

## **Early Attempts at IOC Reform: The International Sports Federations' Quest for IOC Representation in the Interwar Period**

In 1999, following revelations of corruption amongst its members, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) made efforts to reform its structure. In particular, it made changes to the manner in which it composes its membership. Long accused of being an exclusive “club,” the IOC took steps that it hopes will make its membership more representative of the different groups and organizations that have a vested interest in the Olympic Games. For example, International Sports Federations (IFs) are now guaranteed a certain number of IOC seats. This will give at least some of them a greater voice in the IOC’s decisions.

The IFs were not the instigators of these recent reforms. They have, however, agitated for reform in the past. This paper examines the attempts by the IFs to reform the IOC in the 1920s. While unsuccessful in their ultimate goal of gaining IOC membership for themselves, the IFs were able to gain some concessions from the IOC. The dispute is important because it can help us to understand competing visions about the administration of international sport at the time. Though it retained its independence from (and significant authority over) the IFs, the IOC was forced to acknowledge their input into the construction of the Olympic Games.

The goal of IOC reform – particularly in the form of membership for International Sports Federations – was not a new one. The IFs had always believed the IOC marginalized their opinions. When they emerged in significant numbers in the early years of the twentieth century, IFs struggled to assert their position with respect to the IOC. IFs were among the earliest critics of the IOC’s exclusive structure and the manner in which it recruited members. In particular, leaders of some international sports organizations believed that IOC members lacked expertise in the administration of sport. Rather, they argued, the Olympic Games should be organized and controlled by the technical experts of

sport: the IFs. After initial, unsuccessful attempts to usurp the IOC's authority over the Olympic Games, IFs' leaders turned to the tactic of demanding more input into IOC decision-making in the years immediately prior to the First World War.

In the 1920s they became more strident and more organized in their demands. Early in the decade some leaders proposed a union of IFs. Its proponents failed to convince enough of their colleagues of the potential influence a union might have upon the IOC, but they did manage to create the so-called Bureau Permanent des Federations Internationales (BPFIS), a somewhat weaker body, in 1921. Despite the BPFIS presence, the IFs remained generally with their lack of influence with the IOC. Just prior to the 1925 Prague Olympic Congress, several met and asked for IOC membership for all IFs connected with the Olympic Games. The IOC members rejected the request and a struggle ensued with some IFs threatening to boycott the 1928 Olympic Games (causing no small amount of concern on the part of the Dutch). However, the IFs eventually capitulated on their demand for seats and agreed to the formation of a Consultative Council in which the IOC's Executive Commission would meet with the IFs to discuss the latter's concerns.

The result of the struggle was a shift in the dynamics of relations between the IOC and IFs. While they had not gained IOC membership, IFs did gain a mechanism by which to bring concerns to the IOC. Furthermore, the IOC was forced to admit that it would have to deal with the IFs on a regular basis, both individually and collectively.