

Brief Euphoria: Chicago and the 1904 Olympic Games Award

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Despite the celebration of the first two Olympic Games in Athens (1896) and Paris (1900) and American dominance in their track and field contests, knowledge about the Olympic phenomenon was not at all widespread. For an American public to become aware of Olympic Games something other than an obscure athletic festival held in a far off foreign country would have to occur, in effect, an Olympic festival celebrated in an American city. Thus it was that several American cities entertained preliminary thoughts about hosting the 1904 Games. They were: Philadelphia, New York, Chicago and St. Louis. The overtures to win the hosting distinction from New York and Philadelphia were shortlived and without formal submission of plans to the IOC. Detailed correspondence between Pierre de Coubertin and American IOC members and Chicagoans proves that the quest by Chicago to win the Games of the 3rd Olympiad was by far the most elaborately constructed and advanced. In a series of events unfolding between the late summer of 1900 and May 1901 Chicago bid for and finally received the 1904 hosting distinction over a "last minute" counter-bid by St. Louis. St. Louis' case was predicated on the possibility of the Games being celebrated as part of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, delayed by one year, from 1903 to 1904. Analysis of primary sources points to Henry J. Furber Jr. as the chief architect of Chicago's successful bid initiative and subsequent organizational plans. The fact that the Games were transferred to St. Louis by IOC action almost two years later is well known, but the details of the first award of the Olympic Games to an American city is little known. Thus, this paper fills a gap in early American Olympic history.