

XVIII*

The 1921 manœuvre

The situation called above all for a declaration of unity, and that is why the pilot at the helm felt that everyone was looking to him to steer a steady course. The danger was not so much that some other body might succeed in taking over Olympism. A French politician and a French journalist were waging a fruitless campaign to hand over the Games to the League of Nations, which had only just come into being and had not yet found its feet. Such proposals had very little chance of being accepted and it was as easy to fight against them as against the attacks of certain federations, eager to see their delegates sitting at the table of the IOC. The real danger lay in the frittering away of the Olympic idea, which risked being brought about by the proliferation of regional games that were the result of the general impatience that seemed to prevail. They were being created here, there and everywhere or at least we were continually being bombarded with plans, programmes and announcements of the formation of committees and sub-committees

During the last two years of the war, the threat of secession had hung over Olympism. By indirect and unofficial action I had always succeeded in thwarting any such attempts. The "League of Neutrals", which had for a while been mooted, had never been more than a project without any real substance. The "League of Belligerents" of the German group had been nothing more than a vague idea and even if they were to try and carry it through now, it would surely be only very short-lived ; Hungary and Turkey would probably be very reluctant to join in. On the other hand, if all these "Games" which were to be organised in Ireland, Poland, Catalonia, the Balkans, India and the Near East were allowed to take root, it might lead to cracks in the Olympic structure. Admittedly all these undertakings looked to us for blessing and depended on our patronage. But largely ignorant of Olympic matters and unfamiliar with the spirit of the IOC, those who conceived them and sought to organise them harboured ulterior motives of a nationalistic or a religious character which would only upset the whole movement in the end.

I let the year 1920 come to a close and the petty arguments left over from the Games in Antwerp die down : settling of accounts, technical disputes, etc. The overall impression left by these Games was not affected. During this period I had set in motion the preparations for the Congress in Lausanne. The Government of the Swiss Confederation had agreed that the invitations should be issued in each country by the Swiss legations and consulates.

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It was important that they should arrive well in advance ; especially as this time the situation was much more complicated than in June 1914. In Paris we had only had to invite the delegates of the National Committees for the purpose of drawing up the list of the various events in each sport and the technical conditions governing them. In 1921, we had the same problem but many others had arisen in the meantime, which it was not feasible to put all together for discussion by a single assembly.

The table of "Congresses and Olympic Conferences" gives a good idea of the extent of the problem. In fact, there was a whole series of conferences spaced out from 26th May to 12th June 1921 : first of all a Consultative Conference on Winter Sports (26th and 27th May), then a Conference on Mountaineering (28th May), followed by a Conference on Equestrian Sports (29th and 30th May). Next came a Congress of the International Federations organised by Mr. Paul Rousseau who was planning the creation of a sort of superfederation or interfederal council : a solution that would be either a help or a hindrance depending on the state of mind prevailing at the time, but to which, in principle, I was in no way opposed, as some seemed to believe. The Olympic Congress itself would take place from 2nd to 7th June. Finally, plans had been made to hold a Consultative Conference on Literature and Art, and a Conference of "Municipalities", intended simply to clear the ground with a view to the subsequent organisation of sport for the masses and the "restoration of the ancient gymnasium", of which I had spoken for the first time in Paris, in November 1912, and which remained—as it still does—a wish dear to my heart.

Once this copious programme had been approved by the IOC, I drafted a circular letter to my colleagues, sent it to them and at the same time issued the text to the press. It was dated 17th March 1921. The announcement of my decision to hand in my resignation after the 1924 Games preceded the following passages : *The choice of city for staging them (the next Games) is of particular importance this time, owing to the fact that the 8th Olympiad will coincide with the thirtieth anniversary of their revival. Many gratifying candidatures have been received. If we consider the merits of the rival cities, the name of Amsterdam seems to prevail... But, on the other hand, at this moment when the reviver of the Olympic Games judges his personal task to be nearly at an end, no one will deny that he is entitled to ask that a special gesture should be made in favour of his native city, Paris, where the modern revival of the Olympiads was prepared by him and officially proclaimed on 23rd June 1894. I wish therefore, in all fairness, to let you know, my dear colleagues, that at our next meeting I shall appeal to you on this great occasion to sacrifice your preferences and your national interests and agree to award the 9th Olympiad to Amsterdam and proclaim Paris the venue for the 8th.*

It was a masterly coup d'état ! And in actual fact a double one since it decided the future for two Olympiads, a decision that nothing prevented the IOC from taking but which had never been done before. There was a certain confusion and surprise in Paris, elsewhere too. Nobody had expected such a radical and sudden presidential intervention. It was morally impossible to refuse what I was asking. That is why, once the first hesitations were over, French sporting circles en masse deserted the opposition they had been building up against us almost automatically



Four Presidents of the IOC in front of the Casino de Montbenon at Lausanne on 7th May 1921. From left to right : Siegfried Edström (SWE), Pierre de Coubertin (FRA), the Count de Baillet-Latour (BEL), and the Baron de Blonay (SUI).

and, suddenly, the clouds that had been piling up cleared away and the sun shone in a clear sky.

The series of “Olympic Congresses and Conferences” opened in an atmosphere of goodwill and understanding, which promised well for their results. This atmosphere continued right through the meetings, in spite of some tricky questions that were raised and the heated discussions that were bound to follow. First and foremost among these was the problem of the “Winter Games”. The Scandinavians did not want them at any price. In 1894, skating had been included in the list of desirable events. London, which possessed an “ice palace”, had been able in 1908 to organise satisfactory events. But in 1912, Stockholm eagerly seized on the argument that it had no suitable premises, in order to rid itself of the burden of organising this event. However in the last twenty-five years, winter sports had not only developed in a number of other countries but they were so truly amateur, so frank and so pure in their sporting dignity that their complete exclusion from the Olympic programme deprived it of much force and value. On the other hand, how were they to be organised ? In addition to the Scandinavian resistance, there was the twofold concern that they could not take place at the same time or in the same place as the Summer Games. It is possible to manufacture artificial ice, but not snow, and even less mountain peaks.

Would the Dutch be expected, in 1928, to erect a chain of mountains bought second hand or made specially for the occasion ? To set up a sort of autonomous

cycle, nevertheless related to its big brother, was obviously the only solution, even though full of drawbacks. For this reason, I had attempted to interrupt the discussion with a first meeting between specialists. Mr. A. Megroz' report, on behalf of the Consultative Conference, somewhat lessened the shock and finally it was bruited abroad that France—if it were selected (which was not the case as yet)—would be entitled to organise, in Chamonix in 1924, a week of winter sports on which the IOC would bestow its patronage, but which “would not be an actual part of the Games”. This last clause was later cancelled. The “Winter Games” were finally founded in spite of the Scandinavians who ended by abandoning their objection and realising that in view of the roles of Switzerland and Canada in particular they could no longer lay claim to the practical monopoly they had exercised for so long.

The report of the Conference on Mountaineering was drawn up by a famous climber, Dr. Jacot-Guillarmod, well-known for his expeditions to the Himalayas. Few Alpine clubs were represented even though they had agreed in principle to take part but without much enthusiasm. Admittedly, it is quite difficult to measure the comparative merits of exploits of this kind but as nothing prevented each Olympiad either from declaring that there were no grounds for awarding a prize or from proclaiming two prizewinners *ex aequo*, the proposal to invite each Alpine club to put forward the claims of its candidates was not at all impracticable. In Chamonix in 1924, there was no doubt in anyone's mind as the Mount Everest expedition far exceeded the rest of the field in endurance and courage, but in 1928 we were obliged to give up this mountaineering prize and, as I have already said, in doing so we committed in my opinion a very serious mistake.

The Conference on Equestrian Sports was recruited by special invitation addressed to the Ministers of War. It must not be forgotten that all these conferences were purely consultative ones, organised for the purpose of clearing the ground for members of either the IOC or the Congress; depending on which assembly was concerned by the questions raised I have already mentioned how brilliant the Equestrian Games were at the 5th Olympiad (Stockholm 1912, thanks to Count von Rosen's competent zeal, but that the whole context had been exclusively military. It was undoubtedly inevitable because, apart from hunting and polo—sports that are too expensive to be practised by any other than a restricted circle of millionaires—civil equitation always tends to be eclipsed by the military.

Outside certain horse breeding countries, colonial regions where horses are used for transport, or territories like California where they have been kept out of tradition, riding has always been handicapped by organisational difficulties, which could of course have been overcome by enlightened and ingenious action on the part of governments. But such action never materialised in the fashion and to the extent needed. It is impossible for me to attempt to examine this question here ; it would take far too long. For over twenty-five years I have never ceased bringing the matter up in articles or in schemes of various kinds, but always with the same goal : to spread equestrian sport among the “unmounted”, that is to say those who cannot afford to keep a horse of their own. I obtained many assurances of approval from people as varied as the “rough rider”

Theodore Roosevelt and the distinguished horseman Count Maurice de Cossé-Brissac, but when it came to implementing the measures, I came up against an insurmountable barrier, as if it were a question of giving up a class privilege, or surrendering a precious feudal right. I can still hear the bursts of applause that greeted certain speeches at the Equestrian Games' banquet in Stockholm in 1912... and those present included a galaxy of Princes, Grand-Dukes, heads of missions, and all the officers taking part in the competitions. Everyone seemed to be in wholehearted agreement. But this was not actually so. The knights of the Middle Ages were far less exclusively aristocratic in their ideas on riding than their successors today. At the Conference in 1921, which was attended among others by the Italian General Bellotti and the Belgian General Joostens, I could only have my ideas adopted as a remote possibility and I had to content myself with attaching a summary of them to the minutes. The Olympic equestrian programme remained as it was, at least provisionally, but provisional solutions of this kind have a way of lasting indefinitely,

Paul Rousseau did not succeed any better either in creating his superfederation. He had to be content with the maintenance of an "Office of International Federations" which was only very reluctantly granted the minimum rights of intervention and the bare means of existence. I do not know whether this new body would have come up to its promoter's expectations, but from the Olympic point of view it would certainly have helped the IOC by freeing it of a technical role that was too extensive and the responsibilities which I had always hoped it might be able to throw off one day. At any rate, the Congress of the International Federations, both at the first meeting which I was asked to open and at the final banquet, showed that between them and the IOC the era of misunderstandings had come to an end.

The Olympic Congress itself, to which I had appointed, as was my right, our Swedish colleague J.S. Edström as President, was quite lively, and at times positively stormy. Edström president with his usual devotion, intelligence and brilliance... and a show of authority that made me smile when I thought of how often I had been accused of authoritarianism. The atmosphere was very different from that of the 1914 Congress, in spite of the calming influence of the Vaudois setting. The effects of the war years that were just over were still making themselves felt. Nationalistic feelings were aroused for the least little thing and, while in 1914 we had met for the purpose of establishing a permanent Olympic legislation, this time instability and uncertainty prevailed. Right from the start, delegates considered the possibility of a new Congress in 1925, which could be convened to revise what was decided in 1921 : obviously a regrettable state of mind, which circumstances however excused to a certain extent. As soon as it met therefore the Congress agreed, as had been hoped, on the venue for the next two Games. At the very first session held on 2nd June in the evening, the IOC accepted my request and awarded the celebration of the 8th and 9th Olympiads to Paris and Amsterdam.

The motion had been proposed by Mr. Guth-Jarkovsky, and seconded by Messrs. de Baillet-Latour and de Polignac. An objection having been raised for vice of form, the motion was put to a second vote, which gave the same majority in favour of the double award. I had abstained, wishing less than ever to interfere with the liberty of vote, but it would have been really regrettable to see

Amsterdam—which had shown great sporting spirit and international goodwill in withdrawing in favour of Antwerp and was doing the same again in 1921 in favour of Paris, subject to the conditions already mentioned—deprived of a satisfaction so long awaited and so legitimately claimed. With regard to Paris, everybody was in agreement. It would have been the same for Amsterdam except for the fact that, as the Congress approached, a bout of bad temper had broken out in Italy and an attack of impatience in America. Rome had suddenly realised that it could have obtained the 1924 Games or at any rate those of 1928, and Los Angeles, seeing her chances postponed until 1932 at the earliest, had considered the wait too long for transatlantic opinion, accustomed as it was to prompt action. On both sides of the Atlantic the press had reacted, fortunately without the effects being felt until some time after the publication of my letter on 17th March. The Italian excitement had reached such a peak within the space of a few days that Mr. Gaston Vidal, Under-Secretary of State for Technical Education, had considered it best to have himself replaced at the last moment as representative of the French Olympic Committee at the Lausanne Congress. Our colleague Montu became very embarrassed and decided to withdraw after the vote. As for the American delegates, they seemed to harbour a grudge but did not know exactly how to express it as there was no valid reason for it.

Since the events of 1901 and 1905 (the transfer of the 1904 and 1908 Games from Chicago to St. Louis and from Rome to London), the IOC had decided to consider only applications that were backed by an already soundly prepared organisation and by serious financial guarantees. Such had been the case with Stockholm, Berlin and Antwerp ; and would be for Amsterdam too. Rome, on the contrary, no longer offered any guarantee ; no committee had been formed, nor were there any funds to fall back on. In these troubled times after the war and as I had definitely decided to retire, there was also, on top of all the arguments already mentioned, the wish on my part to arrange matters for the near future so that the ensuing stability might help my successor, whoever he was, in the first days of his tenure of office.

With the same end in view and under the pretext of a long journey which I had planned at the time, I persuaded the IOC to approve the creation of an Executive Board which was none other than an enlarged “bureau” : a consecration in law of an already well-established state of affairs. The Board, which was to take over on 1st October 1921, comprised Messrs. de Blonay, Guth-Jarkovsky, de Baillet-Latour, Edström and de Polignac.

Many foundations had been laid in Lausanne with the minimum of upset, but somewhat incoherently. The actual organisation had been excellent, thanks to the local powers that be and also to the enthusiasm of the General Commissioner, my friend Eugene Monod, who had won the architecture competition in 1911. We now had three years ahead of us to make the Games of the 8th Olympiad the “finest and most perfect that had ever been celebrated”. This was the ambition of the organisers and they hoped in good faith to succeed completely in their aim.

(to be continued)