

THE FAILURE OF THE FIRST GLOBAL WINTER OLYMPICS: SKIING AT LAKE PLACID 1932

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You have an abysmal lack of appreciation that the III Olympic Winter Games is a world event, thundered the frustrated Wayland D. Towner on 2 March 1931 to the principal organizer of those games at Lake Placid in 1932, Godfrey Dewey.¹

This was also what the Europeans and particularly the Norwegians had feared. The Fédération Internationale de Ski (FIS) meeting in Oslo in February 1930 had awarded the Games to the United States but there were many reservations. The Technical



FIS-Congress 1930 in Oslo, Lunn 1st left

Committee of three was raised to five “to see that all details have been worked out satisfactorily.” It was, in fact, because Norwegians, who had never been enthusiastic about Winter Olympic Games right from the start simply did not trust the Americans to provide satisfactory cross-country courses nor technically correct jumps although plans had not received one word of criticism from the delegates in Oslo.²

The FIS refused to publish all the documents in English, pleading expense, but would at least print the rules of competition so Americans would be aware of world requirements. All the representatives pleaded poverty and a rumor circulated that the United States would simply send an Atlantic liner over to pick up all the teams. “Ever since I arrived,” the American representative Fred Harris reported, “the matter of expense as been dinned into my ears.” Later, he added, “You will find a studied attempt to get as much out of us as they can.” The FIS delegates would not say whether the next Congress would be held in Lake Placid either. Harris took this as “an attempt to hold a club over our heads.”³

There had been an undercurrent of distrust for years concerning the American’s ability to organize such an event. Sweden’s Ivar Holmquist, the nation’s army chief and FIS’ president from 1924 until 1934, believed that neither the United States nor Canada “had the necessary competence to organize ski events.”⁴ The French representative, the Marquis de Polignac suggested sending a special inspection team to Lake Placid, and the whole committee was thoroughly relieved when Thomas Fearnley, a Norwegian representative offered his own country should the inadequacies of American organization prove too obvious.⁵

The American organization relied almost entirely on Dr. Godfrey Dewey, the autocratic son of an autocratic father, Melvil Dewey, New York’s State Librarian and inventor of the ‘Dewey Decimal System’ for organizing

books. He insisted upon “simplifid speling” and made his Lake Placid Club a selective social resort for wealthy white Christians who would not smoke, flaunt their jewelry or indulge in “rekles skiing,” any one of which brought expulsion from the club.⁶

How did this unlikely entrepreneur (Melvil Dewey died in 1931) of an elite and racist club come to host the first Winter Olympics held outside Europe? These Winter Games were certainly understood to put the Games on the global—if not universal—scene by FIS but not by Godfrey Dewey.

The history of the in-fighting among men not necessarily most interested in skiing, but more inclined to see the Games as an economic boost was not an American invention. Only when the hoteliers of Chamonix got behind their town’s bid for the 1924 Olympics did it become successful. At those Games in France, the Mayor of Minneapolis George F. Leach was the manager of the U.S team solely to politic for Minneapolis as the venue for 1928 or 1932.⁷ He had not looked after the team in Chamonix; he had not contested Anders Haugen’s fourth place in the jump. Later, a report circulated which made Fred Harris’ “blood boil;” jumper Ragnar Omtvedt received no attention after he had broken his leg, and Leach had “seen the team about four times while in Europe.”⁸ The United States Eastern Amateur Ski Association determined to take a hand and in 1928 Godfrey Dewey was appointed to officiate at the St. Moritz winter games. Dewey’s goal was to inspect various Swiss resorts, see the organization that would be required to have an Olympics, make personal contact with Olympic and FIS officials—all to the end that Lake Placid—meaning the Lake Placid Club—would become the St. Moritz of America. Right from the start, the social prestige of his Club and the economic benefits obtained by bringing the Games to Lake Placid was foremost in his mind. He didn’t put it this way, of course, as he “con-

sented to act as manager of the proposed U.S ski team.”⁹

Lake Placid had very particular and quite peculiar factors which played against its selection. The village itself was absolutely dominated by the Lake Placid Club and when Dewey talked of Lake Placid, he was meaning his Club and this club was not a sports club, let alone a ski club. The village was connected to few other villages by a meager road system and railroad line. The FIS committee refused to have competitors and officials bed down in Saranac Lake, ten miles away. In between were forested mountain lands owned by the State of New York and bound by law to be “forever wild,” some land on which proposed Olympic facilities were to be constructed.¹⁰

Dewey also ran up against the state of California which believed, since the summer games had been awarded to Los Angeles, that the winter games should also take place in their state. The row grew to such proportions that William Humphreys of the California Olympic Games Committee called it an “outrage” that Lake Placid should receive the Games, rather than Yosemite. He then suggested holding winter sports in opposition.¹¹ California had two major problems: for years, ‘snow’ had been edited out of all publicity in the land of “sunshine and roses.” Second: there was no area in the state which had any experience in holding skiing competitions. And it did not matter how much the state might budget for the Games.¹² Lake Placid found support from the influential Fridtjof Nansen, who had stayed at the Club, and “provided the windfalls and bushes are removed,” he said, “the terrain for ski races was ideal.” Much to Dewey’s delight he also opposed holding the Games in a western location because “the contestants’ traveling expenses would be doubled.”¹³

California blustered on. To William May Garland, who felt he had history on his side when he went before the FIS Committee to present California’s case, Dewey had written untruthfully that he was not primarily concerned with bringing the Olympic Winter Games to Lake Placid, but was deeply concerned to assure they “challenge comparison with Chamonix and St. Moritz.” He went on to say that California’s developments were new; there had been no sanctioned tournaments—exactly the factors playing on the uneasiness the Scandinavians had for the American winter enterprise. “I am loath,” he went on “to be placed in a position of urging our superior fa-

cilities and long experience in winter sports.” Garland could only reply, “Let the best man win.”¹⁴

The FIS Committee voted unanimously for Lake Placid and the California legislature appropriated \$55,000 for the state to be “the scene of the 1932 Olympic Winter events.” Editorials in Californian papers echoed the Olympic theme much to Dewey’s increasing frustration.¹⁵ The use of ‘Olympic’ as a marketing tool was quite obvious by 1932. After all, Chamonix, France’s premier winter sports resort had held the Olympics, and St. Moritz was already known the world over as the number one

winter sporting venue. The Lake Placid Club, if it hosted the Games, would automatically be registered as America’s St. Moritz.

It was not an easy role for the Lake Placid Club to play. Dewey did not care to realize that both the European venues already had a tourist infrastructure which brought increasing numbers of visitors in summer and, after 1905, in winter. Dewey liked to think that his keeping the Club open in winter for the first time in 1905 gave it the same stature. Chamonix had behind it France’s much respected *Club Alpin Français* whose ski section



Godfrey Dewey (left) and IOC president Henri de Baillet-Latour

had become increasingly important from 1905 on and which had organized the first international ski week at Montgenèvre two years later. But then Chamonix took over: 9000 had visited in 1860, 12,200 in 1867. It was to Chamonix that Henry Lunn brought his first skiing party in 1898, and the local doctor Payot contributed the chapter on skiing in CAF’s *Manuel d’Alpinisme* published that year. By 1906, it was reckoned that there were 500 pairs of skis in the valley.¹⁶ Chamonix went on to host CAF’s International ski meetings in 1908, 1912, 1914, 1920, 1921, and the meet in 1928 served as trials for St. Moritz. Dewey knew none of this: all he knew was that Chamonix had hosted the 1924 games (which in retrospect had become the First Winter Olympic Games) to which 258 athletes had come from 16 countries. At St. Moritz the number was up to 464 from 25 countries.

But St. Moritz was another world. Prior to 1900 it was a health station which reinvented itself into Europe’s most chic destination winter resort, thanks to enterprising hoteliers. St. Moritz played winter host to the wealthy by converting summer hotels into winter palaces so that by 1913, 5314 beds were available along with 43 private villas for hire.¹⁷ That was not all. Notable visitors who had wintered there in 1911 included members

of the royal house of Prussia, King Edward VII's mistress, the Honorable Mrs. George Keppel, fifty-five titled aristocrats including princes and princesses, the Maurice Rothschilds stayed, so did the Archdeacon of Norwich, England, a number of airmen including the famous Santos Dumont were in residence. The founder of the Cresta bob run, Members of Parliament from England, the Mayor of Hamburg, three novelists and Richard Strauss were all winter guests.¹⁸ These aristocrats came from Germany (6), England (4), Austria (1), France (5), Brazil (3), Italy (7), Russia (8) and Belgium (2). Now here was a challenge for Dewey! How could he turn his Lake Placid Club into the St. Moritz of America? By hosting the IIIrd Winter Games—simple as that.

What happened at the Games? The first outstanding fact was that very few teams came. Formal invitations were sent to 65 nations. 8000 beds were planned, but these included 1000 three and one half hours away by train in Montreal, another 1000 were “within motor-ing distance,” whatever that meant. Another 1000 were at Saranac Lake, and a further 1000 were available in Pullman cars left on the railroad sidings. The Lake Placid Club guaranteed 1500 beds and the rest could be found in the village itself.¹⁹

Sixty-five nations had been invited but as the financial depression deepened countries began to fall away. Only four months before the Games opened, the Dutch said they could not come but reversed themselves in December, the German hockey team seemed doubtful, the Swedes asked for a postponement. Dewey wrote to IOC President Baron de la Tour asking him to get full support from the IOC to “keep the games on track” and appealed for a formal statement.²⁰ By December it was reckoned seventeen nations had entered which was bad enough but, for instance with Germany withdrawing from the hockey tournament, these global games would be won

by one of three teams, the United States, Canada or Poland. It was extremely unsatisfactory and Dewey dashed off another cry for help from La Tour.²¹

As late as mid-October 1931, less than four months before the opening of the Games, Dewey had to assure a prominent Austrian journalist that the Olympic Games would, indeed, be held as planned.²² Avery Brundage, with whom Dewey had had acrimonious arguments over fund-raising and the use of the Olympic logo, had suggested that a Czech woman, Milana Jank (leader of a 1931 Everest expedition) might bring in publicity for Lake Placid with an illustrated lecture: “The First and only Complete Crossing of the Alps on Skiis.” Dewey summarily dismissed that idea since “Alpine skiing was not *the* thing in the Adirondaks.”²³ First, he wasn't about to have foreigners interfere in his Olympic Games; he had refused Ernst des Bailleys for similar reasons.²⁴ Second, his club was organized round cross-country trails, odd frolics on the golf course, skjoring behind airplanes on Lake Marcy. It was not part of the fast set's new Alpine world of skiing which put such a premium on downhill and slalom. The skisports, recreation and competition, were to be as they had been since 1920, “amusements.”²⁵ No wonder the skiing world was so frustrated with Dewey. He not only rubbed the Norwegian and Swedes the wrong way—keepers of the old Ski-idraet flame—but equally he had no time for would-be Arlbergers with their schuss and après ski. He was, and remained, the autocrat in charge of the discriminatory Lake Placid Club.

Dewey dispatched Bjorn Blix, one time ski instructor at the Club, now designated International Secretary of the Lake Placid Committee to make the rounds of the European Olympic Committees.²⁶ It became increasingly clear that attendance was dropping off. In the end 17 nations were present with 364 athletes. However, the United States and Canada brought 45.5% of the athletes to Lake Placid, 167 out of 364. A team of 13 represented Japan, the only non-western country, and 13 competitors entered for the demonstration even of dog racing. Statistically, then, this was hardly a global event.

Of the 364 competitors, 115 skiers raced and jumped in extremely poor conditions due to the lack of snow. The 50 kilometer track had to be changed to a 25kilometer track which the runners circuted twice. Henry Baldwin woke his crew up at 2.30am and worked until the end of the race



Birger Ruud, 19 year-old Norwegian winner of the Olympic ski-jump

shoveling snow to keep the very narrow path open.²⁷

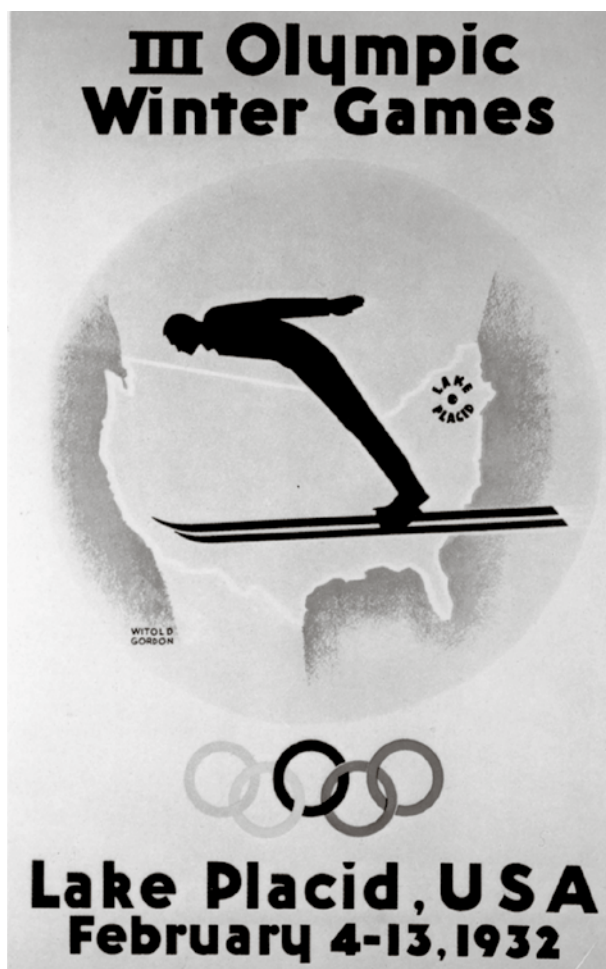
The *Official Report of the III Winter Olympic Games* contained a congratulatory statement by IOC President Count Baillet de la Tour who acknowledged the extreme difficulties presented by the weather and the depression. He then went on to say that the Europeans “were more than pleased” at the plans for staging the games, their facilities were adequate, and housing, feeding and transportation satisfactory. All who attended took home with them “what international sports competition means in its highest sense.”²⁸ Chairman of FIS’ Technical Committee, Ingvald Smith-Kielland’s report to FIS President Ivor Holmquist, however, was quite different with the exception of acknowledging the awful weather and the economic depression. His committee of three found fault “with everything” as the headline under the title of “Olympic Ski Handling Censured” in *Winter Sports* proclaimed a year later.²⁹

The lack of snow had nothing to do with Godfrey Dewey and commentators tended to acknowledge that. Weather conditions became so questionable in the two weeks before the Games that the Technical Committee proposed that the American Organizing Committee arrange for a reserve venue for the contests. Dewey would

not hear of any such move, and was much put out when the Swedes left for training at Lucerne-in-Quebec and the Norwegians joined their compatriots at the Ski Club Norge in Chicago for practice. “It was obvious,” Smith Kielland wrote, “that it was the economical question in connection with changing place” that mattered because Dewey “was personally interested in the Lake Placid club. The sporting interests ranged undoubtedly lower.” At the same time the French believed that the conditions showed that Lake Placid had been a rash choice of venue made worse by “insufficient preparation, ... deficient organization [and] served ill by sporting incidents of all kinds.” It was, according to *Ski-Sports d’Hiver* the “unanimous opinion that the organization of the last games was considerably inferior to the preceding games.”³⁰ The Swiss judged the Games more a circus than a winter performance.³²

FIS’s Technical Committee report was unrelenting in its criticism:³² “Too big burdens were undoubtedly laid on a few men’s shoulders, and those did not manage to perform all that was up to them. They also lacked skilled helpers possessing knowledge and initiative,” wrote the chair of the committee, Norwegian Smith-Kielland. This committee of three with the Norwegian chairman, Sweden’s Axel Norling and France’s Dr. F. Lacq were unsparing in their criticisms: only two members of the American Organizing Committee were present until the Games actually started on 3 February; the American Ski Association had no influence on the skiing arrangements and whose president was not even present during the Games. The full committee of five met with the FIS Technical Committee only on the first day of the competition. Because of bad weather, the Technical Committee could not actually inspect the condition of the cross-country courses so they concentrated on examination of projected courses to insure FIS rules had been followed. These rules were not in English even though FIS has assured Fred Harris that an English version would be provided, “consequently were insufficiently known” to the organizers of the events and the committee felt it had to supervise the laying out and marking of some of the cross-country tracks, and had been involved in the preparing of the jumping hill. The Technical Committee, over Dewey’s objections, had to smooth the outrun and change the take-off. “A thorough revision was required.” The Organizing Committee never had the responsibility to make decisions; “all questions of economical and partly also of technical nature had to be decided on by the president of the head-committee, Dr. Godfrey Dewey who was also the President of the Lake Placid Club.” And that club was “more an enterprise engaged in hotel business.”

Smith-Kielland had years of upholding Norwegian *Ski-idraet* tradition and was determined that Scandinavian ways of doing things were going to be the FIS’s ways, FIS representing the global community of skiing. Norling, the Swede was in full concurrence. If the Olympic Games had to be staged in North America, the French



Poster and postcard

had always been partial to Montreal's candidacy. Member Dr. Lacq, writing for a French audience was guardedly positive but reading between the lines he was quite content to go along with the Scandinavian critique.³³ One sporting incident, for example, was threat of the Norwegians not to participate in the jump because a professional was on the hill stamping down the snow.³⁴ Another was the poor position of the take-off of the jump. The Norwegians simply changed it, much to Dewey's frustration.³⁵

And yet another was the poor judging of the jumping. The great Norwegian jumper Birger Ruud knew he had been marked too leniently and insisted that his team-mate Hans Beck stand on the podium with him to receive his medal.³⁶

The Technical Committee had to give seminars for the judges to insure a uniform way of judging. The judges' platform was poorly situated because special stands which had been constructed for radio broadcasting partly blocked the view. Although asked to change the radio stands, nothing had been done. And there was no telephone communication from the top of the jump to the judges. Spectators were not well policed.

The lack of skilled helpers was all too obvious. Primitive conditions, especially for the marathon 50 kilometer event for which "absolutely nothing had been arranged" for the racers at the end of the course was considered totally unacceptable.

Finally, "the arrangement of the skiing contests much be termed as unsatisfactory." The management was not entrusted to experts, and all questions—economic, technical and anything else—had to be decided upon by Godfrey Dewey, president of the non-sporting Lake Placid Club. It was indeed a one-man show.

The report did not go unanswered—but not by Dewey, but by Fred Harris, a member of the Grand Jury (Smith-Kielland was on both the Grand Jury and the Jury of Appeal). For one who had done so much work it must have been galling to have the Games so harshly dismissed. Harris was particularly incensed by the criticisms of the jump. When the Olympic contest was about to begin, "I found to my utter amazement that Olaf Helset, Captain of the Norwegian team," was up on the take-off fixing the jump to suit his and his jumpers' own particular taste." Sigmund Ruud was there too. Smith-Kielland did ask Helset to stop. "Of course this really did no good," Harris wrote, "because the jump stayed as it was." The young



Ski-Joring, postcard

Swiss jumper Cesare Chiogna was also amazed to see the Norwegians changing the take-off but "it was worthless to protest."³⁷ Harris had lodged a protest about the take-off with the Grand Jury but he was in the minority and his objections never received consideration.

This 1932 Winter Olympics was the last in which the skiing events were Nordic only, it was the last in which there were no skiing events for women. It is, symbolically, the last games when the Scandinavian influence could dominate so completely. It appears that the IOC never realized that when awarding the Games to Lake Placid, that they were really awarding them to the Lake Placid Club which, as Smith-Kielland point out a number of times, was not a sporting club at all. Norwegians—Europeans—relied one hundred percent on their ski clubs and associations for organizing ski events and these were passionately managed. In the United States, skiing was mismanaged by second and third generation sons of Norwegian immigrants in the Midwest and by middle class graduates of Eastern elite universities in New England. Lake Placid was out of the orbit of Norwegian immigrants and their descendents and far from the idealism of male collegians of the 1920s and 1930s. Run by Godfrey Dewey whose effort to turn the wilderness loj into a St. Moritz palace while retaining his autocratic social control by hosting the Olympics was bound to fail. The depression, the weather and Dewey's dogmatic refusal to heed advice made for a disaster for this first attempt at Winter Olympic globalization. ■

Notes:

- 1 Wayland D. Towner to Godfrey Dewey, Lake Placid, 2 March 1931. TMS in Dewey Archives, Lake Placid Historical Society, Lake Placid, New York.
- 2 Fred H. Harris, *Report of the Eleventh F.I.S. Congress, Oslo, Norway, Monday February 34th and Wednesday February 26th, 1930*. TMS copy, Dewey Archives.

- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Commission Executive de CIO, St. Moritz, 13 February 1928. TMS Olympic Archives, Vidy, Switzerland
- 5 International Olympic Committee (IOC), Lausanne, 8-11 April 1929 in Wolf Lyberg, *The IOC Sessions 1894-1955*, 153. TMS Olympic Museum, Lausanne.
- 6 *Lake Placid Club Notes* (March 1905): n.p.; (March 1913): 417; (December 1917): 639; (March 1929): 2017.
- 7 *The Skisport* (1924-25): 22.
- 8 Fred Harris report to USEASA on the Duluth Convention of the National Ski Association, 1926. TMS in Harris papers, New England Ski Museum, Franconia, New Hampshire.
- 9 USEASA Minutes, 2 November 1928. TMS New England Ski Museum archives.
- 10 Bill passed in the New York state legislature in 1885 and applied to the Adirondak Park in 1892. Letter Dewey to Robert Moses, Chairm, New York State Council of Parks, Lake Placid, 4 January 1929. TMS copy, Dewey archives. George C and Stephen C. Orloff, *Lake Placid: The Olympic Years 1932-1980*. Lake Placid: Hollywood Macromedia, 1976, 67-68.
- 11 Nevada State Journal (11 April 1929): 1
- 12 *California Journal of Development* (November 1930): 7-8. The figure for the games was up to \$350,000-\$400,000 by April 1929. When the first bond of \$100,00 was passed, it was "thought of being for Los Angeles and Tahoe." *Nevada State Journal* (11 April 1929): 1.
- 13 Fridtjof Nansen speaking in Berlin, New Hampshire on 2 February 1929, cited in Lake Placid News (22 February 1929).
- 14 Letter Dewey to William May Garland, Lake Placid, 19 January 1929. TMS copy, Dewey archives. Letters and telegrams to Garland, 2 and 5 February 1929, and Garland to Dewey, Los Angeles, 29 January 1929. Dewey to Donald Fair Morgan, 8 August 1929 and Dewey to John B. Stetson, 23 January 1929. TMSs Dewey archive.
- 15 *Oakland Tribune*, n.d., enclosed in a letter, George M. Lattimer to Dewey, Lake Placid, 23 July 1931. TMS Dewey archive.
- 16 Jean Miège, "La vie touristique en Savoie," *Revue Géographique Alpine* 21 (1933): 771-773; Arnold Lunn, *A History of Skiing*. London: Oxford University Press, 1927, 29; Le Ski (April-July 1946): 370; *La Montagne* III, 10 (20 October 1907): 459.
- 17 William W. Barton (compiler), *Engadine Year Book* 1913. Samaden and St. Moritz: Engadine Press [1913]: 11-12.
- 18 Ibid, 189-195.
- 19 *Report of the III Olympic Winter Games Committee, Lake Placid 1932 at the Quadrennial Meeting of the American Olympic Association*, Washington, 1930, 3, 6.
- 20 Letters Dewey to Baron de la Tour, Lake Placid, 8 October 1931 and La Tour's reply, Lausanne, 22 December 1931. TMSs Dewey archive.
- 21 Letter Dewey to La Tour, Lake Placid, 22 December 1931. TMS copy Dewey archive.
- 22 Letter Dewey to W.R.L. Böckl, Lake Placid, 19 October 1931. TMS, Dewey archive.
- 23 Letters Edward W. Macy to Dewey, New York, 5 January 1931 and Dewey's reply, Lake Placid, 10 January 1931. TMSs Dewey archive.
- 24 Letters E. des Baillets to Dewey, Los Angeles, 4 April 1930 and Dewey's reply, Lake Placid, 11 April 1930. TMSs Dewey archive.
- 25 *Lake Placid Club Notes* (November 1920): 886.
- 26 See Blix's letters to Dewey from Stockholm and London, 11 and 30 December 1931. TMSs Dewey archive.
- 27 Henry Baldwin Ms in New England Ski Museum, Franconia.
- 28 Baillet de la Tour statement in Lattimer (compiler), III Olympic Report, 9.
- 29 *Winter Sports* III 5 (February 1933): 4-6, 22.
- 30 Jeux Olympiques de Lake Placid," *Neige et Glace* 10, 151 (10 March 1932): 503. *Ski-Sports d'Hiver* 7 (April 1932): 151.
- 31 Oskar Meier, "Die Bedeutung der Teilnahme der Schweiz an den Olympischen Spiele," *Ski* (Swiss) (1933): 119.
- 32 *Winter Sports* (February 1933): 4-6, 22.
- 33 See the French representative's remarks at the Commission Executive de Comité Internationale Olympique, St. Moritz, 13 February 1928, and Procès Verbal, Lausanne, 10 April 1929. TMSs Olympic Archives, Vidy. Dr. François Lacq, "Ludus pro patria: IIIe Jeux Olympiques d'Hiver: L'Equipe français à Lake Placid," *La Revue du Ski* III, 5 (May 1932): 105-115, especially 114.
- 34 Erling Strom, *Pioneers on Skis*. Central Valley: Smith Close, 1977, 59.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., 57.
- 37 Cesare Chiogna, "Die Winterolympiade in Lake Placid," *Der Schnee-Hase* II, 6 (1932): 226.