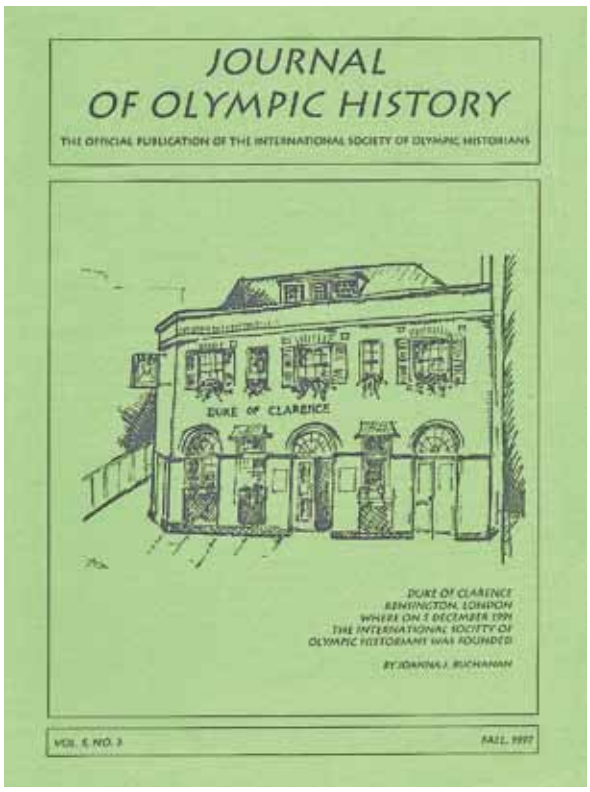
The Founding at History of the ISOH

By Bill Mallon



The year 2016 marks the 25th anniversary of the founding of the International Society of Olympic Historians (ISOH). On 5th December 1991, a group of 7 Olympic historians met at a small pub in the Knightsbridge section of London, England, and formally constituted the society. Present were myself, David Wallechinsky, Ian Buchanan, Peter Matthews, Stan Greenberg, Ove Karlsson, and Ture Widlund. Regrets for being unable to attend were received by Erich Kamper, the guiding presence behind the group; John Lucas, an American academic sports historian; Peter Diamond, an NBC Olympic producer; Volker Kluge, the German Olympic historian; and Tony Bijkerk, the Dutchman who has had such great influence on ISOH.

ISOH started as a concept, however, years before that meeting. In the 1980s I started writing books and articles on Olympic history as a hobby, and in the process, began communication with various Olympic historians and hobbyists, including Kamper, Buchanan, Widlund, Bijkerk, Kluge, and Dutchman Pim Huurman. In several of these letters, which was our only means of communication before e-mail or text messaging, the idea of forming a society of Olympic historians was broached.

Credit for the idea should primarily be assigned to the Swede Ture Widlund, with whom I discussed this multiple times in letters in the 1980s. Ture and I differed in our approach to the idea. He felt that we should seek recognition by the IOC before forming such a society, while I felt we should simply form it, let it progress and possibly seek IOC recognition once established. I won out on this dispute, as we formed ISOH with no affiliation with the IOC or any other formal entity, but in the early 1990s, after a meeting in Lausanne with President Samaranch, ISOH President Ian Buchanan, Wolf Lyberg, and myself, ISOH was given formal recognition by the IOC.

Ture and I also discussed the name the society should have, finally landing on ISOH. One other option I remember was using the French similar name, Société Internationale d'Historiens Olympique, which would have given the acronym SIHO. As I recall, I actually preferred that, but Ture prevailed on the name.

The pub where we met in December 1991 was the "Duke of Clarence", which no longer exists as a dining establishment, but is now a series of low-cost apartment houses. The day was a cool, December London one, with a light rain falling. After meeting over lunch and discussing some of the details of the society, we left for our nearby hotel, planning a dinner that night together with some of the wives in attendance. As we got outside, the rain coming down upon us, we realized we had not elected a President to start the group. Huddling together, by acclamation we pointed to Ian Buchanan, who became the first President of ISOH, and served in that role until 2000. Erich Kamper was also chosen to be the Honorary President of ISOH, in recognition of his huge efforts in promoting Olympic history over the years. They were both excellent choices.

During the initial meeting, we had decided to publish a journal, for which I was chosen as the editor. The journal title we used was *Citius, Altius, Fortius*. The reasoning behind the title was concern over using the word "Olympic" in the title, for fear of trademark infringement with the IOC. Our fears were groundless. A few years later Tony Bijkerk took over as editor and we were then granted IOC recognition. We were given permission to use the word "Olympic" and our publication became, more appropriately the *Journal of Olympic History*.

The initial journal was published on a shoestring. I have recounted several times how it was xeroxed and the pages bound by me and my wife on the floor of our house, often with our dogs walking around the pages, explaining the occasional paw prints one sees on the early journal pages. After our meeting with President Samaranch in 1993, we began to receive financial support from the IOC, which allowed the journal to be more

professionally bound, and look much more attractive. This has been especially so under the editorships of Bijkerk, Stephan Wassong, and now Volker Kluge.

Support from the IOC to ISOH has continued. It was increased near the beginning of my Presidency (2000–2004) at a meeting in Lausanne with President Samaranch, with support from his administrative aide, Fékrou Kidane. We should point out, however, that despite this support, we have never heard one word from the IOC about content issues in the *Journal*, or wishing to influence what was published in anyway. They have supported us, but stayed on the sidelines.

Membership in ISOH started quite small, with less than 40 members initially. We recruited members by word of mouth, our mutual friendships, and sending out some mail to known Olympic historians. Over the years, the society has grown significantly, now with over 450 world-wide members from 55 countries.

In the first few years of ISOH, all that was done was publishing our *Journal* three times a year. Near the end of my Presidency, as our finances improved, I proposed several yearly awards to be given for contributions to Olympic history, and to the best book on the Olympics in the past year, and the best *Journal* article on the Olympics in the past year. I am proud to say these were implemented. We also started supporting students of Olympic history with the Ian Buchanan Scholarship fund, which provides a small stipend to support graduate students. It is not a large amount of money, but at that level, as we all remember, every bit helps.

We have also started meeting formally a bit more often. Initially we had meetings at the 1996 Olympic Games and the 2000 Olympics, as our only meetings of the first decade of ISOH. Under Karl Lennartz's and David Wallechinsky's presidencies the Executive Committee has also started convening annually, usually in Europe. This has enabled ISOH to make much more progress and more reasoned decisions. Both Lennartz and Wallechinsky have also traveled frequently to present some of the ISOH Awards to the recipients, which has been very well received in their countries, and has helped recruit new members to ISOH. We also had meetings of ISOH at the 10th and 20th anniversaries of the lunch at the "Duke of Clarence", and will do so again this year in London this December, on the 25th anniversary.

So now we are about to finish our 25th year of existence, something not all of us could foresee with the small group that started in London. There have been four Presidents of ISOH to date – Buchanan, myself, Lennartz, and Wallechinsky – but it might be said that the guiding light throughout has been Tony Bijkerk, who served as Secretary-General from 1996 until this year, and was on the Executive Committee before that. Tony also served as *Journal* editor for a few years in the late 1990s. Tony's love for Olympic history and ISOH itself has always been evident to all of us who have spent any time with him.

What's next for this small society? The *Journal* has improved significantly over the years, especially so under Stephan Wassong and Volker Kluge. No longer is it necessary for the editor to write several articles themselves, as I frequently did, just to fill the *Journal*, resulting in my somewhat famous pseudonym, Ron Edgeworth, when I decided that too many articles had my name on them. I expect that the *Journal* will continue to improve. We are beginning to see more submissions from academic historians and I hope that will continue, to a degree. I like the fact that ISOH has always been a potpourri of academics, journalists, and hobbyists, and I hope that continues, and that the *Journal* never becomes a purely peer-reviewed one.

ISOH has become recognised throughout the Olympic world, as many people now contact us for information, with the Secretary-General, now Markus Osterwalder, forwarding requests to the appropriate persons to answer the questions. I hope this will continue and ISOH will become even better known as the primary source for information on Olympic history. To this end, the ISOH website has recently been improved with contributions from Mark Maestrone, and this is important, as this is now how we communicate in the digital world in which we all live. Both David Wallechinsky and I have expressed our desire to convert the *Journal of Olympic History* to a digital-only version, and I suspect this will happen, though exactly when is still an unanswered question.

Here is to our little society, started by Ture Widlund and myself in a number of letters in the 1980s, and formalized at a small meeting at a London pub. I'm not sure we ever expected it to get this far, but now I see an even brighter future for ISOH as we go forward into our second quarter century. ■

"The Duke of Clarence" in the London district of Kensington, where ISOH was founded on 5th December 1991. The pub has been closed for some years.

Photos: Bill Mallon, Philip Barker

Invitation

To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the International Society of Olympic Historians (ISOH) will be hosting a gathering for all members in London on 3rd December 2016 from 14.00–17.00. We shall be using the Trafalgar Room which has its own entrance clearly marked. The keynote speaker will be ISOH and IOC Member Richard Pound.

The gathering will take place at the Victory Services Club (photo) at 63–79 Seymour St, London W2 2HF. Spouses are welcome. Food will be available and there will be time to chat. We hope that as many ISOH members as possible are able to attend. If you will be attending, please R.S.V.P. to Secretary-General at **markus.osterwalder@isoh.org**.