

Preparing for the Olympic Games of 1916. The Origins of Sport as a Means of National Representation

Arnd Kruger
Georg-August-Universitat, Germany

In the heat of nationalistic fervour prior to World War I, events which questioned the rank of a nation in comparison to others were regarded with the utmost suspicion. The Olympic Games of 1912 in Stockholm showed the relative decline of British sporting success (only third behind Sweden and the U.S.) and a struggle for 5th place between Germany and France in the presence of much of the European nobility. This paper compares the reaction in Germany and Great Britain (and the Empire). In Britain the National Olympic Association started a major drive for private funding to prepare the athletes for the 1916 Games to be held in Berlin. This resulted in a lengthy discussion in *The Times* and other papers about the role of sport in defining the value of a nation or its "decadence." This was mixed with an old-fashioned amateur spirit ("Buying victories is positively degrading") and a call for a United Empire team. The Imperial government did not get involved at all into the discussion although many prominent persons supported the campaign on a private basis.

In Germany the whole matter of financing the preparation of the team for the Olympic Games was taken over by the Imperial government which won parliamentary support for its position. It followed closely the public discussion in England but drew different consequences. Archival evidence from the DZA Potsdam shows that whether the state should get involved was not questioned, only whether the

Imperial government or those of the separate German states should be involved - since sport was considered a part of the cultural domain. The Emperor himself got involved in the funding and used sport as a vehicle through which to strive for excellence and international reputation.

Germany and Britain looked to the U.S. in preparing their athletes efficiently for the Olympics, hiring foreign coaches and setting up coaches' courses to improve the general standard of competition

This paper argues that Social Darwinism influenced the public discourse at the time, and it discusses the different relationship towards the state in Britain and Germany. Sport, with its symbolic function, was considered then for the first time as a means of national representation.