

# AQUATICS ST. LOUIS 1904: FANCY DIVING



by Robert L. Clotworthy

The 1904 Olympic Games were originally scheduled for Chicago, but because St. Louis was hosting the *Louisiana Purchase Exposition* - the World's Fair of its time - permission was granted for the change of venue. Baron Pierre de COUBERTIN, the founder of the modern Games, approved the change, but did not attend the competition in St. Louis. As it turned out, the Olympics were simply a part of the *Louisiana Purchase Exposition*. In fact, there were so many events designated Olympic Championships, it has taken historians years to sort out those events deserving of that classification.

There was one diving event, the Fancy Diving, and according to the official program, ten entries; however, two divers who did compete were not listed and others who were listed did not compete. One entry who was listed has since been identified as a swimmer. Ultimately, there were five competitors, three from Germany and two from the United States.

The swimming and diving portion of the Olympics was originally planned for July but was postponed until September, the diving being held on the September 7th. The competition took place in the *United States Life Saving Exhibition Lake*, an artificial lake which previously hosted Life Saving exhibitions and other aquatic activities. Photos of the lake taken during lifeboat demonstrations show no evidence of a swimming dock or diving facilities, items which obviously were constructed after the Life Saving exhibitions were completed.

Although different sources have reported the diving event to be: 1. Springboard, 2. Platform, or 3. a combination event, current research leads to the conclusion that the event was springboard. Four photos taken during the competition show a primitive diving board, at least eight feet long, resting on a crude fulcrum, about three meters above the surface of the water. There is no evidence of high platforms. In fact, when the Germans arrived and didn't find an adequate diving facility, they threatened to withdraw from the competition. Instead, they constructed a board, covered it with cocoa-matting, set it up on a homemade platform, and competed.

The results of the competition were controversial, something that has frequently been a part of Olympic diving ever since. Newspapers reported the Germans fully expected to take the first four places in the fancy diving. Instead, they ended up second, tied for third, and fifth.

It is interesting to compare the American newspaper accounts with articles from the German publication, *Schwimmer-Zeitung* from the DSV-Archive in Munich, Germany. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* of Thursday, September 8, 1904 reported as follows:

*"The surprise of the entire session was the defeat of the Germans in the diving contest. Dr. Sheldon saved the honor for America, taking first place. Sheldon was justly entitled to first honors, as every one of his dives was clean, the contestant striking the water in an excellent manner. On the other hand, the German divers struck the water on their breasts and one diver, Hoffman, in two dives, landed on his face. Although Hoffman was awarded second honors, there were those present, who understand the art of fancy diving who thought that Kehoe of Chicago, should have received second honors, but he won third place, being tied with Braunschweiger of Germany, who refused to dive off the tie."*

The *St. Louis Republic* of September 8, 1904 wrote:

*"A local man won the fancy diving contest. Of the possible 18 points of the contest, Dr. George Sheldon of Missouri scored 16 2/3 giving the first place to him."*

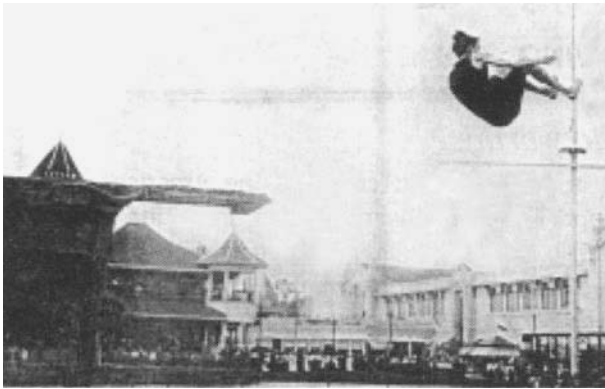
Georg HOFFMAN of Berlin was awarded second place, while KEHOE of Chicago and A. BRAUN-SCHWEIGER of Berlin tied for third place. In the final, the German refused to dive and KEHOE made one plunge from the board and was awarded third place, with the Berliner fourth.

HOOFF, the champion diver of Europe, did not land a place in the competition. His feats were difficult, but he struck the water with a splash on many of his dives and this counted against him. The feat that brought the most applause was probably the "corkscrew" or "twister" dive. The German started from the board and twisted himself no less than three complete circles before he hit the water.

Although SHELDON'S score was reported as 16 2/3 points in the *St. Louis Republic*, other sources list the results and scores as follows:

1. Dr. George H. SHELDON	USA	12.66
2. Georg HOFFMANN	Germany	11.66
3. Frank KEHOE	USA	11.33
4. Alfred BRAUNSCHWEIGER	Germany	11.33
5. Otto HOOFF	Germany	

George  
Sheldon,  
Diving



Unfortunately, the records of the 1904 Games were destroyed in a fire at the *Missouri Athletic Club* in 1914, so much of the information historians could have used no longer exists.

Below is a translation from an article by contestant Otto HOOFF. It is interesting to note that HOOFF mentions required and optional dives, the only reference found regarding rules for the Olympic competition.

*"Fancy diving was last. After all we have heard and seen from the American divers there was no doubt who would win the diving. We were confident. However, three judges, Americans of course, took their positions and after each dive, noted their impressions on a piece of paper, but not independently of each other. One of these gentlemen told the two others behind him what they shall write and they did what he said. After each dive there was a never-ending applause from the audience. After the required dives we had to add other dives which we did in an awareness of our victory. Then we waited eagerly for the results. According to the mood of the audience and the opinion of the experts, there were no doubts about the three winners and it hit us like a stroke from blue heaven when they announced Dr. Sheldon the winner."*

According to the American reports, BRAUN-SCHWEIGER refused a dive-off for the third place so was placed fourth; however, in one German report,

BRAUN-SCHWEIGER and KEHOE are both placed third with BRAUN-SCHWEIGER'S name above KEHOE'S. Once again, here are excerpts from the October, 1904 issue of the German publication, *Schwimmer-Zeitung*:

*"Otto Hooff, our best diver, came in last because of the American judging. Even foreign countries know how to evaluate this case correctly On September 21, Pester Lloyd wrote, "The third and last day of the swimming events ended in regrettable disharmony. Germany had sent their best divers to St. Louis, Hooff, Braunschweiger and Hoffmann, who in our opinion, showed technical and aesthetic brilliance and were much better than the Americans. To the surprise of the experts and astonishment of a large part of the audience, the three American judges declared Dr. Sheldon the winner, Hoffmann second, while the third place was to be decided between the two nations. The Germans were deeply offended and withdrew." Geheimrat Dr. Th. Lewald, the Imperial German commissioner to the World's Fair, withdrew his honorary award for the winner, a bronze statuette, and officially protested the results."*



According to an article in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* of September 23, 1904, James E. SULLIVAN, Director of the Olympics, sent a letter to Dr. SHELDON on September 15 in which he stated the decision of the judges was final and could not be changed. Thus, George H. SHELDON, who had refused to accept the gold medal until the dispute was settled, was officially declared the winner of the first Olympic diving contest.