

XVII*

The seventh Olympiad

(Antwerp 1920)

As soon as the armistice was signed, I began getting in touch with those of my colleagues who were nearest at hand. It was important for this Session to be held in Lausanne, which had in the meantime become the permanent administrative centre of Olympism and needed to have its new-found status confirmed in this way. In the spring of 1919, it would be twenty-five years since the Games had been revived. Without giving it more importance than the circumstances justified, this coincidence could nevertheless be used to add colour and interest to the Session. The Swiss public authorities were of the same opinion. Mr. Gustave Ador, who had recently been elected President of the Confederation, a post which had been thrust upon him because of the universal respect in which he was held and the gratitude of the belligerents for his efforts to bandage their wounds, immediately agreed to preside over the ceremony which was held with all due solemnity, and was a great success in spite of the rigours of a winter that lingered on. Our Lausanne friends, led by the indefatigable and devoted Dr. Messerli, arranged a brilliant and varied setting for our Session. The discussions were peaceful as was only to be expected among friends happy to meet again and to witness the soundness of the Olympic fabric. It was outside the conference rooms that agitation was rife. Paris was the centre of the trouble. Unbelievably, a peevish, disloyal opposition had sprung up and was directed against the choice of Antwerp. If ever a gesture were called for, at such a moment, what could have been better than the choice we were making of Antwerp as the venue for the 7th Olympiad ? What other candidature could equal it ? I am sure that, duly informed, the conscience of the world would have manifested with enthusiasm in Antwerp's favour. In Belgium, at any rate, great interest was taken in our meeting and the government, aware of the responsibility represented by the award of the Games, declared itself ready to accept it.

The Count de Baillet-Latour had not been content merely to discuss the matter with King Albert and the ministers. With his realistic idealism, he had examined all the possibilities and was determined to go ahead and make a success of the Games. Although serious attempts had been made to discourage him, he gave Antwerp's promise—encouraged somewhat by the assurances brought to him from Britain by the Reverend Laffan—that everything would be ready at the appointed time. And so, in fact, it was.

Cuba had gradually faded from the scene. And, in view of Belgium's candidature, none of the others could hope to succeed. But a big problem arose : the participation of the "central empires", as they were still called. It was only a few

* See "Olympic Review" since No. 101-102.

months since the last German soldier had left Belgian soil and since the last cannon shot had been heard on the battlefield. Common sense suggested that it would hardly be wise for a German team to appear in the Olympic stadium before 1924. On the other hand, to ostracise any member country, even right after the conflict that had torn Europe asunder, would create a rift in the Olympic constitution which had been so strong until then ; and it might become a dangerous precedent. The solution however was very simple. At each Olympiad, according to the custom introduced in 1896, it is the Organising Committee that sends out the invitations. In this way, the Organising Committee is in control of distribution, without the fundamental principle of universality having to suffer any direct infringement. The IOC had therefore no new decision to take. Nevertheless, despite the opinion of several of us, a middle way was chosen which consisted in enumerating the countries that would be invited, with the excuse that the others were not represented on the IOC. This was a double mistake, for while death in Germany and resignations elsewhere had left several empty spaces in our ranks, there remained the Hungarians who were neither dead nor on the point of resigning.

During the 1919 Session, fourteen French military planes landed in Lausanne from Nancy, at the invitation of the Lausanne School of Civil Aviation. A letter from the President of the Cabinet, the War Minister, informed me that by sending this squadron, with the authorisation of the Federal Government and “on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the revival of the Olympic Games”, Mr. Clemenceau wished to mark the “high esteem” in which he held the IOC and its work. In this way, the discontented were invited to keep quiet but even so they continued for a long time to grumble and show their ill will in many ways. What exactly did they want ? Nothing very precise. Pressed finally to make known their complaints, the newspapers that backed them fell silent and France’s participation, in its turn, began to take shape.

In Antwerp, the directorial—and sometimes even dictatorial—activity of our colleague worked wonders. Everything had to be created from scratch, and everything was—admittedly not on the lavish scale and with the sumptuousness provided for in the original projects presented to the IOC before the war, when the city’s candidature had been submitted for the first time, but in a perfectly orderly way and with as much moderation and tact as elegance and brilliance. Concerning the number and quality of the entries, we were quickly reassured. One of the most common anxieties related to the brutal disappearance of so many athletes and the lack of training of those that remained. In this connection, the Interallied Games, held in Paris in the spring of 1919 under the aegis of General Pershing, who had a stadium built for the purpose near Vincennes and which still bears his name, were extremely useful. They had been arranged with a view to providing a healthful and enjoyable means of occupying the enforced leisure of the troops of the different armies, whose immediate demobilisation and return home had, for many reasons, not been considered practicable and large numbers of whom were thus held on French soil with very little to do. Naturally, attempts had been made in certain circles to mislead the public by talking of a “Military Olympiad” and suggesting that it should take the place of the regular Olympiad a year ahead of time. Once again the question of the numbering of the Games and

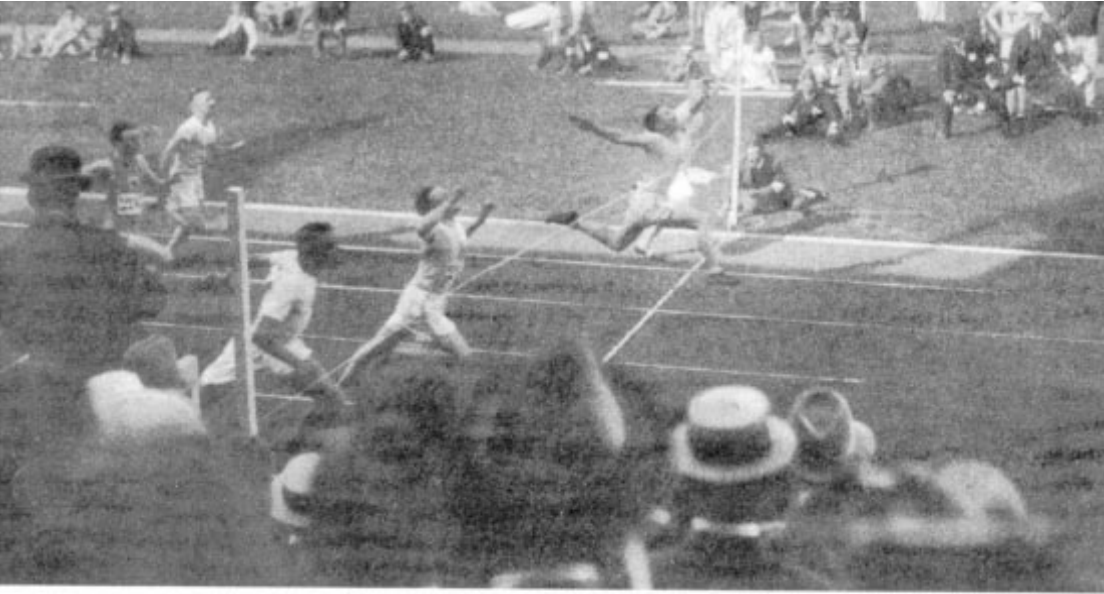
the four-yearly interval ! I have before me a letter from J.J. Jusserand, giving me an account of the steps he was taking (President Wilson was in Paris at the time) and assuring me that the Americans would never allow use to be made of the terms "Olympic" or "Olympiad" for such a purpose. The Interallied Games, as might have been expected, showed moreover that muscular value and sporting enthusiasm were not on the decline.

The Games of the 7th Olympiad opened brilliantly on 14th August 1920, in the presence of the King and Queen of the Belgians, accompanied by the Duke of Brabant, Prince Charles and Princess Marie-José. The parade, the opening address, the choirs, the release of the pigeons, the salvoes, the whole splendid ceremonial, the educational value of which had begun to be realised in Stockholm, showed just how strong Olympism still was, even so soon after the war, and to what extent its laurels continued to be prized above all other sporting honours by the youth of the world. In the evening, the King and Queen gave a banquet in the Palace in exclusive honour of the International Olympic Committee ; this was followed by a very large reception, at the end of which the sovereigns departed for Brussels.

Cardinal Mercier, who was there, had officiated in the Cathedral that morning at a religious service, conceived this time according to a different plan than the one that took place in 1912.

Regarding this point I have not yet had an opportunity of giving an explanation. By holding a public service in the stadium itself, as in Stockholm, before the start of the competitions, we would be forcing the athletes, already grown men, to take part in a religious ceremony that might be displeasing to some. By inviting them, quite outside the Games, to a ceremony in a church, we were only associating religion like any other great moral force of mankind with the celebration of the Olympic Games. Then again, it was important that the ceremony should be sufficiently neutral in character to rise above all differences in doctrine. No mass, no priestly address at the altar : the *De Profundis*, a hymn to the memory of the dead of the previous four years, and the *Te Deum*, a hymn of success and hope ; lay hymns, they might be called, and ideally suited to beautiful musical interpretations. To which could be added a speech, provided that it was couched in liberal terms. This unusual programme appealed to Cardinal Mercier. The ceremony had a special grandeur about it this time owing to the tragic fact that the list of Olympic dead was terribly long. And all those present came away, I believe, deeply impressed by the words spoken in the Cathedral by the famous prelate in a moving service accompanied by the magnificent music of the choirs and organ.

During the Games, all the political, civil and military authorities of the city, the province and the country showed continual keen interest in their success. None more so than the Governor of Antwerp, Baron Gaston de Schilde, who was very popular with all who met him. Antwerp had been brilliantly decorated. From the city centre to the stadium, the route was lined with Olympic flags. Everywhere the five multicoloured rings and the motto : *Citius, Altius, Fortius* were prominently displayed. The festivities were numerous and highly successful, and pipers from a Scottish regiment often added a picturesque note.

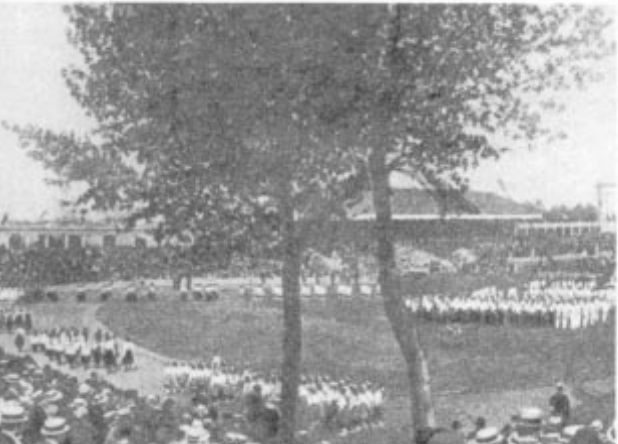


Start of the 50 km.▼

▲ Final of the 100 m.

The opening ceremony.▼▼

▼ Erik Adlerz.



The oldest members of the IOC, General Balck, Professor Sloane, the Reverend Laffan, Doctor Guth-Jarkovsky, Baron G. de Blonay, Baron van Tuyl and Count von Rosen found themselves, once again, united in the same ideal and, around them, a large number of others formed the growing squadron of those who would eventually take over and to whom they would hand over the flame. Distant colleagues were there too : Japanese, Indians, South Africans, Brazilians, potential colleagues from recently emancipated nations—Ireland, Poland—who submitted their candidatures, a representative of the city of Los Angeles, entrusted with the mission of securing the future Games for this city, representatives of the YMCA, now very much attracted by the powerful influence of Olympism, which they had often ignored in the past. Among the last-named, an enthusiast, Elwood Brown, was to become during the following years the keen advocate and champion of Olympism throughout the Near and Far East.

Where would the 1924 Games be held ? The question was on everyone's mind. In fact, there was complete lack of agreement among sports officials. They all wanted a great deal, but did not know what : reforms, innovations, transformations. In the speech that I made before the King the day he honoured the opening meeting of the IOC Session with his presence, I indicated that our hopes for the future lay in democratic expansion. The sovereign was one of those in whose presence one feels free to express one's thoughts. But no sure trend could be discerned as yet ; it was wisest to wait and see. I advised postponing the decision and at the same time proposed convening, in Lausanne in 1921, a Congress which would revise, in so far as the new situation required, the technical decisions reached in Paris in 1914, and to which this time were invited the delegates of the International Federations as well as those of the National Olympic Committees. In addition to this Congress, I planned another, of an educational and social character, for the purpose of studying the measures to be taken to organise sport for the masses. This was the movement that I had sought to start in France in 1906, and which this time would be on the world scale under the wing of the IOC.

The IOC gave its agreement. The atmosphere of our meetings revealed some uncertainty and hesitation concerning the direction to be taken. I felt a vague desire on the part of members to have no decisions to take and to leave everything to me. It became obvious that the choice of venue for the following Games would have to be postponed, but if this were the case then Paris could never hope to see its candidature accepted. Persistent ill humour prevailed among the French, their teams made themselves far from popular, even in the equestrian events. Within the IOC itself, the opinion of the "neutrals" tended to predominate and to them Paris seemed a choice that would only perpetuate the memories of the war. On the other hand, the French federations demanded to be awarded the Games, saying out loud that "we would then see how the Olympic Games should be organised", and quite a few foreign federations lent a willing ear to these words. The press acrimoniously backed up these demands. I was not at all convinced of the feasibility of the plan, but I felt that it was not at all a bad idea to give them a chance. I therefore drew up in my mind the details of a rather unusual manoeuvre and waited quietly for the right moment to put it into effect.

(to be continued)