

OLYMPIC THEMES

Norman Baker
SUNY -Buffalo

Somewhat Reluctant Hosts: The Protracted Decision to Stage the 1949 London Olympics

The decisions to resume the Olympics in 1948 and to hold the Games in London have received little attention from sports historians. A London Olympics has been viewed as pretty much a “done deal” once the big three, Edstrom, Brundage and Aberdare had met in August 1945. In reality the resumption of the Games and the choice of London were the subjects of extensive discussions involving press, Olympic officials and the British Government. It was not until February 1946 that a formal invitation was issued by the Lord Mayor of London. The delay cut into the already limited preparation time. Further, in the course of the debates over timing and siting, issues were raised and attitudes displayed that speak to both great differences from the current Olympic “clime” and an anticipation of some features of the more modern Olympics.

After some brief consideration of the wide-ranging arguments for and against the resumption of the Games as soon as 1948, this paper will focus on the issues that arose as the British Olympic Association (BOA) deliberated over whether or not it was feasible to host the Olympics with less than three years of preparation. There was a distinct difference of opinion within the athletic leadership. The optimists, who carried the day, included the major public figures within the BOA, Portal, Burghley, Aberdare and Curtis-Bennett. The doubters carried less aristocratic weight but had much more direct experience of athletic organization. This group included Jack Crump, Phillip Noel-Baker, Evan Hunter and Harold Abrahams. They all expressed significant reservations over the possibility of effectively organizing the Games with only a 2 1/2 year lead-time. That those with greater social status overwhelmed their collective experience speaks to the operation of a hierarchical system much of which had survived the upheavals of War and significant political change. Partly as a result of these divisions, Avery Brundage’s optimism, evident in August 1945, had significantly diminished by October

when he had become concerned over what he viewed as a lack of enthusiasm among the British.

By way of contrast, there was broad agreement that the organizational task would be simplified if as many events as possible could be staged at a single location. There were indications that, from an early stage, the chosen venue would be “Wembley Stadium.” However, reference to the White City as an alternative main venue persisted well into 1946. Confusion over the choice of venue was compounded by Avery Brundage’s forcibly expressed concerns that Wembley Stadium Ltd., home to greyhound and speedway racing, would seek commercial advantage from hosting the Games.

Although resolution of the Wembley/White City issue revolved in part around the practical advantages that each site had to offer, other factors, political, personal and financial, were also involved. Arthur Elvin, managing director of Wembley Stadium Ltd., was much more cooperative than his rival Brigadier A.C. Critchley of the White City. A financial issue was also involved. The Organizing Committee would have to outlay considerable sums before any revenues from ticket sales would be generated. Elvin’s willingness to provide financial guarantees may well have been the clincher in Wembley’s favor. It may also have contributed to his receipt of a knighthood in June 1946.

The Labor Government would certainly be more inclined to work with Elvin, rather than the outspoken Critchley, a former Tory MP who was publicly opposing many of their policies. Why was that relevant? While, from the outset, the Organizing Committee eschewed financial help from the Government, it was acutely aware of the need for government support and cooperation, most notably in providing accommodation for the Olympic athletes and licenses for the upgrading of facilities. Thus the BOA leaders, Portal and Burghley met twice with Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, seeking assurances of government backing. In justifying his commitment to support of the BOA, he laid the primary emphasis on the anticipated boost to tourism and hard-currency earnings that the Games would generate.
