

MAXWELL L. HOWELL AND REET HOWELL INTERNATIONAL ADDRESS

Roland Renson
University of Leuven

Razzamatuzz in Antwerp: Americans and Canadians At the 1920 Olympics

After the armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, Interallied Games were held in Paris from June 22 to July 6, 1919, in which many American and Canadian athletes competed who had fought in the war. Many of them returned to Europe, one year later, to participate in the seventh Olympiad of Antwerp. In the mean time, the 'Jazz age' had reached Belgium, where syncopated music had made its entrance with black American drummer-singer Louis Mitchell and his Jazz Kings. Jazz was the expression of a new era, the symbol that one could improvise freely while harmonizing with the group. This address focuses on the less serious aspects of these post-war Olympics and especially on the riotous atmosphere among the participants.

During the IOC session in Sydney 2000, the 103 years old American Olympian Han Haig Prieste, who won a bronze medal in the diving competition in Antwerp in 1920, handed over an Olympic flag that he had stolen eighty years before. A police report of the City of Antwerp stated that on August 20, 1920, Olympic flags were stolen from three different squares in the vicinity of the stadium. The official flag had already been stolen after the opening ceremony on the 14th of August, but the Official Report states that the thieves were caught.

These incidents were all in all less dramatic than the so-called "Mutiny of the Matoika," when the American athletes rebelled against their leaders during the Atlantic crossing. Once on steady shore, the razzamatuzz went on, now with the "Irish Whales" from the US team as the new ringleaders. Charles Paddock probably lost his 200 meters race from his compatriot Allen Woodring, because he had already celebrated his expected victory the night before. Canadian hurdler Earl "Tommy"

Thomson, who won gold in the 110 meters, wore the Maple Leaf on his shirt, but he lived and trained in the US and was treated by the American trainer after injuring his left thigh. The American athletes were, together with the Finnish, the most successful competitors. The US team counted 285 participants, the Canadian team only 53. Only few Canadians appeared on the dais, but they performed exceptionally well in boxing, in which they won one gold, two silver and two bronze medals. The first golden Olympic ice hockey team, the Winnipeg Falcons, was made up of Icelandic immigrants who had previously won the Canadian amateur championships. Many of the men who participated in the Antwerp Olympiad had fought before “in Flanders fields . . .”. For them, the Games were a kind of ritual catharsis, a festival of peace and joy, of competition and fun. American women excelled in the swimming and diving events, although James E Sullivan had strongly fought against their participation. The Antwerp Olympiad represented on one side a nostalgic farewell to the Belle Époque from before the Great War and on the other side the start of a new roaring and sporting era.



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