

# THE MELLANDER STORY

FROM OLYMPIC HEIGHTS TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

By Karin Wikberg

**At the Intermediate Games in Athens in 1906, the Swede Hjalmar Mellander won the competition in the antique pentathlon. He also finished fourth in the long jump (6:585 metres); and fourth in the javelin (44:30 metres).**

Mellander was born 14 December 1880 in Åstad, Halland. He was a physiotherapeut and lived in Liverpool, England, since 1902. He competed for his original club: IFK Halmstad and often came to Sweden to start in games. He was an allround athlete, who in 1903 bettered the Swedish longjump record with 6:42 metres.

In 1905 he became third in the British championships with 6:60 metres. He ran the 800 yards in 2:05 and the 1000 metres in 2:43,2, but these results were never accepted as Swedish records.

Mellander also was a good highjumper and hurdler.<sup>1</sup>

For Mellander the years to come were to be filled with bitter fights

in order to keep the trophy he thought he had won for ever. But why had it to be returned to Athens? In December 1907 he was informed by the Greek Organizing Committee that the trophy he had received was a so-called Challenge Trophy and therefore had to be returned for future Games. This claim was repeated in January 1908.<sup>2</sup>

It was only natural that Mellander was not only surprised but also upset:

- "I have heard much in my life, but I have never heard anything like this in my entire life. How can an Olympic organizer award a trophy without in

advance informing the conditions for it? And so two years later request me to return it, because it is a Challenge Trophy. This is absolutely crazy!"<sup>3</sup>

He asked if also the winners of other prizes had been asked to return their trophies, or if it only concerned the one in pentathlon? He wrote that if the Greeks could prove that the prize really was a Challenge Trophy, he was willing to return it. But he asked for the opinion of Colonel Balck in this matter. He, or at least someone else, should have been aware of the rules, because Colonel Balck was a member of the International Olympic Committee [IOC].



Swede Hjalmar Mellander (right) and his Challenge Trophy in 1906

Nothing happened, and the Trophy was not returned. The Swedish National Olympic Committee was discontinued and the Swedish Sportsfederation was requested in February 1909 to continue to work with this matter.<sup>4</sup> During the spring of 1909 the letters from the Greeks to Mellander became threatening and he was informed that if he would not return the Trophy: "severe punishment will be made against you".

It now became evident that the prize actually was a Challenge Trophy and this fact was published in several foreign newspapers.<sup>5</sup>

The Greeks evidently thought that all athletes who wished to compete in the 1906 Games would read foreign newspapers thoroughly before travelling to Athens.

This information in no way persuaded Mellander. Instead, he put up certain conditions, which had to be accepted by the Greeks before he would return "his" Trophy.

1. The Greek Organizing Committee had to prove to his satisfaction that the award was a real Challenge and that the rules for this, and for other competitions, had been published before the actual start of the competitions.

2. He also stated that as soon as the Greek Organizing Committee would make a promise to send him another prize, he was willing to return the Challenge Trophy.
3. He wished to accept no responsibility for the loss of value of this particular Challenge Trophy which might have been caused by an inscription in the English language, which had been made on it.<sup>6</sup>

The Greek Organizing Committee now became very upset and in August 1909, they wrote that both Mellander and J.S. (Sigfrid) Edström should have known that what Mellander had received was a Challenge Trophy. This had been told to them earlier. Clearly it had been stated, that the award was a Challenge Trophy, and that the rules had been set up with the acceptance of the IOC. In the March 1906 issue of the REVUE OLYMPIQUE this information had been forwarded. The Greeks also wrote that the Organizing Committee had originally presented the Challenge Trophy, which was made of old tin and was stated to be of

“large dimensions”. It had been a part of the very famous “Sagon” collection.<sup>7</sup>

Edström told Mellander that he was to receive a special memorial prize to replace the Trophy, as soon as it had been returned.

IOC Member Victor Balck thought that the whole matter became very painful and wrote: “Something must be done to end this matter, which is on the way to become a scandal.”<sup>8</sup> In August 1909, Mellander

was requested to return the Trophy to the Swedish Sports Federation. They guaranteed him that they would look after his interests vis-à-vis the Greeks, which had promised to send a silver cup to Mellander – “if they only would have their Trophy back.”<sup>9</sup>

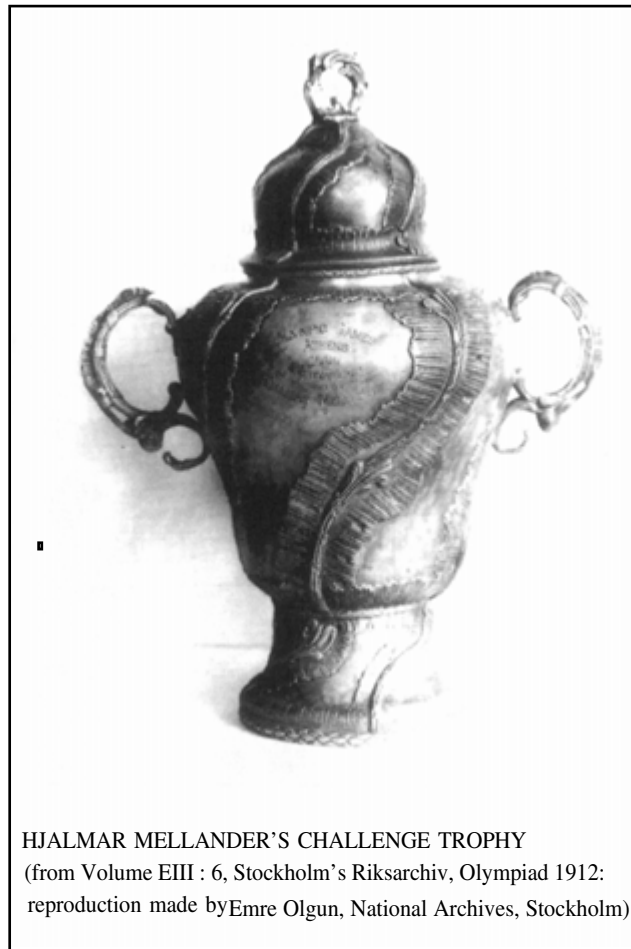
In November 1909, both the Greek Organizing Committee and Pierre de Coubertin were asked whether or not stipulations had been set up with regard to the Mellander prize and if so, if these were

really ‘in power’ before the Games in Athens in 1906?<sup>10</sup> The Swedes also asked if it would be possible for Mellander to keep the Trophy until the next Games, because the antique Pentathlon would be again on the programme. The Swedes probably had in mind the Intercalary Games planned for 1910, but these never took place.

The answer from Pierre de Coubertin was polite but very definite. He described how the Challenge Trophy had been created and told that he himself had delivered it and

that it was to be competed for again in 1906, 1910, and 1914. The value of the Trophy was very high as it came from a very famous collection. It had been photographed and a photo had been published in the March 1906 issue of the REVUE OLYMPIQUE. It would be “very shocking if Mr. Mellander was to refuse giving it up freely after four years.”<sup>11</sup>

Mellander was informed about this letter and about the personal memorial cup which was to be handed over as a substitute. The Swedish Sports Federation



HJALMAR MELLANDER'S CHALLENGE TROPHY  
(from Volume EIII : 6, Stockholm's Riksarchiv, Olympiad 1912:  
reproduction made by Emre Olgun, National Archives, Stockholm)

Mellander's Challenge Trophy

requested Mellander to return the Trophy as it was now considered to be “a matter of honour for our country.”<sup>12</sup> No answer came back – time passed, and the matter seemed to have been “forgotten”.

The Intermediate Games of Athens 1910 were not held and the next Olympic Games had been awarded to Stockholm in 1912. Already on October 7th, 1909, the Organizing Committee of the Stockholm Games had been formed with Victor Balck as President and Sidfrid Edström as Vice-President. Many of the newly appointed members of the Organizing Committee were aware of this problem or had been informed.<sup>13</sup>

The Mellander-Trophy “pops up” again in a letter from July 1911. Pierre de Coubertin had requested the return of the Trophy this month, and that as soon as possible. Kristian Hellström, the Secretary-General of the Organizing Committee, was requested to find a solution and to have Mellander return the Trophy immediately to the Organizing Committee of the 1912 Olympic Games.<sup>14</sup> In September 1911, Mellander informed Hellström that he was going to return the Trophy.<sup>15</sup>

Finally the Swedes could take a breath! They were informed by Mellander that the Trophy was to be sent back from Liverpool with the steamship “Envoy”. But now a new catastrophe occurred! In november 1911, the shipowners informed Hellström that the ship had perished in a storm in the North Sea and that the Trophy was lost. The Swedish Organizing Committee immediately decided to set up a new Trophy and sent it to Athens as a substitute for the lost one.<sup>16</sup> But at the end of November, the Organizing Committee was informed that the Trophy had been saved by the helmsman of the ship, before she had foundered. The helmsman had been aware of the value of the cup! The Swedish Organizing Committee decided to award the man with a gift of 500 British Pounds Sterling.

Immediately, a letter was forwarded to Pierre de Coubertin, requesting him to let Stockholm know where they should sent the Trophy.<sup>17</sup> Swedish honour was saved and the much discussed Trophy was then shown to the members of the Organizing Committee.<sup>18</sup>

This long episode with no doubt leads up to the fact that the Swedish Organizing Committee inserted a special text in the entry-form, dealing with the Challenge Trophies:

“Challenges prizes will not be handed out unless the winner and at least two members of the Olympic Committee concerned give a written obligation – signed on a form provided by the Swedish Olympic Committee – to deliver the prize before January 1st, 1916, in an undamaged condition to the Organisation Committee for the next Olympic Games, and to make good any damage to the prize in question.”<sup>19</sup>

The Swedes evidently wished to have a guarantee that nothing like what happened after the 1906 Intermediate Games, would happen again.

The actual guarantee, which was to be signed by the winner and co-signed by two members of the National Olympic Committee, was worded as follows:

#### GUARANTEE

Mr. ...., having won a Challenge Cup for ..... At the Olympic Games of Stockholm, 1912, and the said Challenge Cup having been delivered to us through the Swedish Olympic Committee, we hereby engage, jointly and seperately, and in agreement with the regulations of the International Olympic Committee, to deliver the prize in uninjured condition into the hands of the International Olympic Committee or the Organizing Committee for the next Olympiad before the first (1st) of January, 1916, and to make good any damage to the said prize that may happen to it during the period, 15th July, 1912 and 1st January, 1916.

Name of Winner

Representatives of the  
..... Olympic Committee<sup>20</sup>

In the Official Report of the 1912 Olympic Games, nothing is mentioned about the specific Challenge Trophy which Mellander won in 1906, nor in any other literature about the 1912 Olympic Games.

By special wish of Pierre de Coubertin, the Mellander Challenge Trophy was to be returned to him. He especially requested this in a letter. But in September 1912, he had still not received it.<sup>21</sup>

As a final summary of the story, it must be concluded that Mellander had really no idea that the prize he had won, or should we say “received”, in 1906 was a so-called “Challenge Trophy”.<sup>21</sup> If he had known this he would most certainly never had given order for the English inscription to be made in the cup. It is clear that Mellander never set eyes on the article published in the March 1906 issue of the REVUE OLYMPIQUE. But how many athletes who competed in the Intermediate Olympic Games in 1906, ever read that article?

Probably none of them. His surprise and indignation also seem to be quite genuine. It is also quite evident that the Swedish officials also had no idea that special rules applied for this Challenge Trophy. Perhaps they had also not read foreign newspapers either?

But where is this famous Challenge Trophy now? Does it have a place in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne?

And what happened to Hjalmar Mellander? Was he invited to attend the Games of the Vth Olympiad in Stockholm, in 1912? He was an Olympic Champion, wasn't he? Or did he remain home in Liverpool? Nothing could be found about this, unfortunately. His life ended in tragedy! He died when he was trying to rescue a person from drowning on the isle of Man.

References Notes:

1. Swedish Sports Lexikon, book 5 [1943]. See also Ture Widlund's article: The Games 1896-1908 in Sweden and the Olympic Games [Commemorative issue published by the Swedish Olympic Committee in 1987, Strömbergs/Brunnhages Förlag, Stockholm].
2. Letter from Comité des Jeux Olympiques à Athènes to “Monsieur le Colonel” [Victor Balck], dated 18 May 1908 and 27 October 1908. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0

3. Letter from Hjalmar Mellander to Nore Thisell, Secretary of the Swedish Olympic Committee for 1908: “My Dear Friend Nore”, dated 13 February 1908. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0
4. Letter from the Swedish Organizing Committee, by Frisell, to the Board of the Swedish Sports Federation, dated 3 February 1909. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0
5. Concept of a letter to Hjalmar Mellander, not signed, dated 10 March 1909. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0
6. Letter from Hjalmar Mellander to the Swedish Gymnastics Federation, dated 17 March 1909. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0
7. Translation from a letter by the Organizing Committee 1906 in Athens to “Monsieur le Colonel” [Victor Balck], dated 23/5 Aout 1909. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0
8. Undated letter from Balck sent to the Swedish Sports Federation, and the Greek Organizing Committee 1906 in Athens, referring to a letter which was probably sent to Mellander. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0
9. Letter in concept to Mellander, dated 25 August 1909, from President Edström and Secretary Thisell of the Swedish Sports Federation, not signed. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0
10. Letter in concept to le Secrétaire Général Monsieur du Comité des Jeux Olympiques, Professeur Lambos in Athens and to Pierre de Coubertin in Paris, dated 11 November 1909, not signed. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0

11. Letter from Pierre de Coubertin, dated 22 November 1909 from Paris. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0

12. Letter in concept to he sent to Mellander, dated 11 November 1909, not signed. Archives of the Swedish Olympic Committee: volume 0

13. Archives of the Stockholm Olympic Games, 1912: Volume A 1 [Organizing Committee of the Games 1912], protocoll of October 7th, 1909. [Papers concerning 1906 and 1908 are kept in volume 0

14. Minutes of the 1912 Organizing Committee, dated 20 July 1911, § 23. Archives of the Stockholm Olympic

Games, 1912: Volume A 1 : 3.

15. Minutes, dated 18 September 1911, § 9, Archives of the Stockholm Olympic Games, 1912: Volume A 1 : 3
16. Minutes, dated 13 November 1911, § 12, Archives of the Stockholm Olympic Games, 1912: Volume A 1 : 3.
17. Minutes, dated 27 November 1911, § 24, Archives of the Stockholm Olympic Games, 1912: Volume A 1 : 3.
18. Minutes, dated 4 December 1911, § 31, Archives of the Stockholm Olympic Games, 1912: Volume A 1 : 3.
19. The Official Report of the Olympic Games of Stockholom, English edition, page 165.
20. The Official Report of the Olympic Games of Stockholom, English edition, page 165/166.
21. Minutes, dated 2 April 1912, § 4, Archives of the Stockholm Olympic Games, 1912: Volume A 1 : 3. Letter from Coubertin to Kristian Hellström, dated September 1, 1912, Archives of the Stockholm Olympic Games 1912: Volume E III: 6 (with several documents concerning the Mellander case).
22. Challenges were awarded at the Olympic Games up to Antwerp 1920. Around 1920, the Swedish Olympic Committee was involved in a dispute with the IOC about certain borrowed Challenges from the Olympic Games in 1912. See: Sweden and the Olympic Games [Commemorative issue published by the Swedish Olympic Committee in 1987, Strömbergs/Brunnhages Förlag, Stockholm].

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