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*A Brief History  
of the Olympic  
Games*

David C. Young

THIS 1880 ATHENS proposal was the first time that international Olympics had ever been suggested (Coubertin was still a teenage schoolboy). Brookes' own National Olympics allowed, even encouraged, foreign entries; yet they always retained "National" in their name. The Greek series sought from the start to restore to the new Greece what were its national games in antiquity. Brookes' international Olympic revival idea was soon published in both Greek and English newspapers. He asked the Greek ambassador in London, John Gennadius, to help rally the Greek government behind his Athens plan. Over the next decade, Brookes wrote a dozen letters to Gennadius, but with no result. Perhaps the anti-athletic Greek Olympic Committee advised Gennadius to quash the Englishman's zeal. With no support from English athletic clubs, his best shot, his international proposal, went nowhere.

### *The French Connection*

Toward the end of the 1880s Brookes resumed his other obsession, to establish physical education in his country's schools. At the same time, a young French nobleman and Anglophile, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, became similarly obsessed with such a project in France. In his own speeches, he began to quote Brookes' writings on the subject. Then he wrote to Brookes asking if he could visit him to discuss their common interest.

Coubertin arrived in Wenlock in October 1890. Brookes held a special edition of his Wenlock Olympic Games in his honor. He also asked the baron to plant a tree there. Brookes loved trees. Trees appear throughout his writings, and trees still ring the field where he held his Wenlock Olympic Games. He hoped his Olympic idea might grow and expand in the same way as his trees, which he always saw as symbols of ever increasing and lasting progress.

Then Brookes took Coubertin into his trophy room. There, in the trophy room, Coubertin himself wrote, Brookes showed him the victors' list from the 1859 Zappas Olympics; and accounts of the 1866 London Olympics. He showed him 1881 newspapers reporting his own proposals for starting international Olympic Games in Athens. Yet years later Coubertin actually stated in print that there had never been any Zappas Olympics at all, and pretended that he knew nothing of Brookes' own Olympic endeavors (Coubertin 1908: 108, 53; 1932 [Brookes' name omitted]; Young 1996: 235, n. 16).

In 1888 Coubertin had ridiculed the idea of modern Olympic Games when it was proposed by another Frenchman. So also, when he returned to Paris from Wenlock in 1890, he belittled Brookes' idea of reviving the Olympic Games, writing "there was no need to invoke memories of Greece" (1986: 1.111 [1888] France; 1890: 712 Brookes; Young 1996: 74, 82). Yet by 1892 he had somehow wholly changed his mind. He himself suddenly made a public proposal for an Olympic revival, maintaining that it was a novel idea, and all his own.

There was action in Greece, too. The Crown Prince Constantine had announced the government would sponsor a revival of the Zappas series for that same year, 1892. But financial and political problems prevented it. Brookes kept writing in vain to Gennadius, because Coubertin had not told him of his own revival proposal. In fact the baron did not even answer Brookes' letters any more.

What Coubertin *did* do was plan for an International Athletic Congress in Paris in June 1894. He was slow in sending out invitations, so that Europeans received no invitation until the month before the Congress. Brookes received one – a mere form letter – and wrote to Coubertin wishing him success in his Olympic enterprise. He also sent a letter to the prime minister of Greece, Charilaos Trikoupis. The letter reminded Trikoupis of Brookes' own earlier connections with the Zappas Games, and ended this way: "My friend Pierre de Coubertin, myself, and others are endeavoring to promote international Olympic festivals. I hope your King will patronize such Games." Thus Brookes saw Coubertin and himself linked together as Olympic advocates.

When the delegates arrived at the Sorbonne to attend Coubertin's conference, which was originally named a "Congress of Amateurs,"

the baron had renamed it "Congress for the Revival of the Olympic Games." This 1894 Paris congress lasted several days. The delegates were wined, dined and entertained in grand style. Coubertin soon held the delegates in his hands. No one opposed his moves to form an international Olympic committee to revive the ancient games. He planned to have the first games in Paris, 1900. Somehow the date got accelerated by four years, to 1896. But the delegates did not at first vote for Athens as the 1896 site. They chose London. Strangely, the Anglophile Coubertin refused to support London. He nominated Athens instead, and insisted on it. When it was clear the London motion would pass anyway, Coubertin had the whole question postponed, "tabled" (Coubertin 1894: minutes for June 19).

The choice of Athens for 1896 remains mostly a mystery. Coubertin was unquestionably the first to nominate Athens. At that same June 19 meeting, Demetrios Vikelas was elected president of that sub-committee, to his great surprise. Vikelas was a Greek intellectual who lived in Paris. He was a fascinating man of diverse talents: a novelist, a historian – he even translated Shakespeare into Greek. But he had never before had a thing to do with athletics. At first Vikelas did not himself support the baron's nomination of Greece, but that evening he changed his mind. Four days later, at a plenary meeting on the last day of the Congress, Vikelas himself made a second, more formal and far more successful proposal for Athens' candidacy. In the meantime, he had communicated with people in Athens. Vikelas' Athens proposal was approved by acclamation. Vikelas was chosen the first president of the IOC, preceding Coubertin and all the rest, such as Brundage, Samaranch, and now Rogge.

Although he had never had a thing to do with any athletic organization, Vikelas was the right man for the job. In the autumn of 1894 Coubertin and Vikelas visited Athens briefly and separately. It was Coubertin's first visit to Greece.<sup>4</sup> Both men met opposition from the Greek government and from the members of the Zappas Olympic Committee, each group claiming that they could not help and that Olympic Games were impossible. There was no money, they said, "No way." Vikelas returned to Athens in December. Coubertin suddenly got engaged to be married and started to write a history book. He lost much of his interest in the 1896 games.

When Stephanos Dragoumis, president of the Zappas Olympic Committee, again emphatically told Vikelas "No," Prince Constantine offered to chair the organizing committee. In early 1895 Vikelas and Constantine rallied other Greeks behind their efforts. Vikelas gave speeches to labor union assemblies, and Constantine formed special committees for each sport. In parliament pro-Olympic Greeks invoked the tradition of the Zappas Games, and said that these international Olympics would fulfill Zappas' dream. That argument won, the government changed, the Zappas committee stepped aside, and Athens began preparing feverishly for 1896. Vikelas and the other Greeks did almost all of the work. Coubertin did very little.

The Athens organizing committee somehow achieved amazing success. There were no previous international Olympiads to serve as models. Very few foreign teams or athletes committed to – or even heard about – the new Olympics. There was, however, a great in-flux of good will and donations for the cause from Greeks both in Greece and abroad. Even peasants in the villages sent a few drachmas to Athens. Giorgos Averoff, an Egyptian Greek, paid to restore the ancient Panathenaic stadium, with magnificent marble seats.

Unfortunately, Brookes did not live to see his own Olympic dream fulfilled. He died just three months before those 1896 games took place, joining Soutsos and Zappas in Olympic oblivion – as Coubertin and history forgot all about them. Even Gennadius had amnesia. Just before the games, he published an article praising Coubertin for his brilliant and original idea of an Olympic revival. The article makes no mention at all of W. P. Brookes, whom Gennadius had rebuffed repeatedly when Brookes had advocated the same plan.

The 1896 games themselves, against all odds, despite truly miserable weather, were an astonishing success. The big stadium, the first in the modern world, overflowed with the largest crowd ever to witness a sporting event. *Everyone* observed virtually perfect decorum. Americans won most events in the stadium, and the Greeks applauded strongly, as they did for every winning athlete. Yet they were burning to win an event themselves in the stadium, in front of the crowd. Greece was favored to win the discus and the shot put. In both events, however, the best Greek athletes finished a tiny fraction of an inch behind the American, Garrett.

Greatly disappointed, the Greeks still applauded him. But it seemed almost as if the Olympian gods had abandoned them.

All thoughts, all Greek hopes now rested with the marathon, a wholly new event to be held for the first time (see appendix C). The hype the day before the race was immense. Businessmen promised great rewards to the winner – if he was Greek. Even unbelievers prayed that the marathon victory go to Greece. As the afternoon of marathon day wore on, all other events were finished except the pole vault, which was suddenly interrupted. It seemed the stadium had gone mad.

“It’s a Greek, it’s a Greek,” the crowd shouted in one voice. It was indeed a Greek, Spyros Louís, who entered the stadium first. The joy that filled the air, reports say, was indescribable. Almost all eyewitnesses, including Coubertin, even many years later, state that it was one of the most memorable sights of their entire lives, truly unforgettable (Young and Bijkerk: 1999). In short, it seems as if Greece had been born again through the victory of this one young man.

These 1896 Olympic Games were so successful that almost everyone except Coubertin wanted Greece to be the permanent seat of all future Olympiads. But Greece itself fell into very hard times – the euphoria of the games was punctured by financial losses and military disasters. The Greeks could not oppose Coubertin’s plans for 1900 in Paris. But the Paris 1900 Olympiad was a big flop. The French government would not cooperate, nor let the games be called Olympics. Athletes from around the world did compete sporadically on the outskirts of Paris. There were no crowds of spectators, and apparently most athletes did not even know they were in Olympics. It was a total failure. The next Olympiad was given to America, and ended up as an appendage to the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. The games were not truly international; almost all the athletes were North American. Attendance was poor, organization abysmal, and sometimes even perverse.

#### *Greece and Sweden Save the Day*

After two such fiascoes the Olympics might well have died in the cradle, if Greece had not come to the aid of the faltering institu-

tion. There had been an agreement, against Coubertin’s wishes, that Athens would hold international Olympics in between the games that moved around the world. Greece was in no position to plan to hold these in-between games for their first scheduled date, 1902. But in 1901 the rest of the IOC members voted, against Coubertin’s strong objections, to sanction IOC games at Athens in 1906. Before these games Coubertin was compelled to recognize them in his Olympic journal, but he did not attend. Others of the IOC, who had supported the project all along, had a business meeting there anyway.

In 1906 Athens indeed hosted its second official IOC Olympiad. Like the first, it was a total success, but a lot bigger, with large numbers of spectators and athletes from many more nations. There was good will and satisfaction among all.

Several important features of our Olympics today were inaugurated at the 1906 Olympiad. It was the first time the athletes paraded around the stadium grouped by nation in an opening ceremony; the first time that all athletes were sent by a national Olympic committee and officially represented their countries. These and other innovations of 1906 were repeated at subsequent Olympiads, and are now among our most characteristic and venerable Olympic traditions (Lennartz 2001: 20–7).

Most Olympic historians agree that in 1906 Greece probably saved Coubertin’s revival movement from early extinction. But Coubertin, always loath to give Greece any credit for the success of the revival movement, declared that the 1906 games were not sanctioned by the IOC and were “unofficial.” This designation has remained with the second Athens Olympiad because for many years Coubertin *was* the IOC and the only other president before World War II was an old crony of his. After the war there was an organized attempt to restore their IOC recognition to the 1906 games, but IOC president Avery Brundage nearly worshipped Coubertin and would have none of it. Early in 2003 the International Society of Olympic Historians submitted to IOC president Rogge a well documented petition asking that the 1906 games be redesignated “Official” IOC games. It was signed by many of the world’s most distinguished Olympic scholars. But for over half a century one of the major functions of the IOC has been to enhance and preserve Coubertin’s image in history. Apparently intimidated either by IOC