

Russia's First Olympic Victor by: John D. Windhausen St. Anselm's College

At the close of the summer Olympic events at London in 1908, the attention of the sporting public was so preoccupied with the crescendo of American criticisms of unfair judging and with the official British responses to these charges, that the concluding events in October were almost overlooked by journalists here and in Europe.* Yet another little known controversy erupted during the October matches at London involving the leading Swedish and Russian figure skaters, Ulrich Salchow and N. A. Panin-Kolomenkin, and which was ignored by the British press and the British Olympic Committee, still smarting from the embarrassing confrontations over the summer games. The Russian team apparently protested the unsportsmanlike conduct of Salchow as well as prejudicial behavior of the Swedish judges. We say "apparently" inasmuch as available British, American and Russian newspapers failed to record the protest, nor was it mentioned in the *Official Report* of the 1908 games. The story is recalled in several recent Soviet sports articles devoted to Panin-Kolomenkin, the winner of Russia's first gold medal for an official Olympic event, the special figures skating match in 1908.¹ Salchow, however, took the gold medal for the compulsory — free skating contests.

Before entering the particulars of this controversy some account must be rendered about the status of international competition in winter sports and the career of Panin. Winter sports were included in the regular Olympic program for the first time in 1908, although the competitions were limited to various forms of figure skating events. Ice skating was the first sport to hold official World and European championships and this sport was holding major international contests even before the revival of the Olympic games. These events should be truly regarded as pioneering activities but the fact that skating has the longest tradition of international matches has been usually overlooked.² The first World and European speed skating championships were held in 1889 and 1891 respectively,

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¹ B. Chesnokov, "Pervoe Zoloto Rosii," *Sportivnaia Zhizn Rossii*, XII (No. 10, 1968), pp. 32-33; and L. Gorianov, "Dorozhite Sportivnoi Chestiu Rossii," *Sportivnaia Zhizn Rossii*, XVI (No. 11, 1972), pp. 33-35.

² Erich Kamper, *Encyclopedia of the Olympic Winter Games* (Stuttgart, 1964), p. 22.

and the following year witnessed the first World championships for figure skating. However, since ice hockey and skiing were not organized on an international level until after 1908, winter events were not included again on the Olympic program until the 1926 games in Antwerp. In 1924 and thereafter they would be held as separately organized Olympic games.

If the early sources were silent about the Swedish-Russian quarrel over the ice matches in 1908, most modern western sources have even ignored Panin's career and his gold medal. Although the *Times* of London and the *Official Report* of the British Olympic Association reported the ice matches, it took nine and fifteen days later for two of the three major newspapers in the Russian capital to report that Panin had won the Olympic special figures event in London, and that the Swedes led by Salchow swept all three places for the compulsory — free figures event.³ The principal newspaper in Moscow, the *Moskovskiiia Vedomosti*, did not yet have a sports column and the victories of Salchow and Panin went unreported also in the *Russkiiia Vedomosti* of St. Petersburg. More importantly, most western sources omit Panin and his achievement altogether. The *New York Times* did not report the contest in 1908 and while the popular sports magazines, *Bailey's Magazine* of London and *The Outing* of New York, carried articles on the London games, neither mentioned the figure skating contests.

Not only the early sources but even the current record listings omit Panin and Russia's first gold medal (not until 1952 will there be another). The 1974 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which carries an expanded article on the history and records of the modern Olympic games, and *The Official Associated Press' Sports Almanac, 1974* make no mention of Panin. Of course, the special figures event in figure skating has been discontinued but both of those reference works promise complete records including the discontinued matches since the revival of the games in 1896.⁴ The most complete record of the modern summer games is the multi-lingual publication en-

³ *Times* (London), October 30, 1908, p. 5; The British Olympic Association, *The Fourth Olympiad: Being the Official Report of the Olympic Games of 1908*, drawn up by Theodore Andrea Cook (London, 1909), pp. 292-293, *Rech*, October 25 (November 7 n.s.), 1908, p. 6; *Novoe Vremia*, October 31 (November 13 n.s.), 1908, p. 5.

⁴ Harold Maurice Abrahams in "Athletic Games and Contests." *Encyclopedia Britannica* (15th ed.; Chicago, et. al., 1974), Macropoedia, 11, pp. 292-293, lists the winners of 17 discontinued events for 1908, including winter games, Dan Perkes et. al., eds., *The Official Associated Press Sports Almanac, 1974* (New York, 1974), pp. 559-563. Both of the above works do list the victory of Solchow and both list the winners of other events no longer on the program. The Perkes' volume also omits the winners of the pairs' figure skating for 1908, p. 560. Kamper suggests that some may not have realized that these ice matches were indeed "fully qualified Olympic contests." See his . . . *Winter Games*, p. 23.

dorsed by the Olympic committees and the product of exhaustive research by its author, Erich Kamper, entitled *The Encyclopedia of the Olympic Games* (1972).⁵ But even this volume omits Panin's victory because the ice games of 1908 and 1920 are excluded, even though they were part of the summer games in those years and the medals had been officially tabulated with those for the other events. These ice events were listed in Kamper's earlier book on the winter games but this is somewhat dated now. More recently, there in the *International Encyclopaedia of Winter Sports* compiled by Howard Bass and published here in 1972. Bass carries the most extensive account of the winter games in 1908 and after, discussing the history of figure skating, the skating organizations, the general character of the 1908 competition and short analyses and results of the men's regular figure skating, women's figure skating and the pairs' figure skating contests. Strangely, there is no mention of the special figures event and its three Olympic medalists — Panin of Russia, Cummings of Great Britain, and Hall-Say, also of Great Britain.⁶

More than a decade ago one academic study of Russian athletics indeed recorded the first Russian Olympic championship of 1908. Unfortunately, the scholarly work of Henry Morton in *Soviet Sport* lists the contest with a rather bizarre error. Hastily reading a quotation from a Soviet source, Morton confused the Russian figure skating champion at the turn of the century named A. N. Panshin with N. A. Panin and so attributed the gold medal in 1908 to the former in error.⁷ In fact, Panin was one of a trio of world renown figurists in the early years of international competitions. The St. Petersburg resident, A. P. Lebedev, allegedly won the second unofficial figure skating championship in Helsinki in 1883 and again so in St. Petersburg in 1890. Alexander N. Panshin, who was also a multi-prize winner in European speed skating matches, was the Russian national figure skating titlist for four straight years

⁵ Interestingly enough, Panin does appear in Kamper's book on the summer games, but as a member of the Russian pistol team which finished fourth in the 50 meters contest at Stockholm in 1912. A distinguished shooter for many years, Panin was listed by his original name, Nikolai Kolomenkin. See Erich Kamper, *The Encyclopedia of the Olympic Game* (New York, 1972), p. 227.

⁶ Howard Bass, *International Encyclopedia of Winter Sports* (South Brunswick and New York, 1972), pp. 158-159; also the *Times*, October 30, 1908, p. 5.

⁷ Henry Morton, *Soviet Sport* (New York, 1961), p. 157. In an otherwise fine study the author confused the data given in the source below.

beginning in 1897.⁸ Nikolai A. Panin-Kolomenkin emerged as one of the premier Russian figurists in 1901.

Without exception, Soviet sports historians refer to the upper class domination of athletics and sports in the pre-revolutionary era. Indeed, working class sportsmen had many difficulties to overcome. Denied membership in official clubs and leagues, especially football (soccer), working class sports societies were often aborted by the lack of facilities and competitors.⁹ This Soviet judgment seems to be a well founded generalization but, as Eugen Weber has shown, the European sports movement in general was initiated by the upper classes.¹⁰ If the laborers were becoming more active in sports in the western nations by the turn of the century, then, to some extent, their involvement was made possible by the increasing leisure time and resources which a maturing industrial apparatus was beginning to provide. By contrast, Russia's industrialization was barely out of its infancy. However, long working hours notwithstanding, some managers as well as Russian capitalists introduced and organized western sports for their workers. In any case, it seems that elitism and class discrimination were less noticeable in the winter sports.¹¹

Although Panin's own class origins are obscure, the relative openness of winter sports along with other vital facts may indicate that he came from a humble background. He was born Nikolai Alexandrovich Kolomenkin in the village of Khrenova in the region of Voronezh in December, 1872.¹² Soviet writers often mention him along with N. Strunnikov the speed skater, M. Diakov the cyclist, Poddubny and Zaikin the wrestlers, and yet many others who emerged as international prize winners amid the deplorable conditions of Tsarist Russia wherein physical education for the common people was nearly non-existent.¹³ The implication is that Panin and the others, by

⁸ D. A. Kradman and G. D. Kharabuza, "Fizicheskaja Kultura v Rossii v Period Utverzheniia Kapitalizma," *Istoriia Fizicheskoi Kultury*, ed. by F. I. Somoukov (Moscow, 1956), p. 47. Lebedev's feat in 1883 was surely an unofficial championship since Kamper records the first world figure skating match for the year 1892 in *Winter Games*, p. 22. Howard Bass, in "Winter Sports," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th ed.; Chicago. et. al., 1974). Macropoedia, XIX, 885-891, lists the first official world figure skating contest for St. Petersburg in 1896 though he does date the European championships from 1891. While Chernokov, p. 32, cites the victory of Lebedev in 1890 he does record it as an unofficial world championship, which event included American as well as European skaters.

⁹ V. V. Stolbov and I. G. Chudinov, *Istoriia Fizicheskoi Kultury* (Moscow, 1962), p. 114. This work fails to discuss figure skating and, of course, omits Panin's achievement, although it does discuss dozens of other sports before the revolution and it contains a rather full account of the 1912 Olympics.

¹⁰ Eugen Weber, "Gymnastics and Sports in *Fin de Siecle* France: Opium of the Classes," *American Historical Review*, LXXVI (1971), 71-72.

¹¹ J. W. Riordan, "The Development of Football in Russia and the U.S.S.R." (Part I), *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, IX [Winter, 1972], pp. 66-67.

¹² Gorianov, pp. 33-34.

¹³ For example, Chesnokov, p. 32.

heroic efforts, managed to achieve fame for the motherland despite their humble origins and despite the legal and social disabilities which confronted them. Sometimes, references are more direct, describing these athletes like Panin as “only a rare few, the most gifted ones who came from the people.”¹⁴ Yet another writer speaks of Panin and the others as “given by the people,” and as “self-made men whose shining successes were achieved only thanks to their own persistence.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, some doubt remains about Panin’s social origins. While Poddubny was referred to as the Poltava farmer and Ivan Zaikin was called the Volga freight loader, no such plebeian occupation was attributed to the great figure skater.¹⁶ Indeed, one reads that he was a teacher in the department of physical chemistry at the University of St. Petersburg.¹⁷ Further reason for scepticism about his working class background arises when one learns that he was for many years one of the premier pistol shooters of the Russian nation. Following his triumphant performance in London in 1908 he went straight to Paris where he won several medals in shooting matches prior to coming home, and four years later he joined the Russian Olympic pistol shooting team at Stockholm.¹⁸ Shooting, like yachting, tennis and fencing was generally known as an aristocratic sport. A Soviet sports encyclopedia even mentions that “circles of shooters were first limited to officers and gentry in Tsarist Russia.”¹⁹ But there is more. A well rounded athlete, Panin excelled at even tennis and football, he was a first class oarsman and yachtsman, and one learns that he even participated in skiing matches and was a member of the hockey team of St. Petersburg.²⁰ Not bad for a working class boy!

Then there is the matter of his name. Panin, of course, was a pseudonym which he first assumed in 1896 when making his skating debut. Russian society was not unique at the end of the 19th century in casting a condescending eye upon sports competitors. And so, because participation in skating matches might besmirch his family name, he chose the pseudonym.²¹ As one writer put it: “Even the word ‘sportsman,’ even partici-

¹⁴ *Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar po Fizicheskoi Kultura i Sportu* (Moscow, 1961), 1, 331.

¹⁵ S. L. Akselrod, et. al., *Fizicheskaio Kultura i Sport v SSSR* (Moscow, 1957), p. 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

¹⁷ Gorianov, pp. 33-34; Solzhenitsyn maintains that the Cheko made mass arrests of University graduates in the 1920’s on the assumption that they were nobles. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, translated by Thomas P. Whitney (New York, et al., 1973). p. 40.

¹⁸ Chesnokov, p. 33.

¹⁹ *Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar* . . . , III, 117.

²⁰ Chesnokov, p. 33; Gorianov, p. 34.

²¹ Gorianov, p. 33.

pation in any kind of sporting contest was often regarded as a humiliation for persons of the gentry status and incompatible with their status in life."²² But what should this matter to the young Kolomenkin, the would be hero of the toiling masses? Unless, of course, his was not a toiling family. Certainty eludes us, but the evidence thus far makes Panin a likely representative of the more leisurely strata.

At any rate, the future Olympian was a careful student of Lebedev and Panshin, succeeding the latter as the best figure skater of Russia in 1901. Russians excelled in skating quite early and the Amateur Skating Society was organized in 1864, although no Russian nation-wide skating organization would be set up as would be established later in Great Britain, the United States and Germany.²³ As earlier mentioned, A. Lebedev won the unofficial world figure skating championship in 1883 and seven years later he repeated his feat. During these years Alexander Panshin was winning medals in Austria, Amsterdam and elsewhere both in speed and figure skating. After 1900 Russian skaters continued their strong showing in a host of international matches. N. Sedov won the world speed skating title in 1909 while N. Strunnikov was European and World champion in 1910 and 1911 and V. Ippolitov won the European championship in 1913. Denied material support from the Tsarist authorities in 1912, Strunnikov could not travel to defend his titles and so retired from competition.²⁴

Such was the highly competitive milieu in which Nikolai A. Panin-Kolomenkin emerged in 1908 to challenge the best figure skaters of Europe, and especially the world renowned Swede, Ulrich Salchow, the perennial world champion who lost to Panin for his first defeat since 1902.²⁵ The defeat, however, came not in the Olympic matches in London but in February of that same year in St. Petersburg when Salchow arrived to compete for the cup named in honor of Panshin. The match included six skaters though in essence it was a contest between Salchow and Panin, whose unexpected victory in special figures combined with Salchow's poor performance in the compulsory event gave the cup to Panin. Salchow won only the free figures event but his total points fell short of the Russian's in the opinion of all five judges.²⁶

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Chesnokov, p. 33.

²⁴ Stolbav and Chudinov, p. 117.

²⁵ Chesnokov, p. 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

When it became known that the program of the Fourth Olympic Games would include figure skating, both men began the most painstaking preparations for the rematch, one hoping for a full revenge, the other setting out to prove that his February triumph was no accident. A Viennese newspaper said that “Mr. Salchow has every reason to be worried about the outcome, having such a formidable competitor as Mr. Panin.”²⁷ The excitement of the return match was evident in England too as the *Times* said that Panin’s “arrival is eagerly expected as he took upon himself to defeat no less a person than Mr. Salchow . . . last winter.”²⁸ Olympic officials must have been pleased when, after dividing the men’s skating into two separate events — the compulsory-free figures in one event, and the special figures for the other one — the two stars registered for both contests.²⁹

Modern Russian accounts, including the reminiscences of Panin, provide the following story of the matches which began on October 29, 1908. Held in Prince’s Skating Club in London, a superb indoor rink constructed in 1895, the skating matches for the men’s singles began with the compulsory figures. Panin, who defeated Salchow in this event earlier in that year, began his performance with a correct figure eight with one foot back. Salchow exhibited behavior unfitting for a champion and demonstratively shouted criticisms of Panin’s form. Hoping to undermine the self control of the rival from Russia, Salchow continued his bombastic verbal assaults so that Panin’s side was constrained to protest. But Salchow relentlessly maintained his psychological attack while the chief judge did not summon him to order.³⁰ Even so, Panin seemed to perform perfectly. The results, however, were not in his favor.

This led to a second Russian protest. Panin was later to say that “the composition of the judges was unfavorable for me since among them were two Swedes, a personal friend of Salchow named Hugel from Austria, and Wendt from Germany and Sanders from Russia — in all, five judges. Wendt and Sanders gave me first place in the compulsory figures, the Swede, Grenander, gave me second place, nine points lower than Salchow and 23 points above the Swede, Per Thoren, who gained third place in the compulsory part of the match. But the remaining judges, the Swede, Herle and Salchow’s friend

²⁷ Gorianov, p. 34.

²⁸ *Times*, October 24, 1908, p. 18.

²⁹ Gorianov, p. 34.

³⁰ Chesnokov, pp. 32-33 and Corianov. p. 34 give almost identical stories here.

Hugel gave me fourth place. They fulfilled their task of ruining me since by the rules of that time victory was decided by the least number of place points.”³¹

As a result Panin declined second place. The partiality of the judges, to continue the Russian version, was so blatant that the spokesman for the Russian team issued a protest, but it was not satisfied, and so in the form of a personal protest, Panin refused to enter the free skating part of this event. At the conclusion of the match a group of Swedes — participants and judges — at first orally and then in official written form, carried an apology to Panin “for the unworthy conduct of Salchow.”³²

The next morning Panin competed in the special figures contest. Salchow bowed out of this event, claiming illness, though he returned later that same day to perform in the free skating segment and thus capture the gold medal for the compulsory-free skating event. It must be said at this point that while the Russians claim that his illness was feigned because he realized the superiority of his adversary from St. Petersburg, such a charge is given some support by a remark in the *Times* a week earlier which suggested that Mr. Salchow may not choose to perform in the special figures contest after all.³³ As it turned out, Nikolai Panin-Kolomenkin easily outpointed his other competitors to win the gold medal, the first for a Russian Olympian. In defeating Mr. Cummings and Mr. Hall-Say of the United Kingdom, Panin was described by the *Times* as “undoubtedly the best performer in the world at this form of skating.”³⁴ The *Official Report* of the British Olympic officials recorded the Russian skater as “far in advance of his opponents, both in the difficulty of his figures and in the ease and accuracy of their execution; he cut the ice in a series of the most perfect intaglios with almost mathematical precision.”³⁵ Not unexpectedly, a St. Petersburg correspondent wrote that “had Salchow chosen to compete, even the bias of the two Swedish judges could not have beaten the representative of the St. Petersburg Society of Amateur Skaters.”³⁶

It seems reasonable to assume that Salchow’s illness was feigned. But what is one to make of Panin’s alleged illness? London sources (the *Official Report* and the *Times*) report

³¹ Quoted By Chernokov. p. 32.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Times*, October 24, 1908. p. 18.

³⁴ *Times*, October 30, 1908. p. 5.

³⁵ *The Fourth Olympiad* p. 292.

³⁶ *Novoe Vremia*, October 31 (November 13 n.s.), 1908, p. 5.

that Panin became ill and so withdrew from the competition in the compulsory-free figures event.³⁷ No mention is made of his performance in the first half of this contest, the story about Salchow's rude behavior, and the resulting protest by the Russian representative; nothing is related about the two "apologies" of the Swedish participants, the second Russian protest with respect to the composition of the judges' panel, the denial of both protests by the Olympic officials, and, of course, the nature of Panin's withdrawal from the match as a kind of personal protest. With respect to this last point, it seems logical to assume that one of the versions must be inaccurate, for had Panin intended his withdrawal as a personal protest, he would not have diminished its force by claiming illness. Lending credence to the Russian interpretation is the fact that Panin, like Salchow, won his gold medal on the same day that he was supposed to have been "too ill to compete" in the other event.

Contemporary Russian newspapers related much less of the story than do the more recent accounts. In fact, the Russian press contained only very short summaries of the Olympic happenings and other sports stories, including Panin's gold medal. Even so, *Novoe Vremia* made mention of the unfavorable composition of the judging panel, while *Rech* mentioned that Panin "retired without a place" from the compulsory-free figures competition with no reference to his illness.³⁸ A small notice in this last newspaper some ten days later also suggests some foundation for the unpleasant story above when, in describing the heralded international skating matches in Berlin, the article says that "Regrettably, the victor of the special figures in London, the St. Petersburg resident, Nikolai Panin, did not participate at Berlin."³⁹ Perhaps the animosities of the London contests led Panin to forego the Berlin affair. At any rate, Salchow took the honors there. Finally, one Russian sportswriter was less reticent four years later when, discussing Russia's dismal showing at the Stockholm games, he accused Swedish judges with prejudicial favoring of their own athletes and noted that biased judging of Russian athletes by foreigners was not unusual.⁴⁰

³⁷According to the version of the British Olympic Committee, "N. Panin was entered in the Men's competition but withdrew because of illness;" and again: "Unfortunately, the men's free skating was robbed of an interesting item by the retirement of Panin who, feeling unwell, decided not to compete." See *The Fourth Olympiad* . . . , p. 338 and p. 293 respectively. The *Times*, likewise, reported that Panin "was too ill to skate." October 30, 1908, p. 5.

³⁸*Novoe Vremia*, October 31 (November 13, n.s.), 1908, p. 5, *Rech*, October 25 (November 7 n.s.), 1908, p. 6. *Rech* was the organ of the liberal Kadet party.

³⁹*Rech*, November 4 (17 n.s.), 1908, p. 6.

⁴⁰*Novoe Vremia*, July 17 (30 n.s.), 1912, p. 6. This paper was well known for its conservative opinions.

Quite obviously, one would like to have more information to corroborate the modern story. Nevertheless, while strong doubt has been raised here about the Soviet version of Panin's humble origins, other information does provide support for yet another incident of turmoil which marred the Games of London. The Olympic games of recent years sometimes disappoint those who view them as opportunities to lessen international tensions. Nonetheless the experience of the 1908 games should remind us that caustic rivalries between nations were part of the stories of even the early modern games. One may speculate then at the motives of the British Olympic Committee members in failing to record anything of this skating incident, especially in view of the large quantity of minutiae contained in the 794 pages of the *Official Report*. One may further speculate on the final judgment of the winter events in the *Times* when it reported that: "The proceedings went off smoothly and pleasantly. . . . The four competitions were won by the best skaters now before the public, and it may be affirmed with confidence that no absentee would have been likely to win a gold medal."⁴¹ One must wonder whether the skating affairs were an embarrassment to the British officials coming so soon after the tumult of criticisms of the summer games, especially by Americans, and whether the controversies, so at variance with the ideals of the international sponsors, were then covered up by hypersensitive newsmen and officials of the host country. Unfortunately, what has also been "covered up" in recent times, by mistake, is the Olympic victory of Nikolai Alexandrovich Panin-Kolomenkin, Russia's first gold medalist.

⁴¹ *Times*, October 31, 1908, p. 15.