

OLYMPISM AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

More of the Baron's Mischief: Pierre de Coubertin and the Award of the Xth Olympic Games

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World War I and the early 1920s were periods of the Modern Olympic Movement's history that continued to be dominated by the will and spirit of its founder, the Baron Pierre de Coubertin. One of

Coubertin's consistent acts during these times was to stymie American hopes to stage another Olympic Games after what he referred to as "the St Louis debacle of 1904." It was not until the eve of his retirement from the IOC in 1924 that the Baron grudgingly supported an American quest to pry the Games away from their habitual European stage.

Despite arguments made to Coubertin from American amateur sport czar James E. Sullivan in the early months of 1914 for a transfer of the 1916 Games from Berlin to a seemingly safe haven in America, the Baron insisted that the Games of the VIth Olympiad remain awarded to Germany. The Baron was adamant . . . if they could not be celebrated there, then the Olympic festival would be cancelled, American arguments aside.

Despite the award of the first post-World War I Olympic Games to the European sites of Antwerp, Paris, and Amsterdam in 1920, 1924, and 1928, respectively, Coubertin's Eurocentric stance began to waiver in the face of a powerful bid made by the City of Los Angeles. Led by California real estate development mogul William May Garland, Los Angeles officials and American Olympic folks moved resolutely to break Europe's stranglehold on hosting the great international festival. They were finally successful in 1923, when the IOC at its annual meeting in Rome, acceded to Garland's logic and argument that "the New World should organize one Olympiad every third year in the future." Although that argument did not prevail in long-term consideration, it did yield the Games of the Xth Olympiad to the City of Los Angeles in 1932. We now know, of course, that those Games were among the greatest ever celebrated, testimony to American initiative and organization, along with California flair and, lest we forget, astonishing fund-raising success during a severe world-wide depression.

The sources for the study were private letters of IOC meetings located in the archives of the International Olympic Committee in Lausanne. Also, sources in the form of letters, memoranda and newspaper articles located in the Ziffren Library in Los Angeles provided valuable insight