

## An American at the first Olympic Games

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Drawing from  
"Scribener's Magazine", 1895

In 1980 the USA organised the Olympic Winter Games while at the same time their President Carter called for a boycott of the Summer Games in Moscow, but at the beginning of the Games in 1896 the country was full of enthusiasm for a sports festival which brought together all the nations of the world. Whereas the present Olympic Games have worldwide press coverage, in 1896 there were only a very few newspapers which gave even a small amount of space to mentioning the Games, since there were no sports newspapers or sports sections in the daily papers.

It was different in those days, when America was much more isolated from sport. The American "Scribener's Magazine", a periodical in the style of Velhagen and Klasing's or Westermann's monthly reviews, devoted a full 48 printed pages to the 1896 Olympic Games, including 42 illustrations, published in three parts, two in April with preliminary reports, and one in September with a list of the 1896 results. There was even a poster to advertise it. For writing the reports, the editors made sure that they had the most competent authors for the situation at the time; the Director of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Rufus B. Ri-

chardson, and Duffield Osborne, whose exhaustive articles dealt first with the historical development of the Olympic Games in Antiquity and then depicted the places where they were held. Richardson covered mainly the building of the new stadium, built at the expense of the rich Greek commercialist from Alexandria, George Averoff, to the tune of 180,000 good old dollars. That was how the first Games were financed, since impoverished Greece would hardly have been able to raise such a sum. Rufus B. Richardson's article, with drawings by Corwin-Knapp-Linson, which appeared in the September 1896 issue of "Scribener's Magazine", nevertheless represents today one of the most important documents in the history of sport, for it is an authentic and exhaustive description of the events in the stadium in Athens, the like of which does not exist.

The following is therefore a short summary of Rufus B. Richardson's report.

It seemed to be a hazardous experiment, this introduction of international athletics competitions under the name of Olympic Games. Homer's sun certainly shone over Greece still. But no magician and not all a millionaire's money could bring back again the stadium in which the Games used to be held in their old form. Richardson meant that it was even more problematic to organise an international sports competition in those days, since such meetings between athletes from different countries were not so widespread then as they are today. But the desire to jump further, run faster, and wrestle better has always existed, and no less a man than Homer said: "Man has no greater honour so long as he lives than that which he achieves with his hands and feet." Despite the thousands of ifs and buts raised in sports circles, the Olympic Committee was unperturbed, and held the Games. Not only was the old stadium renovated; so also was the cultural programme, with performances by numerous orchestras, concerts, the illumination of Athens, fireworks, and the presentation of

Sophocles' "Antigone" in its original version with music composed by Sakellarides, while the presence of the Greek royal family and representatives of many of the crowned heads of Europe lent particular sparkle to the festivities. The 60,000 spectators who had flooded together were almost convinced that ancient times had dawned again.

Without a doubt, at the heart of the proceedings were the events which took place in the stadium, lasting a full week, and the concentrated efforts of the athletes to give and achieve the best.

There was certainly a number of the classical games missing, such as the pure pancratium and boxing. Regrettably, the classical pentathlon was also missing, and regattas replaced the chariot races; according to Richardson, pistol- and rifle-shooting were a poor substitute for javelin-throwing. An Ancient Greek would also have been astonished to see tennis, fencing and cycling on the programme. At the same time, the American reporter was sorry to see the popular sports of football and baseball excluded.

The reporter was astonished that a city of 130,000 inhabitants had managed so well in making all the arrangements for holding the Games in such a short period of time. He went on to say that spring was the best time of year for holding them, but it had the disadvantage that there were few American participants since it was impossible for them to train in the open air so early in the year. It was also impossible for many American students, particularly those near the end of their studies, to come to Greece at that time, so close to the end of the academic year. It should also be taken into account that in America and England at that time sport was mainly practised by students rather than by clubs. Because of the dates, participation from the USA, England and Germany was very weak, while Italy, Turkey and Russia were completely absent. In addition, the weather was not particularly favourable for the Games of 1896. It was so cold it broke all previous records. Mount Pentelicus was almost completely covered with snow. On the day before the Games, when a statue of the donator of the stadium was unveiled, the crowds of spectators were soaked through with the pouring rain. The following Wednesday, when the Games were already under

way, it was so cold that many of the competitors fell ill. The rowing events had to be postponed because of continuous storm conditions, and in the end they were dropped completely. The distribution of prizes on the following Monday was hindered by rain. Despite the bitter cold, 30,000 spectators crowded into the stadium on the first day, while an equal number of the curious assembled outside the barriers.

Richardson also gives a full description of the opening ceremony, at which the Greek king officiated, and then deals with the successes of the Americans.

On the first day, two Americans won two prizes in two of the five competitions held, and in two others they won the preliminary heats. On the second day the Stars and Stripes were hoisted three times, followed by the Danish flag (for the winner of the two-armed weightlifting) and the Union Jack (for the victory in the one-armed weightlifting), and finally an Australian won the 1500 m running event. At the gymnastics competitions the following day, Greeks and Germans shared the honours in front of a thin public. On Friday, the Americans were again in the forefront, in the 100 m sprint as well as in the high-jump, hurdles and pole-vaulting. Much space in the report in "Scribener's Magazine" was devoted to the marathon race, which has since become legendary, being won, much to the public's delight, by a Greek shepherd. This is followed by a complimentary description of the unpretentious prize distribution with the presentation of an olive branch, and the report ends with the statement that Greece had not only won the marathon race, but also a place among the nations of the world, whose representatives would never forget their reception in Hellas. Greece was a poor kingdom, but as great as ancient Greece in its moral qualities.

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