

Paula Welch  
University of Florida

## Coca-Cola's Original Olympic Connection

Coca-Cola's affiliation with the Olympic Games began with the IX Olympiad in Amsterdam. The soft drink's debut at the 1928 Olympic Games occurred amid modest fanfare, four decades before the quadrennial events became a worldwide event via satellite television. One thousand cases containing the familiar hobble-skirt bottle arrived aboard the *SS President Roosevelt*, transporter of the American Olympic team. Billboards and signs above the stadium concessions introduced Coca-Cola to Olympic patrons. Vendors attired in caps and coats displaying the soft drink's trademark sold the cola outside the stadium in tiny shops called winkles. Cafes, restaurants and small shops in Amsterdam served Coke in bottles and from soda fountains. Coca-Cola's Olympic association is the longest ongoing relationship of any company with the quadrennial sport event. This study addresses the central following questions: What were the circumstances that led to the introduction of Coca-Cola to the Olympic Games? Who was responsible for introducing Coca-Cola at the 1928 Olympic Games? Why was the already immensely successful company interested in an obscure sporting event? How did Coca-Cola's officials learn about the Olympic Games?

In 1923, Robert Woodruff, son of an Atlanta banker, became president of the Coca-Cola company. In 1926, he established the Foreign Department which became a subsidiary known as the Coca-Cola Export Corporation in 1930. Questions surrounding the origin of the Coca-Cola Olympic connection are intriguing and challenging. No one in the Coca-Cola Archives can pinpoint the precise source of the original connection between the drink and the Olympic Games. There is more speculation than facts that support the answers to the questions that are central to this study. An examination of sources including Coca-Cola publications, newspapers, Olympic reports, Robert Woodruff's papers, and documents from the Steamship Historical Society support the connection to the 1928 Olympic Games by Coca-Cola. There is evidence that European travel by Robert Woodruff in 1925 may have led him to think about the sport and cola connection. While the 1928 Olympic Games were small in comparison to their modern counterparts, they drew visitors from a variety of European countries. Photographs in the Coca-Cola Archives show the 1928 Olympic Games stadium with the soft drinks' signage and billboards displaying the drink. Early in its Olympic involvement, the company saw a profitable association with sport and the importance of preserving images of the drink and sport. The understanding of history is enhanced through the examination of early commercial endeavors with sport. The Coca-Cola Company has benefited from its association with the Olympic Games by gaining access to international markets. On the other hand, the Olympic Games have profited from the financial support and visibility offered by the Coca-Cola Company. The continuity of the longest commercial association is based largely on the leadership of the International Olympic Committee and the Coca-Cola Company.