
Athens in the spring of 1896

Because I spent so much time abroad and I was travelling from place to place. I did not have the chance to read the Russian newspapers regularly. Therefore, I do not know what was written about the Olympic Games in Russia. I do not even know if they were mentioned. If I described, insofar as I am able, the Games from personal observations, I do not think that they would satisfy the curiosity of some Russian readers. I will describe the Olympic Games as the event was presented. The reports in the newspapers from Athens, which were also sent to the rest of the world, are the ones that gave the latest coverage of the phenomenal Games. The large number of Greeks and foreign guests, as well as their way of celebrating, were certainly a large factor in contributing to the happy event.

Though the most important thing is that the Olympic Games went well, we, who were in some way involved in them, had some doubts before the event. We already knew that although there were intense preparations to rebuild the Panathenian stadium, and that it was not totally finished. Some parts could be built only temporarily from wood instead of marble. That was the only material in the original structure.

The exact programme for the Games was continually revised up until the last day. We knew for sure that the idea of reviving the Olympic Games had not inspired great confidence, so there was no guarantee of their success. For us, it was embarrassing when someone would talk about them with a critical smile. Even when they were taken seriously, there were moments when people reacted negatively to the Games.

On this occasion, there were many philosophical discussions in Germany, and

by General Alexandre de Boutowski*

in some arguments there were people who were totally for or against the idea of the Games. So, for example, the German gymnastics team decided to turn down their invitation to the Games, mainly due to the fact that the idea first came from the French; secondly, the Germans had not been invited to Paris in 1894 to



the athletic congress, and therefore they could not have any representatives in the International Olympic Committee. Finally it was emphasized that the German gymnastics team was opposed to the order in which they would have to perform. It was even said that there was nothing there for the Germans, and that it would be unpatriotic to participate in the Games. Thanks to the diplomacy of the sports committee, the Germans changed their minds. Nevertheless, the Belgians decided against the Games because they saw them as a negative pedagogical influence on youth.

The opinion was expressed everywhere that Greece was a poor country and that it was not in a position to coordinate the Games. Of course, there were also positive opinions about the Games. But these passionate discussions could not as-

suage the doubts that arose about the practical progression of a successful event. I heard such critical opinions everywhere, on my way to Greece, as well as in Vienna and Budapest. I also met many Greeks from Russia at the Russian steamer that travelled from Constantinople to Piraeus. The Greeks were embarrassed to admit that they were on their way to the Games.

During the last exhausting week in Athens, we observed further preparations. In this already clean and well-kept city, there was more cleaning and building to be done, and there were a number of flags and bulletin boards to be put up. The country's blue sky gave the streets a special bluish colour. Extra preparation was needed to illuminate the roads, parks and fields. In the last days of that rainy week, the streets were crowded. By Friday, some sensitive people could no longer stand hearing the shooting and explosions. These are the typical devices which the Greeks use to celebrate an event.

Even the representatives of the Games were not yet convinced. Some complaints arose about the fact that the Congress had not been considered very important by foreigners and that people were worried the Games would not attain international standards as the organizers had hoped.

Nevertheless, the Olympic Games were a big, and one could say, unusual success. This was obvious already on the first day in Athens among the guests who were gathered: even if their number was not very big, it was just about enough to give the Games an international air. The best hotels were filled up to the last room, and the Greek committee had to accommodate some guests privately. Most of the visitors were Greeks who lived along the Mediterranean Sea. In

Marseilles, Genoa. Alexandria, Constantinople, or Odessa. A typical characteristic of Greeks abroad is their home-community. There were also some tourists, of course: Americans or British who were spending their vacation in southern Europe or North Africa and who had stopped in Athens on their way back. But some were very interested in the Games and had travelled to Athens just for this reason. Among those guests there were well-known figures in literature, academia and social work.

It was easy to persuade the foreigners that the Greek committee would do everything possible to give the Games a strong international character. Although not all of the details were covered, the preparations were very well thought out and executed with a strong sense of commitment. The only thing that was missing was the people, to fill this space with life. Even the local press, which had been critical of the Games before, changed their tone. On the first day, there were more than 7,000 visitors. Six thousand were Greeks who came both from abroad and from the provinces. There were about 1,500 foreign guests.

The athletes had to report to the committee office and confirm that they were not professionals. The Greeks had the advantage of considerably better training conditions than the international guests. They could practice on the Games field. I cannot give a specific number of athletes, but from the daily Games programme and other announcements that were made, the athletes according to the nationalities were as follows: there were 22 Americans, 13 British (with 1 athlete from Australia), 15 French, 22 Germans, 20 Austro-Hungarians, 4 Danes, 3 Swedes, 1 Swiss, 5 Bulgarians, 3 Italians, 1 Russian, 110 Greeks. In all, I counted 210 athletes who reported for the Games; 10%, however, did not appear in the arena, including three Italians and our Russian athlete.

Among the well-known foreigner guests, the press was interested in Father Didon, a French priest. On the first day, Didon

gave a sermon in the Catholic church of Athens which was all about the upcoming event. This is how he described his impressions of the Games:

“By bringing pupils from the Albert-le-Grand school in France to take part in the solemn ceremony of the Olympic Games, my idea was, What an appropriate place to pay tribute to the genius of Ancient Greece, of which we Westerners and Latins like to think of ourselves as the offspring. I also wished to be involved in this development in physical conditioning, of which Greece has given us such a perfect example, and which should be increasingly incorporated as a necessary component of education. Last, I wished to teach the young people under my guidance how to join this movement of international unity, which appears to be a first step toward brotherhood among peoples and the moral unity which Jesus first spoke of as the ultimate aspiration of the spiritual kingdom in which he is regent, initiator and the infallible support”.

The unveiling of the statue of Averof helped to raise peoples' spirits for the Games. Averof had invested millions of drachma in rebuilding the Panathenian stadium. The statue was displayed on the first day of the Games, the 24th of March. Averof was an older, modest man, and did not make the journey from his city of Alexandria, though his name is now one of the most famous in Athens. Everywhere, at bookstores or on road signs, people recognized his portrait and knew the story behind it. There were regularly articles and items in the press about him.

The dedication of the statue was much celebrated. Many people were present, including all the members of the committees and the commissions. Timoleon Philemon, the secretary of the Greek committee, gave a speech in his honour, and the Crown Prince, who was also the chairman of the committee, unveiled the lustrous marble statue. Some deputies put a laurel wreath at the foot of the statue. At the end of the ceremony, rain suddenly began to fall, and all partici-

pants became concerned about the success of the first day of the Games. However, the weather cleared up in the evening and people went back outside, where music was playing in the parks. It was the first opportunity for the foreigners to meet the Athenians. There was some curiosity and a little tension in the air. The city was pleasantly approaching the important days.

Every evening, the city was lit up and music was played everywhere. In the middle of the programme, some changes took place, but these were not significant. For example, the yachting and rowing races were omitted owing to strong winds; also, the final celebration was postponed for Wednesday instead of Tuesday because of the weather. All the other events followed the original programme.

The opening ceremony was celebrated on a sunny Monday together with state celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the Greek liberation from the Turkish occupation. The royal family visited the church that morning to attend the religious service. There was also a parade, but it did not have much to do with the Games.

Right on time, the music announced the arrival of the royal family at the entrance of the stadium with the guard of honour. All 100,000 spectators rose together. To the enthusiastic shouts of the huge crowd, the King proclaimed the opening of *“the first international Olympic Games in Athens”*.

Immediately after that, a military band together with a philharmonic orchestra played a ceremonious cantata which the Greek composer Samar had composed exclusively for the celebration. The cantata was played again as an encore. When the crowd became quiet, the trumpet was heard and the first athletes proceeded in to the arena. The Games of the first day started.

* IOC Member in Russia from 1894 to 1900. Except from a travel log.

© US copyright 1989 by Charles Gary Allison. Translation Diana Fakiloa.

BULLETIN DU COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL DES JEUX OLYMPIQUES

PARIS, 229, Rue Saint-Honoré

Citius — Fortius — Altius

Rue Saint-Honoré, 229, PARIS

PROGRAMME DES JEUX OLYMPIQUES DE 1896 ATHÈNES

5-15 AVRIL 1896. — (24 mars-3 avril, Style grec.)

SOUS LA PRÉSIDENTIE DE

S. A. R. Monseigneur le Prince Royal, duc de Sparte

Jan. P-5/8
(ex. 3)

A. — SPORTS ATHLÉTIQUES

Courses à pied : 100 mètres, 400 mètres, 800 mètres et 1,500 mètres plat, 110 mètres haies. — Les règlements seront ceux de l'Union des Sociétés françaises de Sports Athlétiques.

Concours : Sauts en longueur et en hauteur (*running long et high jump*); Saut à la perche (*Pole vault*); Lancement du poids (*Putting the weight*) et du disque. — Les règlements seront ceux de l'Amateur Athletic Association d'Angleterre.

Course à pied, dite de Marathon, sur la distance de 48 kilomètres, de Marathon à Athènes, pour la coupe offerte par M. Michel Bréal, membre de l'Institut de France.

B. — GYMNASTIQUE

Exercices individuels : Corde lisse en traction de bras. — Rétablissements divers à la barre fixe. — Mouvements aux anneaux. — Barres parallèles profondes. — Saut au cheval. — Travail des poids.

Mouvements d'ensemble : (Les Sociétés ne pourront présenter d'équipes inférieures à 10 gymnastes).

C. — ESCRIME ET LUTTE

Assauts de fleuret, sabre et épée : Amateurs; Professeurs (civils et militaires). — Un règlement spécial a été élaboré par la Société d'encouragement de l'Escrime (Paris).

Lutte : romaine et grecque.

D. — TIR

Par suite d'une difficulté imprévue, le programme du Tir ne pourra être publié qu'un peu plus tard.

E. — SPORTS NAUTIQUES

Yachting : Courses à la voile. — L'Union des Yachts Français a élaboré un règlement spécial.

Aviron : Un rameur : 2,000 mètres, sans virage, skiffs.
Deux rameurs de couple, sans virage, yoles et outriggers.
Quatre rameurs de pointe, sans virage, yoles.
Une course spéciale sera organisée pour les équipages des escadres.
Les règlements seront ceux du Rowing Club Italiano.

Natation : Vitesse : 100 mètres. Fond et vitesse : 500 mètres.
Fond : 1,000 mètres.
Jeu de water-polo.

F. — VÉLOCIPÉDIE

Vitesse : 2,000 mètres, sur piste, sans entraîneurs. 10,000 mètres, sur piste, sans entraîneurs.

Fond : 100 kilomètres sur piste avec entraîneurs.

Course de 12 heures sur piste, avec entraîneurs.

Les règlements suivis seront ceux de l'International Cyclist's Association.

G. — ÉQUITATION

Concours d'équitation : reprise de manège, avec et sans étriers, saut d'obstacles, voltige, haute école.

(Il ne sera tenu compte que de l'aptitude du cavalier et non de la valeur du cheval.)

H. — JEUX ATHLÉTIQUES

Lawn tennis : Simple, Double.

Cricket : Les règlements seront ceux de la All England Lawn Tennis Association et du Marylebone Cricket Club.

Fait à Athènes, le 12/24 novembre 1894.

Colonel MANO;
ÉTIENNE SCOCLOUDIS, député, ancien ministre;
A.-D. SOUTSO, chef d'escadron de cavalerie;
RETSINAS, maire du Pirée,
vice-présidents du Comité hellène.
PAUL SKOUSIS, trésorier.
ALEXANDRE MERCATI, GEORGES M. MELAS, secrétaires.

APPROUVÉ :

D. BIKELAS, président du Comité International.
Baron PIERRE DE COUBERTIN, secrétaire général.
A. CALLOT, imprimeur.