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Winning Pierre de Coubertin Over: Sigfrid Edström and the Establishment of the International Amateur Athletic Federation

Track and field is considered by many as the premiere event of the Olympic Games; its inclusion is central to the Games' success. However, during the infant period of the Olympic Games prior to World War I, track and field on an international basis was an unorganized and often controversial sport. The problems stemmed from the fact that the sport lacked standard rules and regulations. Nations that could boast of national track

and field programs acted independently of one another. Not only did each national organization for track and field contrive its own rules and regulations, their power extended into the realm of world record listings. In many cases national champions in each event were listed by their organizations as world champions. There were still other problems, especially the growing debate surrounding the status of the amateur athlete. Thus, it became apparent that in order to address these dilemmas an international organization for track and field had to be established. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was an interested prospective partner. After all, it was responsible for organizing the world's major international sporting event in which track and field was showcased.

Sigfrid Edström, a Swedish diplomat and sport visionary whose efforts ultimately resulted in the formation of the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) took the first major step. In 1913 the IAAF became the international organization that administered track and field. It provided a unified set of rules for competition at the international level, instituted an official list of world records, and presented an international definition of amateurism.

Yet, for Edström, the attempt to form the IAAF was not a simple task. Pierre de Coubertin, President and founder of the IOC loathed the idea of international federations, calling the few that existed at the time "instruments of tyranny." Certainly, Coubertin's fears were justified. Prior to Edström's efforts to organize the IAAF, the American amateur sport czar James E. Sullivan had tried on three different occasions to replace the IOC itself with a new and different international umbrella sport body. Though Coubertin thwarted Sullivan's initiatives, the experience left the Baron embittered and extremely apprehensive about any new international unions that might be formed. International sports federations, he thought, might well erode the power of the IOC.

When Edström approached the Baron seeking his approval for the establishment of the new international federation for track and field, Coubertin exhibited anxiety and resistance. Drawing from a series of letters between Edström and Coubertin written in 1912 and 1913, this paper demonstrates that Edström's respect and admiration for Coubertin and the IOC prompted him to move very carefully with his plans for an international track and field governing body. To that end Edström made sure that the formation of the IAAF did not interfere with the work of the IOC. The correspondence demonstrates how an energetic young entity of emerging power (IAAF) negotiated diplomatically with an established power authority (IOC) for the enhanced status and betterment of each. Thus, the negotiations between Edström and Coubertin on the evolution of the IAAF established a blueprint model whereby other sports federations profited when their time came for IOC recognition.