

THE NORDIC GAMES: PRECURSOR TO THE OLYMPIC WINTER GAMES

Just three years after the first Olympic Games in the modern era, initiative was taken in Sweden to create an equivalent winter event.

Already in the 'birth certificate' in 1899, the Nordic Games (*Nordiska Spelen*) touched upon the Olympic sphere by referring to "belauded ancient sports and competition games". These Games were held in Stockholm seven times in 1901-26, and developed into a precursor to the Olympic Winter Games.

Johan Widmark managed to draw the attention of the Swedish sports movement to a great, recurrent event for winter sports. He didn't have to go outside his circle of friends to find suitable persons to help realise the idea. Sweden's Central Society for the Promotion of Sports (*Sveriges Centralförening för Idrottens Främjande*) had been founded on 7 May 1897, at the Royal Palace in Stockholm. Initiator was Viktor Gustav Balck, "The father of Swedish competition sports", member of the IOC and close friend of Pierre de Coubertin. The Central Society undertook to organise the Nordic Games.

The Games were to be a sports and cultural celebration up to then unmatched in the world. Many cultural, social and merely touristic manifestations were added to a voluminous sports programme, with the national element prominent.

by Åke Jönsson*



The First Games (1901)

The military features were apparent in the first Games: long distance riding between Enköping and Stockholm, c. 80 km, and ski-jöring after horse between Uppsala and Stockholm, c. 60 km, and after reindeer, an exotic feature. (In ski-jöring, skiers are towed behind a horse or reindeer, nowadays also behind a motor-cycle or car, often at night). The newly formed Swedish Trotting Society (*Svenska travsä//skapet*) organised trotting races on ice. Among drivers was one woman, Anna Elofsson. In fencing, the international Games event was the first competition in this sport in Sweden. The extensive ski programme was opened with a ski orienteering relay for three-man teams between Falun and Stockholm, c. 240 km. Cross-country skiing, 30 and 60 km, was dominated by Finland, while Norwegian Arild Nyqvist won the ski jumping.

Features outside the competitions included excursions, fishing trips and tours with ice-breakers in the archi-

pelago, while the Royal Opera gave two gala performances with tableaux from the Nordic history. One banquet followed the other and members of the Royal family were busy visiting the various competition venues. An event without the presence of a royal personage was a rare exception. The great, genuine interest in sports among members of the Royal family naturally gave the Nordic Games a high status from the outset.

Sports officials from the Nordic countries met to discuss whether the Games should become a regular event. For climatic reasons, the Danes already before the meeting declined to contribute in hosting possible, future Games. As for intervals, the proposals were every second or every fourth year, with the site alternating between Stockholm and Christiania (now Oslo). The general view was, that the Games should be held with regularity, but there was no final decision on the intervals. Further, sports officials wanted the Games based entirely on a national Scandinavian foundation. The organisation should be handled only by Swedes and Norwegians, but the rest of the sporting world would be invited to take part in the competitions.

The first Games were concluded with a big party with Crown Prince Gustaf (1907-50 future King Gustaf V) handing over the competition prizes. The organising committee was very satisfied with the Games, and in its summary Balck stressed, that the ancient, classic Games had served as a

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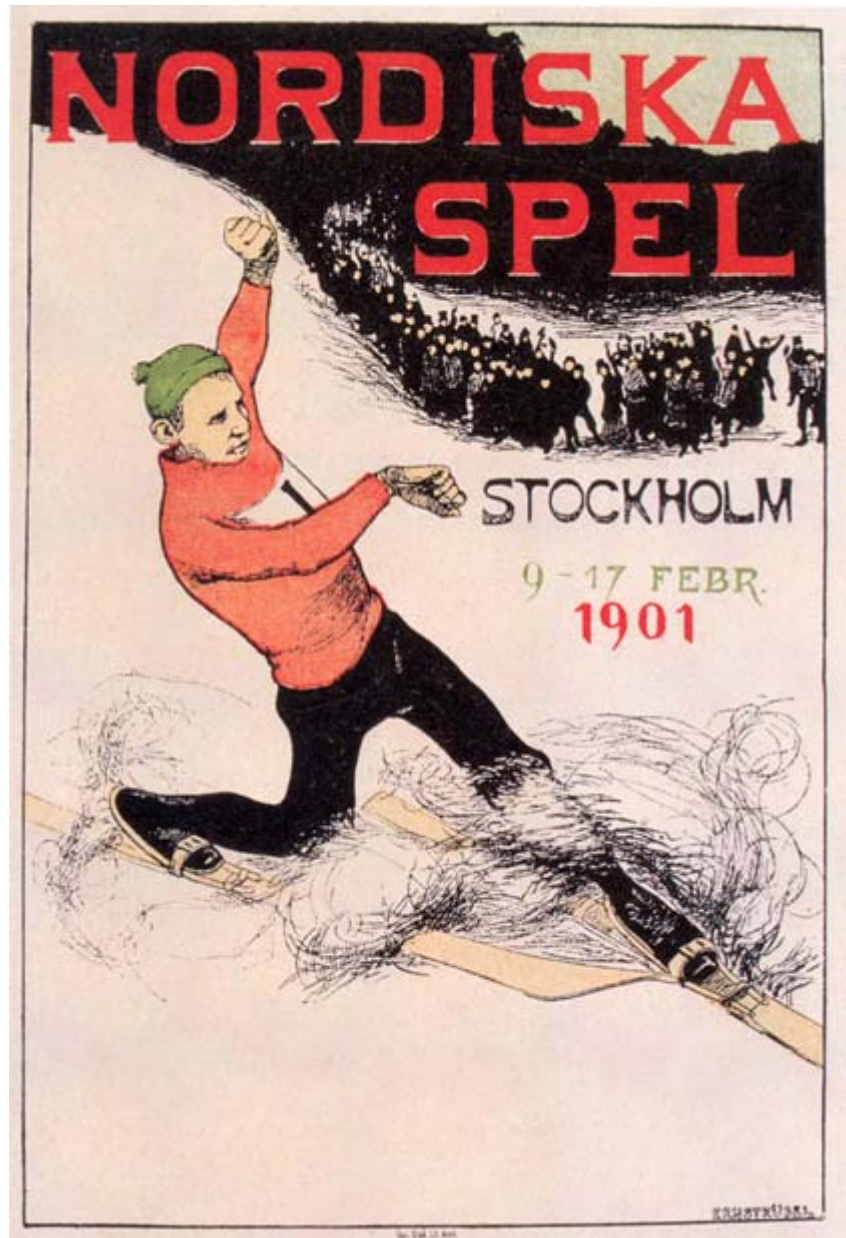
model. He also pointed out, that the Games “had been the biggest contribution so far to the development of Swedish sports”. The Nordic Games enjoyed considerable attention abroad. The IOC devoted almost one entire issue of the *Olympic Review* to describe “*Olympiades Boréales. Les Jeux du Nord à Stockholm*”. However, the magnificent winter sports party caused a substantial loss of 10,286,25 Swedish crowns. Luckily, the situation was saved by a guarantee foundation.

Winter Sports Week in Norway (1903)

Sweden’s Central Society for the Promotion of Sports was very keen to have Games staged in Christiania in 1903. (Norway had been in a union with Sweden since 1814.) However, the Norwegians were not very interested, and had no plans whatsoever to go in the Swedes’ leading-strings, They claimed not to have economical resources to organise such a comprehensive sports event. Finally, after much deliberation, a Nordic Winter Sports Week (*Nordisk Vinterdrætsuge*) was held in Christiania. The programme included bandy, equestrian, (figure and speed) skating, and skiing. A tennis tournament was staged in connection with the Sports Week.

The Second Games (1905)

At the time of the 1905 Games, Norwegian aspirations for independence became even more obvious. With only nine days left to the opening, Norwegian sports authorities withdrew from the Games due to the ‘most serious depression’ in Norway, in turn caused by the union conflict. Sports and politics had found its way into the Nordic Games. (The union



Posters from the 1901 Nordic Games

Sweden-Norway was dissolved later in 1905). An even greater threat to the Games was the total lack of snow in Stockholm. Competitions on ice were held as planned, but ski races had to be moved north, to Östersund. Finland’s John Wikander won the European speed skating title and his

fellow-countrymen continued their domination in cross-country skiing. The financial surplus was 5,898 Swedish crowns, mostly thanks to grants from state and city of 10,000 crowns. The organisers also managed to sell the “cinematographical rights” for 1,000 crowns!

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The Third Games (1909)

The Swedes used the opportunity to “hit back” on the Norwegians. Norwegian sports men were simply not invited. However, Norwegians had to be allowed in the skating events, as they also were World Championships. Speed skating furthermore attracted foreign competitors from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary and Russia. In figure skating, the host country’s Ulrich Salchow won his world title number eight (two more were to follow).

A herald rode the streets of Stockholm to mark the opening of the Games. On his huge timpani, a drummer hit a few muffled rolls before the herald opened a roll of parchment to loudly proclaim: *“Under King Gustaf’s wise and powerful patronage, the Nordic Games in manly sports is held in this city. The citizens are requested to embrace this Games with full devotion and to enjoy them while watching. This is the first day of the Nordic Games.”*

A fatal accident occurred in speed skating. In the veterans’ 500 m, engineer Arvid Nissen fell immediately after finishing the race and collided so hard with a pole that he died. The death caused widespread attention. Finland again had success in cross-country skiing, while 15,000-20,000 spectators enjoyed a Swedish win in ski jumping by Einar Olsson. An additional long distance ski race over 170 km was restricted to soldiers. Despite large crowds at several competitions, there was again a financial loss, this time some 6,400 Swedish crowns. This was however covered by a guarantee foundation set up after the 1905 Games.



The 1913 edition.

Independence threatened

With competitors from eleven countries in 1909, the Nordic Games undoubtedly proved an event of importance far outside the Nordic countries. The IOC also noticed the Nordic Games. Sweden’s Central Society for the Promotion of Sports was awarded the 1908 Olympic Cup for having taken the initiative to so many vital sporting undertakings. Especially noted was the creation of the Nordic Games, considered a most appropriate complement to the Olympics as they mainly embraced winter sports.

When the IOC was to decide host city for the Games of the Vth Olympiad, in 1912, Coubertin emphasized the Nordic Games as a model. Stockholm was awarded the Games, according to observers mostly thanks to the success of the Nordic Games, which proved the Swedes’ ability to organise major international sports events.

At the 1910 IOC Session in Luxembourg, Balck said, in a reply to Robert de Courcy Laffan, IOC member in Great Britain, no winter sports were planned for the 1912 Olympics, as the Nordic Games were to be held in early 1913. Following harsh protests, Balck (after consulting Swedish colleagues present) declared that if the IOC unanimously so wished, he was ready to prepare a programme of winter sports in 1912 and present it to the following session.

At the 1911 IOC Session in Budapest, Comte Eugenio Brunetta d’Usseaux, IOC member in Italy, suggested the Nordic Games should be accepted as the winter part of the 1912 Olympics. The Olympic year could be confirmed as being between 1 June 1912, and 31 May 1913. With the independence of the Nordic Games threatened, Balck insisted: *“Organisationally, the Nordic Games is and must remain, a Nordic affair.”* The heated discussion clearly showed a majority within the IOC was behind Brunetta’s proposal. Realising the Nordic Games was a matter very close to the heart of his friend Balck, Coubertin intervened and, after voting had been adjourned once, it was decided the 1913 edition could not be part of the Games of the V Olympiad.

The Fourth Games (1913)

With an Olympic Stadium in Stockholm, the organisers of the 1913 Nordic Games had an arena with large spectator capacity. Again, the weather caused problem (no snow and high temperatures), and as in 1905 skiing was moved to Östersund. A ski race for women was included for the first time and two

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female teams, both representing The Crown Princess' Hockey Club (*Kronprinsessans Hockeyklubb*), played bandy. The most dramatic occurrence in the 1913 Games was a crash by Prince Wilhelm in the auto race on ice. The Prince, son of the reigning king at the time (Gustaf V), was thrown out of his car, but escaped with minor injuries. Once more, the financial outcome was miserable, a loss of nearly 30,000 Swedish crowns.

The Fifth Games (1917)

Held during World War I, the 1917 Games were limited to participants from the Nordic countries: Norway in skiing and speed skating, a Danish bandy team and a Finnish woman in figure skating. Skeleton, for both men and women, was staged on a course temporarily laid on the premises of Skansen, the open air museum in central Stockholm.

The Sixth Games (1922)

Following a decision in 1920, the Games planned for 1921 were postponed to 1922 in order to have "more suitable intervals between this international winter sports celebration and the Olympic Games". In the planning, another interesting decision was the deletion of fencing and swimming, two Olympic summer sports, from the programme. This was obviously an attempt to appease the IOC, and with the hope that the Olympic Movement in return should refrain from giving Olympic status to yet further winter sports. (After figure skating in 1908, ice hockey also joined the 1920 Olympic programme in Antwerp.)

The 1922 Games came to be known as "The Arctic Games" because of



Women playing bandy at the 1913 Nordic Games

the very cold weather. No less than 235 foreign participants from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Finland, France, Germany, Norway and Romania entered, and in some cases this was



Skeleton event

the first time World War I enemies were able to meet in sports after the conflict. Sledge sports provided an impressive variety of events: bobsleigh, individual skeleton and (simple) sledge racing for men and women, and two-man sledge racing. A total of nearly 50,000 spectators turned up at the four venues on the last day. Especially the autodrome attracted many curious spectators.

The Seventh Games (1926)

Prior to the next edition, in 1926 (25 years after the first), the Nordic Games were called "The Swedish Winter Olympics" by *Idrottsbladet*. This, the leading Swedish sports paper, also wrote, that the gigantic sporting battles "have carried Sweden's name as the world's broadest centre of winter sports".

Sonja Henie, the 13-year-old

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Norwegian “wonder girl”, placed second in the World figure skating Championship. Poor showing by the host country and severe cold meant few spectators at most venues, and after the Games, Torsten Tegnér, the leading Swedish sports journalist, noted: “They [the Nordic Games] have a taste of an epoch that has become out of date.”

At its 1925 Session in Prague, the IOC produced a charter for the Olympic Winter Games, to take place in the same year as the Games of the Olympiad. On 6 May 1926, less than three months after the 7th (and what was to be the last) Nordic Games, the IOC decided - retroactively - to name the *Semaine internationale des sports d’hiver* in Chamonix in 1924 the 1st Olympic Winter Games.

With the IOC definitely on the winter sports arena, and the decision by the International Ski Federation to introduce separate world events, the Nordic Games evidently lost some of its justification. The Swedes had no plans to discontinue the Games, but the 1930 Games had to be cancelled with short notice due to lack of snow and cold weather. With practically no international sports events during World War II, there were proposals to resume the Nordic Games. Games planned for 1942 were never realised, though.

Nevertheless, the Nordic Games remain a very interesting and important chapter in the history of international winter sports. The Games in Sweden paved the way for the Olympic Winter Games.

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Year	Dates	Cities	Number of participating nations
1901	9-17 February	Stockholm	8
1905	4-12 February	Stockholm/Östersund	5
1909	6-14 February	Stockholm	11
1913	7-16 February	Stockholm/Östersund	8
1917	10-18 February	Stockholm	4
1922	4-12 February	Stockholm	8
1926	6-14 February	Stockholm	11

Sports	1901	1905	1909	1913	1917	1922	1926
Auto racing		x	x	x		x	
Ballooning		x	x	x			
Bandy	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Curling	x			x	x	x	x
Equestrian	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Fencing	x	x	x	x			
Ice Hockey						x	x
Ice skate-sailing		x			x		
Ice yachting	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Kick-sledging	x	x	x				
Military sports		x	x	x		x	x
Motor cycling					x	x	
Shooting		x	x	x	x	x	x
Skating	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Skiing	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Sledge racing					x	x	
Swimming		x	x	x	x		

Note: Equestrian included distance riding and trotting; shooting included field and pistol shooting; skating included figure and speed skating; skiing included ski orienteering (relay); sledge racing included bobsleigh, pulka, (simple) sledge, and skeleton (also behind horse).

Included in the Games were the World speed skating Championships in 1901 (men), the World Figure Skating Championships in 1901 (men), in 1905 (men), in 1909 (men, pairs), in 1913 (women, pairs), in 1922 (men, women) and in 1926 (women), and the European speed skating Championship in 1905 (men).