

THE OLYMPIC GAMES (5)

The Olympic s Games and the Universal Exposition of Paris in 1900

After the first Olympic Games of 1896, King George of Greece publically announced that the Olympics would take place in Athens every four years. However, De Coubertin did not want the Olympic Games to be held at a permanent site like the ancient Olympic Games had established at Mount Olympia. Greece's demand to be the constant Olympic Games host collapsed when Greece went to war with Turkey in 1897. De Coubertin scheduled the 1900 Olympic Games for Paris in conjunction with the Universal Exposition. De Coubertin was disappointed when his Olympic Games concepts were rejected by his own nation. The Baron was considered a zealot and a nuisance by most Exposition organizers; and, he was replaced by Daniel Merillon who was more amenable to conducting exhibitions of physical exercise and sports which were drawn out over a five month period. 1330 athletes from twenty-two nations took part. The term "Olympic Games" was absent from all issued official schedules of athletic events. Remarkably, the American team of fifty-five athletes did not realize that the Universal Exposition was an official Olympics until the medals were handed out after the competition was complete. The Olympic track and field competition took place at the Racing Club de France in the Bois de Boulogne on grass turf. A cinder track was not available for track running events and trees interfered with the field throwing events like the discus, the javelin and the hammer!



Another problem ensued for the US team which was composed of numerous US collegiate teams, some of which forbade its students to compete on Sundays while others had no such religious restrictions. In contrast, France and Continental Europe regarded Sunday as a good day to conduct athletic competitions. The original opening day of athletic competition was scheduled for Saturday July 14th, Bastille Day, France's most revered holiday. For this reason, the organizers suddenly changed the opening day to Sunday July 15th without any notice or explanation. Some US competitors could not compete on Sunday. American Alan Kraenzlein of the University of Pennsylvania did compete and won four events: the long jump, the sixty yard dash, the 110 meter hurdles and the 200 meters hurdles. Kraenzlein's low hurdle record time remained for 25 years. His style of hurdling, keeping the front leg straight, revolutionized hurdling technique into the modern era. Peggy Abbott of Chicago, who was vacationing in Paris with her mother, became the first woman Olympic champion when she won the golf tournament. A seven year old French boy was drafted into duty a coxswain for the two-man-with-cox rowing competition. He jumped out the boat at the finish and disappeared on the Paris streets. He remains the youngest Olympic champion in history and he never knew it! For the first time, De Coubertin became disillusioned with his Olympic movement!

The Olympic Games and the World's Fair & Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904

In contrast to Paris in 1900, Americans made sure that the Olympics were a big part of the World's Fair. Coubertin wanted the Olympics in American because the US had been very supportive of the Olympic movement and had won many medals in Athens and Paris. British and French athletes snubbed the Olympics and did not attend St Louis due to Russo-Japanese War and other factors. De

Coubertin himself decided not attend when he was disgusted with reports about the “pygmy Olympics” and that there would competition in tobacco spitting. In fact, less than seven hundred athletes from twelve nations took part. Over five hundred were American competitors. Events were again conducted over five months and many were called Olympic events when they should not have been so designated. Many American sports such as basketball, baseball, boxing, Lacrosse and water polo were held.

President Theodore Roosevelt had helped St. Louis win the Olympic Games bid over the early favorite Chicago. Alice Roosevelt, the President’s daughter, came and participated in picture taking and greeting of athletes. Alice was about to have her picture taken with American Fred Lorz, the announced Marathon champion, who proved to be an imposter, when the real winner incoherent and staggering entered the stadium and literally fell at her feet. Thomas Hicks of the US had been treated by attendees at least twice with raw eggs, French brandy and a grain of sulfate strychnine. New rules were adopted prohibiting any contact with runners during competition. A small Cuban postman named Felix Caraval entered the Marathon and finished fourth. He had lost all the money he raised to go to St. Louis when got involved in a crap game in New Orleans. He made his way to St. Louis only to arrive at the exact time as the start of the Marathon wearing his street shoes and long pants. Martin Sheridan, a US field athlete quickly cut Caraval’s trousers at his knees so he could run! Two black Kaffir tribesmen named Lentauw and Yamasani who were part of the “Boer War Exhibit” ran the Marathon and finished ninth and twelfth, respectively, becoming the first black Olympic competitors. George Poage, a Negro from Milwaukee, finished third in the four hundred meter hurdles winning the first Olympic medal by a black athlete. Coubertin saw the American effort in St. Louis as sheer sensationalism; yet, he was prophetic when he added that such charades would lose their appeal when black men, red men and yellow men learned to run, jump and throw as well as white men!

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