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# The press and the first Olympic Games in Athens.



Immediately after the Congress of Paris, in June 1894, Demetrius Vikelas, first IOC President informed the King of Greece and the Crown Prince about the unanimous wish of the conferees that the first International Olympic Games be held in Athens and to secure their support. "I accepted the commission that was entrusted to me", he writes, "although I am not authorized on these matters by the Society which is under the protection of the Crown Prince". He also mentions that he had agreed to preside over the proceedings of one of the working groups of the Congress because, as he writes "I did not dare to decline such an honour which would reflect on Greece". Before any official reaction was made, however, the first encouraging signs began to appear in articles in the Greek press. The *Acropolis* newspaper refers to the sensation caused by the Delphic hymn to Apollo, which was performed during the Paris Congress by a large choir of women. The journalist, who was in Paris, writes: "Don't you think that Greece should be ahead of the Europeans in re-establishing the Olympic Games?" The *Ephemeris ton Sizitisseon* (Journal of Discussions) points out the "unanimous wish" expressed that the first International Olympic Games should be held in Athens, adding: "Everyone must admit that the Panhellenic Athletic Society has already begun to act in accordance with its mission. Now both the state and the Society should afford it every possible support, equal to the services the Society indisputably performs and will continue to perform for the Nation". The Society had appointed Vikelas to represent it at the International Sports Congress.

by Kostas Georgiadis\*

As the days went by, initially reserved reactions in favour of holding the Games in Athens gave way to enthusiastic articles about the joyful event in almost the entire Greek press.

The press urged Prince George to become head of the preparatory committee so as to provide the success of the Games. The government and local authorities were also urged to offer every aid possible through their departments, treating the Olympic Games as a national public project.

The *Hestia* newspaper provides an extensive commentary, comparing the ancient Olympic Games with the International Olympic Games. It concludes by noting that, "despite the sharp contrast between the men, nations and customs of the past and present, the resurrection of the Olympic Games, as planned by worthy men in Paris, fills the souls of the Greek people with joy. We shall receive our noble guests from abroad with warmth, and there will be no strangers in this city [...] All of Greece is moved by the news of the planned resurrection of the Olympic Games, and all are glad for this opportunity to display their honest admiration of outstanding men...."

To *Asty* newspaper received the Congress decision with the same enthusiasm; it described the proposal for holding the Games in Athens "most appropriate", and the decision for appointing Athens to organize them "a great honour for Greece". It thought that the government, the city, the unions and the Athenians would show how much they appreciated the honour that had been bestowed upon

them by applauding not only the athletes, but those who would contribute and work for the revival of the Games and their organization in Athens.

This enthusiastic attitude on the part of journalists in favour of the Games was often combined with criticism and suggestions for overcoming the problems that would arise from accepting the Congress's "wish". It was widely known that the country's financial position meant that no public money could be "squandered" on celebrating the first International Olympic Games with the grandeur they deserved.

What attracted the interest of the journalists was the fact that Athens would organize an international event for the first time after the country's liberation, beginning with one of the most glamorous Classical institutions - the Olympic Games. The memory of the eminence and glory of the ancient Greeks would be an excellent moral reward for the nation's sacrifices after centuries of slavery and decline, and "a pleasant respite of a few days" in the hard years as the young state struggled for the survival, as the *Ephemeris ton Sizitisseon* put it.

In an article entitled "The re-establishment of the Olympic Games", the *Acropolis* pointed out that "the Games will be an opportunity for showing to the many foreigners who will stream into the Greek metropolis that the Greece of political gangs may be bankrupt, but the Greece of eternal traditions is still alive and has the endurance, despite everything, to overcome every difficulty until the time comes for its re-birth. And this re-birth will be brought about by the young generation, which is swarming into the palaestras [...] So let us move ahead! We

*must all work with zeal and enthusiasm for the success of the first European [sic] Games [...] Let us show the Europeans that Greek youth is still alive, that there is still blood in our veins, that better days are in store for the Greek race”.*

The *Acropolis* suggested that this was a new- opportunity for holding competitions For domestic products at the Zappeion Hall as had been done in the past, during the Zappeion Olympics. It also suggested that musical contests be held at the same time, exactly as in the ancient Greek Games, and that a theatre be constructed for performing ancient dramas while the Olympic Games were on. It is evident that the first Olympic Games were not seen as a purely athletic event by the journalists, who certainly conceived it as a complex venture with a multifaceted character.

However, the essential arguments of the press in supporting the Greek venue were focused mainly upon the potential for maximizing the moral gains for the country itself, with positive effects in such diverse sectors as education, sport, economy, tourism and the environment as additional benefits. The support by the press was universal. A typical attitude was that of the poet G. Drossinis, co-editor of *Hestia*. Thrilled by the idea of the Olympic Games, he wrote to his friend Vikelas to tell him that he was willing, along with their mutual friends, to do their utmost so that the Games would be a success. *“The columns of Hestia”*, he wrote, *“are at your disposal for presenting your ideas about the International Olympic Games”.*

After a period of silence, the press again took up the matter of the International Olympic Games. The opportunity was given by an article in the French newspaper *Le Figaro* about Pierre de Coubertin’s visit to French President Casimir Perier in order to submit the plans for the organization of the first Olympic Games in Athens. It was also stated that Coubertin would be visiting Athens in order to discuss the

schedule of the Games with the Greek Committee.

Indeed, on the day of Coubertin’s arrival at the port of Piraeus, the *Ephemeris ton Sizitisseon*, the government’s semi-official publication, carried an article entitled *“Olympic Games: not in Athens. Too costly, the Committee thinks”.* This is how the Greek public learnt the reasons for their Government’s and the Olympian Committee’s refusal to support the Athens Games; the refusal was mainly based on financial reasons.

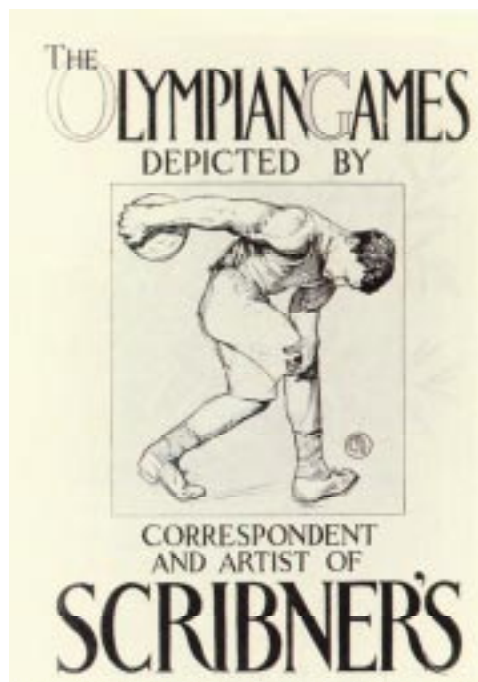
On the day after these articles appeared and Coubertin arrived, a long interview with Coubertin appeared in *To Asty*. He referred to the idea and the significance of reviving the Olympic Games and the favourable reception he had enjoyed in the developed countries of the West. Under pressure from the press, the majority of which was friendly towards Coubertin and supportive of his cause, Prime Minister Trikoupis visited the baron at his hotel, the *Grande-Bretagne*. In their discussion, Trikoupis displayed more good sense and promised that his government would provide its moral support for the organization of the Olympic Games.

On November 4th 1894, 700 to 800 people from every social group filled the hall of the Parnassus Literary Society to listen with great interest to Coubertin’s lecture. His speech filled with enthusiasm the huge audience as well as all the Greek people who read its contents in the press, where parts of the speech were published in Greek alongside the entire text in French. Coubertin was satisfied with the support from the press, which led the campaign for the Games to be held in Athens. Three days after his speech, Coubertin met with Prince Constantine, who officially agreed to be honorary President of the support Committee for the first International Olympic Games. The journalists claimed that this reborn idea would open up horizons in the quest for new values and ideas in many areas. At the time, more and more people in teaching accepted physical education as an integral part of educating youth and developing their intellectual and moral values.

There were also articles about the revival of the Games with titles such as, *“How International Sports may promote peace among the Nations”*, and other examples which pointed out that *“a new era of healthy Internationalism”* was beginning on our planet.

On January 13th 1895, Crown Prince Constantine, who had taken charge of the issue, declared the official start of the preparations for the first International Olympic Games in Athens. This was hailed by the entire press, which pursued with undiminished interest its task of informing the Greeks about the progress of the preparation for the Games. During the Games there were drawings, cartoons and enthusiastic reports, especially of the marathon, which are beyond the scope of the present essay. But the fact remains that the constant, unwavering interest of the press was one of the main factors which contributed to the organization of the Olympic Games in Athens.

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JEUX OLYMPIQUES A ATHÈNES  
Notre compatriote Masson, vainqueur de la course vélocipédique

*During the first Olympic Games, a French newspaper "Le Petit Journal" ran this picture with the caption: "The Olympic Games in Athens. Our fellow countryman Masson, winner of the velocipede race."*