

RUGBY FOOTBALL AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES

BY IAN BUCHANAN

In view of Baron de Coubertin's love of the game it comes as no surprise that rugby football made an appearance on the Olympic program as early as 1900. Neither is it surprising that, because of his modest physique, de Coubertin became better known as a referee than as a player. In fact, he was one of the top referees in France and had charge of the first French Club Championship final between Stade Francais and Racing Club de France in 1892 and he also had the distinction of refereeing France's first-ever international match when they played New Zealand at Parc des Princes on 1 January 1906.

When he was in London early in 1894 for a rather more important meeting he still found time to accompany the rugby team of Le Racing Club de France to Oxford where they lost to a University XV 27-6 on 3 February. Four days later he was entertained to dinner by Sir John Astley at the London Sporting Club of which Sir John was President. The guest list included many luminaries from the British sporting scene and no doubt de Coubertin was able to enlighten them on the forthcoming Founding Congress of the IOC to take place in Paris in June.

Three teams entered for the 1900 Olympic rugby tournament with the French hosts being joined by a German team from Frankfurt Football Club and an English team known as Moseley Wanderers which was made up largely of players from the Birmingham area in the English Midlands. It is not known how the British invitation found its way to Birmingham but it is likely that the Standard Athletic Club, which had been formed in 1890 by British workmen involved in the construction of the Eiffel Tower, had some contacts in the area.

The first game, which was played on 14 October, resulted in a win for the French over the Germans by a score of 27-17. The English were unable to fulfill their fixture with Germany scheduled for 21 October and a 27-8 win over England on 28 October gave France the Olympic title. The match was played at the Velodrome Municipal at Vincennes before 4,389 paying spectators and those who avoided paying brought the crowd up to an estimated 6,000 which was the largest attendance at any event at the 1900 Games. Not

only were the English unable to travel to play the Germans they had great difficulty in getting to Paris for their match against France. On the day before the Olympic match, at least five of the English players had played in hard matches at home after which they dashed to catch the cross-channel night ferry and only arrived in Paris at 6 o'clock on the morning of the match against France. The exhausted English players left for home immediately after the game having spent less than one day in Paris. The Germans were awarded second place by virtue of their better performance against France.

Rugby was not played at the Olympic Games of 1904 and 1906 and, as hosts in 1908, the English were rather better placed than they had been in Paris eight years earlier.

Unfortunately, entries fell well short of expectations: South Africa and New Zealand declined their invitations, Ireland, Scotland and Wales completely ignored theirs which left just Australia, England and France. England were scheduled to meet France with the winners taking on Australia but when the French withdrew one week before the Games, on the grounds that they could not raise a fully representative team, Australia and England were left to face each other for the Olympic title.

The English rugby authorities had first given serious thought to the Olympic Games eighteen months earlier when at a committee meeting of the Rugby Football Union (RFU) on 30 May 1907 it was left to the London-based committee members to decide whether or not the RFU should take part in the Games. The Londoners decided to go ahead, presumably swayed by the thought that it would be unthinkable for the British to stage an Olympic tournament in one of their traditional sports and then not take part themselves.

The Australians had no problems with team selection as most of their best players were already on tour in Britain but the English faced some serious difficulties. Their own best players were themselves on tour in Australia and New Zealand and were not due home until

shortly before the Olympic Games. A letter was sent to the touring players asking if they would be prepared to take on an international commitment so soon after an exhausting tour but the letter was never received and in the ensuing silence the British governing body nominated the reigning County champions, Cornwall, to take on the visiting Australians. As part of their pre-arranged schedule the Australians beat Cornwall 18-5 early in their tour and three weeks later, on Monday 26 October, they were even more impressive, winning the Olympic match 32-3. The Australians were undoubtedly a world-class team, winning 16 of their 26 tour matches including a memorable 9-3 victory over the full England side. Thirteen of their fifteen Olympic players came from New South Wales and included Danny Carroll who went on to win a second gold medal for the US in 1920. Another player to make a second Olympic appearance was Sid Middleton who was a member of the Australian rowing eight in 1912.

The captain of the Australian tourists, Dr. Herbert Moran, missed the Olympic game because of a shoulder injury but from his autobiography, "Viewless Winds," it is apparent that this particular match was of little significance in the overall context of the tour. Dr. Moran considered that his greatest achievement was to get the 'team home after five months away without a single player contracting venereal disease!

There was no rugby at the 1912 Games and by 1920 rugby football was struggling to keep its place on the Olympic program but again the entries were disappointing. The Czechs and Romanians withdrew and England declined to take part on the grounds that it would be impossible to prepare a representative team by early September when their domestic season was just beginning. The minutes of a Committee Meeting of the (English) Rugby Football Union held on 17 October 1919 curtly report: 'Olympic Games at Antwerp. Decided that the Rugby Union do not take part in these.'

This left just two teams, France and the USA, to contest the Olympic title. The sport in America had received an unexpected-and generally unwelcome-boost in 1904 when American Football was banned in California as being too dangerous. Most of the East Coast universities turned to rugby and when the ban on football was lifted in 1918 a certain enthusiasm for rugby remained. After some hesitation, the USOC decided to send a team to Antwerp and entrusted the selection of the team to the California Rugby Union which had recently undertaken a successful tour of British

Columbia. Not surprisingly, all the 1920 US Olympic team were based in California and included the 1908 Australian gold medallist, Danny Carroll, who was currently player-coach at Stanford University.

On Sunday, 5 September the US took on a strong French team and after a scoreless first-half the Americans were victorious by a score of 8-0.

The Americans then played some matches in the south of France before facing the French national team again at Colombes on 10 October. This time France won 14-5 and from time to time articles still appear in the French press claiming that this was the true Olympic match and that France was the 1920 Olympic champions. However, this xenophobic claim conveniently overlooks the fact that the

Games took place in Antwerp while this second match was actually played in Paris.

Entries in 1924 were again minimal and the absence of any teams from Britain and her Colonies was a particular disappointment. The British Olympic Association wrote to the appropriate governing bodies but the minutes of a meeting of the Rugby Football Union held on 9 April 1924 show that the English had already decided not to take part in the Games.

This left just France, Romania and the

USA as the competing nations. The Americans arrived in Europe in late April and after three warm-up matches in England in the space of one week they left for Paris in defense of their title. The Olympic tournament began on 4 May when France overwhelmed Romania 61-3 and the following Sunday (11 May) the Romanians lost 37-0 to the Americans and the stage was set for a repeat of the 1920 final between France and the USA.

Although the Romanians were clearly outclassed in both matches it should be said in their defense that, like the English in 1900, their travel arrangements were hardly an ideal preparation for Olympic competition. In 1924 there were only 270 registered rugby players in the whole of Romania and no funds were available from this truly minority sport to finance an Olympic team. The players were obliged to pay their own expenses but could only afford to travel third class on the train and after a journey of almost four days across Europe they finally arrived in Paris.

Having beaten Ireland, Scotland and Wales and only lost narrowly to England earlier in the season the French were strong favorites to take the Olympic title. A crowd estimated at between 20-25,000 gathered at Colombes Stadium in anticipation of seeing the 1920 defeat avenged. America fielded three (O'Neill, Patrick & Scholz) and France one (Bousquet) of the players who had taken part in the 1920

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final and to the surprise of everyone-including the American players- the US retained the Olympic title by a score of 17-3. The half-time score was only 3-0 in favor of the Americans but in the second-half the American forwards took charge and provided the base for a sensational victory.

The tough, bruising encounter was admirably refereed in difficult circumstances by A.E. Freethy of Wales and while the players of both sides accepted his decisions with equanimity the French spectators took quite a different view. Fighting broke out in the stands, the “Star Spangled Banner” was drowned by boos at the award ceremony and the US team had to leave the field under police protection. By way of contrast, the French press were full of praise for the Americans the following day.

The main architect of the American success was Alan Valentine, a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University where he was chosen three times for the annual match against Cambridge and regularly played top-class rugby in England for three seasons. Valentine was closely involved in raising the US Olympic team but, more importantly, he introduced a completely new tactical playing formation which the French never mastered.

Valentine’s delight at winning a gold medal was tem-

pered in later years when he tried to turn the medal over to the Roosevelt Administration during the Great Depression years-only to have it rejected as being “just lead washed with gold.”

It is well-known that rugby finished as an Olympic sport with the US as the reigning champions. Less well-known is the fact that a tournament of some significance took place in May 1936 in connection with the Berlin Games. Four teams entered for the tournament and in the first round Germany beat Italy 19-8 and France beat Romania 25-5. In the final on 17 May, Germany gave a remarkable good performance before losing 19-14 to France and in the play-off for third place, Italy just beat Romania 8-7.

This was undoubtedly the best organized and most international Olympic rugby tournament to date and the fact that the final was refereed by A. Van der Merwe of South Africa gave further prestige to the competition. For some reason, 1936 Olympic rugby has never been accorded the status of an official “demonstration” event and for the time being is perhaps best described as an “affiliated” event rather along the lines of the 1936 golf match reported on by Bill Mallon in the *Journal of Olympic History* (Vol. 1, No. 3).
