit inspired solely by a desire for the public good.

Naturally, all that was actually accomplished boiled down to a pious expression of wishes. But in those days, when congresses had not yet been overdone, "wishes" still had a certain value. Above all, the very size of the meeting had done great honour to the IOC. The recent creation of the British Olympic Association, which helped to counterbalance the Deutscher Reichsausschuss für Olympische Spiele, gave us two powerful wings. London and Berlin now possessed permanent Olympic centres working with us and under us to a certain extent. This placed us in a much stronger position with regard to Athens. Our colleague Mercati had taken immediate advantage of the fact to establish closer relations, which the Crown Prince moreover had continued to favour as much as he could. Additional Games were to be held in Greece in 1906. It was understood that the IOC would give its support as well as secure that of the bodies already set up in different countries by its members. Thus, even though the Brussels Congress had taken place during the most dangerous period of political tension experienced by Western Europe since 1887, it had succeeded in achieving the maximum of Olympic peace that we had ever obtained. This did not mean however that we had heard the last of our enemies.

(To be continued)