

---

# Sport and Business in the City: The Antwerp Olympic Games of 1920 and the Urban Elite

Roland Renson and Marijke den Hollander\*

That the Olympic Games have played an important role in urban development and politics is well established. What is less well known is how in some cases special groups have exploited the Olympic Movement for their own purposes, using the event to enrich themselves and improve their own private sports facilities. This is what more or less happened in Antwerp in 1920 and which, in part, has been analysed in *The Games Reborn* by Renson (1996). Thus, this research note is an attempt to enlarge on, and clarify further, one of the first attempts at commercial exploitation of the Olympic festival.

The proposal to host the Games of the Seventh Olympiad in Antwerp originated in 1913 from a group of sportsmen, part of the city's financial and commercial elite, who planned to coincide the Olympic initiative with a proposed "World Fair" in Antwerp. However, the First World War intervened and the urban elite who had taken both initiatives were forced to change their trade exhibition plans, while still remaining convinced that the Belgian Olympic Committee (BOC) should entrust them with the Games. Instead of giving their full financial support to the organization of the "Olympiad,"<sup>1</sup> as they had promised, they organized a type of "mini" world exhibition coincident with the Games. These so-called "Olympic-related festivities" competed with the genuine Olympic Games for the public's attention and for financial support from local authorities and business interests. In addition to this, wealthy members of the Beerschot Athletic Club used the Olympics to get their stadium rebuilt, complete with an access road, gas, water and electricity installations, all paid for by public funds. Insinuations of land speculation appeared in the newspapers. And, whereas the Executive Committee of the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad was faced with a financial debacle, the so-called Festivities Society managed to execute their plans quite

\* Roland Renson is professor of sport history in The Faculty of Kinesiology, Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium. Marijke den Hollander is a research assistant in The Faculty of Kinesiology, Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium.

successfully. Therefore, the Olympic Games of Antwerp are an excellent example of how a wealthy urban elite can exploit an Olympic event for its own economic advantage and prestige.



### **A business-based proposal to host the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad in Antwerp**

During the 13th session of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) at Basel on 27 March 1912, the president of the BOC, Baron Edouard de Laveleye, posed a bid to host the 1920 Olympic Games in Belgium (Mayer, 1960, pp. 67,69). Brussels, as the capital of the country, was considered first, but through the endeavours of a group of enthusiastic elite sportsmen, the port city of Antwerp was finally chosen.

The well known international football referee, John Langenus, described in his book, *Soccer from here and everywhere*, how the idea of holding the Olympic Games in Antwerp in preference to the Belgian capital, came about:

Everything in life is a matter of initiative. Already in 1912, in the Stockholm Stadium, a spectator had the idea of bringing the 1920 Games to Belgium, more precisely to Antwerp. The 1916 Games had then already been given to Berlin. This spectator was Mr. Charles Cnoops ... (Langenué, 1943, p. 35).

At the initiative of Charles Cnoops, President of the local Fencing Circle and Vice-President of the Belgian Fencing Association, a meeting was arranged on 9 August 1913 on the premises of The Royal Yacht Club in Antwerp with a view towards organising the 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp (Comité Provisoire, 1914, p. 35). A Provisional Committee was founded with four elected presidents:

Baron Edouard de Laveleye, President of the BOC and member of the IOC,  
 Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, member of the BOC and the IOC,  
 Robert Osterrieth, President of the Royal Yacht Club of Belgium,  
 Charles Cnoops, President of the Fencing Circle and Vice-President of the Belgian Fencing Association.



Baron de Laveleye



Robert Osterrieth (Above Left) - Charles Cnoops (Above Centre) - Baillet-Latour (Above Right)

No less than 22 personalities, elected from Belgium sport and gymnastics societies, became vice-presidents. Amongst them we find several leaders of the Beerschot Athletic Club, (the club whose facilities were to be transformed into an Olympic stadium), most notably, Alfred Grisar, President Paul Havenith, and Charles Cnoops (Royal Beerschot Athletic Club, 1950, p. 44). It will be shown that these “Beerschot boys,” had multiple reasons for involvement in the organization of the Games.

A propaganda brochure to support the Belgium bid was published in 1914 under the title *Aurons-nous la VIIème Olympiade à Anvers en 1920?* In this gaudy publication it was stated that the organizers would set up a Financial Committee with capital of one million francs to ensure the realisation of the Antwerp Olympics (Comité Provisoire, 1914, p. 38). This money had already been assured and would come from a so-called Exhibition Society, founded four months prior to the initiation of the Provi-

sional Committee. This society intended to organise a great World Fair in Antwerp. The Olympic Games would add extra interest to the vast commercial enterprise. Apart from a number of banking and commercial companies, several members of the Provisional Committee were financially involved in the Exhibition Society. Thus, we find the commercial companies of Grisar and Osterrieth, and even Count Ferdinand de Baillet-Latour - father of Henri -, as shareholders (Exposition universelle d'Anvers 1920, 1913). It is clear that the proposal to host the Olympic Games in Antwerp formed part of a greater commercial project that the financial and business elite of Antwerp had set for themselves.

The Provisional Committee's propaganda brochure was used to support the candidature of Antwerp against bids from Amsterdam, Budapest and Rome debated during the Olympic Congress held in Paris between 14 and 23 June 1914 (Coubertin, 1979, p. 94). However, the IOC commission formed to examine the various candidatures was unable to make a decision because of the worsening international situation, a situation which scarcely a month later prompted the outbreak of the First World War. International conflict prevented the organization of the 1916 Olympic Games in Berlin, and in 1915 "neutral" Amsterdam and "hostile" Budapest were eliminated from contention. All the same, after the armistice of 11 November 1918, the proposal for Antwerp as host for the Games of the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad was greeted with a great deal of reserve. The city of Antwerp was faced with enormous post-war economic and social reconstruction, hardly ideal for starting the organization of an Olympic event. Despite large scale scepticism about the feasibility of the project, the Antwerp initiators pressed on with the project. They expected that the Games, after four years of war, would achieve two outcomes, those being a stimulation of international trade on the *one* hand and the organization of all sorts of festivities contributing to postwar social relaxation on the other (Havenith & Cnoops, 1919, 3 February). During a session of the BOC on 29 March 1919, the opposition of some was neutralised when the Provisional Committee reaffirmed the donation of the one million Belgian francs to the Games (*Rapport officiel*, n.d., p. 15). The city of Antwerp promised a grant of 800,000 francs, the construction of a new swimming pool, and an access road to the stadium. They also agreed to put civic facilities at the disposal of the Games. Finally, at the meeting of the IOC in Lausanne on 5 April 1919, the city of Antwerp was officially selected as the venue for the Games of the Seventh Olympiad... barely sixteen months before the actual opening of the Games (*Rapport officiel*, n.d., pp. 10-11).

### **Sport versus Commerce**

On 17 April 1919 the BOC entrusted organization of the Games to an Executive Committee composed of four members of the Provisional Committee of 1913 (Osterrieth, Cnoops, Grisar and Havenith) and four members of the BOC (Alfred Verdyck, Rodolph-William Seeldrayers, de Baillet Latour and de Laveleye). It was decided that, in order to ensure the collaboration of the Belgian sports federations, a National Committee for Physical Education and Social Hygiene would be founded with Seeldrayers as president and Verdyck as secretary (Seeldrayers, 1950). A general meeting of all sporting federations was called on 24 May 1919 to set up technical committees for each sports discipline. Among others, seven special commissions were set up: Financial Affairs, Accommodation, Press Relations, Propaganda, Tech-

nical and Scheduling, Routes and Means of Access, Festivities and Receptions. Administration tasks were allocated to a managerial staff hired by the Belgian Union of Football Clubs (*Rapport officiel*, n.d., pp. 11-13).

Great dedication was put into the work. John Langenus (1943, p. 36) recalled that for weeks on end the office hours were from 6:00 am until midnight. The most difficult problems were of a financial nature. The organisers were finding it impossible to establish correct and realistic budgets because of galloping inflation. An example of this is shown by the defeatist tone of the Official Report whenever it dealt with financial matters:

Caught in a whirlwind of events, the organisers were finding it more and more difficult to meet their financial commitments.... The constant increases in salaries and raw materials.... Not only did the stadium have to be built... there were no access routes, no station, no tramway, no accommodation for the athletes or visitors (*Rapport officiel*, n.d., p. 13).

Furthermore, from the very beginning, conflict rose in the Executive Committee between members of the BOC and members of the Provisional Committee from Antwerp who had promised the contribution of one million Belgian francs, not one franc of which, to that time, had appeared. The donation of the promised capital had been delayed "... ever since the decision taken by the Exhibition Society to go into liquidation" (Baillet-Latour, 1919, June 16). Because of the war, the organization of a great world fair in Antwerp had proved impossible. On 26 June 1919, three days after the Exhibition Society had ceased to function, a new company, the Antwerp Festivities Society, was founded. The shareholders of the original Exhibition Society were encouraged to participate in the new association. In the end more than half of the shareholders were enlisted ("Société des Fêtes d'Anvers de 1920", 1919). The Antwerp members of the Provisional Committee assured that the newly-formed Festivities Society was going to fulfill the financial pledges made by the Provisional Committee. The Festivities Society was a financial group made up of Antwerp bankers, shipbuilders, exporters and diamond merchants who were anxious to recover their investments as soon as possible (Meyer, 1960, p. 124). In the Official Report on the Games mention is made of "... personalities having absolutely nothing to do with sport... "and of "...deplorable rivalry ..." (pp. 15-16). Instead of placing the promised money at the disposal of the Executive Committee, the Festivities Society managed to use it for their own ends. They forced the BOC to sign a contract for a credit of one million francs, at a 4% interest rate. This was conditional on a proportional share in the eventual profits of the Olympic Games. The Festivities Society took advantage of Antwerp being the venue of the Games to organize all sorts of so-called "Olympic events" which had the effect of weakening the interest of the local business community in the "real" Olympic Games themselves. From 1 May onwards, these "Olympic events" aimed at attracting the attention of the Belgian public well before the genuine Olympic competitions, which were not scheduled to start until 15 August (*Rapport officiel*, n.d., pp. 15-17). For example, at the end of July an air show took place, featuring a balloon race and a simulated air battle. The Society also organized several exhibitions, one on the relationship between Belgium and the United States, one on the diamond industry, and one showcasing an exhibition of photographs (*De VIIIe*

*Olympiade*, n.d.; *La VIIème Olympiade*, n.d.). In effect, the Festivities Society organized a miniature world fair on the fringes of the Olympic Games, just like originally had been planned by the Exhibition Society. To organize all these events the Festivities Society asked the City of Antwerp for separate subsidies. The city responded with 500,000 BF "...considering the importance that these festivities could represent for our city" (Mayor and Bench of Alderman, 1919, October 10). As a way of acquiring those separate subsidies, it was specified that the Festivities Society, "... has nothing in common with the Olympic Games Society" (Antwerp Festivities Society, 1919, August 7). Nevertheless, the personnel were almost the same. One of the managing Directors was Charles Cnoops and the Director General was Lieutenant-Colonel Léon Osterrieth. It should be noted that Cnoops and Osterrieth were also members of the Executive Committee, as were some of the other "Beerschot boys," such as Alfred Grisar and Paul Havenith, whom we also find as shareholders of the Festivities Society ("Société des Fêtes d'Anvers de 1920", 1919).

Cnoops, Osterrieth, Grisar and Havenith were also members of the Society of the VIIth Olympiad, an association founded by the Executive Committee on 5 July 1919 for the purpose of managing the finances of the Games ("Société de la VIIe Olympiade", 1919). They could also rely on subsidies of 1.5 million BF from the Government, 200,000 BF from the Province, 800,000 BF from the city of Antwerp and 10,000 BF from the city of Brussels (*Rapport officiel*, n.d., p. 172).



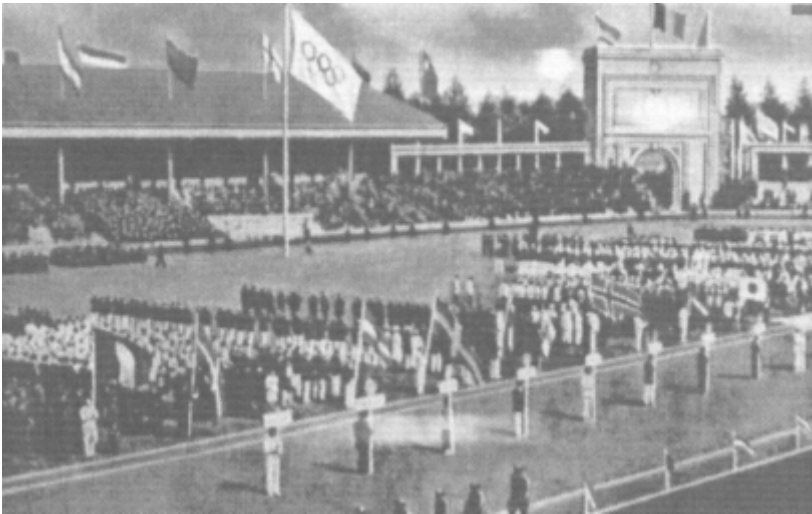
Coubertin (L), King Albert (In Uniform), and Baillet-Latour (R) enter the stadium for the Games' opening

The Society of the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad suffered greatly from the competition between the Executive Committee, representing sport, and the Antwerp Festivities Society, representing trade, as well as from other disappointments and shortcomings noted during the Games. None of this was mentioned when Coubertin commented upon the

Games in the *Report of the American Olympic Committee*. He was full of praise about the “harmonious setting” and the managerial skills of the organizers:

Count Henri de Baillet-Latour may be proud of the work he supervised, and which, placed on a firm financial basis, never ceased for an instant in bringing perfection in technique, together with a lofty pedagogical ideal (Couber-  
tin, n.d., p. 57).

After the Games, however, the “bottom-line” of the final accounting showed a deficit of 626,022.5 BF. A Liquidation Committee was installed on 23 July 1921. Its aim was to wind up the Seventh Olympiad “... in a suitable manner and without a deficit” (Havenith, 1921).



The 1920 Antwerp Games opening

The idealistic sentiments were, however, not a fair match for the mountain of debts. The Seventh Olympiad’s liquidators had intended to pay off all private creditors but hoped that the public authorities would defer or waive their credit. However, the post-war period was a difficult time, a period when shortages and inflation were a part of life. The times were not conducive to “public” generosity in favour of what was generally considered to be a socially exclusive Olympic event. The Catholic and Socialist coalition which had seized power in Antwerp at the time,<sup>2</sup> refused to waive the debt and the commune authorities ended up taking the Executive Committee to court (Comité de liquidation de la VIIème Olympiade, 1922).<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, in terms of resolving the deficit, the National Committee for Physical Education and Social Hygiene intervened. It took control of the organization of sports meetings, profits from which helped to pay off the debts (*Rapport officiel*, n.d., p. 17).

The Official Report concluded that the Antwerp Festivities Society was to blame

for the financial debacle and there was great resentment of the fact that it appeared that - in spite of the financial disaster for the Society of the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad - some people in Antwerp had benefited personally from the project.

### **The Beerschot Athletic Club**

It was the Beerschot Athletic Club which benefited most from the Olympic Games. As early as 22 May 1919 insinuations were being made in a local newspaper that the Beerschot group, led by Charles Cnoops and Paul Havenith, had other aims besides those purely sporting in nature:

...under the pretence of supporting a great sporting event, some are seeking a lucrative financial scheme which will, of course, result in an increase in wealth for some personalities, who are all to some extent involved in the banking business. In practice, these people will take advantage of all the efforts made by the sportsmen whose aim is to enhance human physical culture (Dehem, 1919).

The “Wilrijck exercise field” and the Nachtegalenpark had been proposed by the City authorities as the major venues for the organization of the Games, but this had been categorically rejected by the Provisional Committee. It had to be the stadium of the Beerschot Athletic Club or else ... no Olympic Games in Antwerp! They also forced the City of Antwerp to carry out an extension of *Jan Van Rijswijk Avenue* to link the Beerschot Stadium directly with the city centre (Verslag van de Gemeenteraad, 1919). The Society of the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad was financially responsible for the Olympic “face-lift” of the stadium, which included its enlargement, the building of a small grandstand, the extension of the existing grandstand, and the renewal of the track. The estimate for the work had been one million BF but, due to rampant inflation in this post-war period, the final figure was 2,280,479 BE This was almost half the total expenditure for the Olympic Games that year (Mostinckx, 1983, pp. 90-91). Certain conditions had been incorporated into the contract which were agreed on and signed by the Beerschot Club and the Society of the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad in June 1919. The conditions stated that almost all improvements made to the stadium would remain in place at the Beerschot Club after the Games.

According to Article 9 of the contract, the Society had the right to retrieve everything built in the stadium unless Beerschot members were specifically interested, in which case, they could purchase the buildings “... by right of priority at an equivalent price.” Article 10 stipulated that the Société Coopérative de l’olympiade could not demand any compensation for the earth moving work carried out or for the cementing of the terraces, or for the improvements made to the track “... which will remain with Beerschot AC as compensation for allowing their premises and land to be used for the Olympiad.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Conclusions**

The Beerschot Club was not the sole benefactor of investments made on the occasion of the Olympic Games. The extension of *Jan Van Rijswijk Avenue*, com-

bined with the increased value arising from installing water, gas and electricity, increased the value of the land around the Beerschot Stadium. At the time these grounds changed ownership several times. The Grisar family, who were originally sole owners of the Beerschot grounds, decided to sell their estate by exchanging it for shares in a recently-founded S.A. New Beerschot Athletic Club, which sold two-thirds of their shares to the real estate Association of Industries and Building (AIB). When, one year after the Games the AIB put forward the idea of breaking up the association and selling the land, some of the founding members of the club, among them Alfred Grisar and Paul Havenith, decided to organize another “group” to gather the necessary funds to buy the shares from the AIB (Royal Beerschot Athletic Club, 1950, p. 36). There is some confusion in the transactions that took place involving the Grisar family, the AIB and the Beerschot AC, which may be explained by the conflict between land speculation on the one hand and the promotion of the interests of Beerschot Athletic Club on the other. What is clear is that a small group of prominent citizens of large fortune had succeeded in using the Olympic Games for their own financial advantage and social prestige.

In his official speech on 17 August 1920, Coubertin had issued a warning about the danger of “commercialism” and “opportunism” for the future of true sport:

...may the sporting bodies keep away the opportunities which come forward to manage them and whose only dream is to use someone else’s muscles either to build upon his own political fortune or to make his own business prosper (*Rapport officiel*, n.d., p. 52; Coubertin, 1966, pp. 83-84).

These words seem to have been prophetic if one looks at the financial results of the Seventh Olympiad at Antwerp and the further development of the Modern Olympic Movement.

## Endnotes

1. At the time reference was always made to the Antwerp Olympiad and not the Olympic Games. An Olympiad actually means the period of four years separating the Olympic Games.
2. Prior to 1921, the city of Antwerp was controlled by a Socialist and Liberal coalition.
3. The authors have not been able to verify whether or not this court action took place.
4. Contract signed between the New Beerschot A.C. and the Society of the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad.

## Sources

Antwerp Festivities Society (1919, 7 August) letter to the Mayor and Bench of Aldermen of the city of Antwerp (City of Antwerp Archives: MA 2164).

H. de Baillet-Latour (1919, 13 March) letter to the Mayor and Aldermen of Antwerp (City of Antwerp Archives: MA 2165/12).

H. de Baillet-Latour (1919, 16 June) letter to the Mayor and Aldermen of Antwerp (City of Antwerp Archives: MA 2165).

Comité de liquidation de la VIIème Olympiade (1919, 7 April), *Procès verbal de la séance tenue le 7 avril 1922* (Report of the meeting held on 7 April, 1919), Archives of the Belgian Olympic Committee.

Comité Provisoire des Jeux Olympiques (Ed.), (1914), *Aurons-nous la 7e VIIème Olympiade à Anvers?* (Will we have the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad in Antwerp?), Anvers: Buschmann.

P. de Coubertin (n.d.), "The Seventh Olympic Games," In *Report of the American Olympic Committee* (pp. 47-58), Greenwich (CT): Condé Nast.

P. de Coubertin (1966), *L'idée Olympique: discours et essais* [The Olympic Idea: discourses and essays]. Köln: Carl Diem Institut.

P. de Coubertin (1979), *Olympic memoirs*, Lausanne: International Olympic Committee. (Original work published 1931).

*De VIIe Olympiade en de Feesten van Antwerpen in 1920: gids-programma* (The 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad en the Festivities of Antwerp in 1920: guide-book and program) (n.d.), City of Antwerp Archives.

A. Dehem (1919, 22 May), *L'Anversois*.

Exposition universelle d'Anvers 1920, société anonyme, à Anvers - Status (World Fair of Antwerp 1920, limited liability company - articles of association), *Annexe au moniteur belge du 26 avril 1913*, Act 2986.

P. Havenith (1921, 23 July), *Procès verbal de la séance du comité de liquidation de la VIIème Olympiade tenue le 23 juillet 1921* (Report of the meeting of the Liquidation Committee of the VIIth Olympiad held on 23 July, 1921). Archives of the Belgian Olympic Committee.

P. Havenith, & C. Cnoops (1919, 3 February) letter to the Bench of Aldermen of Antwerp, City of Antwerp Archives: MA 2165.

*Lo VIIème Olympiade et les Fêtes d'Anvers: guide-book and program* (n.d.), City of Antwerp Archives.

J. Langenus (1943), *Voetbal van hier en overal* (Soccer from here and everywhere) Genève: Cailler.

O. Mayer (1960), *A travers les anneaux olympiques* (Through the Olympic Rings), Genève: Cailler.

Mayor and Bench of Aldermen (1919, 10 October) letter to the Antwerp Festivities Society, City of Antwerp Archives: MA 2164.

G. Meyer (1960), *Le phénomène olympique* (The Olympic Phenomenon). Paris: Table Ronde.

W. Mostinckx (1983), *De Olympische Spelen van Antwerpen en hie receptie in de pers* (The Olympic Games of Antwerp and their reception in the press), Unpublished licentiate thesis, Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium.

*Rapport officiel des Jeux de la VIIème Olympiade Anvers 1920* (Official report of the 7<sup>th</sup> Olympiad in Antwerp 1920), (no place and name of publisher), Sportmuseum Flanders, Leuven, Belgium, SMVBC 00037.

R. Renson, (1996), *The Games reborn: the VIIIth Olympiad Antwerp 1920*, Antwerp: Pandora.

Royal Beerschot Athletic Club, (1950), *Livre d'or du Royal Beerschot Athletic Club Antwerpen: 1900-1950* (Golden book of the Royal Beerschot Athletic Club Antwerp 1900-1950), (no place and name of publisher), Sportmuseum Flanders, Leuven, Belgium, KBVLC00045.

R.W. Seeldrayers (1950), *De Belgische Voetbalbond en het National Comité voor Lichamelijke Opvoeding en Belgisch Olympisch Comité* (The Belgian Soccer Federation and the National Committee for Physical Education and the Belgian Olympic Committee), in V. Boin (Ed.), *Le livre d'or jubilaire de l'U.R.B.S.F.A. 1895-1945* (pp. 259-260), Bruxelles: Leclercq & De Haas.

Société de la VIIe Olympiade, société cooperative, à Anvers - Constitution & nomination des administrateurs et commissaires (Society of the VIIIth Olympiad, co-operative society, in Antwerp - Constitution & nomination of administrators and commissioners), *Annexe au moniteur belge du 5 juillet 1919*, Act 6176 & 6177.

Société des Fêtes d'Anvers de 1920, société cooperative, à Anvers - Constitution (Festivities Society of Antwerp 1920, co-operative society, Constitution). *Annexe au moniteur belge du 18 juillet 1919* (Supplement Statute-Book of 18 July, 1919), Act 6008.

Verslag van de Gemeenteraad van 25 maart 1919 (Report of the city-council of 25 March, 1919), *Gemeentebld*, p. 95, City of Antwerp Archives.