

# American Preparations for the First Post World War Olympic Games, 1919-1920

*John Lucas\**

No single Olympic Games in modern history got off to such modest, even tentative beginnings than did the 1920 Games of the Seventh Olympiad in Antwerp, Belgium. The so-called "Great War" had raged only twenty months before, and signatures were obtained on the Treaty of Versailles, June 28, 1919—a little more than a year before the Olympic Games. The conflict had been utterly devastating, with ten million dead, twenty million wounded, and more than \$300 billion in damages.<sup>1</sup> And yet the Baron Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, was able to convince the most cruelly damaged nation, Belgium, to host an Olympic Games—the first in eight years. Belgium was grievously unprepared to do so, nor were any European and even North American countries ready to fully participate in this revived "festival of youth." An analysis of the American Olympic Committee's (hereafter called AOC) unvarnished support for its nation's re-entry into Olympic competition, an analysis of the United States preparations, or rather more accurately, lack of administrative preparations, that country's frequently awkward but eventually partly successful efforts to field a representative Olympic team in 1920, and certain implications regarding the importance of this uneven success on the whole American Olympic movement form the essence of this essay.

What could possibly have provoked the AOC president, Gustavus Towne Kirby, in a post-Olympic Games interview, to call for a complete committee overhaul and thus preclude in the future "any possibility of such conditions as existed... in the preparations for the last Olympic Games."<sup>2</sup> Was AOC secretary Frederick Rubien grossly overreacting when asked to comment on disharmony aboard ship as the athletes headed for the games in Belgium, and answered: "There was an element of dissatisfaction in the team which assumed the aspect of a Bolshevik outburst as we were nearing Antwerp?" Was the veteran of many Olympic Games, New York City Police Lieutenant Matt McGrath, upon returning from the 1920 games, justified in angrily stating: "I

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1. William L. Langer, Comp. and ed., *An Encyclopedia of World History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948) p. 951.

2. Gustavus T. Kirby as quoted in "Olympic Officials plan for future," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1920, section 9, p. 2.

will never enter an Olympic Games again.”<sup>3</sup> Was there collusion between track and field champion McGrath and American Olympic swimmers, boxers, and fencers who stated collectively that their own officials were to blame for abominable conditions aboard the transport ship “Princess Matoika”?<sup>4</sup> How typical was the remark made by a returning American Olympian: “It was horrible; you can’t believe what we’ve been through.”<sup>5</sup> A look at the immediate past history of the AOC and the international Olympic movement is necessary in order to propose disinterested answers to these questions.

*Portent of American Olympic Disharmony*

Track and field athletics was the dominant sport in each of the five Olympic Games, 1896-1912. The United States was the world leader in this sport during this period and thus emerged, on the eve of World War I, as the paragon of Olympic Games participants. A great deal of credit for such success was due to the brilliant and tyrannical leadership of James Edward Sullivan.<sup>6</sup> Sullivan’s brand of leadership—ruthless, autocratic, aristocratic, single-minded and utterly efficient had been very much in tune with the organizational nature of American amateur athletics in that era, 1896-1914. It was very sorely missed at his death. But Sullivan died on September 16, 1914; the Berlin Games of 1916 were cancelled; America’s greatest Olympic track coach, Michael C. Murphy, died the year before Sullivan; and American athletic hero and representative to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), Evert Jansen Wendell, died in battle at Neville, France, on August 25, 1917. Lastly, as if to compound American amateur athletic miseries, both Colonel Robert Thompson, esteemed long-time president of the AOC, and Judge Bar-tow S. Weeks (Sullivan’s successor), resigned their positions in late 1919. Thompson had served well, was old, and stepped down from leadership, while Weeks had been co-opted by the IOC. It was a tenuous situation, one that led eye-witness Alexander M. Weyand to observe that the years 1913 to 1919 “had not dealt kindly” with the AOC. “It was small wonder,” he said, “that the ‘cream’ turned slightly sour.”<sup>7</sup>

The persistent dreamer, Pierre de Coubertin, self-exiled in Switzerland during the years 1914-1918, occupied much of his time in planning for the post-war Olympic Games. Consumed with keeping the Olympic Idea alive, the Baron addressed the Greek Liberal Club of Lausanne, Switzerland, on February 24, 1918, calling for an end to the war, a universal sport-for-all mandate, a restoration of the Olympic Games—and in that order of importance.<sup>8</sup> In a euphoric outburst of letter writing following the war’s end, Coubertin, in one

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3. Matthew McGrath as quoted in “U.S. athletes return angry at Committee,” *New York Tribune*, September 12, 1920, p. 14.

4. “Several members of Olympic Team back from aboard,” *New York Tribune*, September 5, 1920, p. 16.

5. “Olympians return, condemn officials,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 1920, p. 2.

6. For Sullivan’s influence, see John Lucas, “Early Olympic Antagonists—Pierre de Coubertin versus James E. Sullivan,” *Stadion III* (1977), 258-272.

7. Alexander M. Weyand, *The Olympic Pageant* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), p. 136.

8. Pierre de Coubertin, *Ce que nous pouvons maintenant demander au sport* (Lausanne: Edition de l’Association des Hellenes Liberaux de Lausanne, 1918), passim.

of these homilies, called for the brotherhood of nations to emulate the new and exciting American idea of pervasive physical education and intercollegiate athletics.<sup>9</sup> Coubertin's blizzard of correspondence to athletic leaders around the world prepared them for the first post-war IOC meeting in Lausanne on April 28, 1919—the twenty-fifth anniversary of that body. IOC member from Belgium, Count Henry Baillet-Latour very much wanted the 1920 Olympic Games to be held in his own country and convinced some government officials that the successful fruition of an Olympic Games in that country would be visible proof of Belgium's vigor and recovery from the carnage of war. Baillet-Latour and Coubertin were close friends and the Frenchman took little convincing to give Antwerp the nod. Rome's bid for the 1920 Olympic Games fell through; no one else wanted the games, and Coubertin with veiled enthusiasm pronounced Antwerp, Belgium's credentials as "incomprable," and so that utterly decimated city, having requested the games, began preparations.<sup>10</sup> The Baron looked heavenward and predicted a successful Olympic Games—a festival whose origins were rooted in "Anglo-Saxon sporting utilitarianism and the lofty and resounding concepts bequeathed by ancient Greece."<sup>11</sup>

Three-way communication between the IOC, the Belgian Olympic Organizing Committee and the AOC were non-existent between May and October of 1919. It was not until late November that the AOC announced plans to send a team to Antwerp "worthy of upholding the dignity of the nation." Kirby was chosen AOC president and made a plea for \$200,000—a sum desperately needed to fund the American team. He reminded all that the most powerful athletic nations would be in Antwerp (except Germany)... a "foreshadow of stiffer opposition for the American standard bearers."<sup>12</sup> President of the United States Woodrow Wilson was chosen honorary president of the AOC, retired Colonel Thompson and ex-president of the U.S., William Howard Taft agreed to accept titles of honorary vice-presidents of the AOC.<sup>13</sup> A certain smugness at having so many high-powered government officials in their Olympic corner was lost in late December of 1919, when the Belgian Committee announced the Olympic program of events. Ice hockey and figure skating events would begin in early April while swimming and rowing finals would take place on September 30... a half year of Olympic Games competition! "Separate and distinct expeditions" would be needed by a beleaguered AOC that had no money and no ships with which to transport their fractured teams to Europe.

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9. Coubertin letter dated January 5, 1919, as found in *The Olympic Idea: Pierre de Coubertin Discourses and Essays* (Cologne: Carl Diem Institute, 1966), p. 59.

10. Pierre de Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques* (Lausanne: Bureau international de pedagogie sportive, 1931), p. 155.

11. Coubertin "Address...Lausanne, April, 1919," as found in *The Olympic Idea...* ibid, p. 74.

12. "Official decision is made to send an American team to Olympic Games," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1919, p. 15; "To plan U.S. part in Olympic meet," *The New York Times*, November 17, 1919, p. 21.

13. "Gustavus Kirby chosen to head Olympic Committee," *New York Herald*, November 29, 1919, p. 14.

Some solace was obtained in early 1920 when Secretary of War Newton Baker and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels agreed to become honorary vice-presidents of the Olympic Committee. Gustavus Kirby had obtained the patronage of some of Washington, D.C.'s most important people.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless the struggle for monies and the near impossibility of obtaining transportation overseas remained unsolved in the spring of 1920—only three months before the Opening Day Ceremonies of the Olympic Games. AOC boss Kirby convened an emergency meeting on March 13, 1920; IOC member Weeks was annoyed that the American track and field Olympic trials were scheduled *after* final entries were due in Belgium. Kirby was pleased to announce the first donation... a \$5,000 gift from Colonel Thompson. Any thought of easy victories in Antwerp “must be discarded,” warned Kirby.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Olympic Dilemma Compounds Itself*

The Olympic Committee's dilemma was of classic proportions. America's athletic youth, both in and out of the universities, both young men and young women with expanding horizons, were eager to contest for places on the Olympic team. But the AOC had no monies and no way to get the athletes to Europe. Powerful political and military leaders in Washington, D.C., had accepted honorary invitations to the Committee. The Army and the Navy were especially important to the Olympic Committee since much of the nation was still on a war-time basis and all large transport ships, commandeered by the military, were not available to civilian organizations such as the Olympic organization. The few private steamship lines were “fully booked to August 1.”<sup>16</sup> The United States Army of Occupation on the Rhine River had its base at Antwerp and ships plied that 4,000 mile trip on a regular basis. The War Department admitted “that so far as passengers were concerned, transports were running with many staterooms and most of their troopship quarters empty.”<sup>17</sup> It seemed the logistic and fiscal solution of the AOC's major headache. There was only one thing wrong, however; it was illegal for civilian athletes and officials to travel on Army and Navy ships. A painful and protracted period of Congressional hearings and testimonies by AOC president Kirby and his associates occupied all their energies between March and June of 1920. The Games of the Seventh Olympiad were “right around the corner” and the mightiest athletic nation was wholly unprepared.

Gustavus Towne Kirby was a well-educated, experienced and resolute athletic administrator, born in Philadelphia (1874) of ancestors on his mother's side that went back to John Wesley Neveling—George Washington's cha-

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14. *Report of the American Olympic Committee—Seventh Olympic Games—Antwerp, Belgium 1920* (New York City: AOC 1920), pages 18, 20; also see “Government to aid Olympic officials,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 1920, p. 12.

15. “Take long strides in Olympic plans,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 1920, p. 20; also Robert Korsgaard, “A History of the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States,” Ed.D. dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1952, pp. 194-195.

16. *Report of AOC...* p. 21.

17. *Ibid.*

plain. Kirby's father, Thomas E., was wealthy and "perhaps the greatest art auctioneer of all times."<sup>18</sup> G. T. Kirby had engineering and law degrees from Columbia University, had presided over the Intercollegiate Amateur Athletic Association of America (IC4A), the AAU and was, in the spring of 1920, an experienced AOC president who had officiated at every Olympic Games 1900 through 1912. He entered Congressional debates with coolness and an Olympian sense that his cause was just. Kirby immediately sought help from Brigadier General Hines, Chief of Transportation Services, U.S.S., Secretary Baker, the Honorable James Wadsworth of New York, Chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs of the Senate, and the Honorable Julius Kahn of California, Chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs of the House.<sup>19</sup> On March 20, 1920, House Joint Bill 319 was introduced by Representative Rollin B. Sanford of New York state, and thereafter, Senate Joint Resolution 179 by Senator Wadsworth, stating in part:

That authority be, and is hereby, given to the Secretary of War, under such rules and regulations as he may prescribe, to use such army transports as may be available for the transportation of teams, individuals, and their equipment representing the United States in Olympic Games and other international competitions during the present year.<sup>20</sup>

Senate Joint Resolution (S.J. Res.) 179 passed the Senate without difficulty<sup>21</sup> but the House insisted on hearings before its Committee on Military Affairs on April 7 and May 8, 1920. Appearing on behalf of the bill before chairman Julius Kahn of California and his committee were Secretary of War Newton D. Baker; Lieutenant General Robert L. Bullard, Eastern Division, U.S. Army; Commander C. B. Mayo, Chief of the Morale Division, U.S. Navy; Honorable Bartow S. Weeks, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of New York State; General F. H. Phillips, Secretary of the National Rifle Association; and Honorable Murray Hulbert, Commissioner of Docks, New York City. Chairman Kahn opened the April meeting by making it perfectly clear that transportation on military vessels was against the law and allowing Olympic athletes passage to Europe "would be setting a dangerous precedent that would hound the members of Congress in the years to come."<sup>22</sup> These are the first Olympic Games in nearly a decade, pointed out Secretary Baker. Military transportation for civilian athletes is a one-time affair, a war-related emergency and ought not to be done if it would create a precedent; it is a singular event pointed out the secretary, bringing "the athletes of all the nations together."<sup>23</sup> Obtuse discussions followed, touching on the Boy Scouts,

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18. Gustavus Towne Kirby, *I Wonder Why?* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1954), pp. 18, 111.

19. *Report of AOC*, p. 23.

20. See "Olympic Games," *Monthly Catalogue of U.S. Government Publications*, 20 (July 1919 to June 1920), pp. 634, 695; *Congressional Record*, 59, part 5, 66th Congress, 2nd session, March 20, 1920, p. 4670; also March 30, 1920, p. 4993; April 3, 1920, p. 5151; April 5, 1920, p. 5224, and in *Report of AOC*, p. 23.

21. *Congressional Record*, 59, part 5, 66th Congress, 2nd session, p. 5235, April 6, 1920.

22. Kahn as quoted in "Transportation of Olympic Teams," *Hearing Before The Committee on Military Affairs*, House of Representatives, 66th Congress, 2nd session, April 7, 1920, and May 8, 1920 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921), p. 3.

23. *Ibid.*

the Red Cross, the International Association of Churches; finally the meeting was adjourned without decision.

*The Spiraling Bureaucratic Labyrinth*

A meeting on Saturday, May 8, was arranged and President Kirby brought his most persuasive advocates to the House Military Affairs Committee. The eloquent Kirby led the parade of speakers, emphasizing the utter futility of trying to obtain civilian ships when the nation was still on a war-time footing. He underscored the “one-time” nature of this request and reminded the good gentlemen of the Committee that these Olympics athletes—young men and women “from coast to coast and from the Gulf to Canada” represented the glorious United States of America and would bring honor to the nation... but only if they were allowed to go to Antwerp.<sup>24</sup> General Bullard was of the opinion that these August Olympic Games would be even more valuable than the Inter-Allied Games held in Paris the year before. Commander Mayo reminded the Committee that one-fifth of the American Olympic team would be soldiers and sailors and only good could come from their participation in the games. Judge Weeks was a member of the prestigious IOC and spoke with the authority of that office as well as the Supreme Court of New York State. “The United States must help brave little Belgium,” said the Judge, striking at the soft side of the Committee’s hide. Other nations far smaller than the U.S.A. have already out spent her in Olympic preparations, he said. Our fine young men and women, he concluded in his *coup de grace*, “...are going to carry our flag to victory over there on the battle fields of peace, just as they carried our flag to victory on the battlefields of war.”<sup>25</sup> Committee members seemed obsessed with the problem of “paternalism” if a private group of specially selected athletes were allowed free passage overseas. There is no paternalism involved, repeated Weeks and Kirby, this time with a note of peevishness in their words. Since the American Olympic team is not funded by the government, several committee members wondered how Kirby and Weeks could constantly invoke flag, country, and patriotism. Justice Weeks got in the last word and concluded his part of the testimony by repeating the triple invocation of flag, country, patriotism, *plus* “nation defense,” as splendid reasons for allowing some of the country’s finest youth such a rare opportunity.<sup>26</sup>

General Phillips informed the Committee that the Olympic rifle team was easily the best in the world and should be allowed to prove it. “The world is out of joint,” said the last witness, the shrewd Commissioner of the New York City Docks, Murray Hulbert, and it is essential therefore that the government cooperate in order that the athletes “may uphold and maintain the honor and dignity of the United States... upon the field of peaceful compe-

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24. *Ibid*, p. 9.

25. *Ibid*, p. 18.

26. *Ibid*, p. 26.

tion.”<sup>27</sup> Before adjourning, a letter was read from the legendary football coach, Walter Camp, noting that no dangerous precedent would be set in helping the Olympic team get to Europe, for not only would they be the beneficiaries but our entire “industrial population” would be “stimulated.”<sup>28</sup>

Senate Joint Resolution (S.J. Res.) 170 made its tortuous way through the House of Representatives. Slight changes in wording, small additions and deletions took ten weeks of work and revision. Sharper focus on the resolution took place in April and May of 1920.<sup>29</sup> Several members of the House considered it unconscionable that the government would be burdened with huge costs for transporting and feeding several hundred “civilians” in a little understood venture to a European city still smoldering from the bombs of the recent war. The bill’s sponsor repeated, it seemed almost interminably, that:

These boys will come from all over the United States... and the Army and the Navy are interested in the matter on account of the athletic features involved. We want these boys to compete in the service in order to hold up the name of America in these Olympic Games this year.<sup>30</sup>

Will there be any “joy rides” involved, asked several law makers? Absolutely not was the quick reply. Every person has been carefully selected and will fulfill a specific vital role was the essence of lengthy debate in late May. Mr. Gallivan of Massachusetts nodded approval, pointing out to the doubting Thomases that these athletes were “the very best” and “will not be able to go to Antwerp unless they have a helping hand from Uncle Sam.”<sup>31</sup> It was easier going now and on May 24, the Vice-President of the United States laid before the Senate the amendment of the House of Representatives, and on June 2, 1920, Woodrow Wilson, American president, “approved and signed Joint Resolution 179.”<sup>32</sup> For several weeks prior to Mr. Wilson’s approbation, AOC President Kirby was sure of victory. We still need a quarter-million dollars, he said, but government support will save \$80,000 and, more importantly, “it will be a truly American invasion...,” the best American team ever, and “the first time that the government has given official recognition to the participation of American athletes in the Olympics.”<sup>33</sup>

### *An Olympian Ocean Crossing*

Olympic athletes in the Armed Services had no problems and would travel

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27. *Ibid.*, p. 28, 31.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

29. *Congressional Record*, 59, part 5, 66th Congress, 2nd session, p. 5307, April 7, 1920; also part 7, May 12, 1920, p. 6970; May 13, p. 7028; “Use of Army Transports to Olympic Games,” May 21, 1920, pp. 7456-7457; May 23, 1920, pp. 7490-7949; May 24, 1920, p. 7511; part 8, May 26, 1920, p. 7711; May 27, 1920, p. 7713.

30. *Ibid.*, May 21, 1920, p. 7456.

31. *Ibid.*, May 22, 1920, p. 7492.

32. *Ibid.*, May 24, 1920, p. 7511; June 3, 1920, p. 8308.

33. Gustavus T. Kirby, “U.S. Government Supports U.S. Olympics,” Walter Camp Papers, Box 50, “1908-1920,” Yale University Stirling Library; *The New York Times*, May 23, 1920, p. 4, sec. 8; *New York Tribune*, June 5, 1920, p. 13; *The New York Times*, June 5, 1920, p. 21.

first class aboard the armored cruiser “Frederick.”<sup>34</sup> The ship selected to carry the majority of team members was the “fine and fast” “Northern Pacific.”<sup>35</sup> But on the eve of its July 20 departure date the ship was declared “unseaworthy” and the 254 members of the Olympic team appeared stranded. President Kirby hadn’t planned on sailing with the athletes as he was urgently needed at home to support a team threatened with money shortages and a reduction in team size.<sup>36</sup> Incredibly, the only ship available to the U.S. Navy for use by the Olympic Committee was the transport “Princess Matoika,” and she was in mid-ocean on her way to New York City. Even the AOC, ever apologetic about the very halting progress being made about getting the team to Europe, called the “Matoika” a slow ship “and of ancient vintage.”<sup>37</sup> Many years later, passenger Daniel J. Ferris, AAU and Olympic official, remembered the nightmare trip:

...the government gave us this great rusty old army transport, the ‘Princess Matoika.’ Oh, it was a terrible, terrible ship. When we arrived to board, they had just taken off the bodies of 1,800 war dead from Europe. When the team tiled up the gangplank, the caskets were sitting there on the docks, lines and lines of coffins. It was a shocking way to start.

The athletes were quartered down in the hold. The smell of formaldehyde was dreadful. What a black hole that was for them. The athletes had to sleep in triple-decker bunks that hung on chains. The place was infested with rats. The athletes used to throw bottles at the rats. It was terrible, but we had to go this way because we had no money. No money at all.<sup>38</sup>

The Atlantic crossing took exactly 14 days—July 26 to August 8, 1920. The perpetual motion Kirby, before departure, raised \$60,000,<sup>39</sup> made a quick round trip to Antwerp, inspected the “Matoika” and promised “comfortable quarters.”<sup>40</sup> However, after the first night aboard ship, some of the athletes complained about crowded sleeping quarters below the water line. Joey Ray and Charley Paddock lodged protests with Mr. Kirby, who called their allegations exaggerated, although he admitted that the athletes “will sail under severe conditions.”<sup>41</sup> The “Matoika’s” captain took the southern course to avoid ice, but ran into heavy fog and rain. On deck, training was nearly futile; below decks the transport was dirty, infested with rats, the food was “from poor to bad,” and sanitary arrangements were wholly insufficient.

34. J. T. Boone, “Hospital Corpsmen in Olympic Games,” *Hospital Corps Quarterly*, January, 1921; *The New York Times*, May 21, 1920, p. 13.

35. The small 12 person ice hockey and figure skating group left America for Antwerp on April 7, 1920 aboard the liner “Finland;” the 23 rifle team left aboard the transport “Antigone” on June 21; the 8 trapshooters departed June 23 on the “Fort Victoria,” while the revolver and pistol team (16) left on July 6 on the transport “Pocahontas;” See *AOC Report*, *Ibid*, pp. 42-43.

36. “May have to cut Olympic entries,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 1920, p. 13; “Our ‘athletic ambassadors’ in need of financial backing,” *The Literary Digest*, 66 (July 24, 1920), 68-70. “American Olympic Committee Report explains adverse condition...,” *The New York Times*, November 1, 1920, p. 18.

37. *AOC Report*, p. 26.

38. Daniel J. Ferris as quoted in William O. Johnson, *All That Glitters is not Gold. An Irreverent Look at the Olympic Games* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1972), p. 141.

39. *The New York Times*, November 1, 1920, *ibid*.

40. “Kirby back from Europe,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 1920, p. 11; also *The New York Times*, July 5, 1920, p. 11; “Matoika to carry American athletes,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 1920, p. 9.

41. “Olympic athletes sail for Antwerp,” *The New York Times*, July 27, 1920, p. 15.

But a beleaguered Olympic officer responded that the athletes were insensitive to “the many little conveniences and luxuries installed for their comfort.” He further pointed out that earlier that same summer the “Princess Matoika” had transported 600 Boy Scouts to Antwerp and without a peep of complaint.<sup>42</sup>

But within days some of the athletes were in a mean mood—an attitude that sport journalists John Kieran and Arthur Daley called “the Mutiny of the ‘Matoika.’” The giant New York City Policeman, Lieutenant Matthew McGarh—respected by both the athletes and Olympic officials—was frequently called up to smooth matters between management and “the self-confessed ‘cream of the athletic world.’”<sup>43</sup> Everyday aboard ship was a crisis and even the placid McGarh, in retrospect, said that conditions had been so bad that he would never enter an Olympic Games again. The ship’s officers gave us extra food and blankets, he added. “Without the army and navy,” he ended, “we would have suffered a terrible defeat.”<sup>44</sup> American athletes, returning home early from Antwerp for failure to advance beyond the trials, returned to New York, complained bitterly about the wretched conditions aboard the “Princess Matoika.”<sup>45</sup> Another athlete, requesting anonymity, called conditions aboard ship “Horrible. You can’t believe what we’ve been through.”<sup>46</sup> Spokesman for the AOC, Frederick Rubien, pointed out ominously that under the circumstances conditions were as good as possible, but that “There was an element of dissatisfaction in the team which assumed the aspect of a Bolshevik outburst...”<sup>47</sup>

American athletes aboard the “Princess” trained as best they could. Boxers and wrestlers worked on the decks. Track and field athletes ran in place and sprinted along a 70 yard cork track, while swimmers tried to stay fit in a 12 X 9 foot long canvas pool. “Everyone is perfectly satisfied; it looks like one big family,” was AOC member R. S. Weaver’s message to the wire services.<sup>48</sup> But things got ugly; injuries occurred; P. J. McDonald injured his thumb; steeplechaser Max Bohland got three stitches due to “rolling of the ship;” heavy rains forced one athlete to murmur aloud “Our quarters are absolutely unlivable.”<sup>49</sup> Seasickness prompted several to “swear they would never part with dry land again.” Paul Lowry of the *Los Angeles Times* caustically noted that the pending crisis was “not mustard gas, but the revived Olympic Games.”<sup>50</sup> Social critic W.O. McGeehan, quoting a fictitious Olympian, wailed, “No, I ain’t going over to the Olympic Games; I wouldn’t travel

42. *AOC Report*, p. 30.

43. Weyand, *Ibid*, p. 135. Captain Weyand was an Olympic boxer and endured the Atlantic crossing like the rest.

44. Matt McGrath as quoted in “U. S. athletes return angry at Committee,” *New York Tribune*, September 12, 1920, p. 14.

45. “Several members of the Olympic team back from abroad,” *New York Tribune*, September 5, 1920, p. 16; also “Olympic athletes back: angered at treatment,” *New York Tribune*, September 7, 1920, p. 14.

46. “Olympians return, condemn officials,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 1920, p. 21.

47. “Rubien defends Olympic Committee,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 1920, p. 21.

48. “Conditions good on athlete’s arc,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 1920, p. 19.

49. “Athletes suffer injuries on ship,” *Public Ledger* [Philadelphia], August 5, 1920, p. 10; “American track team ruffled,” *Public Ledger* [Philadelphia], August 7, 1920, p. 10.

50. Paul Lowry, “Ready for the Olympic Games,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1920, pp. 1, 2, part III; also *L. A. Times*, August 3, 1920, p. 1, part III.

steerich.” His phantom athlete “Izzy” complained about the “stinking government ship” and how the AOC seems “never to do anything in the right way.”<sup>51</sup>

The lid blew on August 6, the twelfth day aboard the “Matoika.” The great Olympic 800 meter champion of 1912—James E. “Ted” Meredith—was aboard as a Universal Service Staff Correspondent as well as a member of the 400 meter dash Olympic team and described the “indignation meeting” held by the athletes. They simply would not tolerate conditions in Antwerp similar to those on ship, and blamed their own officials, all of who were aboard—for insensitivity and ineptness. “U.S. Olympic athletes threaten to go on strike.” cried the sporting headline of the *New York Tribune*. Several midnight meetings were held, the whole Olympic Committee hierarchy were castigated in a frontal assault and a formal protest to Secretary of War Baker was written. The incensed athletes chose representatives from all geographic areas of the United States to protest their recent fate aboard the “Princess” and to demand first-rate accommodations at the little red schoolhouse already set aside for them in Antwerp.<sup>52</sup>

### *Brave and Ill-Prepared Antwerp Welcomes the World*

Nothing in nearly a quarter-century of American involvement in the Olympic Games had reached such vitriolic levels of anger between athletes and their own officials. Inefficiency was the least of the charges brought against Justice Weeks, Mr. Kirby, AAU boss Samuel J. Dallas. Everett C. Brown and AOC secretary Rubien. Nearly 200 athletes signed the resolution. The bottom line was, finally, that they would compete in Antwerp “no matter what” and in spite of hard bunks and decks, endless rain, poor ventilation, and “evil-smelling holds overrun by rats.”<sup>53</sup> Upon arrival in Antwerp’s harbor at 9 p.m. of August 6, the mood of the team was not enhanced when it was announced that they would have to sleep aboard ship one more night. The next morning the American young men and women found their housing at a local school and YMCA, respectively—all adequately comfortable, although the men had no privacy in the schoolroom filled with rows of cots; nor was there hot water in the showers. The female swimmers found the pool “icy cold” and therefore were probably unimpressed by Belgian onlookers who said, “They swim like men.”<sup>54</sup> Head track coach Jack Moakley from Cornell University found the stadium’s cinder track wholly unsuitable, while hammer

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51. W.O. McGeehan, “Izzy quits Olympic team,” *New York Tribune*, August 1, 1920, p. 19; McGeehan, “In all fairness,” *New York Tribune*, August 2, 1920, p. 11.

52. J. E. Meredith, “Olympians put on indignation meet; may not compete,” *The Pittsburgh Post*, August 7, 1920, p. 7, “U.S. team stages protests meeting,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 1920, p. 7, “U.S. Olympic athletes threaten to go on strike,” *New York Tribune*, August 7, 1920, p. 9: “Olympic team protect to be sent to Baker,” *New York Tribune*, August 8, 1920, p. 20.

53. “Athletes blame U.S. Committee for poor conditions,” *The Pittsburgh Sunday Post*, August 8, 1920, p. 3, sec. 3; “Officials blamed by U.S. athletes,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 1920; p. 19 sport sec.; “Ted” Meredith, “Olympic athletes place responsibility of poor treatment on officials,” *The Pittsburgh Post*, August 9, 1920, p. 6.

54. “U.S. athletes in Olympic quarters,” *The New York Times*, August 9, 1920, p. 11.

thrower Pat Ryan went around declaring that all athletes would get ‘cauliflower ears’ sleeping on hard bunks decorated with hay-filled pillows.<sup>55</sup> The emotional dam broke once again when two more incidents occurred. A letter was read from the Belgian committee to the American team urging them to refrain from boisterous conduct about the schoolhouse quarters. Far more serious was Dan Ahearn’s instant dismissal from the team when he moved out of the primary school and into a local hotel. Two American boxers were also ordered home on the first available ship, having been accused of “boxing for a purse.”<sup>56</sup>

Many of the American athletes were in no mood for such antics by their own AOC members and retaliated with an angry outburst that “left the committee stunned.” Catcalls and heckling were aimed at President Kirby and Judge Weeks. Ahearn’s case was especially galling to team members, but Weeks pointed several acts of insubordination by the triple jump champion. Weeks pleaded for team work, discipline, and duty. “What position would you be in if the Committee refused to continue its duty?” A chorus of angry voices shouted, “Go ahead! We will get a better committee.”<sup>57</sup> Almost immediately President Kirby and his associates changed their minds and reinstated the independent Ahearn, but only after the athlete apologized, and in time for the American participation in Opening Ceremonies of these Games of the VII Olympiad.<sup>58</sup>

### *The Antwerp Games Try to Stand Tall and Straight*

For the Baron, the interregnum period 1912-1920 had been a double horror. The war had been a personal and international disaster. And, of course, it marked eight long years without an Olympic celebration. The great day had arrived, a day that the 57-year-old Baron Pierre de Coubertin had, with extraordinary impatience, waited 8 years to celebrate. Some 1,800 athletes from 27 countries were greeted by King Albert and Queen Elizabeth. The Antwerp stadium seemed “pathetically tiny,” but, nevertheless, Arthur S. Draper said, “It was the best League of Nations meeting since the war.”<sup>59</sup> All the Coubertin trappings were present: royalty, parade of athletes, soaring airplanes, and a solemn ceremony at Antwerp’s Cathedral where Cardinal Mercier compared the athlete’s glory with a higher glory—that of “man’s union to the glory of God himself.”<sup>60</sup> Coubertin was understandably elated, ex-

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55. Kieran and Daley, *ibid.*, p. 125.

56. “Olympic stadium ready for opening,” *Public Ledger* [Philadelphia], August 13, 1920, p. 11; Arthur S. Draper, “Three Americans are barred from the Olympic Games,” *New York Tribune*, August 14, 1920, p. 9.

57. “Committee members heckled by athletes at protest meeting,” *New York Tribune*, *ibid.*; also *Public Ledger* [Philadelphia], August 14, 1920, p. 9; *The New York Times*, August 14, 1920, p. 9.

58. James E. Meredith, “Great Olympic stadium at Antwerp officially opened,” *The Pittsburgh Sunday Post*, August 15, 1920, p. 3, sec. 3.

59. Arthur S. Draper, “Ahearn reinstated by AOC...,” *New York Tribune*, August 15, 1920, p. 19; during the parade of nations all flags except the USA dipped; “The Americans executed ‘eyes right’ and did not dip their flag,” *Public Ledger* [Philadelphia], August 15, 1920, p. 11.

60. Cardinal Mercier as found in *Bulletin du Comité Internationale Olympique*, 19 (January, 1950), 24.

claiming “Sport is King.” Speaking to the 18th session of the IOC, Coubertin maintained that 3 elements would emerge from these games (1) a belief in mankind’s inexorable progress, (2) a conviction that peace is attainable only through a sense of universal objectivity or disinterestedness and (3) a long-held faith that every nation needs to embrace a sport-for-all position.<sup>61</sup>

Probably the American athletes, coaches, and officials were not thinking such thoughts on this Opening Day Ceremony, August 14, 1920. What did concern them was to continue their domination of the Olympic Games, especially in track and field athletics—a national surge that had brought a harvest of 38 gold, silver, and bronze medals in that one sport at the Stockholm, Sweden, games 8 years earlier. American generosity in exporting track and field coaches to Europe during the periods 1910-1914 and 1919-1920, contributed to slightly closing the gap. Yankee athletes won 29 medals in this sport at the Antwerp games, ahead of the awesome athletic power—little Finland. America still ruled the Olympic Games—and in more than one sport. Returning home with precious gold medals were Charlie Paddock, Alan Woodring, Frank Loomis, members of the 3,000 meter team race and 400 meter relay, Richard London, Frank Foss, Pat Ryan, and P. J. McDonald—all in track and field. In swimming, the American victors were Duke Kahanamoku, P. Kealoha, Norman Ross, the 800 meter relay team (men), L. Kuehn, Ethelda Bleibtrey, the 400 meter relay for women, and tiny 13-year old Aeileen Rigin in fancy diving. DeGennaro, Mosberg, and Eddie Egan won boxing crowns while Ackerly won the featherweight class in catch-as-catch can wrestling. There was but a single finals match in Rugby football and the U.S.A. overpowered France, 8-0. The United States Naval Academy 8-oared crew won a stunning, very close victory over England’s Leander crew. The famous John B. Kelly won at single sculls and won again in double sculls with Paul V. Costello. American marksmen were awesome, dominating almost all rifle and pistol shooting, with Mark P. Arie, Karl T. Frederick, Carl T. Osburn, Morris Fisher, and Lawrence Nuesslein especially effective.<sup>62</sup>

By all systems of athletic scoring used in 1920—and there were many—the United States emerged as the dominant nation at these Olympic Games, with tiny Finland in surprisingly close attendance. There were murmuring, however, among some AOC members and especially among journalists that the country had not done as well as the great 1912 U.S. team, and that poor management by the AAU and the AOC was the reason. Matthew P. Halpin, four-time manager of the American Olympic team, wagged his finger at complacent associates, noting that “had it not been for the tremendous loss of life in the world war, which depleted much of the athletic material of our Allies, we might not have fared so well.”<sup>63</sup> In a moment of candor, AOC and AAU secretary Rubien admitted that the Europeans were catching up to the Ameri-

61. Pierre de Coubertin, “Discours prononcé à la séance d’ouverture de la XVIII<sup>e</sup> me session plenièrè du CIO,” 17 August, 1920, p. 1, *passim*.

62. *Olympic Games Handbook* (New York: American Sports Publishing Company: Spalding’s Athletic Library, 1921), *passim*.

63. M. P. Halpin, *ibid.*, p. 9.

can athletes.<sup>64</sup> President Kirby himself returned home and told the press, "If I had it to do over again, I would do many things differently."<sup>65</sup> Limply, the official chronicler of America's activities in Antwerp said that "The difficulties and mistakes of the last Olympiad were largely due to lack of time and to early uncertainties."<sup>66</sup> After complementing Belgium for its bravery in hosting the games, the same writer became more specific:

But to ignore mistakes and shortcomings on the part of the Belgian management and of even more glaring ones on the part of international sport federations which laid down the rules and provided the officials for the contests would be mere pretense.<sup>67</sup>

One of the most perceptive remarks was made in the post Olympic Games AOC report which admitted that "the continuity of the AOC... was severely strained by the Great War" and that some of the most success-oriented American sport leaders were gone by the year 1920.<sup>68</sup> U.S. athletes performed admirably, but unreasonably high expectations by journalists generated as much criticism as praise. Some of the former came from Roy Lewis in the January 1921 issue of *Outing* magazine. The American team was filled with complacency, he said: "sixty percent did nothing but have a joy ride and join the ranks of 'also rans.'" He quoted fellow journalist Sparrow Robertson of the *New York Herald*— that there was "too much deadwood" among the U.S. athletes. His most damaging cut was at AOC leadership. "The team seems never to have been in hand," was his conclusion.<sup>69</sup> Lastly, the author of the *Literary Digest* essay titled "Was the recent Olympiad a failure?" concluded that he did not find "in the seventh Olympiad a pleasant retrospect." Bad weather, injuries, a swollen team of non-scorers, a drop in medal wins compared to 1912, and even a negative comparison in male physiques compared to the Finns were all comments by John J. Hallinan in the *Boston Globe*. As far as America is concerned, he said, the games "will go down in history as a failure." Hallinan was present at both the Stockholm and the Antwerp games and the Belgian organizers suffered by comparison. Injuries and poor physical condition of many of our athletes were laid at the feet of the AOC. Dreadful conditions aboard a very slow tub were inexcusable, he lamented and "While the Committee, no doubt, failed in its mission, the athletes, too, were not above censure for the way they acted." Hallinan's very detailed, and balanced view of conditions aboard the "Princess Matoika" tended to find the athletes not without fault, but the burden of ineptitudes lay with American Olympic officials. Hallinan's series of essays in the *Boston Globe*, August 22-28, 1920, was widely quoted in American newspapers and magazines.<sup>70</sup>

64. F. W. Rubien, *ibid.*, p. 4.

65. Kirby as quoted in "Olympic Committee to make a report," *The New York Times*, October 5, 1920, p. 9.

66. *Report of AOC*, p. 46.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

68. "American Olympic Committee Reports," *The New York Times*, November 1, 1920, p. 8.

69. Roy Lewis, "Our 'scintillating' stars at Antwerp," *Outing*, 77 (January, 1921), pp. 162-163.

70. John J. Hallinan as quoted in "Was the recent Olympiad a failure?" *The Literary Digest*, 67 (October

*The Bottom Line on America's Olympic Preparations*

The World War I holocaust interrupted America's Olympic Games success. There was a loss of international athletic leadership among Americans after the death of James E. Sullivan in 1914. The AOC had never solicited monies from its government and in the difficult days immediately after the war precious little cash was located in the public and private sectors. All of this was compounded by slow, painful progress by the Belgians. Coubertin was responsible for all this precipitousness. "Everything had to be created from scratch," he admitted, and was hardly comparable to the London and Stockholm games of 1908 and 1912.<sup>71</sup> All countries had trouble getting to Antwerp, none more so than the British—and they had only a short trip across the lowest portion of the North Sea to the Olympic city. Latent ill-will against American athletic aggressiveness and a long-standing coolness toward any sporting event without a British label resulted in almost no monies for a team to be sent to Belgium. The Reverend R. S. de Coursey Laffin and Sir Theodore A. Cook worked unceasingly to heighten national enthusiasm and raise the needed funds. They succeeded somewhat and a small British team performed well at the games.<sup>72</sup>

The bottom line regarding American difficulties in preparing for the Antwerp Olympic Games of 1920 was that, in addition to a myriad of serious handicaps for which it could not be held responsible, the American Olympic Committee was sadly lacking in vision, forcefulness, and in its capacity to raise monies. General Palmer E. Pierce, President of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), in his 1920 annual address, blamed the AOC for a poorly managed Olympic effort.<sup>73</sup> The AAU was the most powerful arm of the AOC and there were those that said the root of the problem lay with them; but the AAU "disclaimed all responsibility for the alleged mismanagement" of our Olympic involvement during the difficult years 1919 and 1920.<sup>74</sup> The AOC was acutely aware of its own shortcomings and after a series of meetings in October, November, December of 1920, and in 1921, a significant restructuring of the organization took place. Permanent subcommittees were formed, mandated to work year 'round and every year rather than just during the Olympic Games period. Fund raising was given the highest priority, and men whose memories easily went back to America's first Olympic Games' involvement in 1896, and to each of that country's successive unrivaled Olympic success—forged ahead and changed the name of their own committee to "The American Olympic Association (AOA)." The old guard—Sloane, Armour, Mills, Weeks, Halpin, Rubien, all were there to

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16, 1920, pp. 70, 78. Hallinan's original articles appeared in the *Boston Globe*, August 22, 1920; pp. 1, 16; August 23, 1920, p. 12; August 27, 1920, p. 7; August 28, 1920, p. 10.

71. Coubertin, *Mémoires Olympiques*, *ibid.*, p. 157.

72. Examples of British indifference to the Antwerp games may be found in *New York Tribune*, May 22, 1920, p. 15; *The Times London*, August 14, 1920, p. 6; *The Egyptian Gazette* (Cairo), August 10, 1920, p. 5; *Public Ledger Philadelphia*, August 16, 1920, p. 14; *The Times London*, August 23, 1920, p. 8; *The Times London*, August 27, 1920, p. 6.

73. Palmer E. Pierce, "President's Address," *Proceedings*, 15th NCAA, December 29, 1920, p. 56.

74. Kongaard, *ibid.*, p. 194.

nod approval to AOA president Kirby's remark that these changes were but precursors and "will preclude any possibility of such conditions existing as did exist in the preparations for the last Olympic Games."<sup>75</sup>

James Edward Sullivan had been for twenty years an extraordinary able leader for both the AAU and the AOC. His notes were directives; he never issued suggestions but always mandates. He was honest, extremely intelligent, brutally direct, and above all, totally dedicated to keeping his country the supreme track and field power in international contests and Olympic Games. He was very successful at his work. This "aggressive American patriot" without "a shred of cosmopolitanism," as Lucas called him,<sup>76</sup> had no comparable successors in American amateur athletics following the first world war. Kirby and his athletic entourage were worthy men with considerable experience, but some of the steadiest men in the American Olympic movement were gone, and were missed. Besides, it was a new era—the 1920's and an age of heightened individual awareness and independence. For the first time, in significant numbers, American amateur athletes were speaking their minds, refusing to "knuckle-under" to the AAU and the AOA. It was a disconcerting period for the athletic leadership.<sup>77</sup>

Internecine struggles all through the decade of the 1920's between the AAU, the NCAA, and the Olympic Committee were to reach unprecedented proportions. In other words, the dismal U.S. Olympics administrative problems of the period of 1919-1920 were the result of a sudden loss of leadership, the encompassing trauma of the war, a certain "touchiness" and new independence on the part of American athletes and the special frenzy of Pierre de Coubertin during these years. All of them were precursors of a nearly permanent discontinuity between the American amateur sporting bodies. And in a quite extraordinary way that goes well beyond the boundaries of this paper, the Olympic Committee of the United States was, for two more generations, caught in between the two most powerful of these "sporting bodies"—the NCAA and the AAU. It was no place to be. Part of the reason for such a juxtaposition can be traced to the several years of indecision and lack of genuine leadership by the American Olympic Committee during those years of trial 1919 and 1920.

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75. Kirby as quoted in "Olympic Officials plan for future," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1920, p. 2, sec. IX; also "American Olympic Association Meeting," November 25, 1921 (New York Public Library under Kirby, Gustavus Towne); "New Olympic Body formed at meeting," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1921, p.16.

76. Lucas. "Early Olympic Antagonists..." *ibid*, p. 65.

77. A classic and representative case was that of the multiple Olympic Games champion, Charlie Paddock—an angry thorn in the side of the AAU and Olympic officials from his first competition in the Paris, France Inter-Allied Games of 1919 to his retirement on the eve of the 1932 Olympic Games.