
Selling American Civilization:

The Olympic Games of 1920 and American Culture

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The Olympic Games and American culture in the shadow of the Great War

World War One interrupted the cycle of modern Olympic Games, revived at Athens in 1896 and then celebrated in Paris in 1900, St. Louis in 1904, London in 1908, and Stockholm in 1912. The 1916 Olympics, scheduled for Berlin, were casualties of the war. As the Great War ended, the Olympic Games were once again revived and scheduled for Antwerp, Belgium, in 1920. The end of World War One also marked the emergence of the United States as the world's most powerful industrial nation. American economic and technological prowess sparked "fables of abundance" that dazzled global audiences. In the wake of the Great War the United States appeared to much of the world as an enchanting material utopia. America seemed a model of energetic productivity and bountiful consumption that beckoned the rest of the globe to follow in its powerful footsteps to a future of comfortable plenty.¹

The United States had not only become the world's industrial giant. It had also become the leading exporter of culture. From forms of cinema to fashions in music to styles of sport, American popular culture exercised powerful influences on the rapidly modernizing societies of many of the post-war world's nations.² These new cultural exports seemed an entirely logical development to many in the United States, especially given the fact that in most American minds industrial abundance and culture were inseparably linked. Americans argued that their celebrated abundance had its roots not simply in technological and commercial virtuosity but in the very fabric of American culture. From this perspective, American culture was the primary motor of American power. Culture produced industrial might. Nations that looked to emulate

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the United States needed to do more than copy American production techniques. They needed to reproduce American culture.

Americans wanted to help the world do precisely that. During World War One, the United States government created the Committee on Public Information (C.P.I.), a wartime agency charged with selling the Great War for both domestic and foreign consumption. The C.P.I. designed an advertising campaign to sell American culture to the world. The director of the agency, George Creel, dubbed the project the "Gospel of Americanism." Creel described the program as the "world's greatest adventure in advertising." After the war, although the C.P.I. disbanded, both private and public agencies continued to sell images of the United States through the mass media. American culture became "as familiar around the world as Gillette razors, and Heinz ketchup." Creel and his successors sold the United States as the model that all other nations should emulate.³

One of the successor agencies to the C.P.I. in the global marketing of the "gospel of Americanism" was the Young Men's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.). By the 1920s the Y.M.C.A. had broadened its approach beyond its original nineteenth century foundation in Protestant evangelism. The new Y.M.C.A. embraced scientific approaches to social problems, advocated progressive politics in the international arena, and encouraged secular as well as religious reform.⁴ This new Y.M.C.A. still maintained its tradition of using sport to capture popular support and promote the process of social regeneration. The Y.M.C.A.'s more secular missionaries continued to preach that sports could reform individuals and nations.⁵

In addition to the Y.M.C.A., the United States had another source of athletic missionaries who promoted the idea that American civilization should be emulated by any nation that sought abundance, progress, democratic government, and social equity. "America's athletic missionaries," as American Olympians were known before in the years before the World War One, had a history of preaching the "gospel of Americanism" in the world's Olympic stadiums.⁶ Just as the Y.M.C.A. was a private organization that employed public relations campaigns to sell the American way of life to rest of the world, so too was the American Olympic Committee (A.O.C.) a private organization committed to spreading the public "gospel of Americanism" through United States Olympic teams. The first five modern Olympic Games sparked the creation in the United States of the idea that national strength could be measured in Olympic stadiums. American writers and public moralists developed arguments that the results of one-hundred-meter dashes and high jumps indicated the health not only of Olympian athletes, but of the societies that produced those athletes. The American press invented the tradition of the national medal count at the Olympics. Claiming victory with frequently dubious arithmetic, the press then used that tradition to trumpet affirmations of American superiority not only in athletics, but in all the characteristics of government, society, and economy that they believed characterized modern nations.⁷

After the Great War, the way in which the American media sold "American's athletic missionaries" changed in important ways. Y.M.C.A. missionaries had adopted more secular approaches that concentrated on public service rather than Christian conversion. The A.O.C. and its partners in the American press adopted new strategies which, if not more secular than previous approaches, were less enmeshed in the political ideology of American republicanism. These new strategies were closely

related to the commercial advertising techniques that revolutionized American culture in the 1920s--techniques that had been perfected in C.P.I.'s campaign for selling the Great War. Beginning in 1920 at the Antwerp Olympics, press accounts about American Olympians retreated from the realm of political symbols. Instead, the Olympians became characters in the new "fables of abundance" spun by the media. The popular literature interpreting American experiences at the 1920 Olympics illustrates the ways in which selling American civilization through sport were changing. Selling the Olympics as a call for political reforms in the United States was on the decline. Selling the Olympics as proof of American global cultural superiority continued to be a common practice. Selling the Olympics as popular entertainment became a growth industry. While nationalism remained the primary ingredient in the American Olympic product, the way in which the press, politicians, athletic leaders, and government officials packaged the product changed markedly.⁸

The Ghosts of the American Athletic Nationalism

One example of the change in packaging is highlighted by the contrast between an article about the pre-World War One American Olympic team and the succeeding accounts describing the 1920 team. In 1918, during the November in which the warring world finally agreed to an armistice, *Everybody's Magazine* published a gloomy reminiscence about American glory at the Stockholm Games of 1912 and the life and times of the late James Edward Sullivan. Sullivan dominated the American Olympic movement before World War One through his control of the most powerful body in amateur sport, the Amateur Athletic Union (A.A.U.), and his leadership of the A.O.C.⁹ William G. Shepherd, a sportswriter who had covered the Stockholm Olympics, returned to Sweden in 1918 to cover a benefit for war orphans. Sitting in the Olympic stadium surrounded by the pageantry of the benefit, Shepherd became "overwhelmed by the ghosts" of the Olympic past. Specters from the 1912 Olympics captured his imagination. He remembered especially the sight of American Olympians humiliating their haughty German adversaries. He recalled the military precision of the German team, "each man looking like all the others, each man walking, striding, jumping, spreading legs like everybody else--massed formation in sport, with no individuality. no personal responsibility, except to see that you do your best to win the coveted cup by crushing your individuality and doing everything as everybody else does it." Shepherd recollected that in 1912 the world had laughed at the "machine-like movements" of the Germans, and he lamented. "The day was to come when we would shudder at what we laughed at then."¹⁰

The ghostly visions at the stadium helped Shepherd recapture an important lesson that he had learned at the Stockholm Olympics. As he waited for the 1912 Games to begin, a cable from his editors produced intense panic. They had wanted a story about past American Olympic victories and predictions of success in 1912. He recalled that he knew very little about the topic. Fearing he might lose his job, he begged an audience with Sullivan, the leader of the American team. He hoped Sullivan could provide him with the "inside dope."¹¹

Shepherd met Sullivan for dinner. When Shepherd confessed to Sullivan what his editors wanted, the A.O.C. president wondered what the problem was. "I'm no sporting editor. This is all new to me." replied Shepherd, admitting his ignorance of

athletics. "But sport hasn't anything to do with it," claimed Sullivan, "This isn't a study in athletics. It's a problem in Americanism." Sullivan then proceeded to lecture the young reporter on the meaning of sport for American civilization.¹²

Sullivan, the son of Irish immigrants who rose to leadership in American amateur athletics, declared that American Olympians were products of the melting pot shaped by American institutions into champions who could beat anyone from their former homelands. The American champions represented the adventuresome souls who had escaped the tyranny and repression of the Old World to participate in the great republican experiment that forged the United States. "That's why we'll win these Olympic games, this time and every time, until we cease to attract the pick of the folk from Europe," Sullivan assured Shepherd. Of course, Sullivan felt that given superiority of American civilization and the attractions of the "golden door,"¹³ the United States would always beckon the "pick of folk" from the rest of the world.¹⁴

Shepherd remembered that Sullivan's predictions of American invincibility had come true. If the outbreak of the World War had not interrupted the Olympic cycle, the United States, according to Shepherd, would have dominated the 1916 Olympic Games scheduled, ironically, for Germany. "The games that were to have been held in that great stadium on the outskirts of Berlin, in 1916, are being held in French and Flemish fields and in Italian mountains," noted a solemn Shepherd, returned from his visits with ghosts to the present. "Our Olympic team has gone to Europe, and Jim Sullivan's dope is good and sure," Shepherd continued, referring to the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) engaged in combat on the Continent. The result of the war, like the result of the Stockholm Games, had been decided even before the contest, declared Shepherd. "By Jim Sullivan's dope we *can* do the job; all we have to do is to go ahead and *do* it."¹⁵ When *Spalding's Athletic Almanac* reprinted Shepherd's tale in 1919, the editors added a postscript. "'Jim Sullivan's Dope,' was true to form," wrote the compilers of the athletic journal that Sullivan himself had founded.¹⁶

From 1896 to 1912, the idea that massive immigration combined with egalitarian social institutions made American Olympians into world-beaters - "Jim Sullivan's dope" - was a stock explanation of American athletic prowess. The press regularly lauded the American team as melting pot victors.¹⁷ Shepherd's essay drew on that tradition. Significantly, among the many magazines and newspapers that covered the American Olympic team in 1920, not a single one would mention the melting pot as the crucible of American athletic power. One of the most important political messages in prewar celebrations of American Olympic victories disappeared entirely from public discourse. Shepherd's article echoed the past rather than presaging the future.

The "Military Olympics"

Before the A.O.C. could advertise its version of American civilization at the 1920 Olympics, the Y.M.C.A. and the United States military offered their own spectacle celebrating the "gospel of Americanism" through athletic endeavor. The "Military Olympics," as the event was popularly known, foreshadowed the way that the 1920 American Olympic team would be used to advertise American culture.

When the American Expeditionary Force went to war in Europe, it took with it an intensive sport program run by Y.M.C.A. leaders. The United States military used

athletics to boost morale, teach martial skills, and maintain the vigor of its troops.¹⁸ The American dedication to sport, even in the midst of combat, was touted in the United States as one of the keys to Allied victory in the Great War. An article by J.R. Hildebrand in *National Geographic* revealed that the United States government had spent millions of dollars for sporting equipment and facilities during the war. American passion for sport surprised the Allies. "Even the sport-loving Britons are said to have admired and wondered at the American dough-boy, whacking out three-baggers amid the booming of Big Berthas, issuing occasional rain-checks in mid-inning when the downpour of bursting shell became too distracting," reported Hildebrand. The *National Geographic* correspondent declared that the "qualities of initiative and courage and endurance implanted" through sport "shone with glorious luster at Cantigny, at Chateau-Thierry, and in the Argonne." Hildebrand concluded "that is why one of the most valuable byproducts of this crucible of suffering will be a realization in this country that the sinews which won the war are just as needful for the rigorous, bloodless battles of peace." Sport won the Great War. Sport could also build a lasting peace. The logic represented by Hildebrand's sentiments was typical of American interpretations of the role of sport in World War One and the new world emerging in the war's aftermath.¹⁹

When the armistice ended the war in November of 1918, Americans dreamed that they could build a new world order through sport.²⁰ Hildebrand believed that war would spread Anglo-American sport throughout the globe. "Men from every clime-black, yellow, and tan-carry home the games they saw these sturdy Britishers and wiry Americans playing," he noted. Sport would transform the world. "The World War has helped stress a higher claim for sport," revealed Hildebrand, "for it has proved that sport conditions the moral fiber of a people and tempers those mental qualities that advance civilization."²¹

Hildebrand was not alone in his beliefs about the power of sport to rebuild the world in the aftermath of the calamity of the Great War. Even before the armistice had been signed, Elwood S. Brown, a Y.M.C.A. play leader assigned to the A.E.F., proposed a "Mititary Olympics" to cement relations between the victorious Allied nations. Modeled on the "Far Eastern Olympics" Brown had organized in East Asia in 1913, the "Military Olympics," or, as they were officially known, the Inter-Allied Games, were held in Paris in 1919. As soon as the armistice became a reality the American commander in Europe, General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, embraced Brown's plan.²²

The "Military Olympics" were supposed to lay the spiritual groundwork for the League of Nations, an American-designed international agency dedicated to peaceful conflict resolution and global harmony. According to the official United States military report on the Inter-Allied Games, "the Games signalized to a vast number of soldiers of the various armies of the Allies the end of the Great War and the beginning, in this unique love feast of divers [sic] races and nationalities, of a greater and more hopeful peace than the world had yet known."²³ The United States eventually refused to join the League of Nations, but it did sponsor the "Military Olympics." The A.E.F. erected a stadium in Paris and named it after General Pershing. In the weeks before the Inter-Allied games began, the military staged mass athletic games for common soldiers and an A.E.F. championship series to select the best American competitors for the "Military Olympics." The "Fighting Marine," Gene Tunney, won his weight

class in boxing at the A.E.F. championships.²⁴

From June 22 to July 6, 1920, nearly 1500 athletes from Allied nations in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific met in Paris for the Inter-Allied Games.²⁵ The defeated Central Powers-Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire-were, of course, excluded from the "Military Olympics." Those nations would also be excluded from the 1920 Olympics. Allied athletes contested in a great variety of sports including baseball, basketball, American, association and rugby football, golf, boxing, track and field athletics, rifle and pistol shooting, swimming, fencing, equestrian events, cross-country racing, Greco-Roman wrestling, tennis, sailing, tug-of-war battles, and a "hand-grenade throw" contest.²⁶

The U.S. military understood that the games were more than merely athletic contests. The official report insisted that "arousing universal interest in organized sports" was a key element of the Inter-Allied Games. The American military set up a publicity department to disseminate "sport propaganda as well as athletic news." Military dispatches sent information about the contests to newspapers around the world. Advertising the games was as important as playing them.²⁷

U.S. athletes, according to the American press, overwhelmed their competitors winning twelve first and seven second places on the twenty-four event schedule. The U.S. team dominated track and field events. Track and field served as the centerpiece of the Inter-Allied Games just as it did in American visions of the Olympic Games. The "Military Olympics" produced a number of heroes. World-class sprinter Charles Paddock, who would become a media darling during the 1920s, was the star of the track meet. Norman Ross dazzled the crowds with his swimming prowess.²⁸ Both men won victories the next year at the Olympic Games.

The "Military Olympics" demonstrated that the world was ready for a revival of the Olympic cycle which had been interrupted by the Great War. Even war-devastated Europe had been momentarily enchanted by the military athletic contests. American success in the inter-Allied Games whetted appetites for the renewal of Olympic competition. The chance to broadcast another installment of "sport propaganda as well as athletic news" in the campaign to spread American culture would prove too tempting to resist.

The Olympic Games and American Athletic Nationalism in the Postwar World

The 1920 Olympics served American interest groups as a forum for selling their versions of American civilization. The Games also presented Baron Pierre de Coubertin and the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) with an opportunity to revive a modern Olympic movement that had been badly damaged by global warfare. In 1920 the Olympic Games were once again revived and scheduled for Antwerp, Belgium. The I.O.C. originally chose Antwerp as the host of the Games of the Seventh Olympiad before the war had forced a cancellation of the 1916 Olympics at Berlin. Despite the war-ravaged condition of the "city of Rubens [sic]," the I.O.C. elected to honor its pledge to Antwerp in order to symbolize the spirit of the brave Belgian defense against the overwhelming onslaught of the German army in World War One.²⁹

Baron Pierre de Coubertin had spent the war years in a self-imposed exile in Lau-

sanne, Switzerland, writing letters and essays in a desperate attempt to keep the Olympic idea alive. After the war Coubertin kept the I.O.C. in Switzerland as a gesture to the spirit of internationalism and because he had tired of the ceaseless political wrangles in France. As soon as the war ended, Coubertin and the Belgian representative to the I.O.C. (and future I.O.C. president), Count Henri Baillet-Latour, moved to insure that despite the distressed condition of Belgium, the Games of the Seventh Olympiad would be held in Antwerp.³⁰

The American press cheered the selection of Belgium and Antwerp. The “rape of Belgium” had played a significant role in moving the American public into active support of Allied war effort. The city symbolized Allied sacrifice and victory in the Great War. Hosting the Olympics seemed a fitting honor to that sacrifice. American newspapers reported that King Albert of Belgium was doing everything in his power to make sure that his nation put on a spectacular Olympic Games.³¹ In the *Playground* Arthur Drew noted that in the victorious Allied nations posters, athletes hurling discuses were replacing soldiers hurling grenades, symbolizing “in an artistic way the return of peace to an anguished world, and the triumph of fair play over foul.” Drew also noted that the Olympics would give the United States an opportunity to renew what most American authorities claimed was an unblemished history of American victories at the modern Olympics.³²

As the 1920 Olympics approached, reporters resurrected the classic scripts of American Olympic mythology. Olympic performance once again represented national power. “Another American Expeditionary Force is soon to take ship for Europe, and is expected to return as liberally covered with glory and so widely held in renown as those contingents who a year ago looked with gladdened eyes on the shores of home,” predicted the *Literary Digest* of the 1920 United States Olympic team. The magazine recalled “the bloodless fields of Stockholm,” where the United States had performed magnificently and thrilled to the chant of “Rah, rah, ray! U.S.A. A-M-E-R-I-C-A.” The self-proclaimed Olympic champions were now bound for Antwerp. The city had become, in the hyperbolic prose of the *Digest’s* reporter, “the Mekka [sic] of hopeful prodigies of strength, skill and fleetness: the Cockpit of Europe is prepared for another invasion, and for this one the Belgians hold out welcoming hands.”³³

Literary Digest anticipated a continuation of the American Olympic dynasty, noting that “it has become something of a habit with American field-and track-athletes to ‘bring home the bacon’ from any international contest in which they happen to be entered, and the men now in process of selection to represent America in the Olympic games in Antwerp this summer will be expected to uphold Yankee tradition.” American victory seemed guaranteed by the fact that World War One “has taken a far greater toll of European athletes, naturally, than of our own,” realized the *Digest*. The decimated populations of European nations were “unfortunate, from our own point of view as well as Europe’s for we are developing men of such promise that they might well become worldbeaters under any circumstances,” concluded a rather insensitive *Digest* in its assessment of American Olympic advantages in the shadow of the Great War’s killing fields.³⁴

An A.O.C. panel of experts selected the track and field team after regional try-outs in Philadelphia, Chicago, New Orleans, and Pasadena. A final test at the National Amateur Athletic Union (A.A.U.) Championships at Harvard Stadium, in

Cambridge, Massachusetts, finished the process.³⁵ After the tryouts, sportswriter Edward Bushnell warned that the hyperbole that flooded American newspapers and magazines with tales of an American squad composed of “galaxies of stars” misrepresented the team. Bushnell claimed that the United States entry had no “super athletes.” Still, he reassured his readers that the team was strong and deep, and that the lack of “super athletes” would not prevent American domination of the Olympics.³⁶

Few of Bushnell’s colleagues adopted his restrained style. Track and field had historically been considered the most important Olympic sport by Americans. The *New York Times* assured its readers that for those key events America’s athletic leaders had selected the “greatest athletic team which ever competed in international games for Uncle Sam.” One-hundred and thirty-two “scintillating track and field stars” had qualified to wear the “wear the American shield.”³⁷ A story in the *Literary Digest* refuted Bushnell’s cautious approach, announcing that the team was composed of “a whole galaxy of American athletic stars” and declared it the greatest Olympic team of all time.³⁸ In the *Pittsburgh Press* Ralph Davis used the same rhetoric, referring to the American track and field team as a “galaxy of stars” in a column reassuring his readers that “Uncle Sam is confident that his Yankee boys will come through with another victory.” Davis proclaimed that “there is no greater share of honor and strength in the national life of any country than that reflected in its athletes.” He concluded in a rhapsody of athletic jingoism, declaring that “America stands for the superlative in everything—super honor—super athletes—super leadership.”³⁹

For the first time, the United States military played a major role in providing athletes for the American team. The Army and Navy each held its own series of tryouts and sent the winners forward to the official Olympic tryouts. Military personnel dotted the rosters of the track-and-field, swimming and diving, fencing, wrestling, and boxing teams. Midshipmen from the United States Naval Academy won the qualifying regatta to represent the United States in the eight-oared crew competition. The Army provided teams of expert marksmen for the revolver and pistol team. Army and Marine sharpshooters united on the rifle team. The Army’s cavalry branch sent horsemen for the equestrian events. A survey of the roster in the A.O.C.’s report from Antwerp indicates that about one athlete in every four (79 out of 327) was an active-duty soldier or sailor. The Army contributed 49 athletes to the team. The Navy and Marines contributed another 30 athletes. In addition, about one coach or manager in every three (nine out of 26) was an active-duty officer. The significance of the military presence was not lost on Olympic organizers. In fact, the A.O.C.’s official report noted that its most important achievement in 1920 was “bringing into the Olympic cause the stalwart support of our Army and Navy.”⁴⁰

For the first time, the United States also officially sent women athletes to the Olympic Games. Baron de Coubertin had originally demanded that only men compete in the modern Olympics—following the ancient Greek pattern. Beginning in 1900, women participated in small numbers in certain quasi-Olympic events. In 1912 women’s swimming and diving became part of the official Olympic program. Before 1920 the United States resisted including women. After the war, with a new group of leaders in charge of the A.O.C., policies changed and women joined the American squad.⁴¹

The A.O.C. sent a lone female figure skater, Theresa Weld of Chestnut Hill,

Massachusetts. to the April 1920 Olympic ice-skating contests. Weld skated both the single figures contest and in the pairs competition with Nathaniel Niles as her partner, Arriving very near the beginning of the competition Weld rushed to the rink and finished third in the single figures behind two Swedes. A few days later she and Niles finished fourth in the pairs. Weld lamented the lack of Americans on the judging panel. noting that every other nation with skaters in the Olympics was also represented among the judges. She felt that the judges were “unavoidably prejudiced” for their fellow citizens. Cornelius Fellowes, president of the International Skating Union of America concurred with her assessment, asserting that Weld had done “far better than the result shows on account of the very partial decisions of some of the judges.”⁴²

Weld’s performances under difficult conditions did not open the Olympic floodgates for America’s women athletes. A.O.C. officials failed to field a team of women’s tennis players for the August 1920 Olympic contests. The A.O.C. did manage to select fifteen American women for the swimming and diving team. A picture in the A.O.C.’s official report, ignoring Weld’s solo trip to the Olympic skating rink, labeled the swimmers and divers as “the only girls to go.”⁴³

A Changing of the Guard

The inclusion of women athletes was not the only innovation undertaken by the post-war edition of the A.O.C. Behind the confident boasts and extensive tryouts, an inexperienced and frazzled A.O.C. worked to mount an effective Olympic campaign. The leadership of the A.O.C. had changed completely since 1912. Sullivan, the dominant figure in the American Olympic movement before the war, died in 1914. One of the American delegates to the I.O.C., Everet Jansen Wendell, had been killed in action in France. Colonel Robert M. Thompson, citing poor health and advancing years. resigned the presidency of the A.O.C. in 1919. New York State Supreme Court Justice Bartow S. Weeks stepped down as secretary of the committee when he was appointed to fill Wendell’s position with the I.O.C. Two long-time leaders in amateur and collegiate athletics replaced the retired officers.



Frederick W. Rubien, AOC Executive Secretary

The committee elected Gustavus Town Kirby as president and chose A.A.U. secretary

Frederick W. Rubien to serve as the executive secretary of Olympic Committee.⁴⁴ In addition, in a 1918 meeting, the A.O.C. had reconstituted itself as a continuing committee composed of representatives from the national sporting organizations that oversaw Olympic sports. The change in status marked an important step in creating a more permanent A.O.C. to work in both Olympic and non-Olympic years on organizing American entries.⁴⁵

The newly reorganized A.O.C. had severe communication problems with the Belgian Olympic organizers. A Belgian member of the I.O.C., Colonel Leon Osterrieth who served as Chief of the Belgian Military Mission to the United States, met with the A.O.C. in New York City. Still, the A.O.C. did not get word of the official program that the Belgians had planned until February of 1920, just two months before the April starting date for the first competitions--skating and ice hockey. The last events on the program, swimming and rowing, were scheduled to begin their final rounds on September 30. Spread over six months, the program precluded a single Olympic expedition and severely taxed the limited financial resources of the A.O.C. treasury.⁴⁶

Funding the Expedition

A.O.C. president Kirby warned the public that financial support was “the weakest link in our chain of preparations.” He remained confident that when the public understood the needs “it will rally to our support and make success assured by providing funds to send sufficient entrants to maintain our proud athletic records in past Olympiads.” The team must have money, cried Kirby, “Our wonderful war showing abroad has led all European nations to expect that every future American invasion will be conducted upon a similar winning scale.” According to the A.O.C. president the Europeans expected “the United States to sweep forward to victory just as our troops did in the Argonne forest.”⁴⁷

With little time for organization and action, the A.O.C. set a fund-raising goal of \$200,000. The American committee wanted to win as much publicity as possible. They succeeded in securing President Woodrow Wilson’s name and title as honorary president of the A.O.C., continuing what American Olympic bureaucrats claimed was “the precedent under Presidents Roosevelt, Taft, and McKinley.” Wilson, debilitated by a stroke in 1919 after he took his case for the League of Nations to the American people, could have been no more than a figurehead as honorary president. More importantly, the A.O.C. gained crucial support from the United States Army and Navy. Secretary of War Newton Baker and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels played active roles as honorary vice-presidents of the A.O.C. Baker and Daniels not only made sure that the military supplied athletes for the team but lent crucial logistical support to the American Olympic expedition as well.⁴⁸

To solicit funds the A.O.C. used techniques similar to those employed during World War One by the Committee on Public Information. Graphic posters, newspaper stories, motion picture coverage, and patriotic appeals for money to all segments of American society--even to children--had characterized war efforts. The A.O.C. established a “junior membership” for school children who contributed \$1, printed posters to promote the drive, and pursued newspaper and newsreel publicity. They used patriotic appeals to encourage giving. The A.O.C. system for raising money,

constructed in part from lists of donors put together by former A.O.C. boss James Sullivan's crew for the 1908 and 1912 Games and in part by the new techniques learned from the propaganda agents during the war, managed to raise a little more than a \$163,000.⁴⁹

The money funded an American entry that faced challenges from rivals who were adopting American attitudes about organizing Olympic teams. By 1920 many other nations had imitated the American Olympic style. Even athletic authorities in England, which had for so long clung to antiquated notions of amateurism and presented disorganized Olympic entries, began to admit that the United States might have developed an effective system. The London *Telegraph* urged Great Britain to adopt American training and organizing efforts. "It was said that other countries-and America in particular-carry the processes of specialization in training to excessive lengths, and produce not all-round champions, but super-champions for each separate event," admitted the editors. "But what is an Olympiad for except for the display of the prowess of the super-athlete?," asked the *Telegraph*, urging the British to adopt American methods.⁵⁰ E.D. Osborn of the London *Morning Post* went so far as to quote Theodore Roosevelt's "priceless maxim," the former president's call to "sweat and be saved," in an effort to try and convince Parliament to find enough money to subsidize the English Olympians. Osborn pointed out that France, Italy, and Sweden had already underwritten their teams. He worried that a war-wearied Great Britain might not respond to an appeal for a public subscription.⁵¹

The A.O.C. proudly boasted that it financed the American team without depending on the government for any funds. However, that boast was less than accurate. Whether people were war-weary or unconvinced by the advertising campaign, the public subscription in the United States failed to raise enough money to send the American team to Antwerp. The A.O.C. quickly discovered that chaotic conditions on the post-war trans-Atlantic passenger lines due to war losses and labor strikes on both sides of the Atlantic made it impossible for the American team to travel on commercial vessels. The A.O.C. turned to the War Department for help. The United States Army of Occupation of the Rhine was stationed at Antwerp. Military transports made frequent supply runs to Belgium from New York City. The U.S. Navy's contingent of the Olympic team planned to travel to Antwerp on the armored cruiser U.S.S. *Frederick* as part of a training exercise. Why not transport the team on military vessels wondered Kirby and Rubien?⁵²

The A.O.C. request ran into immediate problems. Secretary of War Newton Baker, an honorary vice-president and a staunch supporter of the A.O.C., advised the Olympic committee that he was legally restricted to allowing only military personnel and their wives, Congressmen and their wives, or other federal officials to travel on military transports. Baker and the A.O.C. turned to Congress for relief. A joint resolution allowing the Olympians to travel on military transports was proposed in the House and in the Senate. At a hearing on the bill, Secretary Baker, and A.O.C. leaders Kirby and Weeks blustered about the patriotic nature of the Olympic crusade, picturing it as a vital part of the American system of national defense. Despite the flag-waving assault, some members of Congress resisted giving a "free ride" to the Olympians.⁵³

Intense lobbying by the A.O.C. and the War Department failed to remove all of the opposition to the proposal. Still, the bill enjoyed the support of the chairman of

the Senate Committee on Military Affairs, James Wadsworth of New York, and the chairman of the House Committee on Military Affairs, Julius Kahn of California. Marshaling their congressional troops they worked behind the scenes to muscle the resolution through the legislative process. Those tactics worked in the Senate but members of the House engaged in a major debate over the bill.⁵⁴

The resolution reached the floor of the House of Representatives on May 21. Representative Rollin B. Sanford of New York asked for unanimous consent. Sanford explained that about 100 of the 300 Olympians (he inflated the figures slightly) were in the armed services and could thus travel on the transports already. But the other two hundred would not be able to make the trip if Congress failed to pass the resolution. Some of his colleagues were skeptical. Representative Thomas L. Blanton of Texas opined that the three hundred Olympians could serve the nation better by working on farms in his home state than by running races in Antwerp. Faced with dogged opposition and lacking the necessary quorum, Sanford allowed the House to adjourn and consider the matter the next day.⁵⁵

On May 22, the debate continued. Blanton continued to lead the opposition. The opponents argued that faced with huge budget deficits the government simply could not afford to send the Olympians to Antwerp. They also noted the importance of a recently enacted law that remedied a history of past abuses of military transports, including wasteful “junkets” by members and friends of Congress, by limiting travel solely to military personnel. They feared that allowing the Olympians an exception would create a “precedent” and that Congress would be swamped with groups demanding “joy rides” to overseas destinations. Blanton and his followers were careful to make it clear that they did not oppose sport in general and especially the Olympic Games. Blanton explained that he was “in favor of encouraging athletics in every school, city, town, hamlet and village in this Nation.” However, he felt compelled to exercise fiscal integrity on this issue and block the government funding for the American Olympic team.⁵⁶

The proponents of the resolution to allow civilian members of the Olympic team to travel to Antwerp on military transports warned that the United States could not possibly win the Olympic Games unless, as Representative James A. Gallivan of Massachusetts put it, “they have a helping hand from Uncle Sam.” Gallivan ominously remarked that he believed that a failure to send a representative American team to the Antwerp Olympics “would not only be a misfortune but almost a disaster.” New York’s Sanford warned that the governments of Great Britain and France had financed their Olympic teams. The supporters of the bill also impugned the patriotism of Blanton and the opposition. One Congressman demanded “What American could possibly be against our being represented in Europe in these games?” Gallivan wrapped himself firmly in the flag, declaring, “Let me say to my good friend from Texas [Mr. Blanton] that when winners are picked in each event that they are announced to the assembled throng by throwing out to the breeze the flag of the country whose chosen representative has won the event, and, of course, we want to see the Stars and Stripes flying aloft as often as possible.” Applause interrupted his speech momentarily, and then he concluded: “These boys can not go in the numbers necessary unless we pass this bill.” The House averted Gallivan’s “disaster” by passing the resolution by a vote of 279 for to 79 against (with 2 “presents” and 87 members not voting.) Congress decided to support the effort to advertise American civilization

through the Olympic team.⁵⁷

The Voyage to Antwerp

Congressional action put the A.O.C. on the same playing field as other organizations committed to promoting the “gospel of Americanism.” As with the other campaigns to “spread the American dream” in the 1920s, the Olympic team represented a private effort undertaken with government endorsement and aid.⁵⁸ President Wilson signed the congressional joint resolution on June 2, 1920, authorizing the Secretary of War to transport the Olympic team on army troop ships. The War Department picked the *Northern Pacific* for the Olympic journey. The *Northern Pacific* seemed an ideal choice. It possessed the speed and comfort of a passenger liner. Unfortunately, a loosened plate beneath the waterline rendered the ship unseaworthy for the trip from New York to Europe, scuttling the A.O.C.’s plans. The last-minute discovery threw the expedition into disarray. Most of the team had been waiting in New York City to board the *Northern Pacific* on its July 20 departure date. In order to keep the Olympians in training, athletic officials housed the stranded members of the team at Fort Slocum, New Jersey, until a replacement vessel could be found. That decision produced a great deal of “disgust” among the athletes.⁵⁹

The army first offered the *S.S. Buford*. Wisely, the A.O.C. vetoed the prospect of a sixteen day crossing--compared to eight days on the *Northern Pacific*--on the small transport. The A.O.C. and the War Department finally settled on the *Princess Matoika*. “Unfortunately,” as the official report stated, “the *Matoika* was not the *Northern Pacific*; one was an up-to-date, fast-going ocean steamer, the other slow and of ancient vintage.” Under federal law, officers and their wives, and federal officials and their wives, had to be housed in staterooms. On its Antwerp voyage the *Matoika* carried both the officers and officials originally booked on it, and the *Northern Pacific*’s scheduled passengers, as well as the Olympians. The women swimmers and divers and a few coaches and officials who “deserved some precedence” traveled in staterooms. The rest of the team found quarters below decks in “troopship” conditions.⁶⁰

The transportation problems drew criticism from the New York press. In a satirical column in the *New York Tribune*, sportswriter W.O. McGeehan announced that his fictional source for all important news from the sports world, the vaudeville-inspired master of malapropisms Izzy Kaplan, had quit the Olympic team rather than make the journey in “steerich [steerage]” on a troopship. Kaplan recalled that he had already made such a voyage once, when he was shipped overseas for the Great War. Kaplan boasted that he would have won the pinocle tournament at the Olympics for the United States. When he showed up to join the Atlantic voyage, the crew initially mistook him for a United States senator and began to ready his “statement room.” When he informed the crew that he was an Olympian instead of a senator, the crew chief shouted, “show this bum to the steerich.” Kaplan refused to get on the ship and remarked that, given his treatment, “if the United States should lose this Olympic games it would serve them right.”⁶¹

The A.O.C. hosted a farewell gathering for the athletes at the Manhattan Opera House on July 26, 1920. As soon as the *bon voyage* party ended the team boarded a boat for Hoboken, New Jersey. There they transferred to the transport *Princess*

Matoika.⁶² Republican presidential nominee Warren G. Harding cabled his wishes to the Olympians on board the *Princess Matoika*: "To the company of American athletes sailing to participate in the Olympic games I want to send a word of Godspeed and good wishes." Harding greeted the team, "You will uphold all the traditions of American sportsmanship, I well know, and I want you to know also that I am joining with all your countrymen in wishing that you may come home with your full share of the honors of the great occasion and added distinction to our country."⁶³

The *Matoika* sailed after the party. During the trip across the Atlantic most of the Olympians signed a statement protesting the conditions of the rat-infested troopship. The declaration absolved the army of any culpability and laid the blame for all of the problems on the A.O.C. The athletes charged that the vessel was dirty and vermin-ridden; that the crew was inept both in keeping the troopship quarters clean and at the mess table; and that sanitary facilities onboard were atrocious. They demanded improved conditions for their return trip to the United States. They made sure that the American press knew about their dissatisfaction. One headline in the *New York Tribune* shouted "U.S. Olympic Athletes Threaten to Go on Strike." The A.O.C. leadership responded that the athletes had ignored the "emergency of the situation." The officials chided the Olympians with an anecdote about the behavior exhibited by a troop of Boy Scouts who had traveled on the same ship that summer. Six hundred scouts had made the voyage on the *Matoika* from Antwerp to New York City. They never complained. They "cheerfully" cleaned the ship. They "smiled at their discomforts." Indeed, they "expressed unqualified appreciation of the opportunity afforded them by the War Department to have transportation to and from their International Convention," reported A.O.C. sources.⁶⁴

War-Ravaged Antwerp

The rugged journey finally ended when the American team arrived in Antwerp on August 8, fourteen days after they had debarked from Hoboken. "It was a brave and splendid thing for war-torn and all but prostrate Belgium to hold the Seventh Olympiad," commended the A.O.C.'s official report. The gloom of war still hung over Antwerp. Cheering crowds, festive decorations and "eager athletes" could not hide the scars of war. More than 2500 athletes from twenty-nine nations competed in the Antwerp Games. Several nations were conspicuously absent. The flags of the Central Powers (Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, and Turkey) and the banner of the Soviet Union were missing from the national banners displayed at the stadium. The Olympic movement had not tendered invitations to the losers of the Great War nor to the Bolsheviks of the new Russian regime. Baron de Coubertin, finding his internationalism hard to reconcile with the exclusion of the Great War's losers, consoled himself by explaining that the Belgian hosts rather than the I.O.C. had blocked the extension of invitations to the former Central Powers.⁶⁵ Arthur Drew, writing to an American audience, was not troubled by the exclusions. He explained that by igniting a world war Germany had "sacrificed her privilege of being numbered among sportsmen."⁶⁶

The American team was housed in a variety of locations, some of them less than adequate. A.O.C. president Gus Kirby had secured lodging for the majority of the American team at a schoolhouse on the *Rue Oudaen*. The shooting, polo, and equestrian

trian teams billeted with the American army in distant Coblenz. The rowing team stayed near a Brussels canal. The women swimmers bedded at the Y.W.C.A. Hostess House in Antwerp. The Americans arrived in Antwerp in the midst of a three-day holiday. They discovered to their dismay that Belgian workers had not finished outfitting the schoolhouse to accommodate the athletes. The Olympians found the toilets disgusting, the showers offering only cold water, and fewer cots than athletes at the schoolhouse. And if the poor rooming conditions were not enough, the food the Americans received at Antwerp according to the official report, and not simply the athletes' complaints. "was far from satisfactory."⁶⁷



Gustavus Town Kirby, AOC President

The animosity between athletes and officials that had festered during the long voyage to the Olympics boiled over the day before the opening ceremonies when Kirby dismissed the Illinois Athletic Club's world record-holding triple jumper Dan Ahearn for insubordination. Ahearn had missed the 10:00 p.m. curfew at the schoolhouse the night before. Ahearn claimed he could not sleep in the noisy school. He slept in the hotel "where the big weight men were allowed to sleep." Some of the team threatened to boycott the Olympics unless Ahearn was reinstated. The A.O.C. angrily replied that their decision was irrevocable. "even if 90 per cent of the athletes refuse to compete."⁶⁸

American Olympic officials held a mass meeting to defuse the tense atmosphere, but the athletes forced the committee to reconsider Ahearn's case. The Olympians greeted Kirby and Justice Bartow S. Weeks, the A.O.C. secretary, with "cat-calls and heckling." The meeting created "considerable wrangling among the athletes themselves." Some of the Olympians demanded silence from their teammates who attacked A.O.C. officials with "heckling interrogations." Justice Weeks "pleaded the need of teamwork and discipline" with the athletes. "What position would you be in if the committee refused to continue its duty?" queried Weeks. "Go ahead, we will get another committee!." and other insults cascaded on the stunned justice.⁶⁹ The next day A.O.C. officials reinstated Ahearn.⁷⁰ Ahearn eventually finished sixth in the Olympic triple jump.⁷¹

The Opening Ceremonies

The Games opened on a Saturday, August 14. The *Atlanta Constitution* reported that in spite of the "warm sunshine of a perfect day," only a small crowd sat in the stadium to witness the parade of nations.⁷² The *New York Tribune's* Arthur Draper

labeled Antwerp's stadium "pathetically tiny," and noted that while it was dwarfed by New York City's Polo Grounds, only half the seats were filled for the opening ceremonies. Draper did admit that Antwerp's Olympic stadium was beautifully decorated. He also conceded that the event was "the best League of Nations meeting since the war."⁷³

Cardinal Desire Joseph Mercier held an inaugural service for the Games of the Seventh Olympiad at the Cathedral of Antwerp during which a *De Profundis* was sung for the athletes who would have competed in the 1920 Olympics had they not been killed in the war. Among the casualties, in addition to the American I.O.C. delegate Wendell, had been a number of famous Olympians. Lieutenant Wyndam Hallswelle of England, the winner of the 400 meter race at London in 1908, Jean Bouin, the great French distance runner, Hans Braun, the German star in the 800 meters at Stockholm, and many others, had been killed in the war.⁷⁴ The *Pittsburgh Press* commented that the absence of athletes killed in the Great War, as well as the absence of the flags of Germany, Austria, Turkey, and Russia from the pageant, infused a solemn tone into the festivities.⁷⁵ For the first time in Olympic history the Olympic flag, with its five multicolored rings entwined on a white background, appeared at the Games. Another innovation of the Antwerp Olympics was the recitation of the Olympic oath. A Belgian athlete spoke in the name of the assembled sportsmen: "We swear that we are taking part in the Olympic Games as loyal competitors, observing the rules governing the Games, and anxious to show a spirit of chivalry, for the honor of our countries and for the glory of the sport."

The national teams marched past the Belgian royal family and Cardinal Mercier at Antwerp stadium.⁷⁶ The American team made "an impressive sight in their white flannels and bluejackets with the American shield on the left breast," proclaimed an A.O.C. official.⁷⁷ In 1912, at the Stockholm Olympics, the American press had criticized European athletes for marching in military style at the parade of nations.⁷⁸ William Shepherd complained about the "machine-like movements" and "mass formations" of the Germans in his world war-tinged reminiscence of Stockholm.⁷⁹ In 1920 many American athletes and officials paraded before the Belgian monarchy in full military dress. Officers who commanded the American military contingents in the Olympic Games marched at the front of the American team with A.O.C. president Gustavus Kirby. Following the blue and white clad civilian Olympians came the soldier Olympians in parade uniforms of their service branch—the U.S. Army, Navy, or Marines.⁸⁰

The *Atlanta Constitution* proudly reported that while "a great many of the delegations dipped their flags as they passed the royal box," American flag-bearer Patrick MacDonald "did not drop the flag."⁸¹ After creating an international incident by refusing to dip the flag in the parade of nations at London in 1908, the United States team had lowered its banner at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics.⁸² In Antwerp the American Olympians returned to the practice of using the parade to make nationalistic gestures with the flag. The official report of the A.O.C. confirmed that the "Stars and Stripes was borne aloft" by MacDonald, a champion shot-putter, a New York City police officer, and a veteran of the 1912 Stockholm Olympics.⁸³ King Albert pronounced the Games open amidst a booming cannonade, while a delegation of Belgian army veterans released pigeons into the skies of Antwerp.⁸⁴

Counting Medals and Complaining

The American press lodged claims for “victory” in the Olympics from 1896 forward, usually on the basis of American supremacy in track and field. The Americans regularly claimed that they were the Olympic “champions,” a title that the I.O.C. failed to sanction. Before 1920, when the American press counted medals it usually counted them in strange and highly partisan ways.⁸⁵ In 1920, for the first time since the St. Louis Olympics in 1904, and for the first time ever on foreign soil, the United States actually won more total medals in all the Olympic events than any other nation. The United States gathered 41 gold, 26 silver, and 27 bronze medals at Antwerp. Runner-up Sweden won 17 gold, 19 silver, and 26 bronze medals. The United States dominated men’s swimming and diving, the shooting contests, rowing, and even won the Olympic rugby title. In swimming Norman Ross repeated his spectacular performances from the “Military Olympics” and won three gold medals. Hawaii’s Duke Kahanamoku, a veteran of the 1912 Stockholm Olympic team, swam to two gold medals.⁸⁶

The United States failed to send any women’s tennis players to take on France’s Suzanne Lenglen, anointed by the world press corps as the female star of the Antwerp Games. Still, American women dominated swimming and diving. America’s women swimmers and divers swept every event except the “plain” diving contest. They won four of five of the women’s events—two individual swimming races, a swimming relay, and two diving events. Ethelda Bleibtrey matched Ross’ numbers, winning three gold medals for the United States. She won both individual swimming races and led the United States to victory in the swimming relay.⁸⁷ Coach Otto Wahle pronounced the performance of the American women’s swimming and diving team “unprecedented.”⁸⁸



Ethelda Bleibtrey, triple gold medalist

Where precedents really mattered, in track and field, the American team fell far short of national expectations. For the American public and press, track and field was the center of any Olympic Games. American tourists and military personnel comprised a significant segment of the crowd for the track and field contests. From a seat in the royal box A.O.C. president Gus Kirby led the American fans in chants of “U.S.A., U.S.A., A-M-E-R-I-C-A” that drowned the cheers of spectators from other nations.⁸⁹ Overall, the Americans won nine firsts, twelve seconds, and eight thirds in

the twenty-eight event program for track and field. Still, that was a very disappointing showing for a team that had generated so much pre-Olympic hyperbole. On the first day of track and field competition the United States swept gold, silver, and bronze medals in the very first track event as Frank Loomis set a world-record in the 400 meter hurdles. American sprinters dominated the 100 meter and 200 meter races. Charles Paddock, the track hero of the 1919 "Military Olympics," won gold in the 100 meter contest and silver in the 200 meter contest. However, the American team fared poorly at distances beyond 400 meters. B.G.D. Rudd of Great Britain won the 400 meter race. British star Albert Hill won both the 800 meter and 1500 meter races. Finland's great distance runner Paavo Nurmi won the 10,000 meter race, the 10,000 meter cross-country race, and finished second in the 5000 meter race. Another great Finnish racer, Hans Kolehmainen, won the Marathon.⁹⁰

The Finns also did well in field events, upsetting the American flag-bearer Pat MacDonald in the shot put, and winning the javelin throw, the discus, and the triple-jump. Americans won the high jump, the pole vault, and the hammer throw. MacDonald came back to win the fifty-six pound weight throw.⁹¹ Sol Butler, the heavy favorite in the long jump, a star in the 1919 "Military Olympics," and one of the few African-Americans on the 1920 team, "pulled a tendon" and had to withdraw from the competition.⁹² In the all-around events a Finn won the pentathlon and a Norwegian won the decathlon.⁹³

As the track and field contests drew to a close, stories in Americans newspapers reassured readers that in spite of a lack of stellar performances the United States was in the process of winning a commanding victory as a national team. "America Sure of Olympics," "Athletes of the U.S. Are Supreme," "American Team Now Assured of Victory in Olympic Games at Antwerp," "Yankees Are Far in the Lead," "Yankee Track Team Winner of Olympic Games," read headlines.⁹⁴ During the week in which the track and field events were contested, the *New York Tribune* ran a box on its front page listing the Olympic "score" of each nation. According to the newspaper, the "Olympic system of scoring" gave seven points for first place, five points for second place, four points for third place, three points for fourth place, two points for fifth place, and one point for sixth place. The system was in fact not an I.O.C. policy but instead was the invention of the American press. The American team held a commanding lead from the first day. When the track and field contests had been completed, the *Tribune's* headline crowed "Uncle Sam's Boys Double Sweden's Score at Antwerp." In the final tally the United States scored 215 points to 105 for Sweden, 102 for Finland, 95 for England, 33 for France, 27 for Italy, 24 for South Africa, and 10 or fewer points for ten other nations.⁹⁵

On August 30, King Albert of Belgium presented medals to the victors in track and field, swimming and diving, and rowing. U.S. ambassador Brand Whitlock watched as the Belgian monarch presented the "lion's share" of those medals to American athletes.⁹⁶ The final results cheered A.O.C. officials and coaches. American track coach Lawson Robertson, in a report syndicated nationally by the United News Service, declared his American squad "the best team on the field, without a doubt, so there is no cause for alarm of retrogression among followers of track and field sports at home."⁹⁷

In spite of Robertson's pleas, the "lion's share" of medals, the "Olympic scoring"

tables, and the newspaper headlines, calls of alarm reverberated in the American press. Given the enormous expectations, many Olympic observers found the American performance in track and field less than satisfying. In *Outing* magazine Roy Lewis satirized the *New York Times* pre-Olympic hyperbole that hung the “scintillating stars” label on the United States track team. “We sent an immense team of 108 men, only 25 percent of whom did effective work,” grumbled Lewis, “Sixty per cent did nothing but have a joy ride and join the ranks of the ‘also rans!’” Sportswriter Sparrow Robinson thought that the United States sent “too much deadwood” to Antwerp. Lewis concurred in that assessment. He found it remarkable that no American track athletes won more than a single event. “If we are to rank as we should among the nations of the earth,” wrote Lewis, “we must train our men properly and consistently in the distance runs, we must pay more attention to our field events, particularly the discus and javelin.” He also argued that the United States needed to develop middle distance runners who were as good as the champion American racers of the pre-war era. Lewis concluded his criticism of the American track and field performance at the 1920 Olympics with an admonition. “No American team has ever gone to Europe without teaching the Continentals something to their advantage,” he insisted. “If we do not quickly begin to learn as well as teach, we shall be letting others break all the worsts at the finish lines,” he warned. “The European has too often been accused hereabouts of taking the inventions or ideas of others instead of originating anything,” he declared, “True or not, we must admit that the winner counts most heavily in the score. What shall it profit a man if he create the tools but disdain to use them?”⁹⁸

Others agreed with Lewis, yet they managed to do so with less disparaging language. W.O. McGeehan, in his *New York Tribune* column, conceded that American Olympians had “piled up the points” in the Antwerp Games. Still, McGeehan admitted that “experts declare that it was not quite the best team that could have been selected.”⁹⁹ A *New York Times* sports editorial announced that “followers of the sport in this country are awakening to the realization that the supremacy enjoyed heretofore by America in the classic games is to be challenged hard.” The newspaper revealed that the American team achieved triumph in track and field through “balanced strength.” Still, the editorial admitted that the 1920 team did not possess the “individual brilliance” of past American Olympic squads. The editorial concluded that the Americans “should not rest on their laurels but should commence without delay the work of developing a conquering team for the next Olympiad.”¹⁰⁰

The American Olympians managed to satisfy the expectations of a few commentators. One *New York Times* editorial proclaimed the squad “doubtless the strongest in the annals of athletics.” when “considered as a team.” The editorial noted once again that the 1912 Olympians had led in the “number of individual stars,” winning sixteen gold medals in track and field to the 1920 delegation’s nine, “but the number of entries this year was far larger and competition proportionately keen.”¹⁰¹ Under the headline “American Athletes Are Still Supreme,” a *New York Times* sports reporter insisted United States athletic dominance “has not really been threatened.” The reporter counseled that “while it behooves this country to watch its step for European development during the four years that will intervene before the next Olympics, nothing transpired during the games just concluded in the stadium at Antwerp to warrant the belief that the United States is in danger of being dethroned for some time to

come.”¹⁰² Jack Masters, in the *New York Tribune*, took one European threat more seriously. He granted the United States a “clean-cut victory,” but warned Finland, a nation smaller than the “State of Montana” with a population “considerably less than that of the city of Chicago,” was “seriously threatening the athletic supremacy of the United States.”¹⁰³

The few positive notices for the track and field team failed to convince the majority of athletic experts. Many worried that the American showing in track and field might signal the beginning of a trend. Even the American triumphs in other sports could not dissuade some critics from worrying that the Olympians had lost their sense of mission. “Many athletes failed to realize that they were representing the United States, battling for the flag and not for themselves,” lamented the Boston *Globe’s* Hallinan. The 1920 team seemed to have a different character from that of previous Olympic contingents.¹⁰⁴

Many Olympic watchers thought the massive casualties suffered by the European nations had eased the American task at Antwerp. The *Rocky Mountain News* opined that “more than a generation will be required to place the four great nations chiefly engaged in the war on a near equality with the more favored nations.”¹⁰⁵ The *New York Times* agreed that the “poor showing of the leading European countries,” could be attributed to the war. “Many who would have been victors lie in France,” mourned the New York newspaper.¹⁰⁶ *New York Tribune* writer McGeehan hoped that by the 1924 Olympics “English manhood has recovered from the drains that were made on it by the war and that the next American team will meet with sterner competition.”¹⁰⁷

Given the war losses, America’s supposedly poor showing became even harder to explain. The Boston *Globe’s* John J. Hallinan insisted that “many of our stars were incapacitated” by the long ocean voyage and the limited preparation time in Belgium. Hallinan recalled that the late James E. Sullivan had always insisted that the American team be provided with a fast boat and two or three weeks to acclimate itself to the European climate. Ignoring the old A.O.C. boss’s commandments had doomed the 1920 team to a sub-par showing.¹⁰⁸ McGeehan concurred with Hallinan’s assessment, arguing that the transportation and housing of the American team had created performance problems.¹⁰⁹

Olympic Bickering

American athletes and officials had other explanations for the problems they experienced in Antwerp. They insinuated that the Belgians and the I.O.C. had conspired to undermine American performances and harass the American team. Perhaps the biggest scandal at the Antwerp Olympics involved American sprinter Morris Kirksey. Kirksey finished second behind American star Charles Paddock in the 100 meters. Kirksey won a gold medal, with Paddock and two other teammates, in the 400 meter relay. When he attempted to get onto the stadium’s field for King Albert’s medal ceremony, he had a skirmish with Belgian police. They subdued him with rifle butts, hand-cuffed him, and sent him to jail. Two of his track teammates, Paddock and Robert Le Gendre, managed to get Kirksey released from prison.¹¹⁰ Kirksey alleged in the American press that when the officers failed to let him through to the medal ceremony, he “playfully” took one of their guns. The police officer who lost

his weapon was angered and “squared off” to hit Kirksey, who also “squared off.” In the ensuing melee Kirksey claimed that several Belgian gendarmes assaulted him. He was knocked out by a blow to the ribs with a carbine. Kirksey insisted that “though, I admit, I was wrong in not stopping at first, surely there was no need for the brutal attack, or for arresting and manacling me.” Belgian authorities promised to investigate and to apologize to Kirksey if evidence revealed that the gendarmes had acted inappropriately.¹¹¹ American athletes interpreted the Kirksey affair as much more than an aberration. They contended that the incident was “the climax of a long series of insults typical of the anti-American spirit that has characterized this year’s games.”¹¹²

On that issue, if on nothing else, the A.O.C. and American athletes were in agreement. The A.O.C. shunted the blame for the failure to meet expectations onto the I.O.C. and the Belgian organizing committee. The official American report initially, and briefly, “commended and applauded” the Belgian efforts. The report then launched an attack on the Belgians and the I.O.C. “To ignore mistakes and shortcomings on the part of the Belgian management and of even more glaring ones on the part of international federations which laid down the rules and provided the officials for the contests would be mere pretense,” the A.O.C. insisted.¹¹³

The managers of the track and field, boxing, track and field, and swimming teams each complained about poor officiating and lack of proper training facilities and schedules.¹¹⁴ Track coach Lawson Robertson announced: “I have seen four Olympics and this is the worst I have witnessed. The weather has been terrible, the field is bad, and the management has been miserable.” Robertson claimed poor field conditions had caused a rash of injuries to American track and field stars.¹¹⁵ *Pittsburgh Press* sports columnist Ralph Davis concurred with Robertson and blasted Belgian officiating.¹¹⁶

Decisions in the boxing and wrestling matches incensed American spectators and officials. American military personnel cheering boxers with army and navy connections staged a near riot after questionable judging cost U.S. boxers several matches in an opening session.¹¹⁷ American officials grouched about “professionals” on other squads--particularly on the Canadian team.¹¹⁸ Boxing coach Spike Webb was particularly incensed by a series of decisions that went against his fighters.¹¹⁹

Aileen Riffin, the fourteen-year-old who won the women’s “fancy” diving contest, claimed the problems began before the team actually ventured to Antwerp. Riffin revealed that American divers never received clear rules from the Belgian organizing committee. That oversight greatly hampering their preparation for the Olympic competitions. She described awful conditions in Antwerp. The divers trained in near constant rain by diving into an icy pool located in an old moat.¹²⁰ Other sources noted that the crowds at the swimming and diving events were less than friendly to the Americans. Arthur Draper of the *New York Tribune* explained that the “superiority of the Americans in most forms of sport hasn’t added to their popularity over here with the general public.”¹²¹

Nearly every section of the American team quibbled with the way the Antwerp Games were run. The complaints had a familiar ring. After previous Olympic Games Americans had always proclaimed that their athletic organizing skills were far superior to those of the Europeans. The Antwerp Olympics sparked another outburst in

the long series of A.O.C. attacks on the I.O.C.'s capabilities.¹²²



Aileen Riggan, receiving her diving gold medal

Going Home

The voyage back to the United States brought more outbursts of discontent. The A.O.C. managed to secure return passage for many of the Olympians on ocean liners. Officials had guaranteed the Olympians a pleasant return trip. But sixty athletes were consigned to the army transport *Antigone* and another forty-nine to the *Sherman* for the voyage back to New York. The sixty unfortunate Olympians agreed to travel on the *Antigone* on the condition that their accommodations were clean and “in a good part of the boat.” The A.O.C. assured them they would have staterooms. The Army promised it would see to it that the return trip would be comfortable. In spite of the assurances, the *Antigone* proved to be just as bad as the *Princess Matoika*. The Olympians jumped ship in Liverpool, England. According to the A.O.C.'s official report, “it was felt to be a hardship to insist even upon those in staterooms remaining on board [the *Antigone*] and authority was given for accommodations to be secured for all on the *Mobile*.” The sixty athletes sentenced to a “troopship” crossing on the *Antigone* instead reached New York City in first class cabins on the ocean liner S.S. *Mobile*.¹²³ The forty-nine athletes on the *Sherman* also complained vociferously about the conditions on their ship. They were accompanied on the return voyage by the bodies of 763 American soldiers who had been killed in the Great War.¹²⁴

As soon as they reached New York City, the Olympic athletes angrily attacked the A.O.C.'s handling of the entire situation. Richard Remer, bronze medalist in the 3000 meter walk, gave an interview to the *New York Times* immediately after debarking from the *Sherman*. “I wouldn't make this trip again for any consideration,” announced Remer. “It can be safely said that if the team had been permitted two hours for deliberation before it sailed on the *Matoika*, every man Jack of them would have quit the team and remained home,” swore the disenchanting walker. Remer claimed that he was not exaggerating by reporting that complaints began the moment the athletes boarded the ship and continued until they landed in New York City. He denounced the A.O.C. for all the housing and travel problems the athletes suffered.¹²⁵

The official A.O.C. report blamed the poor traveling and training conditions on a

“lack of time” for organization and “early uncertainty” about the Games. The report implicated the Army as a culprit, claiming that officers on board the *Antigone* ignored a direct written order to upgrade the Olympians’ quarters.¹²⁶

The War Department tried to distance itself from any criticism. In his official report General William M. Wright, who headed up the transportation detail, denied the United States Army had any responsibility for the problems encountered by the Olympic team. Wright contended that the athletes’ complaints “indicate that some of the competitors did not realize the natural discomforts to be expected from an ocean voyage or collective housing in a crowded city, immediately after the war.” The general also suggested “that they failed to appreciate the impossibility of supplying so large a number of persons with accommodations such as would be enjoyed by a tourist traveling for pleasure.”¹²⁷

The A.O.C. also obliquely admitted that its own internal chaos had contributed to the problems. Events since the 1912 Olympics had “severely strained” the “continuity” of the ruling body, claimed the official report—with some justification. They did promise that in the future things would change. “With a permanent, continuing organization, sufficiently financed, not only should the United States be able to prepare a super-team for the next Olympics, but the public should be educated as to the purpose and wider significance of Olympic Games so that athletic prowess may be real and lasting,” concluded the official report. The A.O.C. announced the formation of a Committee on Reorganization to remedy the situation.¹²⁸

Changing Interpretations of Olympic Stories

The press coverage of the Olympics disturbed the AOC and played a part in the reorganization efforts. In fact, the way in which the press covered the Olympics was changing substantially from pre-World War One styles. The squabbles between the A.O.C. officials and the athletes, which the press focused on as intensely as the actual events, indicated that a different perspective was emerging on the sporting pages. The media devoted its newspaper columns and magazine articles not to explanations of the ways in which the American political system produced champion athletes, as it had in the past, but to gossip-filled accounts of horrid trans-Atlantic crossings and personal feuds.

The press devoted voluminous attention to the scandals. The series of incidents surrounding the Olympic expedition infuriated Roy Lewis. “We are having enough troubles with professional athletics. strikers. strike-breakers, Bolsheviks, and the League of Nations without being forced to turn our attention to squabbles within what should be the cleanest organization in the world,” he scoffed. Lewis characterized the scandal as “a series of charges and counter-charges which seem to be aimed at and worded for the greatest possible publicity.” He charged the athletes with “undue individualism,” and sarcastically noted that triple jumper Dan Ahearn was reinstated “at the *demand*--not *request*, mind you--of the rest of the contestants.” Lewis also condemned the officials, who “talk back to the press in veiled threat and innuendo of ‘charges’ which they may prefer.” Lewis thought the incidents added up to “a sad business all around.”¹²⁹

A *New York Times* sports editorial cautioned that “ordinary decency and common sense call for a suspension of judgement in the altercation” until all parties had

returned to the United States. The New York City daily was positive that A.O.C. president Kirby and secretary Weeks “were utterly altruistic and patriotic” in their efforts. The two unfortunate organizers “had no beds of roses to offer the touring athletes” at Antwerp. That Kirby and Weeks “were at fault however, is not clear.” concluded the editorial.¹³⁰ John Hallinan of the Boston *Globe* spread the blame more liberally: “While the committee, no doubt, failed in its mission. the athletes, too, were not above censure for the way they acted.”¹³¹

Political Heroes and Heroines Again?

The squabbles between the athletes and the A.O.C. bureaucrats, and the furor over the degree of “scintillation” American Olympians managed at Antwerp, dissipated for a time on October 2, 1920, in New York City. A procession of Olympians wound from the New York Athletic Club down Fifth Avenue from Fifty-Ninth Street to City Hall. More than one hundred of the nearly three hundred members of the American team participated in the march. Thousands of New Yorkers packed roofs, windows, and curbs along the route. The crowds gave a thundering ovation to Times Square traffic cop, Olympic champion in the 56-pound weight throw, and flag-bearer at both the parade of nations in Antwerp and in the New York City parade, Pat “Babe” McDonald. The crowds also gave loud salutes to six members of the gold medal winning eight-oared shell crew from the United States Naval Academy. The loudest roars went to fourteen-year-olds Aileen Riggin and Helen Wainwright, winner and runner-up respectively in the “fancy” diving contest.”¹³²

At City Hall Mayor John F. Hylan addressed the Olympians. Hylan claimed that the American victories at Antwerp “show the aggressive spirit as well as the unconquerable one.” Hylan believed that the “confidence in your own ability-in which we all secretly shared-was the basis upon which you built your triumphs.” The mayor presented commemorative medals to the Olympians and announced that “it makes us all feel proud that we are Americans and belong to the country that produces such wonderful specimens of virile manhood and womanhood.” Hylan predicted that American “achievement and high ideals in sport would do much to counteract the forces of unrest in this country and destroy the influence of agitators who preach the destruction of the American form of Government.”¹³³

That evening the mayor held a banquet at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel honoring the American Olympic team. State and city officials crowded the official dais. The Olympics made for positive public relations. New York City commissioner Grover Whalen presided over the affair and told the audience of more than a thousand that the American victory at Antwerp was exactly what the nation expected. Whalen declared that “it is an American’s duty, . . . to win, and to win always.”¹³⁴

Father Francis P. Duffy, the war hero chaplain of the famous World War One combat unit the “fighting 69th,” presented the keynote speech at the banquet. He contrasted the Chicago “Black Sox” who fixed the 1919 World Series to the Olympians. The priest told the diners that “the examples of the clean-cut victory of the American Olympic team at Antwerp will do much to counteract the effect of the baseball scandal.” Duffy thought it “only proper that distinguished men and women of New York City should unite to give you applause for upholding the American ideal of a clean mind in a sound body and for adding new prestige to this Republic and new glory to

its flag." The priest, raising the spectre of the Red Scare that in 1920 had gripped the United States, and especially New York City, noted that devotion to sport would prevent the "radical reign of terrorism" in the United States.¹³⁵

Mayor Hylan continued his praise of the Olympians at the banquet. He seconded Father Duffy's Red Scare theme. The mayor anointed the Olympians as the champions of American morality who opposed sinister agitators seeking to tear down the American way of life. "You men and women have shown how a citizen should live, and love, revere and respect his native land," commended the mayor. "By your hard, earnest work and deserved victories you have set an example of energy which should help in some measure to counteract the insidious counsels of agitators who revile the Government and urge doing nothing for the common weal. It is with this misguided element in mind." Hylan preached, "that I say the moral value to the nation of such upright Americanism as displayed by the Olympic team is almost beyond computation." He insisted that "the widest publicity should be given to your patriotic achievements for the influence of your example can stimulate a nation's productive power and help bring things back to normal." Hylan congratulated the Olympians on their patriotism. "You have shown what loyalty and brains can accomplish," preached the mayor, "and that these things are possible to every one under the protecting folds of Old Glory, but that they must be sought in a spirit of fairness and fidelity to the American form of government."¹³⁶

New Olympic Scripts for a New Political Culture

The 1920 American Olympic experience produced a mixture of images. Many had anticipated a rekindling of American athletic idealism at the Antwerp Olympics. That did not happen. Instead, poor organization, lackluster performances, the dislocations caused by the war, and internecine struggles plagued the American Olympic effort. Yet deeper changes in the structure of society and the function of sport were altering the role of the athletes who before World War One had been dubbed "America's athletic missionaries."¹³⁷ The clear connection in American interpretations of the Olympics between political culture and sport had been blurred. The press no longer linked Olympic victory with the melting pot and the progressive political agenda. American Olympians no longer championed the confident political faith of Theodore Roosevelt's generation. Instead they were pictured as one-hundred-percent American defenders of the ill-defined "American form of government" against undefined, sinister forces.

Certainly, in the autumn of 1920, Mayor Hylan and much of the public felt that the republic was under assault from a host of sinister forces. The enemies took many forms in American imaginations. There were the bomb-toting anarchists of "foreign" persuasions who blew up the front porch of the United States Attorney General's residence, sent letter bombs to the mayor of Seattle, a Georgia senator, and several stalwart foes of labor and champions of immigration restriction. On one morning that fall, a wagon-load of explosives detonated on Wall Street, killing thirty-five people and destroying the edifice of J.P. Morgan's banking syndicate. Bolsheviks and "Reds" comprised another threatening tribe. Americans saw them everywhere, scurrying through labor camps in the garb of labor organizers and instigating a rash of strikes, threatening the public safety in the Boston police walkout, and arriving by the

boatload to join their comrades in the alien landscapes of urban jungles. Leaders of the American Left lent credence to the hysteria by announcing that revolution was imminent. A Red Scare seized American minds.

The Red Scare represented an attempt by American society to purge Mayor Hylan's ill-defined "sinister forces" from the American system. The nation created an enemy, lumping all the ills that perplexed society onto the backs of the agitators. They sought to purge the enemy from their shores in an effort to revitalize society. The Justice Department, led by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, rounded up a collection of cultural scapegoats and shipped them back to the evil Old World on the S.S. *Buford*--ironically the very ship on which American Olympians refused to return from Belgium. In matters closer to Hylan's focus of attention, the New York State Legislature, at the behest of the Lusk Commission--an irresponsible body that associated Bolshevism with the pro-German sentiment, thus mingling both war hysteria and anti-communist paranoia--expelled five duly elected socialists from its body. Mainstream politicians condemned the expulsions of the socialists and the work of the Lusk Commission. Charles Evans Hughes, the Republican loser in the presidential election of 1916 and later a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, offered to mount a legal challenge on behalf of the expelled socialists. Even the Republican presidential candidate for 1920, Warren G. Harding, denounced the New York assembly's thwarting of constitutional principles.¹³⁸

The Red Scare dissipated quickly after the fall of 1920. But the nativistic fears that spawned it continued to shape federal policy throughout the 1920s. Perhaps it is not so surprising that in such a climate, the nation forgot James E. Sullivan's "inside dope" about immigrants as the lifeblood of American vitality. Odes to the melting pot character of the American Olympic team, one of the staples of pre-World War One coverage of the Olympics, were conspicuous by the absence in the press coverage of the 1920 Olympics. The fact that American Olympians were not used as the political symbols of the prowess of a multi-ethnic America in which immigrants enjoyed freedom and equality unimaginable in their native lands represented a major change in American interpretations of the Olympics. While claims that the melting pot and an egalitarian society created an invincible Olympic team were frequently difficult to square with social realities, they had nevertheless been a staple in the American media's depictions of Olympians before World War One.¹³⁹

The changes in American interpretations of the political meanings of Olympians revealed important alterations in the nation's political culture. The central issues of the pre-war generation had eroded. Mayor Hylan had hoped that the Olympians' "patriotic achievements" would recharge the nation's "productive powers" and "help bring things back to normal." New York City's mayor was not the only politician in the autumn of 1920 who was thinking about a return to normal conditions. "America's present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy." proclaimed Republican presidential candidate Warren G. Harding. "Normalcy" became his central campaign theme, a word that no one could find in a dictionary but which represented a vague notion that Americans interpreted in a variety of ways. In spite of the diffuseness of Harding's platform, or perhaps because of it, the voters chose the Republican. Harding's vague platitudes sold well to a nation of consumers, bedazzled by a variety of new products and lifestyle choices, who were disenchanted with politics.¹⁴⁰

Before the Great War, American social reformers had used sport to channel individual and social energies toward political goals. Sport had been a part of the progressive attempt to create a national culture, a mechanism for assimilating immigrants, a schooling system of democratic values, an agent of empire. Sport provided American society with an important social technology that served specific political ideas. In the new cultural setting that emerged after World War One, sport was becoming a social technology that served a burgeoning entertainment industry. The press focused on “scintillating stars” and the details of petulant feuds and petty complaints. Another signal of the change was the fact that articles about the Olympic Games of 1920 disappeared entirely from influential political journals that had made the Olympic Games part of the debate over social reform in the Progressive Era.¹⁴¹ *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s*, *North American Review*, *Independent*, *The Outlook*, *McClure’s*, *Living Age*, *Forum*, *World’s Work*, *Review of Reviews*, *American Magazine*--each of these venerable journals of politics and opinion had run stories about the Olympics in the period from 1896 to 1912. Not a single one of these journals commented on the Antwerp Olympics. In 1920, intellectuals abandoned their old practice of using the Olympic Games to stir political discourse about the nature of the American republic.¹⁴²

As the 1920s began, the dislocations of war, the collapse of faith in political action, the rise of a thriving consumer-based economy, and the full emergence of a mass society eroded earlier American ideas about the connections between sport and political reform. The 1920 Olympics marked a beginning of shift toward new attitudes about sport.¹⁴³ That shift was not absolute. Occasionally, the media used Olympic athletes in the older progressive style that had generated the idea of a sporting republic. Athletes still sometimes served as advertisements for social reform issues. The *Playground* was the nation’s foremost national journal dedicated to physical education, youth sports programs, and civic and school-based athletic facilities; as well as publication with deep roots in the older progressive tradition. In the pages of the *Playground*, Arthur Drew painted the Olympians as average Americans transformed by the playground movement into world-beating athletic stars. “The Olympic champion is simply the playground boy grown up; he is the youth who ran races in the streets and played on the village ball team,” he declared. Drew used the Olympians to promote American interest and commitment to the strenuous life.¹⁴⁴ In doing so he followed in the footsteps of a legion of progressive politicians and social reformers from the three decades that preceded American entry into World War One.¹⁴⁵

The New Media Interpretations of American Olympians

In press accounts of the 1920 Olympics, Drew’s traditional progressive message was overwhelmed by newer cultural forms. The new media stories sold images of the Olympians as “stars” of a thriving entertainment industry.¹⁴⁶ The transition from political archetypes to popular culture icons was brought into sharp relief in press accounts of the women’s swimming and diving team. The swimmers and divers were not amorphous ‘everywomen.’ Diver Helen Wainwright became “a blue-eyed, raven-haired little beauty, one of the loveliest girls ever to climb into a bathing-suit.” Olympic diving champion Aileen Riggan was “a little beauty with tremendous personal charm.” Olympic swimming champion Ethelda Bleibtrey became “a handsome

blonde.” One of the most famous and insightful sportswriters of the 1920s, in spite of his unrelenting male chauvinism, Paul Gallico, explained that their fame, beauty, and accomplishments were inextricably linked in American popular culture. “Those girls could swim, and some of them could swim faster than any other girls in the world,” he marveled. “And what is more, after climbing out of the pool where they had been fighting like terriers for winning positions, they could put on evening dress without looking like the first-string halfback playing the feminine lead in the varsity show, and dance at night, hold their liquor like gentlemen, most of them, smoke a cigarette if they felt like it, and spoon a little, or be gay and wholly feminine,” Gallico observed. “Sex appeal,” he concluded, clinched their position as the most popular female athletes of the 1920s. Olympic sport, Hollywood, and Madison Avenue were beginning to merge. The women Olympians were not models of democratic womanhood nor visible manifestations of the fight for women’s rights but sexual commodities marketed for popular consumption.¹⁴⁷

Gallico noted that during the 1920s American newspapers began to use female athletes, especially swimmers and divers, as a “sales stimulus.” Women athletes appeared in the media much more frequently in photographs than in articles. Through such methods, Gallico explained, editors sold the female form to “family” audiences. Sex appeal rather than athletic prowess made them popular commodities.¹⁴⁸ Coverage of the Antwerp Olympics revealed Gallico had accurately assessed the situation. In the *New York Tribune* Bleibtrey became a “blond New York mermaid.”¹⁴⁹ In the *Pittsburgh Press* coverage of American prospects for the 1920 Olympics, Riggins, Wainwright, Bleibtrey, and the other American women swimmers appeared in alluring poses in their swimming suits under headlines that celebrated their physical appeal, such as “A Bevy of Fair American Mermaids.” Their images popped up in the special Sunday picture sections of the Pittsburgh daily.¹⁵⁰ Pictures of male Olympians also appeared, but in athletic poses rather than in the contrived postures designed to highlight the sex appeal of the female athletes.¹⁵¹ On the days when the women athletes’ photographs were prominently featured by the *Pittsburgh Press*, they failed to appear in the text of articles about American Olympians. Those articles concentrated mainly on the prospects of male track and field athletes for the Antwerp Games.¹⁵²

After the “fair American mermaids” became Olympic champions their exploits occasionally made it into the text of stories. But their pictures continued to dominate press coverage of women’s sports. Even when their images appeared in conjunction with photographs of men in bathing suits, “sex appeal” still dominated the presentations of the female swimmers. In a series of pictures published in 1922 celebrating the female Olympic stars and the new phenom in men’s swimming, Johnny Weissmuller, the difference appears with startling clarity. Gertrude Ederle, Helen Wainwright, and, especially, Ethelda Bleibtrey, strike captivating poses for the cameras while clad in their suits. Weissmuller, placed by the editors right next to the women swimmers, is also clad in his suit, but is photographed in action rather than in posed pictures.¹⁵³ In one series of photographs in *Current Opinion*, Weissmuller appears in an action shot, ready to leap into the pool, above the caption “The Fastest Swimmer in the World.” Bleibtrey appears right next to Weissmuller, her hand lounging on one hip, her breasts prominently displayed in silhouette, smiling beguilingly.

ing at the camera, above the caption "A Modern Mermaid With No Rival."¹⁵⁴

The new depictions of Olympians as attractive images for public consumption fundamentally altered older connections between sport and politics in American culture. Some of the "galaxy of stars" from Antwerp understood those changes and took advantage of the new cultural landscape. "Handsome blonde" Ethelda Bleibtrey turned her stardom into a job selling the power of positive thinking to American women in *Ambition Magazine*, advertising the idea that women would soon surpass men in swimming and many other sports.¹⁵⁵ Sprinter Charles, or Charley as he became known to the public, Paddock used the Olympics to promote himself as an early sports celebrity, writing essays in popular magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and working in Hollywood's film industry.¹⁵⁶

Other commentators spun tales about the power of sport, especially the Olympics, to sell American-style culture around the world. The *Literary Digest* explained in a 1921 article entitled "Why America Wins Championships" that Olympic victories had helped the United States win from Great Britain the honor of the world's leading power in every important marker of modern civilization.¹⁵⁷ *Literary Digest*, at that time the most widely-read news magazine in the United States,¹⁵⁸ confirmed that American Olympians projected "fables of abundance" to a global audience.

Some English writers concurred. English scholar of American civilization H. Perry Robinson noted admiringly that "considered merely as an advertisement, the investment of the United States in the Olympic Games has been almost fabulously profitable." Robinson posited that "it might plausibly be argued that no other single thing-not its wealth or power, not its share in the war, not even the splendour of its world-wide charities and benefactions-has done so much to win admiration for the United States. at least in the eyes of the youth of the world. as have the American triumphs in the Olympic Games."¹⁵⁹

The Olympic Games had become an international advertisement of American power and prowess. American politicians understood that as well as English historians. Congressman James Gallivan of Massachusetts grasped that essential fact when he told his colleagues during the House debate on the bill to permit the American Olympians to travel on military transports that when American Olympians won gold medals, "as we expect them to ..., the glory will not be theirs, but will be that of the United States of America."¹⁶⁰ Considered merely as an advertisement, to borrow H.P. Robinson's phrase, the Olympics were of enormous value. The glory they generated sold the United States as a model for the rest of the world to emulate. Athletes such as Charley Paddock and Ethelda Bleibtrey comprehended the new reality. They understood that they could tap into the very national glory that they had helped to generate to launch careers as public figures. Many politicians also understood the new reality and sought to associate themselves with the Olympic team. The United States government sponsorship of the 1920 team underscored the attraction of its advertising power.

Beginning in 1920, American Olympians began to be transformed into advertising symbols for projecting American culture around the world. This transformation did not represent a complete break with the past. Indeed, in the period before World War One, American Olympians had symbolized national prowess. However, important differences in the way in which the Olympians were used were becoming evi-

dent. Before 1920, the Olympians had represented concrete political ideas such as the assertion that a multi-ethnic population, at least of peoples of “melted” European descent, was a national strength. In that earlier era, American Olympians were icons of the common citizen rather than the superstars of sporting marketers. In 1920 the image of the Olympians as a melting-pot team dissipated. The Olympians became a “galaxy of stars,” players in a thriving entertainment industry spawned by an economy and a culture geared to consumption. Nationalism remained a central part of the appeal of American Olympians, but it was from 1920 forward a more diffuse and inchoate nationalism. The A.O.C. understood the changes on one level. It sought to create an efficient corporate organization that would field a “super team” for American consumers of sporting entertainment. Subsequent Olympics in 1924 at Paris, in 1928 at Amsterdam, and in 1932 at Los Angeles—in America’s new entertainment capital of Hollywood—would reveal these changes in ever-more startling relief.¹⁶¹ A new era in the role of the Olympic Games in American culture had dawned.

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