

RADIO SPORTS BROADCASTING IN THE UNITED STATES, BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA, 1920-1956 AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE OLYMPIC GAMES

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Radio has played a significant role in the development of sport virtually since broadcasting became a mass medium in 1920. The honor of taking radio from an amateur pastime to public utility, and at the same time giving sport a presence on the airwaves, belongs to Dr. Frank Conrad, an engineer with Westinghouse in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (1) In 1920, Conrad operated an amateur radiotelephone station, 8XK, transmitting music and sports results. Head and Sterling claim that while other experimenters, both within America and abroad, had conducted similar transmissions, Conrad's informal programs were unique for the chain of events they set in motion. Newspapers began mentioning the broadcasts and Horne's department store in Pittsburgh installed a demonstration receiver, took out newspaper advertising to publicize the venture and began selling wireless receivers. (2) Westinghouse seized upon the success of its employee's experiment and converted a radiotelegraph transmitter for radiotelephony. The world's first radio station KDKA went on the air from a studio in the Westinghouse factory in East Pittsburgh on 2 November 1920. The opening of the station was scheduled to coincide with the Harding-Cox presidential election, so that news of the vote count could be aired. In its first year of operation, KDKA pioneered broadcasts of orchestra music, church services, public service announcements, political addresses, dramas and sports events.

On 11 April, 1921 *Pittsburgh Post* sports editor, Florent Gibson described a lightweight boxing bout between Johnny Ray and Johnny Dundee on KDKA the first live sports event ever broadcast. On 5 August, 1921 Harold Arlin broadcast a baseball game between the Philadelphia Phillies and the Pittsburgh Pirates for KDKA and later became the first broadcaster to describe football and tennis on radio. (4) The bout between champion Jack Dempsey and challenger Georges Carpentier was the first world heavyweight title to be broadcast, but it was a technician, J.O. Smith and not a sports commentator who provided the radio voice. The bout was held at Boyle's Thirty Acres in Jersey City, New Jersey on 2 July 1921 and was broadcast over station WJY. Major J. Andrew White, a news commentator relayed his description by telephone to the studio,

where Smith repeated the description on into the microphone. Jack Dempsey's knockout victory in the fourth round denied Smith a lengthy career as a boxing commentator. (5)

Westinghouse did not have the radio field to itself for very long. With strong appeal to newspaper owners, department stores, educational institutions, churches and electrical equipment suppliers, license applications burgeoned. By the end of 1920, 30 licenses had been issued but that number had grown to 200 by May 1922 and 576 by early 1923. In 1922 alone, over 100,000 radio sets were sold in the USA. (6)

Given the popularity of sporting broadcasts, it is a rather curious fact that radio had only a moderate influence on public interest in the Olympic Games. According to Beezley: "The four year intervals of the Olympiad did not coincide with radio's great technical improvements. Radio and the Olympic Games did not synchronize. When radio broadcasting had finally achieved a technical level at which it could provide live accounts of the Games, television was already making its appearance." (7)

The first summer Olympics following the birth of radio were the Paris Games which stretched from 4 May to 27 July, 1924. These were the second Olympic Games to be held in Paris and were granted to the French capital at the request of Baron de Coubertin, who wished to erase the memory of the badly run Games of 1900. (8) It was after the 1924 Paris Games (9) that de Coubertin retired as President of the International Olympic Committee.

French monk, Father Henri Didon may have coined the Olympic motto *citius, altius, fortius* for the Paris Games, but American radio stations were not inspired by the maxim. They had little interest in the sketchy, dated reports of competition in Paris and confined their sports coverage to popular events within the United States. Had the American radio stations been privy to a direct coverage of the Games, they might not have been enamored with the outcome. While American athletes, such as Johnny Weissmuller, William De Hart Hubbard and Martha Norelius, wrote themselves into Olympic history, the French crowd was

anything but pro American following criticism by the United States' government of French occupation of the Ruhr. (10). This led to *The Times of London* running a story on 22 July, 1924 headed "Olympic Games Doomed" and an editorial "No More Olympic Games". The charges against the Games were "miscellaneous turbulence, shameful disorder, storms of abuse, free fights, the drowning of national anthems of friendly nations by shouting and booing...persistent hostility to the Americans". *The Times* suggested that the British public should not subscribe to sending a team to other Games and that the Americans should take a similar line as "the death knell of the Olympic Games has, in fact been sounded". (11)

In Britain, radio broadcasting began in 1922 with the creation of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), but sports commentary was not permitted until 27 May, 1925 (12), which ruled out coverage of the Paris Olympics. Thus British listeners were denied information on the victories of their runners, Harold Abrahams in the 100 meters and Eric Liddell in the 400 meters.

The somewhat fictionalized story of the two British teammates was to be the basis for David Putman's 1981 Academy-Award winning film, "Chariots of Fire."

The problem for the BBC was that under its charter, responsibility for broadcasting lay with the Postmaster General and the relationship between the government and newspapers had to be protected. Assistant Secretary of the Post Office, F.J. Brown, claimed that since the BBC had a monopoly on distribution of news as compared with newspapers where there were a number of publishers, his department had to concern itself with relations between wireless and written press. By insisting that the BBC should secure its news from press agencies, there would be "some sort of assurance that the news was of the general type of uncolored news." (13)

As part of the agreement with press interests when the BBC was formed, news was not to be broadcast before 7 p.m. and the BBC could not air any news or information except that obtained and paid for from the press agencies. (14) In September 1924, this policy was relaxed slightly by allowing the BBC to broadcast ceremonies, speeches and official functions provided that such broadcasts were limited to a preliminary announcement and a microphone record of the occasion without any description or comment. (15) In February 1925, the BBC put forward proposals to broadcast a "running story of the first half of the England versus Scotland Rugby Match;" a "coded narrative of the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race" (the key to the code to be published in early editions of the newspapers on the day of the race); a "coded narrative of the Football Association Cup Final;" and "the broadcast of the Epsom Derby" which would include "impressions" such as a bookmaker taking

odds. The press representatives rejected the proposals with the proviso that "natural noises" could be broadcast from Epsom, but these were to consist of only the sound of horses' hoofs and the shouts of the crowd. (16) Giving evidence in 1923 to a House of Commons appointed committee, chaired by Major General Sir Frederick Sykes, which studied broadcasting matters, Lord Riddell, representing the Newspapers Proprietors' Association, said: The broadcasting of racing and football results and similar matter would certainly seriously interfere with the sale of newspapers, for example, a publican with a broadcaster would be able to supply the requirements of his customers, who would be eagerly waiting in the bar for the results. (17)

In Australia, the federal parliament introduced its first broadcasting legislation in 1905 when the Wireless and Telegraphy Act regulated experiments in wireless communication. The formation in 1910 of Amalgamated Wireless Australasia Limited (AWA) by the merger of the Marconi and Australia Wireless companies gave the fledgling industry its most important boost. (18)

However it was June 1922 before AWA was able to reach agreement with the federal government for the development, manufacture and sale of radio equipment. The initial broadcasts were under a 'sealed set' system whereby receivers were sealed, so that only stations for which the set owner had paid a license fee could be heard. The first station on air was 2SB Sydney on 23 November, 1923. (19)

The system was not successful and by mid-1924, the government issued new regulations for sets to be unsealed with "A" and "B" class licenses to be granted. "A" class would be financed by revenue collected from the Postmaster General's Department license fees, supplemented by some advertising. "B" class stations would receive no government funding, but could take unlimited advertising. (20)

The first "B" class station, 2BE Sydney, went to air in November 1924, but ceased operation in 1929. The oldest extant commercial broadcaster is 2UE Sydney, which commenced on 26 January, 1925. (21)

The sale of wireless sets boomed, so that by mid 1926, some 130,000 people held licenses and by mid 1928, that number had reached 270,000. More than half were in the State of Victoria, which for a time, had a higher proportion of registered listeners than any other place in the world where corresponding figures were kept. This was much to do with geography, for more Victorians lived within earshot of transmitters in the state capital of Melbourne than in any other Australian state. (22)

With the rapid growth in radio audiences, station owners were mindful of the benefits to be gained by the broadcast of popular sporting events, but many sporting bodies were fearful of radio's impact. (23)

The earliest known sporting broadcast in Australia was of the Grand National Steeplechase at Melbourne's

Flemington racecourse in July 1923, four months before radio broadcasting officially began. AWA had been experimenting with radio transmissions and Mr. W.H. Sweeting provided a description of the event for the experimental station. Radio 2BL Sydney provided the first football commentary with the broadcast of the Rugby League Grand Final between Balmain and South Sydney from the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) in July 1924. The same station began giving scores and commentary (though not continuous description) of cricket from the SCG in December 1924. (24)

In early 1932, the federal government introduced a bill to establish the Australian Broadcasting Commission. The commission, which was government funded, took over the operation of a network of "A" class stations, with the new broadcasting service going on air on 1 July, 1932. (25)

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, as it became in 1983, remains today an integral part of the Australian broadcasting system.

Despite *The Times of London* forecast of the Olympic Games' demise, the 1928 Games were held on schedule in Amsterdam from, 17 May to August 12. For the most part, the Amsterdam Games were a success with Germany competing for the first time since 1912 and Women's track and field events included on the program. (26)

However, radio coverage followed the same pattern as in 1924.

Beezley maintains that American interest in the rebroadcast of Olympic events had little chance of success, as English U.S. experiments in transatlantic transmissions using ships at sea had made minimal progress. (27)

Within Europe, the broadcasting industry was in crisis over the allocations of wavelengths. At a 1927 conference in Washington D.C. of representatives of national administrators, it was agreed that countries could assign frequencies and any type of wave to stations in their territory, "upon the sole condition that no interference with any service of any other country will result there from". (28)

It was not until a 1929 conference of governments in Prague, that European agreement was reached, with the BBC records of 1930 stating that "in the twelve months ending with August 1929, the international side of European broadcasting has outweighed the national side in importance. (29)

Even allowing for the frequency problems in European broadcasting, the BBC was still restricted in its news coverage by the severe limitations imposed by the Newspaper Proprietors' Association. The BBC still had to take news bulletins exclusively from the press agencies (the Newspaper Society, Reuters Limited, the Press Association, the Exchange Telegraph Company and the Central News); could not edit its own news (this remained in force until

1930); and could not broadcast a news bulletin until 6 p.m. (30)

In Australia, radio news was also restricted by newspaper proprietors but for a different reason. With the move to "A" and "B" class stations, press interests were actively seeking "B" class licenses and were loath to allow news to be given to potential rivals. Radio stations were not in the economic position to set up their own news gathering services. (31)

Having picked up messages broadcast in Australia in September 1927 by opera singer Dame Nellie Melba and Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, the BBC decided to provide short wave Empire broadcasts. The first was a special program broadcast to Australia from the Marconi Works at Chelmsford on 11 November, 1927. While the BBC reported an enthusiastic response to such broadcasts, it admitted that the demand would have been greater had Reuters Limited allowed news to be broadcast during the transmissions. (32)

The 1932 Olympics were held from 30 July to 14 August in Los Angeles. The effects of the Depression, United States' prohibition and California's geographical isolation kept participation at its lowest level since 1906. (33)

However, for American radio corporations, this was the first opportunity to broadcast an Olympic Games. While Britain and Europe were again denied live commentary due to continuing technical problems with eastward transatlantic broadcasts, American listeners fared little better. The fear of radio as an entertainment rival was to stifle the radio networks' Olympic plans.

Sports promoters throughout the United States feared that radio broadcasting of sporting events kept away paying customers and in 1931, both the St. Louis Cardinals (baseball) and the St. Louis Browns (football) banned radio commentary of their games. While club owners in Major League Baseball voted narrowly to allow radio broadcasts, the New York-based Giants, Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers banned broadcasts of their games from 1934 to 1939. (34)

Organizers of the Los Angeles Olympics held similar fears and were pressured further by the Hollywood movie industry which vehemently opposed radio broadcasting. Studio owners, as well as actors and directors, were willing to give both money and celebrity backing to the Games, but not if they were to be undercut by the relatively new entertainment rival. (35) Two days before the opening ceremony at the Los Angeles Coliseum, arrangements were made for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) to provide limited coverage. CBS was allowed to give a 15 minute summary each night at 11 p.m. Eastern time. The network chose Ted Husing, well-known announcer for the George Bums and Gracie Allen Show and "regarded by many fans as the

greatest of all sportscasters” (36) to provide the summaries for WABC in New York.

In spite of the Depression and perhaps due in part to the limited radio coverage, track and field events drew crowds of over 60,000 per day and set a record for gate receipts of \$548,334. (37)

The Berlin Olympic Games from 1 to 16 August, 1936 presented the largest task undertaken to that stage by the radio industry. The Listener reported that German authorities estimated that broadcasters would give over 3,000 commentaries, reports and eye witness accounts, and that commentators would make special demands from day to day, as some particular country found itself unexpectedly in a final for which a broadcast had not been arranged.

Other broadcasts have a higher interest value for individual countries, and even for groups of countries, but never before has there been such a concentration of the world’s broadcast commentators in one country. (38)

With renowned German efficiency, technicians created an elaborate short-wave system which reached 40 countries during the Games. (39) However the German Olympic Organizing Committee also issued guidelines for radio commentators and newspaper journalists *General Rules and Regulations for the Printed Press and Radio* which directed announcers and reporters to restrict their comments to the Olympic events and travel appreciation, with no mention of the political, and especially religious, issues in Germany. (40)

For Australian listeners, commentary of the Berlin Games could be received from the BBC at night, unless atmospheric conditions made it inaudible. Having heard the British commentary, the Australian Broadcasting Commission applied for, and was granted, the exclusive rights to broadcast the British Empire Games scheduled for Sydney in February 1938. These games were to be the first in which Australian commentators provided short wave descriptions for other countries. (41)

America’s NBC sent football broadcaster Bill Slater to cover the Berlin Games. Slater had the honor of bringing the news of Jesse Owens’ four gold medals to the United States audience, but Berlin marked a turning point in his career in particular and American sports broadcasting in general. Slater had a disagreement with NBC Director of Sport, John Royal, over expense payments for the Berlin Games and resigned from the sporting department to become host of the extremely popular quiz show “Twenty Questions.” (42)

Slater’s sporting role was filled by Bill Stem who became one of the most controversial, but most successful sportscaster in the United States. (43)

This was radio’s Golden Age, but the Berlin Games were to mark the beginning of the end of radio’s dominance.

Unannounced until the day of the opening ceremony, German organizers planned a trial television coverage of selected Olympic events. Under a headline “Television of the Games Disappointing Result,” *The Times of London* on 3 August, 1936, reported that televiewing rooms had been established with a cathode-ray large-screen projection receiver. However pictures “resembled a very faint, highly under exposed photographic film, and were so much worse than ordinary transmissions from a studio that many turned away in disappointment”. (44)

While television testing was still in its infancy, radio lost the chance to capitalize on major technological advances, with World War II causing the Olympic Games of 1940 and 1944 to be abandoned. By the time of the London Games (29 July to 14 August 1948), television had commenced regular transmissions in both the United States and Britain. NBC had telecast an Army-Navy football match on WNBT New York in December 1945 using a coaxial cable link from the Philadelphia game site, (45) while the BBC’s television service began for a limited audience in the London area in June 1946. (46)

The BBC television cameras were at Wembley Stadium to capture the deeds of Fanny Blankers-Koen and Emil Zátopek, but it was radio that provided the major coverage of the London Olympics. Host broadcaster, the BBC, was given the Palace of Arts, constructed for the 1924 British Empire Exhibition, to serve as a broadcast center with eight radio studios and 32 channels. There were 15 commentary boxes and 16 open positions in the stadium and 16 commentary points at the Empire Pool. (47) Lines reached to 30 Olympic venues, with coverage of the Games supplied by BBC commentators in 40 languages. As practice, the commentators had spent time in describing “actual sports meetings or before a film of some of the events in the 1936 Games.” (48)

One problem for technicians was that with commentary in such wide range of languages, broadcasts could be lost as they were wrongly routed through different countries. To reduce the chance of this happening, the BBC experimented with an idea suggested by the Finnish radio engineers who were preparing for the Helsinki Games of 1952. In previewing facilities for the more than 200 broadcasters at the London Olympics, *London Calling* (24 June 1945) said: The intention is to have records which can be played for several minutes before a broadcast starts: for example, the disc for Poland will keep saying in English, in the language of destination, and perhaps, in one or two other languages, “Transmission from London to Warsaw.” That message repeated over and over again, should ensure that operators along the route to Poland can easily recognize the line that will soon be carrying all the way to Warsaw a broadcast of, say, the Marathon from Wembley Stadium. (49)

For Australian audiences, the Australian Broadcasting Commission relied exclusively on BBC commentary of the 1948 London Olympics, but so inadequately were Australian performances reported, that for Helsinki in 1952, Bernard Kerr was sent as the first Australian commentator to describe Olympic events. (50)

The XV Olympic Games in Helsinki (19 July to 3 August 1952) saw radio coverage of a similar nature to London but with an ever increasing amount of television and newsreel exposure. The catalyst for change from radio to television dominance in Olympic coverage was the Melbourne Games (22 November to 8 December 1956). Television transmission began in Australia shortly before the Melbourne Olympics and Wenn believes that: Debate between television executives and the Melbourne Organizing Committee concerning the transmission rights for the 1956 Olympics contributed importantly to the expanded publicity for and marketing of the Games. The Australian episode acted as a springboard for the revision of Rule 49 (Publicity), the IOC's initial legislative effort regarding the marketing of television rights. (51)

Given the small number of television sets in use in Australia, home audiences relied heavily on radio for coverage of the 1956 Games. As it turned out, overseas audiences did likewise, as a dispute with the Melbourne Organizing Committee over television and cinema newsreel royalty rights saw international television networks and cinema companies impose a wide-ranging boycott of the Games.

The disagreement led directly to a distinction being made between news coverage and live television rights (entertainment) of the Olympics with television networks paying for telecast rights for the first time at the Rome Games of 1960. (52)

Television rights were to become the lifeblood of the Olympic Movement and by 1974, the IOC drew over 98 per cent of its income from the sale of television rights to the Olympic Games. (53)

There will always be a place for radio coverage of the Olympic Games, but the pageantry, spectacle and athletic contests make the Olympics a visual event-ideal for the age of television. The timing of technological advances and world hostilities meant that radio never quite became the medium of the Olympic Games.

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