

Power Drain: The IOC and Federation Internationale de Football Association, 1925-30

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The Antwerp Games of 1920, the first Olympics celebrated after World War I, showed the IOC that it was not alone in the administration of international sport. International Sport Federations (IFs) were becoming increasingly involved in the administration of international sport contests, including the Olympic Games. While IOC president Pierre de Coubertin had realized the necessity of having IFs control technical aspects of sports as early as 1914, the decade of the 1920s witnessed the IFs coming of age and attempting to assert their place in the growing Olympic movement. This paper looks at one instance of a Federation attempting to assert itself in the face of the IOC's dominant position.

In 1925 the city of Prague played host to an Olympic Congress attended by IOC members, IF representatives, and National Olympic Committees (NOCs). The key issue on the agenda was the persistent problem of amateurism. The Congress reached no consensus on a standard definition, but the IOC continued to insist that the IFs respect its general amateur categories. One of these categories stated that athletes were not to be reimbursed for time they spent away from their occupations attending sporting competitions. The IFs represented at the Congress agreed to this stipulation. Shortly after the Congress, which it had attended, the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) decided to modify its rules and allow its constituent National Federations (NFs) to make their own decisions about reimbursement for time spent away from work. This touched off an intense argument with the IOC (and with certain other IFs and NOCs).

The IOC Executive Committee held several meetings with the leaders of the FIFA in an attempt to resolve the situation in time for the 1928 Amsterdam Olympic Games. While neither side was willing to change its fundamental position, both were eventually able to make concessions. The FIFA first offered to limit eligibility to those players who had not received payment for lost time after a certain date. When the IOC refused to bend because it did not want to reverse the decision of the Prague Congress, the FIFA threatened not to take part in the Amsterdam Games. This prompted a new

offer from the IOC President Henri Baillet-Latour accepting payment for lost time under certain conditions. The FIFA accepted the offer. Baillet-Latour then persuaded the IOC Executive to consider the situation with FIFA a "fait nouveau," which did not fall under the purview of the previous Congress' decisions. The Executive Committee agreed, exceptionally, to allow a soccer tournament, under FIFA rules, at the Amsterdam Games. This outraged many other IFs, NOCs, and some IOC members, believing as they did that the Olympic Congress was the highest authority of the Olympic movement, and even the IOC could not go against decisions made there.

The IOC (and the FIFA) prevailed for the 1928 Games, but the issue of lost time and the question of authority prompted the IOC to call another Olympic Congress. The 1930 Berlin Olympic Congress addressed the concerns of the IFs irritated with the FIFA situation, clarified the IOC's position on amateurism, and, ultimately, removed the Olympic Congress as the highest authority in the Olympic Movement. Thus, the struggle with FIFA contributed to a minor redistribution of power by prompting the IOC to realize that it could not ignore the IF's positions on Olympic matters.