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The Americans, the Swiss, the IOC and the Ligue Internationale de Hockey sur Glace at the 1948 Olympic Winter Games

In February of 1948, the Olympic Winter Games were held for the first time since the end of World War II in the Swiss resort town of St. Moritz. As always, hockey was one of the sports on the program and teams from nine countries entered the tournament. While Olympic rules limited the entries to one team per country, disputes among governing bodies in the United States had resulted in the arrival of two teams from that nation, each claiming to be the rightful representative. One team represented the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States (AAU) and, by extension, the United States Olympic Committee. The other represented the Amateur Hockey Association of the United States (AHA) which was affiliated with the Ligue Internationale de Hockey sur Glace (LIHG). The dispute quickly engulfed the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Swiss organizing committee and the LIHG.

This paper examines the events that unfolded in St. Moritz in the week before the start of the Games as each side in the dispute argued its case for participating. American IOC member and vice-president Avery Brundage championed the cause of the AAU team. A principal instigator behind the formation of the team, Brundage wanted to challenge the right of the AHA to participate in the tournament because he felt it was tainted with commercialism. On the other side, the AHA defended its right to participate because it was properly affiliated with the LIHG, the organization in charge of the tournament in St. Moritz. The Swiss organizing committee supported the AHA as did the LIHG because of their affiliation with one another.

The IOC was quickly brought into the argument to arbitrate and decided that neither team should be allowed to participate. The Swiss, much to the IOC's shock and anger, ignored the ruling and stated that they would allow the AHA team to participate. This added fuel to the fire, prompting the antagonists to spend nearly a week attempting to work out a compromise. After acrimonious negotiations, with threats from one group

met with counter-threats from the other, the Swiss organizers prevailed and the AHA team played in the tournament. Nonetheless, to appease the IOC members at least partially, the Swiss suggested that the Americans' results should not be counted in the final standings. With little other choice, the IOC acceded. However, deeply angered by the whole controversy and determined to reassert their authority, IOC members suspended their organization's recognition of the LIHG once the Games were over.

This case provides some very interesting insights into the relative levels of power of the organizations and individuals involved. That Brundage was able to convince the AAU to field a team was significant. Even more impressive was his ability to persuade the IOC to consider the issue, given the general acceptance of the AHA internationally. For their part, the Swiss showed unusual bravado in refusing to bow to the IOC's directive. Finally, the IOC, unable to dictate the actions of the Swiss, transferred its wrath to another party, the LIHG.

The paper is based upon minutes of the IOC session in St. Moritz in 1948, IOC Executive Committee meeting minutes, transcripts of Executive Committee meetings with the Swiss organizing committee, and correspondence between some of the principals involved. The bulk of this material is in the Avery Brundage Collection.