

# Architects of the Modernized American Olympic Committee, 1921-1928: Gustavus Town Kirby, Robert Means Thompson, and General Douglas MacArthur

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Despite the domination of the Olympic Games by the United States in the 20 years before the First World War, the American Olympic Committee (AOC) was an ineffective organization, one without a professional staff, assembled only in the year of the games, and disbanded as a working group for the three years following the quadrennial festival. The universities of America supplied the athletes, with significant help from some famous big-city athletic clubs. The selection of the team, the negotiations with the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and communications with the host city organizing committees were managed by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), founded much earlier in 1888. This peculiar arrangement worked well through the 1912 Games of the Fifth Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden, but preparations by the AOC-AAU combine for the Olympic Games of 1916 and 1920 were abysmal. It became evident to some that the Great War, debilitating as it was to international athletics, was not the sole reason for the series of bumbled actions by American amateur sport and AOC leaders. This article is not so much a reiteration of these ineffectual efforts, but rather a description and analysis of three AOC presidents who began the long process of modernizing and professionalizing the nation's Olympic Committee.<sup>1</sup>

American Olympic authorities had neither the money nor the means to do better than send their team to Antwerp, Belgium, in 1920, aboard the rotting "death ship" *Princess Matoika*. The tiny vessel had carried hundreds

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1. The definitive work on preparations for the never-held 1916 Olympic Games is Karl Lennartz, *Die VI. Olympischen Spiele Berlin 1916* (Köln: Carl Diem Institut, 1978). Lennartz's bibliography (pages 201-215) contains 389 citations. See also John Lucas, "American Preparation for the first Post World War Olympic Games 1919-1920," *Journal of Sport History* 10 (Summer 1983): 30-44. This researcher has over a hundred articles from New York City and London newspapers dealing with the cancelled Olympic Games scheduled for Berlin 1916. There is significantly more primary and secondary literature out of America, France, Germany, Britain, and Belgium on the 1920 Olympic Games in Belgium.

of American dead soldiers back from European World War I battlefields and the still-powerful fumes of embalming fluid formaldehyde sickened most of the American athletes in the lengthy Atlantic crossing. It was only the latest AOC “spiraling bureaucratic labyrinth.”<sup>2</sup> Something had to be done, and 1920 and 1921 saw significant restructuring from within the AOC.

### President Gustavus Town Kirby (1874-1956)

World War I resulted in the cancellation of the Games of the Sixth Olympiad, scheduled for Berlin in 1916. It only added unease to the disconnected AOC and to the leadership’s realization that a permanent, fiscally responsible group was needed, one that would meet regularly and often. Historian Arnold Flath called it correctly when he described the AOC in the year 1919 as having “neither constitution, by-laws, nor rules of procedure.”<sup>3</sup> “Gus” Kirby was assigned the task of reorganizing the committee and was elected president of the AOC on November 28, 1919, succeeding the multi-millionaire industrialist, Colonel Robert Means Thompson.<sup>4</sup> The committee was in disarray, having failed to raise sufficient monies to send the team to the post-war Antwerp, Belgium, Olympic Games, nor was it successful in recruiting the very best male amateur athletic talent in the country. For the full calendar year 1920, President Kirby vigorously sought help from his government in Washington, D.C., starting with Woodrow Wilson and Secretary of War Newton Baker, continuing with the Navy secretary, Josephus Daniels, and on to a dozen committee chairmen, politicians, and military personnel. Gentlemen, help your AOC, send a winning team to the Olympic Games in Antwerp, Kirby wrote and testified in the Halls of Congress. For all his efforts, Kirby’s AOC received not a dollar bill and only the loan of an awful, leaking ship, the *Princess Matoika* to carry America’s male athletes and several female swimmers to Antwerp. Kirby’s first year in office was less than a success, despite major efforts, political and intellectual.<sup>5</sup> When it was all over and the American Olympic team returned from Belgium with less than the overwhelming success enjoyed in the previous five games, Kirby met with his colleagues in the New York Athletic Club on December 4, 1920, and announced “a complete reorganization of the AOC.”<sup>6</sup> Robert E. Lehr’s

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2. See Lucas, 35.

3. Arnold William Flath, *A History of Relations Between the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the Amateur Athletic Association of the United States, 1905-1963* (Champaign, IL: Stipes Pub. Co, 1964), 40.

4. See *The New York Times [NYT]*, November 29, 1919, p.12, “Kirby elected president”; also “Gustavus Kirby chosen to head Olympic Committee,” *New York Tribune*, November 29, 1919, p. 14.

5. Considerable primary literature exists on Kirby’s efforts to gain favor with his own government in Washington, D.C. See John Lucas, “The First Post World War Olympic games.” Lucas read, in part, the *Monthly Catalogue of U.S. Government Publications: the Congressional Record: Hearing Before the Committee on Military Affairs*; “U.S. Government Supports U.S. Olympics,” Walter Camp papers, Box 50 (1908-1920); *The Official AOC Report 1920*; the Woodrow Wilson papers, Reel 342. Several score secondary sources are also cited by Lucas.

6. “Olympic Officials Plan For Future,” *NYT*, December 5, 1920, p. 2.

doctoral dissertation deals with the restructuring of the AOC into a permanent and professional American Olympic Association (AOA), and a fund-raising, team-recruiting committee in the year of the Olympic Games.<sup>7</sup>

“Gus” Kirby was born in Philadelphia, but lived his long life in New York City. His father, Thomas, was one of the city’s most successful art dealers and he sent his son on to Columbia University where the young college fencer and track and field athlete received degrees from the School of Engineering and the Law School. Before becoming president of the new AOA, Kirby served as presidents of two powerful organizations—the Track and Field Intercollegiate American Amateur Athletic Association (IC4A) and the AAU.<sup>8</sup>

Kirby and his people launched the new AOA, with an optimistic hope from the president:

The American Olympic Committee is at an end . . . The American Olympic Association is about to be born. May it be a potent force in ushering in a new era of peace and goodwill toward men.<sup>9</sup>

The very busy Kirby, with half-a-dozen major obligations, including the invention of the instant picture, photoelectric sport camera, resigned as AOA president and was succeeded on November 22, 1922, by the former AOC president, the seventy-one year old, Col. R. M. Thompson, who took charge of both Olympic organizations.<sup>10</sup> The double-committee members from the AOC-AOA, almost all “old-line” AAU loyalists, now assembled on a regular basis at the New York Athletic Club (NYAC), where Thompson was president, or, even better, on the colonel’s luxury yacht anchored in New York Harbor. A renewed sense of purpose melded to new and, hopefully, more efficient Olympic committees prepared for the First Olympic Winter Games in Chamonix, France, and the summer Olympic Games in Paris, both in the year 1924.

## Colonel Thompson’s Second Term in Office 1922-1927

In the early months of his second presidency, the elderly but vigorous Thompson dedicated himself and that of his AOA and AOC committees to

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7. Robert E. Lehr, “The American Olympic Committee 1896-1940: from Chaos to Order,” Ph.D. dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, 1985, chapters 2 and 3.

8. Read Kirby’s autobiography, *I Wonder Why?* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1954). See also his “Reminiscences,” in the *Amateur Athlete* 9 (December, 1938), 4, 24, 39. Kirby’s biography is located in *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 45 (1962), pp. 20-21, while his obituaries may be found in *NYT*, February 29, 1956, p. 31; *New York Herald Tribune*, February 29, 1956, p. 12, and in the *Amateur Athlete*, 27 (April, 1956), 12. Extensive Kirby files are located in the archives of the United States Olympic Committee in Colorado Springs. Olympic historian John Lucas (Penn State University) accumulated a file of approximately 400 references on Kirby.

9. *AOA Minutes*, 25 November 1921, p. 14.

10. See *AOA Minutes*, 22 November 1929, p. 13; *NYT*, November 23, 1922, p. 27. Thompson and his inner circle of AOA-AOC membership, met in the White House with the President of the United States, Warren Harding.

the most careful preparations for the two Olympic Games in 1924. The cost would be enormous, \$325,000 for the summer games in Paris, and President Thompson pledged “no repeat of the *Princess Matoika* incident, that everything would be first-rate.”<sup>11</sup> Thompson, a graduate of the United States Naval Academy (1868) and president of the powerful Washington, D.C., lobby group, the Navy League, used his every influence with President Calvin Coolidge, with Secretary of State, J. W. Weeks, and Secretary of the Navy. Ray Lyman Wilbur, and others, to obtain money for the nearly 400 Olympic athletes that were scheduled for Chamonix and Paris. All to no avail: not a dollar came from that direction, and the very wealthy Colonel Thompson contributed thousands of dollars of his own money.<sup>12</sup> AOA Finance Chairman, Henry T. Allen, did what he could in early 1924, and sent “A Personal Message to all those who believe in upholding American traditions of clean sportsmanship.”<sup>13</sup> Thompson’s vigor, influence, and the efforts of his new, full-time AOC, were successful in sending a full complement of American men and women to Paris, aboard the luxury ship *America*. To the surprise of the international sporting world, the winter and summer Olympic Games were dominated by Scandinavia’s Norway, Sweden, and Finland, with the United States in close attendance in the winning of gold, silver, and bronze medals. Thompson was certainly pleased, as was the Honorary President of the AOA-AOC, “His Excellency Calvin Coolidge, President of the USA.” We did our duty regarding medals, wrote Thompson, on September 18, 1924, but more importantly:

. . . the Americans worthily represented the best traditions of chivalry and sportsmanship, cheerfulness in defeat, modesty in victory, fair play, courtesy, and courage.<sup>14</sup>

The growing American athletic giant, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), sent three of their most important officers to the Paris Olympic Games, and they all sent letters of congratulations to Colonel Thompson. “A job well done,” wrote NCAA president, Brigadier General Palmer E. Pierce. AOC treasurer and NCAA officer, Robert Tait McKenzie, M.D., complimented “the English speaking peoples in Paris,” for “they hold in their hands and in their language, the future of the games.” Amos Alonzo Stagg had attended four games, and was astonished at “Thompson’s team”:

11. “Paris trip to cost \$350,000,” *NYT*: October 26, 1923, p. 20; “Thompson outlines Olympic plans,” *NYT*, November 20, 1923, p. 15. For details on money-raising efforts, see *NYT*, June 7, 1923, p. 17; June 19, 1923, p. 15; October 26, 1923, p. 20; January 14, 1924, p. 22; see editorial, March 23, 1924, part II, p. 6, and March 24, 1924, p. 14.

12. Colonel Thompson (1849-1930) was successful in obtaining \$2,500 from the AAU: a thousand dollars from the IC4A, and “a large sum from the Navy League” (*NYT*, November 23, 1922, p. 27). Thompson convinced Secretary Wilbur to be an honorary vice-president of the AOA (see *NYT*, March 28, 1924, p. 11), and made vigorous efforts to lobby influential State Department politicians. See State Department File 1910-1929, under “AOC,” located in the National Archives, Washington, DC.

13. Allen’s full statement is located in *Athletic Almanac For 1924* (New York: Spalding’s Athletic Library, American Sports Publ., 1924), p. 13.

14. Thompson to Coolidge; letter dated September 18, 1924; located on p. 5 of the *AOA Report on VIII Olympiad 1924*.

The difference between the Olympic Games of 1900 and the games this year was so great that it is impossible for me to describe it.<sup>15</sup>

After an exhausting trip to both Amsterdam and The Hague, to inspect the 1928 Olympic venue and to attend meetings of the world track and field body (IAAF), the nearly 80-year-old Thompson returned home and turned over the presidency of the AOA and the AOC to William C. Prout of Boston. The date was November 17, 1926, and the colonel was to live another four years.<sup>16</sup> Prout, a veteran AAU man, lawyer and banker, served very briefly and died suddenly on August 4, 1927, at age forty-one.<sup>17</sup> An immediate and intense search for a replacement began and a young general of the Armies, on leave of absence, was selected. Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) took charge and immediately set the agenda: to “win” the next summer Olympic Games in Amsterdam, Holland.

### General MacArthur and His Olympic Committee 1927-1928

For 20 years, at West Point, and later, as a rising star in the American Army, Douglas MacArthur supported competitive athletics for men. U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General Charles P. Summerall gave the junior officer permission to accept the AOC presidency because “favorable publicity might accrue to the Army from MacArthur’s [Olympic] participation . . .” In his autobiographical *Reminiscences*, MacArthur recalled that “General Summerall agreed to place me on detached service” and in so doing serve the nation in a different way.<sup>18</sup> The 47-year-old MacArthur was fully aware of growing tensions among the NCAA, the AAU, and the Olympic committee. It was another challenge for the imperial army officer, who found the

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15. All three quotes are to be found in the *Proceedings* of the nineteenth annual convention of the NCAA, December 30, 1924, pages 13, 83, 99-104; John L. Griffith reminded Dr. McKenzie that “America’s universities and not the nation’s athletic clubs were mainly responsible for our great success in Paris.” See letter Griffith to McKenzie, dated January 16, 1925, located in McKenzie Archives, University of Tennessee.

16. See *NYT* April 11, 1926, sec. X, p. 5; July 25, 1926, sec. IX, p. 8; also “AAU defeats rival organization in bid for Olympic Committee Control,” *New York Herald Tribune*, November 18, 1926, p. 25, 27. This 3,000-word essay was written by Jesse Abramson, possibly the nation’s most knowledgeable journalist on the machinations of the AAU, IC4A, NCAA, AOA-AOC. On March 9, 1926, IOC president Baillet-Latour nominated R. M. Thompson for membership, but the elderly American was unable to accept. See *NYT*, March 10, 1926, p. 17. A Thompson biography may be constructed from the following citations, selected from a much larger body of extant factual material: *Dictionary of American Biography* 31 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons 1944), 687-688; *Who’s Who in America 1922-1923*, p. 3048; *NYT*, April 27, 1922, p. 15; June 7, 1922, p. 17; August 22, 1922, p. 13; July 24, 1924, p. 9; April 19, 1925, part XI, pp. 1, 4; September 6, 1930, p. 15. Also, “From Robert M. Thompson, Pres. AOC to His Excellency Calvin Coolidge, Pres. USA and Honorary Pres. AOC” in *Report VIII Olympiad Paris 1924*, pages 5, 7, and *AOA Minutes*, November 22, 1929, page 13.

17. See William Christopher Prout (1886-1927) in the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 21, p. 386.

18. For Summerall’s decision, see D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur*, vol. I, 1880-1941; 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), 325. Also, MacArthur’s *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), 86. “The President of the AOC is Major Gen. Douglas MacArthur. The committee is elected by the AOA to which the organization above [NCAA] is expected to make application for reinstatement.” See “NCAA rejoins AOA,” *NYT*, December 30, 1927, p. 15.

non-war years of the 1920s “a spiritual desert.” The phrase was that of William Manchester, who wrote that during this period. MacArthur “needed something to engage his attention and arouse his enthusiasm.”<sup>19</sup>

“We had frequent mini-victory speeches by General MacArthur on our Atlantic crossing aboard the *S.S. Roosevelt*” remembered 1,500-meter Olympian Raymond Conger, as the American team headed for Amsterdam and the 1928 Summer Olympic Games. “We all feared and admired the general, simultaneously,” said Conger, who was accompanied by his wife, Bernice, chaperone to the first female Olympic track team.<sup>20</sup> For MacArthur, ordering the forces of the AAU and Olympic committee to work in coordination with the NCAA, thus forging an unbeatable “army” of American Olympians, was close to instinctive behavior, as he lectured the team aboard ship on America’s manifest destiny. “I told them,” MacArthur recalled, that “We represented the greatest nation in the world.” He continued to challenge them on a daily basis:

We have not come so far just to lose gracefully, but rather to win, and win decisively. I rode them hard, stormed and pleaded and cajoled.<sup>21</sup>

Once in Amsterdam, the driven MacArthur never let up, and when the manager of the U.S. boxing team threatened to withdraw from the games over what he regarded as an unfair decision, MacArthur refused, snapping back “Americans never quit.”<sup>22</sup> One journalist sat in on a MacArthur session of coaches and managers. “These meetings,” he wrote, “had about the same chilling spiritual temperature as a bank director’s meeting.”<sup>23</sup>

The centerpiece of these summer games, as they were from the beginning, was track and field athletics. While MacArthur’s “troops” did well, the Scandinavians, led by Finland, matched American victories, and this in spite of MacArthur’s insistence that 11 track coaches make the trip to Amsterdam. In addition, he had appointed Thomas Kennedy of Princeton University to the AOC Executive Committee—“the final step,” wrote *The New York Times* journalist, Bryan Field, “in the healing of the breach between the NCAA and the AAU.”<sup>24</sup> General MacArthur found the Amsterdam games a kind of “war without weapons,”<sup>25</sup> offering that the arduous ocean crossing was well worth

19. William Manchester, *American Caesar, Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978), 137. Another biographer called the 1920s, for MacArthur, “frustrating, imprisoning years.” See Richard H. Revere and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The General and the President . . .* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Pub., 1951), 30.

20. Researcher’s personal interview with Ray and Bernice Conger in State College, Pennsylvania, January 2, 1992.

21. See MacArthur’s *Reminiscences*, 86.

22. MacArthur quote in Manchester’s *American Caesar*, 140.

23. The journalist’s name is not mentioned in Clayton James’ *The Years of MacArthur*, 327-328.

24. See “Lawson Robertson and 10 assistant track coaches,” *NYT*, March 22, 1928, p. 23. Bryant Field authored this by-line which also contained the observation on the AOC-NCAA-AAU.

25. The phrase is not that of MacArthur, but the title of a book *War Without Weapons* (London: W. H. Allen, 1968) by Christopher Chataway and Philip Goodhart.

it. "We have nine events sewed up."<sup>26</sup> Possibly he knew the battlefield better than the athletic field and the USA decidedly did not sweep nine events, prompting Herbert Reed of *Outlook* magazine to write: "There isn't the shadow of an excuse for the mishandling of this venture from General MacArthur, the head of the Committee, down."<sup>27</sup> MacArthur appeared undaunted and hailed America's Olympic victory, and graciously received from Holland's Queen Wilhelmina "some beautiful MacArthur red roses named after the general's father." Setting foot back on American soil, MacArthur exclaimed:

Our victorious team returned to New York with the plaudits of the country ringing in our ears. The team was feted from coast to coast, both the press and my superiors being most generous.<sup>28</sup>

MacArthur's final brief, overblown but effective gesture as Olympic committee president was an oft-quoted letter to his commanding officer, President Calvin Coolidge, a small portion reading:

'Athletic America' is a telling phrase. It is talismanic. If I were required to indicate today that element of American life which is most characteristic of our nationality, my finger would unerringly point to our athletic escutcheon.<sup>29</sup>

He went on for pages, talking about "athletic codes," the "ages of chivalry and knighthood," the "highest moral laws," the "uplift of man" and an athletic philosophy, a kind of religion "that has no hypocrisy in its brave and simple faith [which] binds man to man in links as true as steel—the religion of a gallant sportsman's loyalty and honor." When popular American journalist, Bob Considine, read MacArthur's report, he laughed for a long time, and wrote about the general: "He dipped his pen into his purple ink pot, his gorgeous report probably confounded Calvin Coolidge."<sup>30</sup>

Of course, General Summerall, was delighted with MacArthur's brief interlude as AOC president, and wrote him:

I can best voice what is universally recognized that you alone are responsible for cementing the bonds between disorganized and factional organizations.<sup>31</sup>

Summerall was talking about the well-known athletic acronyms of the day: AAU-NCAA-AOA-AOC. He concluded his letter to his junior officer:

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26. See *NYT*, July 30, 1928, pages 1, 12, and July 31, 1928, pp. 1, 19.

27. Herbert Reed, "Olympic Aces and Deuces," *Outlook*, 149 (August 15, 1928), 625.

28. See *Reminiscences*, 86-87.

29. MacArthur to Coolidge in a letter titled "Report of the President of the AOC to the President of the USA," located in the *AOC Report—Ninth Olympic Games 1928*, pp 6-7.

30. Bob Considine, *It's All News to Me, A Reporter's Deposition* (New York: Meredith Press, 1967), 269.

31. Summerall to MacArthur letter is located in a footnote on p. 87 of Douglas MacArthur's *Reminiscences*.

“You have not only maintained the reputation that Americans do not quit, but that Americans know how to win.”<sup>32</sup> Much of it was great theatre. Some of it was part of the “old boys” West Point network. But some of it had made an impression on the American public and its ostensible servants, the print media journalists.

### Conclusion

The varicolored personalities and talents of three American Olympic Committee presidents during the brief period 1921-1928 had made a contribution to amateur athletics in creating a permanent stamp in the minds of millions of Americans. Gus Kirby, Colonel Thompson, and General MacArthur were unusually talented American business and professional men, and for various personal reasons brought their variegated abilities in the service of the seriously wounded national Olympic committee. They melded business acumen with super-patriotism—two complementary mind-sets that were perceived during this era as the essence and central focus of most Americans. The 1920s belonged to the businessman, and, as historian David A. Shannon said of the era: “America was a business civilization.”<sup>33</sup> No organization could survive without business efficiency and that certainly applied to that once old-fashioned club, the American Olympic Committee. The trio of Kirby, Thompson, and MacArthur brought a degree of operational vigor and heightened patriotism to the AOC, which in tandem, had been missing for a full generation before the Great War. The new order of American Olympic presidents had hoped to mend fences between the constantly bickering AAU, NCAA, and AOC. They had hoped to reduce the tide of profit-making among the super-star pseudo amateur athletes. They had hoped to dominate the gold, silver and bronze medal awards at the winter and summer Olympic Games, just as they had done in earlier days. They had hoped for a modicum of financial help from the American government to support the ever-growing size and expense of American expeditionary Olympic teams. They had hoped for and worked toward bringing either the Olympic winter or summer games, or both, to American shores during this decade of the 1920s. In every single one of these objectives they failed. And yet in failure, there was some success. Possibly without their full awareness, the team Kirby-Thompson-MacArthur had created a national awareness of their existence and importance, something not so in earlier times, and in so doing they laid the vestigial beginnings of what one day, three generations later, in the mid 1990s, would become the largest, wealthiest, and most successful Olympic committee in the world.

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32. *Ibid.*

33. See Chapter Ten, “The Politics of Business, 1919-1929,” in David A. Shannon, *Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1964). The specific quote is located on p. 196.