

Cesar R. Torres  
Kent State University

## **Struggling for a “Civilizing” Expedition: The Congressional Debate over the 1908 Argentine Olympic Participation**

It is widely accepted that “from the British Isles, modern sports went forth to conquer the world.” Argentina, a country whose nineteenth century economy was so heavily influenced by British entrepreneurs that some historians have considered it as an informal member of the British Empire, was no exception to the conqueror referred to by Allen Guttmann. Mainly introduced by English merchants or Argentines who had visited Europe or the United States, modern sports had become by the late nineteenth century an integral part of Argentine culture.

By the end of the nineteenth century modern sports had also conquered the heart of the classically educated Baron Pierre de Coubertin. Largely influenced by the British sports ideology, the French Baron founded in 1894 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) convinced that modern sports were the tool to inculcate national vigor, and international peace and reconciliation.

Coincidentally, Jose B. Zubiatur represented Argentina in the original IOC governing council. Coubertin had included Zubiatur, a well-known educator, hoping that the Argentine would advocate the Olympic ideal in South America.

Despite the fact that Argentina had an IOC member who strongly favored Anglo-American sports in the schooling system from the beginning of the IOC and that Argentines had fully embraced and were enthusiastic about modern sports, the Olympic Games, a set of international competitions including several modern sports sponsored by the IOC, did not rapidly capture the imagination of the country. Unlike the popularity that the Olympic Games enjoyed in the United States, Olympic competition did not constitute in Argentina “a major component of the common language of sport” until the 1920s.

Many had already realized in late nineteenth century Argentina that there was a relationship between modern sports and political culture. Zubiatur for example was a passionate proponent of modern sports and physical education as a subject matter that could serve as the moral and social force needed to constitute the foundation of a stable nation in Argentina. He also advocated the notion of sport for all. No wonder that Zubiatur conceived modern sports as a powerful public technology. However, for him, that technology had to serve a pedagogical goal within the confines of Argentina. On the other hand, in the middle 1900s a group of Argentine genteel sportsmen started to construct modern sports as a technology that could display on an international scale what they considered the fabulous progress of Argentina. It was this group that saw the Olympic Games as a possibility to manifest to the world that Argentina had benefited and learnt from being an informal member of the British Empire and that it was a growing and civilized nation.

This paper investigates the first effort ever made in Argentina to send a national team to the Olympic Games. In 1907, and with the 1908 London Games as its goal, members of the upper class group who saw modern sports as a unique means to bolster national identity and international reputation activated its connections and forced a congressional debate on the issue. Although the group failed in his attempt, the fascinating debate marked two radically different views on the role that modern sports had to occupy in Argentina. Moreover, the discourses surrounding

the proposed participation in the Olympic Games made explicit to the country that modern sports, understood as a technology, and international competitions constitute critical forces for shaping culture. Whether or not this group of Olympic promoters overestimated Olympic participation as an arena in which societies or nations could create, recreate, and express ideals of common identity, progress, and modernity, the congressional debate to subsidize an Olympic expedition at least introduced the Olympic Games to the common language of sports. The Olympic imagination of the country, however, would take another ten years to be captured.

---



Pat Vertinsky    Roberta Park    Laura Thomas    Tara Magdalinki